American Farms, American Food: A Geography of Agriculture and Food Production in the United States

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American Farms, American Food: A Geography of Agriculture and Food Production in the United States


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Academic geographers receive occasional criticism that they are locked away in ivory towers, conducting research on arcane topics of limited practical relevance. With their monograph, American Farms, American Food, Hudson and Laingen provide a broad overview of the agricultural geography of the United States, a topic of broad interest to the general public, students, and instructors. At first glance, this monograph seems somewhat slender in relation to the complex nature of its subject, the geography of agriculture and food production in the United States. Not so many years ago, most geography departments at colleges and universities across North America offered semester courses in agricultural geography and, indeed, many do today, although the course titles now might include terms such as sustainability or food security.

Hudson and Laingen clearly intend this monograph as a general introduction to the agricultural geography of the United States, providing broad topical coverage of spatial patterns of crop and livestock production, focusing also on the family farm and organic farming. Less attention is given to transportation and distribution of agricultural products, although these topics are not entirely overlooked. The book is organized into ten chapters, five of which focus on specific agricultural products, one on the geography of a specific agricultural region (albeit it a region with no universally accepted definition), one on the geography of farms, and another on the geography of the family farm, one on organic farms and organic food, and one on agricultural conservation programs.

Each chapter is illustrated with numerous maps, occasional tables, and figures, providing a visual and statistical context, along with a list of references. An instructor organizing a course along the topical lines of this text could use each chapter as a core reading, developing more comprehensive lectures and discussion to engage student learning. Most major topics are discussed, but inevitably some issues receive less attention in a monograph designed as a general overview.

What topics are left out? First, the authors give special emphasis to the Corn Belt, which is understandable given their academic interests, but there are many other agricultural regions in the United States. Also, the geography of specialty crops, including fruit and nut production, receives limited attention. Among other topics of current interest, the rise of community gardens in urban and suburban communities, the related movement toward organization of urban farms, farmer's markets, and the geography of food distribution are generally overlooked. Additionally, the topics of food security and access to retailers providing healthy food options are not discussed—
but then, this book is focused on the geography of food production rather than its distribution and consumption. Perhaps the authors might contemplate a companion volume addressing these topics.

A few other comments are in order. The monograph is illustrated with many maps, mostly using data taken from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) sources, occasionally depicting results of additional data analysis but more typically illustrating univariate results. Data graphics and tables provide a statistical context, and the book includes numerous photographs. It is tempting to criticize the overreliance on the USDA Census of Agriculture, but this is by far the most comprehensive available national data source. Some topics are given historical treatment, but the authors have chosen these very selectively, and most of the maps show current patterns, with limited historical context. Those who read this monograph cover to cover will discover many interesting facts to counter prevailing myths about farming and food production in the United States. Among the interesting facts, the family farm remains the most common type of farm in the United States. The organic farming movement extends across the United States, but has its highest concentrations on the West Coast, and areas within the Great Lakes states, New England, and the Middle Atlantic states. The geography of food production continues to evolve into the twenty-first century, suggesting a need to update this monograph perhaps decennially.

This monograph is a welcome addition to my personal bookshelf, which already includes several books by Hudson on the Corn Belt and the regional geography of North America, among other topics. It should be especially useful for undergraduate courses in agricultural geography, but also as a general reference tool for those wanting a quick summary of patterns of agricultural production in the United States.