

A History of Agriculture Misses the Mark

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2014

a review of

A History of Agriculture: From the Neolithic Age to the Current Crisis by Marcel Mazoyer & Laurence Roudart. Monthly Review Press, 2006, 528 pp., \$50 paperback

Monthly Review was established in 1949 as a Marxist, Soviet-oriented Stalinist journal. In recent years it has changed its stripes somewhat, now pushing, for example, a green/eco Marx (!) and a reformist outlook. The latter outlook typifies Mazoyer and Roudart's *History of Agriculture* which bills itself as "a path breaking and panoramic work."

It is panoramic, for the breadth of its survey, but hardly path breaking. Many yards wide but only an inch or two deep, I'd say.

Its guiding idea is "a theory of the evolution of agrarian systems," an overly vague concept in practice. The book provides much information about places around the world where agriculture originated roughly 10,000 years ago. And, it discusses the series of agricultural revolutions that outline a global development marked by overpopulation and crisis.

Our authors, both from the National Institute of Agronomy in Paris, argue that the current models (e.g., Green Revolution, further mechanization) do not work and often increase rather than lessen poverty. They propose replacing the unrestrained profit motive of neoliberalism with a system of crop price guarantees.

For Mazoyer and Roudart, protecting peasant farming is key to solving the prevailing poverty crisis. This would be accomplished by a new international system they call "a hierarchical world organization of markets." Controlled development along a Five-Year-Plan-type model is Mazoyer and Roudart's leftist agenda.

Unsurprisingly, *A History of Agriculture* says almost nothing about the environmental devastation agriculture has wrought, and barely mentions domestication, agriculture's essence and its inner logic.

I'm reminded of an observation by the situationist Mustafa Khayati: "The university teaches everything about society, except what it is." The nature of what Jared Diamond and others have called the worst mistake in human history, namely the turn to domesticating animals and plants—and ourselves, in the bargain—does not concern the authors. Nor does its ethos of ever-increasing control, from early plant and animal breeding to GMOs and nanotechnology.

Domination of nature, civilization, mass society are givens on the Left. Its progressive view of history applauds all of this, just as it disrespects the integrity of the indigenous dimension.

This lengthy tome provides a lot of information about agriculture in various times and places without for a moment problematizing what it is, at base.

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