

Book Review

- *Soybeans and Power: Genetically Modified Crops, Environmental Politics, and Social Movements in Argentina*, by Pablo Lapegna, Oxford University Press, 2016.

When do communities experiencing health and environmental suffering related to agrochemical exposure engage in contentious actions? In *Soybeans and Power* Pablo Lapegna analyzes the social and environmental impacts caused by the expansion of the GM crops and agrochemicals in Argentina. Lapegna's book focuses on a much less studied topic in social movement research: demobilisation. Argentina is the third largest world producer of soybeans genetically modified to resist herbicides. Tracing the changes in time within a rural community in the province of Formosa, northern Argentina, Lapegna asks: why did peasant families organize disruptive protests and legally demanded reparation to agribusiness enterprises due to an agrochemical drift in 2003, but did not organize any collective action facing the same problem in 2009?

While disputing the techno-productivist and moral discourse promoting GM crops and its enthusiastic uni-linear narrative of progress, the book engages with the critical scholarship on food regimes. The literature draws on world-system theory and Gramscian analysis to underscore the material and discursive bases of agrarian capitalism and situates GM crops as part of a neoliberal project. Differently, though, to the macro-analytical methods that dominate such scholarship, Lapegna uses what he calls a global ethnographic approach and social movement analytical categories to explain how global agrarian biotechnology takes root in Argentina, mediated by particular experiences and understandings and by the support and the opposition of local and national actors. In addition to the asymmetries between world regions and social classes, the book claims sensitivity to the spatiality of its impacts and its uneven geographies within countries.

The book is organized in five chapters. The first chapter explains how GM soy spread so quickly in neoliberal Argentina in the nineties, emphasizing the uneven geographies and the socioenvironmental consequences: deforestation,

forced evictions of peasants and indigenous communities and contamination by agrochemicals. It analyzes the relationships between the ‘postneoliberal’ government, social movements, and agrarian elites. Then, the author provides the reader with historical and place-specific knowledge on the regional dynamics of peasant mobilization and patronage politics in northeast Argentina in late 1960s and 1970s.

Against this background, chapter 3 presents the contention around rural communities’ exposure to agrochemicals led by the Peasant Movement of Formosa (MoCaFor) in 2003, showing the discrepancies between the official discourse about the potential advantages of an environmental-friendly technology and its environmental- and health impacts on the ground. The author challenges the discourse that technologies are *per se* neutral, and shows how the misuse of this discourse can cause damage by keeping invisible the fact that the introduction of GM crops is embedded in unequal social and power relations.

The final chapters develop the core argument of the book by describing the processes of demobilisation and accommodation of MoCaFor since 2003. In a context in which state-society relations have been historically characterised by pressures from clientelism and patronage politics, Lapegna critically avoids the concept of ‘co-optation’. This concept is based on very simplistic assumptions about the power relations between social movement leaders with, on the one side, authorities, and, on the other side, their grassroots bases. Instead, he coins the concepts of ‘dual pressure’ and ‘institutional recognition’. The first refers to organisation dynamics of peasant movements while responding to pressures from below (the grassroots’ members) and from above (access to resources in exchange for support for the government). By distributing resources resulting from national political alliances, movement organisations keep running at the cost of refraining from contention at regional and local levels. Demobilisation results from MoCaFor’s strategy to support the center-left national government, which is allied to regional authoritarian governments. While both governments belong to the same Peronist party, they represent different constituencies and political programmes. The concept of ‘institutional recognition’ relates to how provincial authorities responded to the pesticide drift of 2009 with what Lapegna calls ‘performative governance’: authorities gave the impression of a governmental response by conducting blood tests with peasants and holding health and environmental surveys, while actually doing nothing to remedy the situation of toxic contamination. This event led social movements to reconsider the effectiveness of mobilisation and eventually to negotiate and adapt to GM crops and agrochemical exposure, even adopting GM cotton themselves.

My few critical remarks concern the way Lapegna relates his explanations of demobilisation with social movement theory. He asks why MoCaFor demobilised despite favourable political opportunities due to access to national authorities and resources. In my view, there is room to explore the concept of political opportunities and threats with a multiscale analytical perspective. While subnational social movements had contacts and resources at the national level, their political opportunity at the provincial level was closed. Not only did they lack chances of influencing the governor through institutional channels, but they also faced threats of police repression if choosing to pursue contentious actions. Meanwhile, they could not count on national allies for political mediation. So, at the provincial level, MoCaFor's conditions were not favourable to mobilisation.

Here actually lies a fundamental contribution to the scholarship on patronage politics, demobilisation and political opportunity structures. Scholars have argued that social movements might not seek more advantages but increased access (Gamson, 1992), expecting that access to institutional spaces in the policy process becomes a durable opportunity structure (Tarrow, 2005). In contexts of high social and political inequalities, having access to allies and resources from the polity can become the priority of a social movement, even if it has to forego some of its demands. Another strength of the book is the ethnographic, fine-grained study of social movements that abstains from romanticizing and judging them. Lapegna does that by paying attention to the ambivalences among subalterns and the politics within social movements, by listening to leaders, rank-and-file members, potential adherents as well as rural poor who have internalized elite discourses that stigmatize social movements. He problematises the mythic figure of an agroecological peasant showing how rural communities in Formosa had no concerns about pesticides as long as these were not misused and caused them health and economic damage.

This is a superb book that will appeal to scholars and non-academics interested in agrarian, political and environmental debates in a number of topics such as social movements, GMOs, pesticides, postneoliberal governments and patronage politics in Latin America.

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References

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