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Geopolitics and the Green Revolution: Wheat, Genes, and the Cold War

By John H. Perkins



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During the last 100 years, the worldwide yields of cereal grains, such as wheat and rice, have increased dramatically. Since the 1950s, developments in plant breeding science have been heralded as a "Green Revolution" in modern agriculture. But what factors have enabled and promoted these technical changes? And what are the implications for the future of agriculture? This new book uses a framework of political ecology and environmental history to explore the "Green Revolution's" emergence during the 20th century in the United States, Mexico, India, and Britain. It argues that the national security planning efforts of each nation were the most important forces promoting the development and spread of the "Green Revolution"; when viewed in the larger scheme, this period can be seen as the latest chapter in the long history of wheat use among humans, which dates back to the neolithic revolution. Efforts to reform agriculture and mitigate some of the harsh environmental and social consequences of the "Green Revolution" have generally been insensitive to the deeply embedded nature of high yielding agriculture in human ecology and political affairs. This important insight challenges those involved in agriculture reform to make productivity both sustainable and adequate for a growing human population.



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Editorial Review

Review

"An easy-to-read book for anyone interested in the entanglement of politics and agricultural development. All levels."--*Choice*

"John H. Perkins has written an important book on the development of wheat breeding in the United States, Great Britain, India and Mexico during the 20th century. He analyzes the development of scientific knowledge about breeding techniques along with efforts to increase agricultural production within each country itself. His original goal was 'to understand the plant-breeding science behind high-yielding varieties of wheat' in these four nations. In the course of his research, however, he discovered that science during this period was intertwined with domestic and international policy issues, noting especially 'the immense importance of agriculture in general and the cereal crops in particular to the shape of human culture and the security of nations'. This realization is crucial to a full understanding of the role and place of science in the world in modern times, and provides the central compelling theme of the book."--*Endeavour*

"This book seeks to use a 'political ecological perspective' to integrate 'the political economic and ecological dimensions of agricultural management' (p5) of wheat. What emerged in the late 19th century was the new science of plant breeding, an important component of which was wheat breeding, with Britain and the U.S. as major participants. Although Britain initially was a major wheat producer and breeder, early this century the U.S. became an increasingly important wheat producer with a large well-integrated network of state-subsidized agricultural research stations and a leading source of new varieties of wheat."--*The Quarterly Review of Biology*

"The discipline of political ecology seeks to link the two theoretical concepts of political economy and ecological analysis. As a scientific outsider to this social science, I see its strengths to lie in its multidisciplinary nature and its dependency on actual events. *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution* remains true to these strengths. The pivotal importance of agricultural productivity in shaping the present political, economic, and social context is researched well and presented suitably in this book. . . . *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution* is a positive addition to the science of political ecology. It will also be a good read for agricultural scientists in general, and plant breeders in particular, who will learn about how the fruits of their labor can have a social impact that goes beyond improving crop yields."--*BioScience*

"Uses a framework of political ecology and environmental history to explore the emergence of what public relations professionals christened the Green Revolution from about 1900 to about 1980. Places the development and dissemination of high-yield wheat strains in the context both of security planning of the US, Mexico, India, and Britain and of the long history of the interaction between the two species, human and wheat, since neolithic times. Develops some insights that challenge those involved in reducing the impact of

the Revolution and making agriculture both sustainable and adequate for a growing human population."--*SciTech Book News*

"John H. Perkins . . . has provided by far the most comprehensive, historically grounded, and insightful volume on the subject to date. . . . Perkins successfully shows how the early concerns of Progressives in the United States and their British counterparts led them to use plant breeding . . . to increase agricultural productivity. This, they asserted, would free more people to work in the growing industrial economy while improving the living standards of those left on the farm. This theory was supplanted by a new one in the post-World War II period . . . The new theory suggested that population growth led in a Malthusian fashion to hunger. . . . Perkins quite properly evaluates the various strands of both theories in light of the empirical evidence he has carefully amassed from statistical tracts, documentary analysis, and interviews. . . . [T]his fine volume will for many years to come be the main reference on the Green Revolution."--*Environmental History*

"This study employs techniques of environmental history and political ecology to analyze the causes of the green revolution, which has produced immense increases in agricultural yields in more as well as less developed nations since the 1950's. . . . Readers interested in the politics of international relationships might want to concentrate on Perkins's discussion of the 'population-national security theory,' his term for the conceptual framework formulated in the United States to justify promotion of agricultural development in the Third World(chap. 6). . . . Perkins does a good job of discrediting the conceptual leaps of faith required to maintain belief in the population-national security theory. . . . [T]his book succeeds in bringing historical scholarship to bear on the analytic concerns of political economy and ecology."--*Environmental Ethics*

About the Author

John H. Perkins is at Evergreen State College.

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