

Gerardo Otero (ed.): Food for the Few: Neoliberal Globalism and Biotechnology in Latin America

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The social and ecological impacts of agricultural biotechnology are the subject of increasing concern in social science research. In particular, scholars critical of neoliberal restructuring point to the intersection between the “life science” project and the promulgation structural adjustments and political institutions necessary to open foreign states to investment, foreign markets to commercial products, and foreign ecologies to exploitation. *Food for the Few: Neoliberal Globalism and Biotechnology in Latin America* brings together 13 authors to explore these connections and their implications for farming communities, biodiversity and the distribution of power in Latin America. The volume, edited by Gerardo Otero, grounds the discussion in the Green Revolution to trace the historical and material lineage of the modern agricultural paradigm of which biotechnology is the latest addition. The book concludes, quite unsurprisingly, that the adoption of intensive, industrial models of agriculture is “having profound effects on agrarian social organization in developing countries” (292). Drawing on case studies of Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil, the authors give the lie to the industry’s promise that genetically-engineered products are “pro-poor,” ecologically-beneficial (or at a minimum benign) and scale-neutral. Rather, these detailed empirical accounts document environmental and social injustice of proprietary biological organisms; or what Otero calls the “anti-poor technological dynamics” (293) of the corporate biotechnology project.

Food for the Few begins by situating the effects of genetic engineering within the context of societies already

suffering the impact Green Revolution technologies and the extension of the political economic and agricultural practices developed for the needs of the global North. The contributing authors then present wonderfully specific historical accounts of the regulation and social life of agricultural biotechnology in each of the major countries examined to draw insights that unite the experiences of agricultural communities across Latin America and the developing world. For example, Elizabeth Fitting (Chap. 6) documents how the displacement and migration of millions of Mexican peasants in the aftermath of NAFTA is leading directly to the loss of indigenous agroecological knowledge, decreasing in situ maize production and threatening crop biodiversity—a fact with significant local and global implications.

The book’s crucial contribution is a geographic perspective lacking in current debates of biotechnology’s merits. For example, Kathy McAfee (Chap. 3) argues that genetically-engineered crops developed for temperate, industrial agricultures are fundamentally incommensurate with the cultural, ecological and social context of Mexican food production. Focusing on the unequal geography of scientific and political capital, Kees Jansen and Esther Roquas argue that the biosafety regulation in Latin America is marked by a persistent reliance on “absentee expertise” and structural and financial impediments to domestic research and development. Accordingly, it is hard, if not impossible to develop regulation that responds to the needs of individual Southern countries.

Food for the Few makes a second significant contribution to discussions of the social mobilization against genetically-engineered crops. The chapters by Wendy Jepson, Christian Brannstrom, and Renato Stancato De Souza (Chap. 9) and Manuel Poitras (Chap. 11), in particular, highlight the opposition’s role in destabilizing the

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industry's hegemony. Scholars interested in the practices and politics of contemporary social movements at large will appreciate the detailed accounts of the struggles in Brazil and Mexico, respectively. Such analysis has been sourly ignored to date by the agrifood literature and these works provide a needed perspective on the technology's prospects in Latin America. More important, these essays counter characterizations of anti-biotechnology activism as "anti-technology" or "anti-progress." On one hand, Jepson and her colleagues illustrate the ways the state's opposition turns on economic and technological priorities. Poitras, on the other hand, repositions opposition from civil society groups within "the broader counter-hegemonic movement against neoliberal globalism" (267). Either way, the chapters widen understanding of the meaning and impact of the growing resistance to genetically-engineered crops.

The volume is not, however, without shortcomings. Despite the collection's empirical richness, there is a noticeable lack of methodological detail. As such, scholars and students may find it difficult to compare findings across cases or to assess conclusions. Moreover, many of the chapters offer preliminary and speculative investigations. While, Otero is supported in his final deductions that "the question of hunger and whether biotechnology will, in fact, become the savior of the poor appears to be answered... with a resounding 'No'" (292), it remains important to ask to what extent current data can support generalizations of the impacts of agricultural biotechnology on agrarian

communities and biodiversity in Latin America? In fact, the geographic perspective at the book's heart suggests the need to carefully consider the applicability of findings across national borders. Thus, *Food for the Few* makes clear that there is still much work to be done and many avenues yet to be explored to fully understand the ramifications of agro-technological change in the developing world.

In conclusion, *Food for the Few* is a timely contribution to discussions of biotechnology and agricultural regulation in Latin America and beyond. Its chapters will be of interest to geographers, sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists, as well as anyone concerned about the ongoing changes in food production and agricultural trade in the Western Hemisphere. The authors' emphasis on empirical detail in lieu of theoretical debate makes this work suitable for upper level undergraduate and graduate students across the social sciences.

Author Biography

Robin Jane Roff received her doctorate from the Department of Geography at Simon Fraser University. Her research and publications focus on the tactics and politics of anti-biotechnology activism in California and the broader United States. She is particularly interested in the relative impact of non-GMO certification and territorial exclusions on the market for genetically-engineered crops.