

Book Review

– *Social Mobilization, Global Capitalism, and Struggles over Food: A Comparative Study of Social Movements*, by Renata Motta. Routledge, 2016.

Genetically modified (GM) crops are obtained from genetically engineered seeds patented by biotechnology corporations. These crops (soybeans, corn, cotton, and canola) produce a toxin that kills a pest or resist an herbicide. GM soybeans were commercially released in the United States and Argentina in 1996, and since then the area planted with GM crops has steadily grown, particularly in the Americas.

Against this backdrop, Renata Motta's book analyzes the sweeping expansion of GM crops in Brazil and Argentina and addresses a set of questions: Why have Brazilians actively contested agricultural biotechnology, whereas Argentines tend to be more passive about its adoption and expansion? And why, despite these differences, are these countries now among the largest global exporters of GM crops? The book adroitly tackles these specific puzzles with the ultimate goal of answering a broader question: Can contentious collective action influence the shape and direction of the global food system?

An introductory chapter poses these questions and offers an overview of the Brazilian and Argentine contexts. Chapter 1 reviews the theoretical approaches to GM crops, and Motta does a superb job at condensing the research on global food regimes, scientific and policy culture, public participation, "bio-hegemony", social movements, and peasant studies. She knits suggestive connections between these literatures, making a compelling case as to why bridging these diverse strands of work helps us to better understand the social context in which GM crops are supported and questioned. One of Motta's contributions is that she accomplishes this feat without missing sight of the important role of action and agents in shaping structural and global processes.

Chapters 2 through 5 apply the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 1. Chapters 2 and 3 scrutinize the adoption and expansion of GM crops in Argentina, and the subsequent contestation of their social and environmental impacts. Whereas Argentina converted half of its agricultural land to GM soybeans in the span of a decade, in Brazil the adoption and expansion of GM crops has been more contentious. This is presented in the next two chapters,

first zooming in on the controversies surrounding the introduction of GM crops in Brazil and then analyzing their eventual incorporation and extension.

The empirical analysis is put in perspective in Chapters 6 and 7. Motta compares and contrasts Argentina and Brazil by drawing from Peter Newell's concept of "bio-hegemony": "the alignment of material, institutional, and discursive power in a way which sustains a coalition of forces which benefit from the prevailing model of agricultural development" (2009, p. 38). Argentine agriculture quickly became ensnared in GM crops; the strong alignment of the state with a pro-GM position ensured their fast and ironclad expansion. Indigenous-peasant organizations, neighborhood associations, and supportive scientists mobilized after the fact, when the exposure to agrochemicals and other social problems (land evictions and repression) were well underway. In Brazil, in contrast, agricultural biotechnology was initially strongly contested due to the presence of a large environmental movement and a number of NGOs ready and able to engage in legal mobilization, in alliance with the national administration and state governments. Later on, peasant movements entered the fray and bolstered this opposition. By the mid-2000s, however, a changing political and agrarian landscape ultimately created obstacles for continued mobilization. Farmers, agribusinesses, and the pro-GM camp took advantage of the "fait accompli" of GM seeds smuggled from Argentina and planted in southern Brazil to pressure the government for an approval of GM crops. As peasant movements were increasingly delegitimized in the media, and allies in the government wavered in their opposition to agricultural biotechnology, the pro-GM coalition combined global and local agribusiness interests and savvy politicians of the *bancada ruralista* to win the upper hand. By 2013, GM crops had gained prominence in Brazil's export-oriented agriculture.

Motta crafts an ambitious analytical framework to scrutinize the similarities and differences between Brazil and Argentina regarding the adoption and expansion of GM crops. One of the main contributions of the book is to provide detailed country case studies while opening a conversation among literatures that often talk past each other. For example, it is an excellent demonstration of the importance of paying attention to political economy to understand the trajectory of social movements and their role in shaping public policy.

As is often the case with shrewd social science, the book's strengths also reveal some of its weaknesses. By covering a variety of events and connecting several theories, the book sacrifices detail and specificity for breadth and geographic coverage. Motta leaves no rock unturned when dissecting every major controversy about GM crops in Argentina and Brazil, and each relevant organization in these countries is covered. But as the saying goes, the devil is in the details. For example, the argument that illegality and repression played a key role in fostering GM crops is quite insightful. This point, however, is only briefly discussed. Readers with knowledge of the cases may be left eager to hear more about this and other issues. To be clear, this is not a flaw but rather suggests that the book is quite thought-provoking.

Social Mobilization, Global Capitalism, and Struggles over Food: A Comparative Study of Social Movements should be read by anyone interested in the relationship between social movements and agrarian capitalism, and it is mandatory reading for anyone interested in understanding how GM crops came to dominate South American plains.

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Reference

Newell, P. (2009). Bio-hegemony: The political economy of agricultural biotechnology in Argentina, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 41(1): 27-57. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X08005105>