

**G rard B aur, Francesco Chiapparino (ed.),  
Agriculture and the Great Depression. The Rural  
Crisis of the 1930s in Europe and the Americas,  
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The Great Depression was arguably one of the most intense and critical peacetime thresholds in 20<sup>th</sup>-century economic and social history. General wisdom usually associates the crisis of the Great Depression with the crash of the Wall Street Stock Exchange in October 1929, yet its roots lie much deeper. Black Thursday may have developed an astonishing emblematic power, but its vivid symbolism of panicking shareholders should not obscure the fact that it stands for a much more complex and long-lasting process of economic and social turbulence with manifold causes that transcended national borders. Indeed, the Great Depression should not only be seen as a setback to globalization and as a catalyst for protectionism and »national« answers to global challenges. Nor is it solely a North American story, however biased the historiography may appear in this regard.

In fact, transnational entanglements and global interconnections not only shaped its origins, its course, and its ramifications, but the Great Depression was also a period in which many societies around the globe faced similar challenges and intensified processes of mutual observations across national boundaries precisely because the crisis raised unfamiliar, unexpected and in many ways unprecedented problems. As the historian Arnold Toynbee famously captured the gravity of the situation in 1931, looking back on the preceding »annus terribilis«: »men and women all over the world were seriously contemplating and frankly discussing the possibility that the Western system of society might break down and cease to work«.

One of the many interlacing and transnational dynamics of crisis stemmed from agriculture. The publication of a collection of studies covering a wide international spectrum of countries linked to the Atlantic economy in the volume »Agriculture and the Great Depression« is, therefore, highly welcome and timely. The precise role of agriculture in the Great Depression has remained puzzling, even though it has been subject to intense debates among historians, as G rard B aur and Francesco Chiapparino outline in their introduction. While some scholars insist on the impact of farmers' indebtedness on local bank failures in the United States and on shrinking rural consumption and investments as key factors of the crisis, others exonerate agriculture from its alleged responsibility for the Depression: »Not Guilty« was the verdict that Giovanni Federico expressed in an influential article on this



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issue almost twenty years ago. However, it may seem questionable to what extent the concepts of »guilt« and »responsibility« are useful categories of historical analysis, and the volume legitimately raises a set of questions that go beyond this normative-judicial terminology and break new ground on the history of agriculture in the Great Depression. The volume attempts to understand how the impact of the Depression varied from one country to another, how agricultural problems were transmitted internationally and impacted macroeconomic dynamics, how far agriculture not only accompanied the general crisis, but also preceded it, and how the mobility of agricultural labor – or the lack of it – contributed to the unfolding crisis.

This set of questions is addressed in one way or another in the fifteen chapters that make up the volume. They are structured along three parts and bracketed by the introduction by the editors and a conclusion written by Price V. Fishback who attempts to summarize the findings of the volume and to compare them with the explanations dominating in US-historiography. The first part contains two contributions that situate the Great Depression in long-term perspectives. Ernst Langthaler uses a Polanyian approach to examine food regime transitions in the context of the Great Depression in the Soviet Union, the United States and Germany, while Vicente Pinilla focusses on the Spanish case to explore the changing character of the agricultural crises in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his view, the food supply crises of earlier times were, from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, replaced by crises that stemmed much more from international contexts and the entanglements of global markets or were conditioned by transformations in other economic sectors and by new technologies.

These long-term perspectives are followed by six case studies that explore the mechanisms of crisis in various national frameworks. Paul Brassley analyzes the 1929 crisis from the viewpoint of the United Kingdom as one of the major food importers of the time, while Julio Djenderedjian and Juan Luis Martirén do so from the perspective of Argentina as a major exporter of agricultural products. Francesco Chiapperino and Gabriele Morettini examine how the Great Depression impacted the heterogenous agricultural landscape of the »Rural Italies«, Socrates D. Petmezas compares the effects of the crisis on the agricultural economy of Greece, Turkey, and Bulgaria, and Zsuzsanna Varga explores how the Great Depression affected Hungary's agriculture that was shaped by an extremely unequal land distribution inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the final contribution to Part II, Tadeusz Janicki sheds light on the Polish case in which the crisis hit particularly hard, aggravating the existing social and economic problems in the countryside, and causing widespread unemployment, poverty, and hunger.

Part III of the volume assembles five contributions in which the focus shifts from the economic dynamics of the Great Depression to the political answers that were developed to cope with the crisis.

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Again, this part is composed of a series of national case studies. The late Mats Morell shows how the experience of the Great Depression in Sweden accelerated the acceptance of regulatory agricultural policies across the political spectrum, leading to converging dynamics between social-democratic and farmers' interests thus paving the way towards a »corporatist welfare state«. Quite another story is provided by Juan Pan-Montojo and James Simpson whose case study on Spain recounts how the Great Depression intersected with domestic political and social turbulences. The crisis affected the attempts to agrarian and land reform set up by the Republican government, accelerated the polarization in the countryside and thus contributed to the escalating conflict dynamics that gave birth to the Civil War. Focusing on the Mexican case, Alejandro Tortolero Villaseñor argues that the revolutionary crisis of 1915 gave rise to an agrarian reform policy that was, however, only implemented in the context of the crisis of 1929; the crisis thus opened a window of opportunity that strengthened the family economies in the Mexican countryside.

Alain Chatriot and Anne-Lise Head-König bring the readers back to Europe. Chatriot shows how the provision with grain became a major political question in interwar France and sketches how the Great Depression enabled the creation of the »Grain Bureau«, an interprofessional public organization which integrated producers, wholesalers, consumers, and public officials in an attempt to stabilize prices, to store grain and to regulate imports and exports. In Switzerland, the Great Depression reinforced the reorientation process that the food supply crisis at the end of World War I had already triggered, leading to a departure from the one-sided orientation on the purchasing power on the world markets and to a diversification of domestic agricultural production.

In sum, the volume provides a highly interesting overview on how the Great Depression impacted rural spaces and agricultural production in several countries tied to the Atlantic economy. It documents an immense variation in the national and regional situations as well as in the political strategies developed to cope with the crisis. Even if the contexts varied between and within different countries and their heterogeneous agricultural structures, the future perspectives for farming were quite bleak in most places already in the late 1920s, and the Great Depression certainly added to this experience of vulnerability. The decrease in prices in the early 1930s, the ensuing fall in farmers' incomes and an increasing albeit very diverse regulation by the national governments belonged to the common experiences throughout the countries covered in the book. But it is not only the spatial scope that makes the book a valuable contribution to the history of agriculture in the 1930s, but also its temporal scope: The fact that most contributions apply a long-term view and place the cataclysm of the Great Depression in broader and longer economic processes and contexts is certainly one of the chief merits of the book.



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As ambitious as »Agriculture and the Great Depression« is, it nonetheless raises a few critical remarks. Firstly, the volume provides a relatively narrow perspective on the economic history of agriculture in the crisis of the 1930s; it is dotted with numerous tables and graphs documenting trade volumes and prices, exports and imports, crop areas and GDP developments and its language is dominated by conceptual borrowings from economics and economic theory. Consequently, the actual experiences of rural people struggling to come to grips with the consequences of economic distress in their everyday lives disappear behind abstract language and seemingly unequivocal numbers.

Secondly, as welcome as the broad international scope of the volume is, the individual contributions remain, a few exceptions aside, within the framework of national history. They are not conceptually framed in a comparative or transnational perspective and thus only pay scant attention to the impact of changing commodity frontiers or the transnational circulation of agricultural policy ideas across national boundaries. The book therefore leaves the impression of a series of national case studies that are highly informative in themselves, but are strangely disconnected and isolated from each other. The intellectual gain from a comparative and transnational history is thus left to the readers because the authors hardly make it explicit.

The book provides thus both: an extremely valuable contribution to the economic history of agriculture in the Great Depression and an invitation to social and cultural historians to shed more light on the experiences, the struggles and the perceptions of rural people trying to come to terms with the repercussions of the crisis on their livelihoods, and to global, comparative and transnational historians to investigate the interconnections and currents on which the knowledge to combat the Great Depression traveled.



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