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Marci R. Baranski, The Globalization of Wheat: A Critical History of the Green Revolution

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Marci R. Baranski,
*THE GLOBALIZATION OF WHEAT:
 A CRITICAL HISTORY OF THE GREEN REVOLUTION*,
 Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022, 256 pages.

The Green Revolution has sparked intense scholarly debates among a considerable number of researchers. From the blatant idolisation of Norman Borlaug, hailed as the father of the Green Revolution,¹ to the politically charged criticism of Borlaug's Green Revolution initiatives,² it is difficult to view this subject through an unbiased lens. And for a good reason. Amid an unprecedented acceleration of the climate crisis, historians' gaze instinctively shifts to the past, seeking to identify the origins of the factors that are still confronting us with an irreversible situation. The rapid anthropocenic rise of the agro-industrial complex undeniably stands out as a significant contributor – if not the most significant one – to this perilous juncture, with the Green Revolution playing a pivotal role in facilitating its emergence.

It would be inaccurate to assert that Marci Baranski's book on the globalisation of wheat is not openly critical of the planning and implementation of the Green Revolution. However, in contrast to numerous scholars and ecologists who underscore the adverse political consequences of the Green Revolution on the subaltern, Baranski's academic background as a biochemist provides a more valuable perspective. Her insights delve into the technocratic system of globalised capitalism, highlighting how its conditions can be influenced by seemingly small yet crucial technical details.

The exploration of wheat globalisation unfolds across five chapters, navigating through various subjects and scales. The first chapter holds paramount significance in Baranski's overarching objective, as the author critically assesses Borlaug. This chapter elucidates the paradigm shift instigated by Borlaug, who elevated the concept of wide adaptation – a notion even marginal to the early agricultural programmes of the Rockefeller Foundation. Borlaug's celebrated narrative of triumphant shuttle breeding to combat world hunger catapulted the wide adaptation of an uncritically accepted “black box” status in international development, despite external critiques.

¹ Leon F. Hesser, *The Man Who Fed the World: Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Norman Borlaug and His Battle to End World Hunger: An Authorized Biography* (Dallas: Durban House, 2006).

² Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology, and Politics* (New Jersey: Zed Books, 1991).

Baranski takes a significant turn in the next three chapters, which constitute the core of her historical research on the matter, eventually crafting a nuanced case study on wide adaptability in India and – implicitly – the instrumentalisation of the Green Revolution. These chapters stand as the crux of Baranski's analysis, meticulously pieced together from a diverse array of archival materials and interviews with both retired and active field scientists. The intricate examination of plant breeding and plant breeders in India, spanning historical and contemporary perspectives, lays bare the elevated status of this specific scientific discipline over agronomy, extension and other agricultural domains. The narrative also unveils the growing centralisation within the Indian agricultural authorities, shedding light on factors that sustain wide adaptability in wheat. This persistence, however, Baranski asserts, exists in a harsh contradiction to the realities faced by small-scale farmers and the stated goals of the Indian government in achieving and maintaining food security.

In the ensuing chapters, the author shifts her focus from India to undertake a thorough comparative analysis of wide adaptation schemes implemented across diverse global contexts. This exploration zeroes in on Mexico, which has emerged as the second most crucial sandbox for Borlaug's wide adaptation initiatives, alongside the Middle East and North Africa. An intriguing twist unfolds as international institutions step into the spotlight as key players, resolutely upholding the philosophy of the Green Revolution despite compelling evidence showcasing the unsustainability of such

endeavours. In this milieu, Baranski accomplishes a commendable feat. Amid a narrative that might initially appear historically anchored, she adeptly forges a connection with the contemporary era – a dimension frequently overlooked by historians who tend to confine themselves to the security of archival materials, avoiding their exposure into our present reality. Baranski, however, sidesteps this tendency, crafting an environmental history that not only imparts knowledge but also provides a compelling rationale for more stringent criticism, supported by ample hard-science evidence, against the doleful trajectory that our economic systems have embraced.

One potential critique of Baranski's book pertains to the allocation of agency. The emphasis placed on Borlaug, while scientifically accurate as the catalyst behind the Green Revolution, seems to overshadow the regional and local political dimensions at play. Baranski's narrative concentrates on Borlaug's pivotal role without delving sufficiently into the political agendas that championed wide adaptation efforts. Additionally, lower-level agronomists and state technocrats, who played crucial roles in the local implementation of these schemes, receive less attention. Admittedly, addressing the intricate political landscape and myriad actors involved at various levels would necessitate a significantly larger book. Such an expanded focus could potentially dilute the narrative's commitment to showcasing the top-down nature of contemporary global food-security strategies.

In this context, the book emerges as a significant contribution to contem-

porary academia. Its importance lies in challenging the preconception that a critique of a technocratic process cannot be objective. Baranski boldly takes a clear stance against the implementation of the Green Revolution, substantiating her position with compelling

evidence. Consequently, the book holds significance not only for its thematic insights but also for its methodological approach.

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