

BOOK REVIEW:

RESEARCHING THE CULTURE IN AGRI-CULTURE: SOCIAL RESEARCH FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, BY MICHAEL M. CERNEA AND AMIR H. KASSAM, EDITORS. PUBLISHED IN 2005 BY CABI PUBLISHING, CAMBRIDGE, MA. ISBN: 9780851990033 (HARDBACK), 480 PAGES

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In the past two decades there has been an awakening centred on the importance of locating, understanding, and synthesizing the role of culture in conventional biological and technical agricultural research. We know that agricultural economists have had a seat at the agricultural development table for some time, but increasingly the research findings of rural sociologists, anthropologists, and geographers are penetrating work that historically has maintained a 'hard' science veneer. Scholars in the field of agricultural development increasingly realize that many of the obstacles we continue to face in the advancement of a sustainable agri-food system are relational in nature, that is, they are tied to the context of people and places. The realization of the value of social or 'relational' variables in agriculture can be seen not only in the vibrant streams of research conducted by sociologists and anthropologists, but also in the rise of sociological and cultural issues in the work coming out of other disciplines. How many of us have scratched our heads in wonder as we read of animal scientists' attempts to flesh out humans relationship to animals or horticulturalists' efforts at correlating human behaviour and vegetable consumption? One could argue that disciplines such as horticulture or soil science are poaching on social science turf when they cross disciplinary boundaries to probe social phenomenon. On the other hand, perhaps it is the inability of rural sociologists and cultural anthropologists to satisfactorily answer these pressing questions – or to disseminate our findings sufficiently. Cernea and Kassam marshal compelling evidence for a structural interpretational of this practice.

In *Researching the Culture in Agri-Culture: Social Research for International Development*, the editors have tried to bring the fruits of this social science integration and collaboration to light and showcase the emerging role of social science scholarship and knowledge in agriculture. The editors themselves reflect this trans-disciplinary partnership; one is an anthropologist and the other an agro-ecologist. Their objective is to recount the role of social and behavioral research in the scientific agenda of Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). CGIAR is an educational and outreach group comprised of "15 autonomous international research centres with over 8500 scientists and staff – co-sponsored by major development agencies, by some 50 countries of the North and the South and by other international and regional organizations and foundations" (pg. xix). The primary focus of the scientific research coming out of CGIAR centres has traditionally been bio-ecological, although sociologists and anthropologists began to be brought on board CGIAR projects in the early 1980s to communicate the social and cultural attributes of agricultural development. No doubt, the integration of social science theories and methods into biologically based agricultural research has

assuaged the asocial nature of this research and constructed a more empirically grounded conception of agricultural development. The fact that this has not been an easy marriage is revealed in almost every chapter of the book; it has clearly been a painful process for both the newcomer social scientists and old-time bio-physical scholars. The editors write in the preface that bringing social science into the biological and technical research agenda of CGIAR has been an “incessant struggle to affirm its potential and contributions against institutional obstacles, intellectual narrowness, and under-financing, and prejudices of various sorts. Indeed, the book reads at times as if this volume were comprised, in good part, to make a case for the survival of this stream of research due to a recent erosion of institutional support (see page 6).

Researching the Culture in Agri-Culture is an ambitious volume of nearly 500 pages comprising 22 chapters many of which are organized as case studies to collectively explicate the role of culture in agriculture. The authors embrace the familiar working definition, “culture is one’s total way of life” – including beliefs, values, norms, structures, etc. More precisely, culture includes “diverse patterns and forms of social organization” which are the primary building blocks of agricultural systems (page 6). Beyond this initial definition in Chapter 1, the construct of culture is used to develop technical assessments that describe research collaborations between biological and social scientists operating in the CGIAR centres and demonstrate the usefulness of social science. The first section of the edited volume consists of three chapters each devoted to communicating the value of social science in CGIAR’s research program and highlighting the process by which this integration unfolded, including institutional receptivity to the newcomers and a demographic profile of the social scientists themselves.

In the second and third sections of the book, the editors adopt Merton’s “insiders” and “outsiders” dialectical framework to organize these sections. Section II is devoted to the “insiders”; those social science scholars inside CGIAR centres who provide a lens into the evolution of the social science research thrust by exploring accomplishments, obstacles, and future prospects. The strength of the 12 chapters that make up Section II lies in the utility of the cases to provide a micro look into the internal workings of the organization. They do a fine job of highlighting social-biological science collaborations, but more importantly, they reveal patterned conflict and resistance embedded in the institution.

Having begun my career in a U.S. agricultural university experiment station filled with biological scientists and one agricultural economist, as the lone sociologist many of the experiences recounted in Section II were painful reminders of intellectual isolation and alienation. Many of the accounts told in this volume will be shocking to social scientists. They communicate episodes of bias and discrimination directed toward early social science pioneers in CGIAR centres. For instance, one chapter discusses the efforts of gender analysts to sensitize biological scientists to participatory action research with women. Cited in this chapter is an illustration of male scientists laughing, ignoring, and, in general, not listening to gender specialists. Their primary concern being, “Will it make a difference to what I am working on?” (page 90). This chilly climate succeeded in pushing social scientists out of CGIAR and justifying reduced investments in this research stream. I do not want to suggest that these acts of bias are individual shortcomings. They are a product of knowledge structures that privilege certain epistemological and ontological assumptions over

others and, as such, foster an inability to entertain new paradigms or to engage in the critical reflection needed to question assumptions for the purpose of broadening the horizon of possibility in agricultural development. The most illuminating aspect of this book is its ability to begin a dialogue around the diversity of the scientific community allowing us to question who we are as scientists, and probe our values, assumptions, and world views.

Section three showcases the work of “outsiders”, those who are not members of the CGIAR centres, but are part of a much broader scholarly community. The seven chapters in this section raise pressing research questions in need of a social science lens and offer up fruitful lines of inquiry and sustained partnership. Other chapters take the ‘outsiders’ perspective to comment on the value of CGIAR scholarship in the past or offer up prescriptions for future research and policy directions. A few chapters give a first person account of previous employment in CGIAR centres.

The shortcoming of this volume, in my mind, is that it frequently reads as an appeal for social science variables and methods that will seem obvious to social scientists. Thus, I assume the primary readership is natural scientists, and perhaps administrators who control purse strings. It is heavy on institutional introspection and as such the heavy focus on CGIAR can alienate some readers who are simply looking to learn more about the role of culture in agriculture. This is not so much a book for exploring the conceptual role of culture in agriculture, as it is an ontological exercise, probing the nature of agricultural research and providing useful correctives in the form of trans-disciplinary partnerships. The intellectual and disciplinary cultural barriers for cross-disciplinary collaboration are high and straddling these hurdles is often unrewarded. It becomes easy to maintain the status quo. Cernea and Kassam have done a service to agricultural development specialists and, hopefully, in these useful illustrations and honest appraisals of the challenges to overcome, have started to chip away at the intellectual silos in which most of us work. The strength of this collection is that we have concrete illustrations of cross-disciplinary collaboration in action and for this we are much better equipped to confront the resistance and bias of naysayers and to dismantle structural barriers. Rhoades chapter (20), for example, offers a welcome perspective in his endeavor to explain the marginality of social and human sciences as a function of differential status and rewards among scholars.

In support of *Researching the Culture in Agri-Culture: Social Research for International Development*, I see the book’s utility as twofold. It belongs in a graduate social science theory or methods course where students can benefit from pairing theory with these concrete case studies. In a similar view, I think it would also be useful to pair chapters with more theoretical readings on the sociology of culture. Most importantly, however, I think any social or biological scientist considering trans-disciplinary partnerships would do well to review this book for useful instruction on the intellectual foundations and work cultures of each group.