

Agriculture in World History

Mark B. Tauger



Themes in World History

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Civilization from its origins has depended on the food, fiber, and other commodities produced by farmers. In this unique exploration of the world history of agriculture, Mark B. Tauger looks at farmers, farming, and their relationships to non-farmers from the classical societies of the Mediterranean and China through to the twenty-first century.

Viewing farmers as the most important human interface between civilization and the natural world, *Agriculture in World History* examines the ways that urban societies have both exploited and supported farmers, and together have endured the environmental changes and crises that threatened food production.

Accessibly written and following a chronological structure, *Agriculture in World History* illuminates these topics through studies of farmers in numerous countries all over the world from antiquity to the contemporary period. Key themes addressed include the impact of global warming, the role of political and social transformations, and the development of agricultural technology. In particular, the book highlights the complexities of recent decades: increased food production, declining numbers of farmers, and environmental, economic, and political challenges to increasing food production against the demands of a growing population. This wide-ranging survey will be an indispensable text for students of world history, and for anyone interested in the historical development of the present agricultural and food crises.

Mark B. Tauger is an associate professor of history at West Virginia University. He has published extensively on famines and agriculture in the USSR and India. His work has won the Eric Wolf Prize of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* and the Wayne D. Rasmussen Award of the Agricultural History Society.

Themes in World History

Series editor: Peter N. Stearns

The Themes in World History series offers focused treatment of a range of human experiences and institutions in the world history context. The purpose is to provide serious, if brief, discussions of important topics as additions to textbook coverage and document collections. The treatments will allow students to probe particular facets of the human story in greater depth than textbook coverage allows, and to gain a fuller sense of historians' analytical methods and debates in the process. Each topic is handled over time – allowing discussions of changes and continuities. Each topic is assessed in terms of a range of different societies and religions – allowing comparisons of relevant similarities and differences. Each book in the series helps readers deal with world history in action, evaluating global contexts as they work through some of the key components of human society and human life.

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**I dedicate this book to the memory of my father,
Herbert Tauger**

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Introduction

The place of agriculture and farmers in world history

This book is part of a series of concise topical studies of “Themes in World History,” meant primarily, though certainly not exclusively, for use in undergraduate world history survey courses, taught in colleges and universities in the U.S. and other countries. While the topics of all of the studies in this growing series are important and revealing aspects of world history, the topic of agriculture has a unique value and relevance.

While all of the other topics were either core components of civilization or important products of civilization, agriculture was the component that made civilization possible. A society of hunters and foragers could not construct large permanent settlements or spare a significant part of its able-bodied members to specialize in activities not related to food. While early societies must have had systems of authority and social hierarchies, they were not in a position to form governments, class systems, strong armies, large-scale trade and markets, sophisticated writing and education systems, and other elements of a full-scale civilization. A civilization with those elements required the production of a reliable and substantial surplus of food before anything else. That surplus would free a significant group of people from food production, allowing them to develop the specializations necessary for a civilization. The anthropologist Robert Redfield in the 1950s contrasted civilization’s advanced culture, what he called the “great tradition,” with the peasants’ folkways or “little tradition.” Yet that great tradition utterly depended on that little tradition for its survival.

Agriculture was thus prior to and a prerequisite for civilization. Farmers supported civilization by producing crops and livestock, work which placed farmers in continual interaction with the natural environment. Farmers thus served as the interface between civilization and the environment. The problem that is the main focus of this book, however, is that civilizations did not simply rely on farmers, but most of the time dominated and exploited them. The relationships between farmers and urban civilization, and between farmers and their environment, were highly complex, but in general, in both relationships, the farmers were subordinate: a pattern I call the dual subordination.

2 Introduction

This book examines these relationships between farmers, environment, and the civilizations that depended on farmers. It describes and analyzes the changes in these relationships in the main world civilizations. In particular it focuses on the actions of the small but important groups of reformers, from politicians to scientists to groups of farmers, who tried to reduce farmers' subordination and improve their lives. Such groups had limited success at first, but in more recent times they increasingly won their case, so that by the modern period the status of most farmers improved greatly.

Yet this improvement was qualified, even ironic, because as reforms eliminated most of the old oppressions, though not completely and not everywhere, new and greater problems emerged. These problems, such as global warming, declining oil production, environmental pollution, debt, and the declining numbers of farmers, are issues of great importance for both farmers and those who depend on them. This book seeks to provide a long-term historical perspective on many of these issues. This long perspective provides a moderate optimism that people have survived a quite difficult, even disastrous, agrarian crises, and at least have the potential to overcome the present ones.

My approach here is chronological, because farming systems had a history of conflict and development over time. This approach also makes this book more compatible with survey courses. The nature of agrarian history and its sources, however, required certain compromises. Despite the importance of South Asia in the modern period, there is so little evidence about South Asian farming before the Mughal period that it is not discussed until Chapter 4. Certain processes have their most important part in one period but their roots in an earlier one, and it would fragment the story too much to discuss that beginning in one chapter and the sequel in the next. So the discussion of Chinese collectivization in Chapter 7 begins with the late nineteenth century and reviews the early twentieth century, topics that might have been included in Chapters 5 and 6. For the most part, however, the chapters are chronologically cohesive and discrete.

This book relied on many sources, both primary and secondary. I have listed the main sources, mostly books and a few of the articles, in the suggested readings. These readings and their bibliographical sources will lead interested readers to additional sources. Agrarian history is a growth field, with important new publications and findings appearing regularly. Certainly new research can qualify or challenge some of the information and views presented here. I present this book as an introduction for students, a possible overall interpretation for scholars, and as an encouragement for discussion and further work for all interested readers.