

TO SEE OR NOT THE SEE THE SOY

Review by Annika Rabo

KREGG HETHERINGTON, 2020, *The Government of beans: Regulating Life in the Age of Monocrops*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 286 pp., ISBN 978-1-4780-0689-3

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“The soy is everywhere – you just can’t see it” (p 70). This is one of the many sentences I have underlined in my copy of this cleverly crafted book. It is geographically grounded in eastern Paraguay, but with links and ramifications across the globe. Soy is, indeed, everywhere. It is utilized for human consumption in many different edible and non-edible products, and today the vast majority of soy is used for animal fodder. In many parts of the world, people thus eat ‘refined’ soya when they eat meat. More than 300 million tons were produced in 2019 making it the sixth most important staple crops in the world on a list headed by maize. And like maize, traces of soy can be found in human meat eaters and vegetarians alike. Brazil is the largest producer of soya, followed by the USA. Paraguay is only the sixth on that list, but considering the comparatively small size of the country, the bean is now very important for the national economy. In the book soy appears, disappears and reappears in different guises supported by some actors and resisted by others.

“*La Soja mata – soy kills*” is a recurring expression and theme in the book. Increased meat consumption, the increased soy cultivation, and deforestation of the Amazonas are deeply connected. Forests are cut down to provide space for grazing animals and soy cultivation. The soy is processed and given to domesticated animals - also outside South America - to maximize their growth, thus maximizing profits. Soy contributes to the killing of trees, and to

the thousands of animal and plant species which live in, off, and among the tropical forests. Soy also kills humans through the careless or illegal use of pesticides and other chemical products which have become an integral part of their cultivation.

The book can thus be read as a history of the contemporary victory of monocrops - where nature has been thoroughly commodified - exemplified through the case of Paraguay. It can also be read as a narrative of how small farmers and day laborers in the eastern part of the country have economically suffered and been exposed to serious health hazards, and even death, due to the introduction and expansion of soy cultivation. Migration, uprooting and settlement along the often porous national border, as discussed by Hetherington, is intimately linked to the presence or absence of the Paraguayan state, and that deeply affects different and differentiated citizens. He also describes and analyzes the - in the end futile - efforts of using law and legal means to curtail the advance of the literally toxic development of a monocrop like soy. The book can hence also be read as a condensed narrative of Paraguay's development since late 19th century.

The book starts with a massacre in northeast Paraguay in 2012. Riot police had arrived to evict landless *campesinos* trying to lay claim to land. The ensuing fight resulted in eleven dead peasants and six dead policemen. This took place not under a dictatorship, but during the presidency of bishop Fernando Luga who had come to power through the support of rural and urban people, parties and organizations struggling for land reforms and rural welfare. Some of these supporters were appointed by the new president to set new environmental policies in place to, among other things, eliminate the health hazards caused by chemicals in agriculture and particularly in the cultivation of soya. Heatherington refers to this new group of officials as *The Government of Beans*. It was a short-lived experiment and only a few days after the massacre, the president was removed from office and the reforms were halted. Through the book this critical event is made legible not by following a conventional chronologically ordered narrative, but by intricately weaving layer upon layer of interpretations in short chapters in the three parts of the book.

Soy was introduced in the early 1920s by Pedro Nicolás Ciancio. He insisted that the bean would cure rural hunger, give income to poor *campesinos* and earn the nation much needed export income. He was not successful, but like soy itself he appears in different guises in the book. Ciancio was both a medical doctor and an agronomist combining a concern for the health and control of both humans and plants. This is a central nexus in the book. In the last century pervasive ideas of economically, physically and culturally improving the human stock

through investment in improved agriculture have locked plants and humans in a dance macabre threatening and even destroying both. Heatherington critiques Foucault and those concerned with *governmentality* for privileging humans over other life forms. We must, he argues, pay attention also to the *agri-* in biopolitics to understand the emergence of monocultures and its devastating impact on all forms of life.

Only in the 1970s did soy had its dramatic breakthrough in Paraguay, and then almost by accident. From the 1940s US-supported agricultural programs impacted greatly on Paraguay and twenty years later the forested eastern part of the country had been transformed. Landless *campesinos* had been resettled and given land for cultivation in return for support to the regime. Cotton was deemed particularly suitable for such small family farms. Concomitantly wheat was introduced and cultivated on larger farms often run by Europeans from agricultural colonies on the Brazilian side of the border. It was the commercial growing of wheat which paved way for the soy. Farmers found that it was an excellent nitrogen fixing summer crop supporting the wheat grown in the winter. But when global demands for soy increased dramatically it became the main concern of these farmers. These farms expanded across vast areas often encircling, or pushing, out the smaller cotton farmers who came to see soy as their enemy. Ultimately “soy won” (p. 155). But Hetherington does not cast the bean as a villain and cotton as the conquered hero. Cotton also relied on toxic chemicals and conquered other life forms by depleting the soil and polluting the water. But while labor intensive cotton opened economic opportunities for landless *campesinos*, the highly mechanized soy cultivation instead pushes rural people into poverty.

This well-written and important book is simultaneously a political and economic history of Paraguay, particularly its eastern part, and a depiction of a short historical period of radical politics on the part of the state. But perhaps first and foremost it is an exploration of how to anthropologically engage in understanding, explaining and writing about the age of monocrops. It is mercifully devoid of academic jargon and Hetherington combines rich ethnography based on long-term field engagement with innovative writing and analytical openness. The issues presented and the conflicts laid bare are not resolved. Instead, the political and economic - the *agribiopolitical* - placement of plants and people, shift and change, forcing the reader to be attentive to the complexity of these relations.

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