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### **Review/Reseña**

Elizabeth Fitting. *The Struggle for Maize: Campesinos, Workers, and Transgenic Corn in the Mexican Countryside*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

### **The Continuing Struggle for Maize**

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In this monograph Elizabeth Fitting summarizes a decade of work on the debates surrounding Mexican national policy as it relates to small-scale agriculture, corn production, and the lives of corn farmers in the Tehuacán Valley of the Mexican state of Puebla. In the introduction Fitting states that her intention is to “...provide readers with... a ‘political economy of meaning’ of the corn debates, which asks under what conditions food

innovations are accepted, ignored or rejected...”(1). She notes that the book is meant to address the impact of neoliberal corn policies that affect maize producers and consumers in Mexico. Fitting is also interested in the extent to which the neoliberal project of transforming peasants into new rural subjects—either agricultural entrepreneurs focused on commercial and export agriculture, or a cheap labor force—has been successful. She draws on both national and international data, interviews and observation of policy makers and activists and an ethnographic case study of corn farmers in the Tehuacán Valley to support her arguments. The principal research for this volume began in 2001-2002, with several data collection periods over the subsequent 6 years.

The chapters of the monograph are divided into two parts. Part 1: “Debates” reviews theoretical issues regarding the impact of neoliberal agricultural and economic policies and the introduction and use of genetically modified corn varieties on the rural Mexican communities. It “...examines how questions of culture, risk and expertise are framed in the controversy surrounding transgenic maize” (6). It draws on an analysis of interviews with participants in the corn debates, observations of meetings, press conferences and activist fora, and a review of media reports and government documents. These two chapters provide a useful, though not particularly novel, analysis of the ongoing debates regarding shifting rural and agricultural policy over the twentieth century in Mexico. Starting with the creation of the *ejidos* in the 1930s, and moving through the green revolution, the repeal of Article 27, the implementation of NAFTA and the contemporary penetration of genetically modified corn varieties into rural Mexico, and to some extent into the small farm sector, Fitting reviews both historical and contemporary movements for the “modernization” of corn production, and the “defense of maize” as a symbol of the Mexican producer.

Chapter 1 discusses the debates and activist movements regarding the release of GM corn in Mexico, and triggered by the discovery of transgenes in fields of supposedly landrace maize in Oaxaca in 2001. Fitting provides a useful overview of conventional and GM corn breeding and the history of the introduction of genetically modified corn varieties in

Mexico, beginning the early 1990s. She reviews the impacts of NAFTA on the importation both of corn as a commodity and transgenic seeds and the development of activist coalitions in “defense of maize.” She frames her analysis of the intersection of “neo-liberal” rural agrarian and agricultural policy and the expertise of corn farmers and the activist coalitions around the defense of maize in terms of the meanings of GM and conventional corn varieties, the flow of genes between and among varieties, the ways in which risk is understood and used by the anti-GM activists as relating not only to health and environmental concerns, but also in terms of the assault on cultural values and the role of small farmers as experts in corn cultivation.

Chapter 2 extends the analysis of the of the corn debates by focusing on the place of corn as a powerful and changing symbol of the Mexican nation, and as a “marker of race, class and gender” (77). Following the analyses of writers such as Pilcher (1998), Fitting discusses the interplay between maize and wheat as symbols of the native Mexican people and the colonial Spanish respectively. She reviews the history of agrarian policy in Mexico, beginning with the agrarian reforms of Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s and the history of racial hierarchies and castes through and after the colonial period with special regard for the notions of *indigenismo*, *mestizaje*, modernization and the neo-liberal state as conceptual models for understanding the Mexican experience of race, class, and gender through the lens of maize production and consumption. She analyzes both the conceptual models of proponents of modernization and anti-GM groups in terms of the way that they portray and essentialize the Mexican peasantry.

Part II, “Livelihoods,” focuses on an analysis of peasant agriculture in the “cradle of corn” drawing on Fitting’s research in the Tehuacán Valley over the last decade to provide what she argues is an understanding of a rural Mexican agriculture community from the point of view of the indigenous and non-indigenous people who live there. Fitting analyzes the livelihood and agricultural strategies of the *campesinos* of San José, a rural community in the Tehuacán Valley of the State of Puebla. She draws on both historical and contemporary documentary materials, and her own data to build a compelling picture of contemporary peasant agriculture, the interactions and conflicts over water and land, and the impact of trans-

border migration, principally to U.S., on the texture of rural livelihoods and agricultural activities. In these chapters she argues that national economic policy over several decades, including the “neoliberal corn regime” and the North American Free Trade Agreement, have created a set of conditions that result in livelihood strategies in the Tehuacán Valley that displace maize from local farming systems in favor of higher value crops, in this case green corn (*elotes*), factory work (*maquilladoras*), and trans-border migration, both legal and more commonly, illegal, principally to the U.S. As Fitting notes in her conclusions to this chapter, her aim to provide a detailed and nuanced picture of the community of San José that highlights the complex nature of rural Mexican communities, the differences in both access to resources, understandings of the nature of rural community life, social standing, and livelihood strategies.

In Chapter 3 Fitting provides an introduction to the community of San José and its farmers. The description of the social life and institutions, the notions of indigeneity and *metstizaje* and the complex social organization of rural Mexican communities will be familiar to students of rural Mexico. A significant contribution is the description of water management regimes and the local and extra local tensions and conflicts that characterize access to water. Chapter 4 builds on this foundation by reviewing corn production in San José and places it in a historical context, discussing the impact of policies and the process of globalization in the second half of the twentieth century. Fitting focuses on the impacts of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the globalization of corn production and consumption, which she refers to as the “Neo-liberal corn regime,” to build a picture of the shifting livelihood resources of San José. The place of the “*maquila* boom” and increasing transnational migration have shifted somewhat the strategies of San Josepeños, but, as I will argue below, not significantly from those of the pre-NAFTA rural Mexico. In this chapter and the next we are introduced to several of Fitting’s participants with summaries of their life histories. We get a tantalizing taste of the lives of individuals. I would have like to have seen more of this kind of data and analysis in the monograph. Chapter 5 completes the argument by addressing the generation differences in attitudes, the meaning of corn, and

identity in San José. She highlights the intersection of national agricultural policy and “projects” with the expert knowledge of San Josepeños for the production of corn and management of a transnational rural community. She also examines the gendered nature of the experience of being a San Josepeño in the twenty first century.

In general, the conclusion Fitting reaches contribute to an understanding of NAFTA era policy and the shifting character of the globalization of production and consumption of both foodstuffs and other commodities on San José. However, a longer-term attention to shifting contexts would strengthen Fitting’s analysis. I applaud Fittings approach to historical materials, but find it somewhat curious that she does not mention the Puebla Plan (*Plan Puebla*), which, in 1967, was, arguably the first attempt to introduce green revolution maize to small corn farmers in Mexico. *Plan Puebla* was firmly based on the Mexican national project towards industrial modernization and self-reliance begun in the early 1940s. After World War II, the rural agricultural population was already seen as a source of inexpensive labor for industrialization. However, by the 1960s, the next steps of the national project were clearly to incorporate peasant agriculturalists into a “rational,” productive (read: commercial) agriculture. The International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), developed from the earlier Rockefeller Foundation programs in agricultural research, worked on higher yielding varieties of several crops, and eventually, the development of green revolution, hybrid varieties of both wheat and, more importantly here, maize. Joining forces with the national Postgraduate College for Agriculture at Chapingo in 1967, CIMMYT moved forward on research to understand peasant agriculture and the potential for its commercialization. *Plan Puebla* was a project intended to demonstrate the ways in which green revolution seeds and technologies could be integrated into peasant agriculture (Edelman 1980, Redcliff 1983). While the region in which *Plan Puebla* was implemented did not include the Tehuacán Valley, it did take place in the eastern part of the state of Puebla. The impacts of *Plan Puebla* have been examined in several very interesting pieces (e.g. Edelman 1980, Redcliff 1983,) and the arguments regarding the ways in which the modernist project of

agricultural development was brought to the small farmers of Puebla provides an early parallel for Fitting's analysis of turn of the (twenty first) century Tehuacán Valley.

*Plan Puebla* was followed by several other similar projects in other regions of Mexico, including the *Plan Lerma* project in the Valley of Solis in 1969-1973 (B.R. DeWalt 1979; K.M. Dewalt 1983). The impacts of *Plan Lerma* on rural livelihoods and the production of hybrid and *criollo* corn appear similar to Fitting's discussions. The *ejidatarios* of Puente de Andaró said in 1973 "*Maíz no es negocio*" (B.R. DeWalt 1979), and, according to Fitting, maize production was still not seen as profitable in the Valley of Tehuacán in 2001. I mention these works to make the argument that the processes that Fitting observed in 2001-2008 were extensions of, and not significantly different from, previous stages of the same national rural project. In the late 1960s one did not talk of neo-liberal economic strategies, and NAFTA was not yet on the radar; GM varieties were being investigated but not thought feasible at the time. It was "green revolution" hybrid and other varieties and technologies that were of concern. But, clearly, the goals of import substitution industrialization and the "rationalization" of small-scale agriculture were similar to the more contemporary neo-liberal strategies. Moreover, the introduction of green revolution varieties of maize and the associated technologies were, I would argue, not significantly different than the introduction of GM varieties in terms of their impacts on livelihood strategies, even with respect to the impact on *criollo* varieties. In the case of *Plan Lerma*, even CIMMYT officials conceded in the 1980s that the endosperm hardening genes incorporated in the high lysine corn varieties included in the *Plan Lerma* technological package probably escaped into local landraces. Certainly women in Puente de Andaró noted in 1977 that *criollo* corn got harder to cook after *Plan Lerma*. I would suggest that green revolution varieties and technologies, as they became incorporated into programs directly aimed at the *ejido* sector, had a greater impact than GM varieties have to date. And in similar ways, also engendered critical activist responses and raised significant environmental concerns.

Some of the same economic strategies Fitting describes were documented beginning in the 1960s, including migration to urban areas of Mexico by younger household members in order to provide remittance's for the rural parts of extended families, reliance on a combination of subsistence production, commercial production (often of maize but other crops as well) and local off-farm labor by both men and women to support rural households as well as the strategic sending of household members off to labor opportunities in urban areas in order to generate income from remittances (Lewis 1960; Hamilton et al. 2003).

I believe the Fitting has missed an opportunity to really place twenty-first century Puebla and the Valley of Tehuacán in a historical context which would allow for the examination of longer period of peasant responses to the modernist project and an examination of the consistency of peasant responses to those processes including the shifts in the choice of crops, distribution of resources among livelihood strategies, and even the social and ritual responses of San Josepeños she so well documents. Some of Fittings most useful conclusions are a reaffirmation of the resiliency of rural Mexican communities following the same kinds of mixed livelihood strategies in the twenty first century as have been noted by earlier studies. San José continues as a viable rural community through reliance on small-scale, semi-subsistence agriculture and off-farm labor, often conducted outside of the local region. She also very rightly focuses on one of the critical concerns for agriculture, and especially peasant agriculture of the twenty first century—the management of water—and the escalating conflicts over water and water rights across the globe. The management of water and the rights of *ejidatarios* and other small producers *vis-à-vis* larger and more well connected uses of water, also has a long history, but Fitting's focus on this, as the magnitude of the issue is exploding, is appropriate and compelling.

Another significant contribution of Fitting's work is the analysis of materials from several generations of San Josepeños. The different expectations and understandings of older San Josepeños compared with the expectations and understandings of those who have and are migrating provides important insights into the dynamics of rural life and the potential

for intergenerational tensions regarding the management of property and time. The ethnographic materials she has collected and analyzed here provide a textured and nuanced understanding of the farmers of the Tehuacán Valley, the problems they face, and their strategies to manage them. They focus our attention on the right issues, although I feel that she misses an opportunity to connect her data to a much longer historical context.

While I feel that both Parts I and II provide interesting data and analyses, one of the weaknesses of this work is that the promise of an incisive analysis of the impact of hybrid and GM seeds, and neo-liberal agriculture policies is not really fulfilled in the analyses of the case study materials from the Tehuacán Valley. Fitting tantalizes us with a discussion of GM seeds and policies associated with them, but as I have noted above, the data presented in Part II is conventional in terms of the analysis of *campesino* and migrant concerns. The two parts of this monograph seem to be only loosely connected. While the conclusions do try to tie together the several threads of arguments into a single narrative, the data presented are less connected, and somewhat less compelling than the conclusion suggests. Also the emphasis that Fitting places on the value of her portrayal of the community of San José as a complex social environment with individuals and families pursuing different strategies and accessing different resources suggest that she believes that this is a new approach. A number of earlier (sometimes much earlier) pieces of work have documented a complex and very dynamic social context in rural Mexico for some time. After a good deal of discussion of the potential impacts of the penetration of GMOs and the impact of neoliberal policies, the description of agriculture and livelihoods in the San José reads very like the descriptions of Mexican rural life and small scale agriculture written thirty years before.

In the end, this is a very good piece of work, with quite interesting analyses both of the contemporary corn debates and the current form of the Mexico's approaches to rural communities of the lives of rural small farmers in Mexico into the twenty first century. It is a strong contribution to a body of research that, as a whole, provides a very compelling case study



of the impact of policy and the strategies of the people that are affected by it.

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