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## Journal of Biosocial Science

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***The Future Control of Food. A Guide to International Negotiations and Rules on Intellectual Property, Biodiversity and Food Security.* Edited by Geoff Tansey & Tasmin Rajotte. Pp. 266. (Earthscan, London, 2008.) £19.99, ISBN 978-1-84407-429-7, paperback.**

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## Book reviews

**The Future Control of Food. A Guide to International Negotiations and Rules on Intellectual Property, Biodiversity and Food Security.** Edited by Geoff Tansey & Tasmin Rajotte. Pp. 266. (Earthscan, London, 2008.) £19.99, ISBN 978-1-84407-429-7, paperback. doi:10.1017/S0021932009990290.

*The Future Control of Food* is a valuable addition to the vast literature on the commoditization of food and its effects on the livelihoods of poor people in ‘developing’ countries. Like related works, the contributors to the volume attempt to contrast individualized and short-term ideas of nature, property and benefits upheld by powerful actors in ‘developed’ countries with more localized understandings of and access to nutritious foodstuffs and biodiversity. The volume not only explains the bewildering array of rules and forums related to intellectual property (IP) and biodiversity in place as of the date of its publication (parts I and II), but also refers to a series of civil society movements that attempt to counteract market-oriented policies guiding the production, distribution and consumption of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture or PGRFA (part III). While the chapters are more descriptive than analytical, broad ethical issues of IP arise such as the incompatibility of ideas of nature, property and ownership in the farming and breeding sectors, contradictions and interrelations between public and private domains, and power struggles that have emerged between individuals, communities, nation states and international bodies.

In chapter 1 Geoff Tansey introduces the chief paradox of IP, which he sees as a ‘legal fiction’ based on the Western principle that human modifications of nature become the property of the inventors. As implicated in his argument and throughout the book, ideas about what should and should not be patented or protected, as well as key concepts such as innovation and liability, depend on how one distinguishes nature from culture or technological innovation. The legitimizing effect of assigning property rights to living beings only goes so far in IP as the non-human sphere may not always be as controllable as most IP advocates suppose. One representative example, mentioned by Geoff Tansey (chapter 1) and further explained by Susan Bragdon, Kathryn Garforth and John E. Haapala Jr (chapter 5), is the case of *Monsanto v. Schmeiser* in which a breeder’s right under IP to prohibit the spread of patented transgenic seeds (which was, in this case, unintended) undermined a Canadian farmer’s right as a landowner to save seed and manage his farm. The authors use this case to illustrate that long-held assumptions concerning private property rights, such as freedom of choice and the promotion of innovation, are being re-formulated in legal battles over IP.

The problem of definition in IP not only impedes understandings of what is meant by private property but also hinders attempts to draw borders around the commons. As Pedro Roffe (chapter 3) notes, exceptions to patentable life forms under TRIPS

(Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) rest on an ambiguous and narrow distinction between socially valued products that cannot be commodified and patentable inventions. Such contrived boundaries exclude those who regard all claims to ownership over life as immoral (e.g. indigenous peoples, see Box 5.4, p. 93). Moreover, even policies and movements which challenge unequal access to genetic resources cannot agree on how to delineate public and private realms. Where one draws the line has as much to do with values as with legal conventions. Michael Halewood and Kent Nnadozie (chapter 6) and Tasmin Rajotte (chapter 7) point to the difference between the terms laid out in the CBD (Convention on Biological Diversity), under which traditional knowledge (TK) is treated as an economic asset of sovereign states, on the one hand, and those in the ITPGRFA (International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture), on the other. The latter upholds a more encompassing notion of TK as a shared resource that can neither be commodified nor situated, a form of universal heritage that represents long-term relationships between humans and nature rather than an enclosed source of aggrandizement.

Despite the merits of this work, a more profound understanding of what people mean by the commons and how this relates to local ideas and uses of land and its products could have been attained if specific ethnographic accounts had been included. Ethnography of rural livelihoods and food production would provide the necessary counterpart to this kind of book, and should be included in future works of this kind. Indeed, though the contributors give much lip-service to daily realities of rural people in the ‘developing’ world, their legal perspective leads to an emphasis on formal institutions and networks – both market-based and alternative – rather than on the myriad unvoiced versions of justice that may be identified if one steps out of the boardroom and into the farming household.

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**Obesity among Poor Americans. Is Public Assistance the Problem?** By Patricia K. Smith. Pp. 197. (Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 2009.) £19.95, ISBN 978-0-8265-1636-7, paperback. doi:10.1017/S0021932009990307.

Obesity is a hot subject nowadays. Even literary journals speak about this matter: for example, in one of the latest issues of the *New Yorker* a lengthy book review by E. Kolbert is dedicated to the fattening of America (*New Yorker*, July 20, 2009). The number of books is really enormous: when clicking ‘obesity in America’ on Amazon.com I got 1351 results. However, in this vast flow of books and research articles, *Obesity among Poor Americans* would not stay unnoticed. First, because it looks at the obesity problem at a very special angle; second, because it gives a comprehensive, multidisciplinary outlook on the studied subject; and third, because of important recommendations for social policy makers.

The book opens with an introduction explaining its goals and design. The aim is to ‘... examine all of the available evidence’ in order to explain ‘... associations

between obesity, poverty and public assistance' (p. 6). The design is straightforward: there are six chapters in the book, the first one considering general trends while the following four chapters (from 2 to 5) discuss different models linking obesity and public assistance to find pro and contra arguments for the hypothesis of causal relationships.

In general (chapter 1), Smith states, there is some evidence linking participation in the public assistance program with adult obesity but the picture becomes more complicated when different models are considered. These four models are as follows: 1) public assistance causes obesity; 2) obesity causes public assistance; 3) poverty causes both; 4) factor X causes both.

Examining the evidence for the first model, the author concludes that special programs for food supplement in children do not lead to their higher obesity, while in adults there is a possibility that the Food Stamps Program is associated with higher BMI and increased obesity risk among women. However, this is not the reason to curtail the program but to revise it in such a way that participants would have more access to healthy food products.

Consideration of the second hypothesis gives some evidence that obesity increases the risk of poverty, particularly for white women, through barriers to better education, better jobs, marriages, etc. Two approaches may follow from this: to reduce obesity itself and to reduce its discriminative effects through establishing '... nationwide laws prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of body weight' (p. 68).

The third, most complicated model of 'poverty causes both public assistance and obesity' is examined in the fourth chapter. The author analyses six pathways that lead from poverty to obesity: through education; food availability and prices; food insecurity; stress and mental health (depression, etc); time preference; physical activity. Each topic is discussed at length (this is the longest chapter in the book) bringing evidence from many different disciplines: anthropology, economics, sociology, psychology, medicine and public health, etc. In conclusion it is stated that 'poverty, both on the individual and community levels, influences food intake and physical activity and thus obesity status' (p. 112), and recommendations for the government to prevent obesity among low-income citizens follow.

The 'factor X' hypothesis is discussed next. Among possible X factors, such as physical and intellectual disabilities, mental illness, physical and sexual abuse, and some others, the abuse factor seems to be associated with public assistance and obesity. So certain actions should be taken to reduce family violence and abuse, and the author gives a list of those suggested actions.

The final chapter gives an overall summary of the evidence and results, producing an important concluding table (Table 6.1) on causal pathways between public assistance and obesity. It also contains a strong appeal to academics to step out of their particular disciplines for an interdisciplinary approach that should bring a broader understanding of obesity, its causes and consequences for society. As a physical anthropologist I strongly support this appeal, and I think that the author, who is a professor of economics at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, has already made this important first step for the unification of different disciplines in her book.

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