

Food for the few. Neoliberal globalism and biotechnology in Latin America, edited by Gerardo Otero, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2008, xiii + 321 pp., US\$45 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-292-71770-1

The book achieves the important objective of demonstrating from a cultural, political, and economic perspective how the introduction of biotechnology resonated with the dramatic consequences of economic liberalisation in Latin America. Anthropologists, economists, geographers, political scientists, and sociologists contributed their field studies to this volume analysing how changing dietary patterns, belief in the miraculous nature of transgenic molecules, the advice of absentee experts, corporate concentration in the agro-food market, and global food policymaking all contributed to the increasing importance of transgenic crops grown for export. What makes this book an exciting read for a readership beyond the one interested in Latin America is that the patterns of deregulation that the authors find in Latin America correspond to similar patterns worldwide where weak states – or cunning states pretending to be weak – surrender to the imperatives of global corporations and international trade agreements (Randeria 2003), give up state monopolies over the distribution of seed, remove the requirement for all commercial seed to be certified, and weaken the monitoring of seed quality.

The book opens with a chapter by Gerardo Otero that sets the introduction of transgenic crops in the historical perspective of the Green Revolution, demonstrating that farmers cultivating transgenic crops are caught in between a few multinational corporations that own the intellectual property rights, sell the seeds, and buy the products on a contract basis. The type of agriculture that Latin American governments promote (Otero and Pechlaner) favours intensification in areas with high agricultural potential using (bio)technological packages with high inputs in fertilisers and pesticides to the detriment of subsistence agriculture. The social and environmental consequences are accelerating economic exclusion, decreased crop and dietary diversity, and increased malnutrition. The book contests the argument frequently heard in international forums that biotechnology would be an appropriate tool for combating hunger in the world if only the populations in developing countries were ‘capacitated’ to receive the technology, and if their institutions became capable of regulating it. In their respective chapters, Kathy McAfee and Kees Jansen and Esther Roquas provide examples from Argentina, Mexico, Brazil and Honduras demonstrating that new regulations were often introduced by ‘absentee experts’ according to standards set from outside without addressing the socio-economic consequences that the new technology would have on the national level, but focussing instead exclusively on securing intellectual property rights and on assessing and framing risk.

As several authors show in this volume agricultural biotechnology is not only a vehicle for reinforcing unequal power relationships in agriculture, but appears for many producers as a last resort, a miraculous remedy for defending their precarious competitive position on the increasingly open American market. Manuel Poitras, in his research on the regulatory changes in Mexico that prepared the ground for the introduction of agricultural biotechnologies, shows how the state withdrew from the public control and distribution of seed, liberalised the lines of seed research, weakened seed quality monitoring, and did not enforce bio-safety regulations.

He argues that the creation of a regulatory environment favourable to the monopolistic strategies of the life science multinationals makes it impossible to orient agro-biotechnologies towards the needs of small and midsize farmers. At the same time – as he argues in a separate chapter co-authored with Gerardo Otero and Gabriela Pechlaner – there is an element of irrational faith in the benefits of agro-biotechnology that seems to motivate farmers under high economic pressure to adopt the technology. The authors show, using an empirical case study from La Laguna, Mexico, that dairy farmers respond to the increasing market pressure from milk imported from the United States since the signing of NAFTA by massively adopting the genetically modified growth hormone rBST (used to increase milk production in cows), consciously embracing its high sanitary risks even though its profitability remains at best questionable. A similar pattern prevailed in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, as Wendy Jepson, Christian Brannstrom, Renato Stancato de Souza, Shuji Hisano and Simone Altoe show, where small and medium sized farmers readily adopted genetically modified soy beans illegally imported from Argentina in order to stay competitive, while large soy producers in other states like Parana were much more reluctant to engage in genetically modified (GM) soy production because they wanted to preserve their European GM-free markets and were anxious about the monopoly control by agro-biotechnology companies.

In Argentina, as Miguel Teubal shows, transgenic soybeans for export have supplanted crops for the domestic market, drastically reducing the variety of food available for domestic consumption. While the agricultural output, especially in soybeans, expanded dramatically, hunger and poverty also increased. Teubal argues that the effort – promoted by politicians, journalists, and experts – to transform the country into an intensive export producer by reducing the number of farms and increasing their size and their technological outfit contributed significantly to hunger and misery but has not led to a decrease in food prices for the consumer. As Elizabeth Fitting points out in her study of Mexican corn producers, the neoliberal reforms no longer pursue the objective of food self-sufficiency, but focus instead on providing access for urban consumers to imported cheap grains, exposing urban consumers to the vagaries of fluctuating world market prices and small rural corn producers to competition with highly industrialised US farmers, which they cannot sustain.

Manuel Poitras contributes a conclusion to the themes of this book by arguing that resistance to genetically modified organisms (GMOs) displaces the allegedly neutral discourse about GMOs and uncovers the power relations at play in the use of this technology. He claims that resistance against biotechnology is vigorous because the technology has been imposed from the top down without the active support of the users/producers and the consumers of the technology. While he certainly has a point when he argues that consumers were not consulted, the case is less clear-cut for producers, who often adopted biotechnology enthusiastically, sometimes even before it was authorised by the authorities. Biotechnology as it is in use today is certainly a technology that benefits the few, while many use it hoping against better knowledge to be among the winners in a ruthless competition. The strength of this book is its analysis of both the political and institutional backgrounds of the regulatory structures of biotechnology, together with the individual motivations of greed, fear, and faith, that drove technology adoption.

References

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Birgit Müller © 2009

LAIOS-CNRS, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris

Email: bmuller@msh-paris.fr

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