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**Review of *Troubled Fields: Men, Emotions and the Crisis in American Farming*. Eric Ramirez-Ferrero. Reviewed by Leon Ginsberg.**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Eric Ramirez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields: Men, Emotions and the Crisis in American Farming*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. \$64.50 hardcover, \$24.50 papercover.

The Farm Crisis is a major American problem that has caused social and economic dislocations in the rural areas of the United States. This book, *Troubled Fields: Men, Emotions, and the Crisis in American Farming*, is an anthropological study of the effects of the Farm Crisis in Northwest Oklahoma. Some stark statistics illustrate the tragedy. The suicide rate among farmers during the 1980's, perhaps the height of the farm crisis, was three times greater than for the general population in Oklahoma. Although accidents are a leading cause of farm related deaths, Oklahoma farmers in the 1980's were five times more likely to die from suicide than from farm accidents.

The author, a Stanford-educated anthropologist developed most of the data for this book from interviews he conducted with twenty-six individuals - thirteen men and thirteen women. Their life stories required three or four visits of one and a half to two hours each so the information obtained was extensive. He has personal history in Northwest Oklahoma and especially the major city of Enid. Although the back cover of the book calls Ramirez-Ferrero a native Oklahoman, his family, in fact, came from Cuba to New York in 1961. Ramirez-Ferrero was born in 1963. His father worked as a waiter at a restaurant in the city and was also involved in the diamond industry. But, disenchanted with New York City, the family moved to Enid when the author was 11 years old to purchase and operate a motel there. So, although the author knew Oklahoma from childhood, he did not grow up in a farm family.

This richly researched and well-written book is valuable for many reasons. It does an excellent job of explaining the basic issues in the Farm Crisis. It also shows the ways anthropological studies can come to conclusions about human behavior and phenomena without the use of large samples and structured questionnaires.

Several issues constituted the crisis, which had major

impact on Midwestern farming, especially grains, perhaps less on ranching and on fruits and vegetables. The genesis of the crisis was a collapse in farm earnings and agricultural real estate prices in the 1980s. In the 1970s, many of the world's nations became large customers for American farm products, especially nations of the former Soviet Union. Those nations were incapable of producing enough food for their own populations but could purchase American farm products at relatively low prices because of a weak dollar. As the economic value of farming increased, the cost of farmland increased, as well. Farmers, eager to benefit from improved farming profits, purchased more land with borrowed money.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the growth of the money supply and the low value of the dollar caused changes in the federal fiscal systems. Budget deficits during the Reagan administration caused interest rates to increase. The increased value of the dollar made the purchase of American products, including farm products, more expensive than the purchase of similar products from other nations. The value of the land farmers had purchased declined. Lenders would not provide them with new loans and, in some cases, would not continue current loans because the value of the land, which was used as collateral, had declined.

The result was farm foreclosures, bank insolvencies, the failure of many local businesses (which could no longer sell their products to farm families), migration of people from farming communities to other areas, the closing of schools and hospitals, family breakups, and suicides. Men who were no longer able to retain their farms comprised a significant portion of those who committed suicide.

Of course, the issues were more than simply loans and land values. Farming became an increasingly industrial enterprise, often with the encouragement of government and the cooperative extensions services of the state. Family farming as an institution declined and farming as a business, like any other, replaced it. Increasingly farm products were less valuable and the labor that went into them less well-paid than other work and products in the American economy. In many ways, farm products were worth no more than they had been decades earlier, although the prices of products needed to

operate farms and to simply live were now much more expensive than they had been.

This rich work sheds light on a number of additional elements useful in understanding farming in modern America. One of the most significant is the increase in the size of farms. The author shows that from 1959 to 1997, the average farm size in Oklahoma grew from 503 acres to 698 acres. More technology, a larger scale of operations, and a more industrial approach to farming were all significant factors in changing the lives of farm families.

The book also discusses the American Agricultural Movement, an important grassroots effort to sustain family-oriented farming and its values. In its relatively few pages, it is loaded with interesting, and, for most readers, new information about a phenomenon that has had a great effect on and will continue to impact the whole United States, especially its rural areas.

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Rami Benbenishty and Ron Avi Astor, *School Violence in Context: Culture, Neighborhood, Family, School and Gender*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. \$39.95 hardcover.

Rates of bullying, victimization, and critical incidents of violence in schools represent an important contemporary educational policy concern. Given the proliferation of programmatic and policy efforts in recent decades (ranging from conflict resolution programs in local schools to federal zero tolerance policy), there are striking gaps in the quality of the existent knowledge base. Benbenishty and Astor carefully document the lack of theoretical development in this area. In particular, they highlight the surprising lack of attention to school contextual variables. While prior research on school violence general focuses on the student as the critical unit of attention, Benbenishty and Astor essential apply a "school-effects" framework to their study of school violence.

Three general topical areas organize this twelve chapter book. The first chapters outline the theoretical framework and