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Review of *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* by Ronald R. Kline

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Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America. Ronald R. Kline. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xii+372 pp. Introduction, illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliographical and methodological notes, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

Ronald Kline examines the acquisition and use of automobiles, electricity, telephones, and radios among farm families from the early twentieth century to 1960. He builds his argument around the tension between farm folk and the forces of urbanization in cities and towns, federal agencies such as REA and Extension Services, and corporations that manufactured and sold various technologies. While purveyors of machines and energy expected they would initiate urbanization of rural social and economic relationships, and that farm families who adopted them would therefore become

modern, farmers resisted both the technologies and the assumptions of urbanization until they found the new gadgets useful enough to justify their expense. Even then, farmers befuddled the agents of directed change by incorporating the new technologies into existing patterns of communication, household and farm spending, and labor organization.

Kline dismisses widely accepted definitions of modernization, describing the process as “relative to time, place, and culture” rather than monolithic and inevitable. Modernization is a “fractured process” subject to debate and varying levels of acceptance. While the agents of change tended to refer to the technologies as modernizing, inherent in their arguments for acceptance of new technologies was the process of urbanization—making rural life more like city life. These distinctions allow Kline to hear the voices of dissent in farm homes and communities and to legitimize the concerns of rural people without condescension.

Resistance to the new technologies took various forms. Farmers sometimes dug ditches in roads to trap and disable automobiles; they cut down telephone poles or used telephones to listen to music down the line, rendering the phone lines useless for calls and using up batteries; they accepted electrical wiring, but refused to buy appliances that used expensive kilowatts and increased their monthly costs. But the most common form of resistance was to the advice and insistence of urban experts who blindly promoted technological change without reference to farmers’ interests and who assumed that those who adopted new technologies were model, “modern” farmers. The contest of wills between farmers as individuals or as members of technology co-ops and the agencies and corporations that sponsored change makes up a large part of *Consumers in the Country*.

This is an engaging, well-researched book. Kline does a good job of explaining the technology, though more pictures of the cars, telephones, ranges, and washing machines he writes about would have been helpful. He has also done a fair job of considering how gender affected both acceptance and resistance of technology as well as the role of women as agents of change, but racial issues are largely missing. His one reference to a mixed race electric co-op in the South indicates this might be an intriguing line of research. He discusses regional differences in farm interest in technology, but seldom examines regions west of the Mississippi except for the Pedernales (Texas) Electrical Co-op Lyndon B. Johnson organized.

Kline’s presentation of farmers as historical actors who controlled acceptance of technology on their own terms is valuable and should inform future studies of agricultural communities. **Barbara Handy-Marchello**, *Department of History, University of North Dakota*.