

Review / Reseña

Leguizamón, Amalia. *Seeds of Power: Environmental Injustice and Genetically Modified Soybeans in Argentina*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2020. 224 pp.

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Like soybean cultivation across Argentina, soybean growth near Ituzaingó Anexo, Córdoba, relied on a cancer-causing herbicide called glyphosate, sold commercially as Round-Up. After noticing high rates of cancer in their neighborhood, the Grupo de Madres of Ituzaingó Anexo (Madres) began to raise awareness about the effects of soybeans in their community. The mothers created a color-coded map of soybean- and glyphosate-related illnesses and deaths in Ituzaingó Anexo. While plants use biochemicals to display vibrant reds, yellows, and whites to warn herbivores, in Ituzaingó Anexo, the soybean plant cast its warnings in every color: red for leukemia, blue for cancer, green for thyroid disease, and a white dot to indicate death. Amalia Leguizamón visited Madres in the early 2010s to investigate their protests against genetically modified (GM) soybeans. Upon her arrival, the mothers quickly suggested that Leguizamón first “start with the map” (118). Leguizamón counted 127 blocks and could hardly find one street without a warning color.

Seeds of Power traces a “cultural history of extractivism” in Argentina through the proliferation of genetically modified soybeans and the environmental injustice it reflects and reinforces. From the map in Ituzaingó Anexo, Leguizamón expands her

analysis across soybean growing areas in Argentina's expansive northern grasslands called Las Pampas. In less than twenty years since the government-sanctioned extension of glyphosate-tolerant soybeans in 1996, Argentina went from producing one million kilograms of soybeans annually to nearly 88 million kilograms. Even though the military initiated the neoliberal introduction of soybeans in 1976—which echoed the occupation of Las Pampas one hundred years earlier—Leguizamón is clear that the support came from all political groups. Like the historical support of broad-spectrum Peronist politics, *sojización* has received broad political support. For instance, pink-tide politicians endorsed soy expansion and redistributed profits to reduce poverty from 38.2% to 14.4% from 2003 to 2009. Soy also displaced tens of thousands of farming families and left Argentina with one of the world's highest deforestation rates. With this in mind, Leguizamón tries to understand this widespread political support of soybean development despite the environmental injustice it causes. To analyze the formations of power and silence that shaped how Argentinians accepted soybean development so early and earnestly, *Seeds of Power* asks how elite and local communities legitimized and justified it.

Leguizamón divides *Seeds of Power* into four chapters that cover distinct but overlapping periods, geographies, and themes. The first chapter provides the historical and cultural roots of Argentina's political economy of extraction. For Leguizamón, there is no explaining “the early and vast adoption of herbicide-resistant soybeans in the Argentine Pampas” without analyzing the legacies of racialized and gendered settler colonialism since the genocidal Desert Campaign (1833-1834) and the Conquest of the Desert (1870s and 1880s). These campaigns aimed to eradicate Indigenous people, such as the Puelches, Pehuenches, and Ranqueles, in order to encourage and protect European migration. This violent settler colonialism helped Argentina become a “granary of the world” and helped politicians justify extractive tendencies. It also feminized and racialized Indigenous people, alienating them from decision-making power in this landscape management. From the generations of 1837 and 1880 to the military regimes of the twentieth century and the technocrats of today, Leguizamón shows how small groups of powerful, white men have narrowly shaped agricultural modernization in Argentina. Ethnocentric and patriarchal simplification was charged with nationalistic fervor and undergirded the monoculture that Leguizamón argues helped Argentinians understand and justify why “[they] all live off the countryside” (18). Once the military regimes opened Argentine agricultural modernization to foreign banks and transnational corporations in the late 1970s, they did so through violence

and soybean development. Argentina's legacy of disappearances during the Dirty Wars and the continuity of military violence in Las Pampas add another layer to the book's argument. These legacies of state violence buttressed power and silence formation in the region.

Chapter Two traces continuities from Chapter One into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Las Pampas was not the site of much agricultural modernization until the Green Revolution in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the author insists that this agricultural transformation led to military neoliberalization in the late 1970s and *sojización* after 1996. Logics of extraction and simplification stretched across history and the Pampas. The discursive and material longevity of Argentina's "granary of the world" becomes sharper as Leguizamón interviews agribusiness employees, investors, and consultants. These conversations reveal the contours of life and farming in a rural soy town in Las Pampas.

From a distance, a soy town seems to resemble James Scott's description of the early modern state: "all thumbs, no fingers, no fine-tuning."¹ Buildings and people are few and far between, separated by miles of soy plantations as far as human eyes can see. However, under closer inspection, the visible hand of the soy agribusiness is dexterous and intricate. Alfred Chandler once argued that the visible hand of management can be as forceful as the invisible hand of markets; in the case of Las Pampas, the managers of soy expansion represented another demographic shift in the region rooted in knowledge and interchangeability.² Moreover, managers devised the official narrative that genetically modified soybeans sustained both Argentina's environment and its economic status in the global economy.

Knowledge came in many forms: agronomists, agribusiness managers, and a technological package consisting of glyphosate, glyphosate-resistant soybeans, and no-till machinery. Together, rural "tech bros" and their rented technology packages devalued and replaced poor farmers. Knowledge rendered land and labor fungible, or as Leguizamón aptly put it: "agribusiness elevate[d] knowledge as a means of production more valuable than the land itself." Here, long-standing mythologies about Argentina's feeding the world reinforced the industrialization of the countryside. When corporate employees and farmers said to Leguizamón, "we all live off the countryside,"

¹ James C. Scott. *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 24.

² Alfred D. Chandler. *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1977).

they meant everyone but poor and displaced people. Whiteness was central to the accumulation of land. However, it did not protect poor Euro-descendant farmers from losing their farms to corporations with knowledge and technology. Between 1988 and 2008, nearly 80,000 smallholders lost their land to the agribusinesses that could finance operations and lease farming equipment. The financialization of soybean expansion made “land disappear from the farming equation” (68). The soybean industrialization combined with the lease-operate strategy accelerated this reduction of land and labor. Soybeans as flex crops enhanced this violent interchangeability. They have “multiple and flexible uses, as foods, fuel, animal feed, and building material,” which help global capitalism achieve its “flexibility, efficiency, and predictability” (67).

Seeds of Power then shifts from power to silence. Rather than focus on the managers and consultants who controlled operations without experiencing the consequences, Leguizamón highlights the mothers of the soy town of Santa María. They feel the benefits and the burdens of soy. Unlike managers and consultants who used nationalistic and environmental arguments to downplay the adverse effects of soy, the mothers of Santa María support denial through doubt, silence, and policing themselves and others. This silence was such a distinguishing factor in the countryside that Leguizamón defined soy towns like Santa María by their lack of protest. Despite the lack of protest, the mothers revealed that their gendered positions helped them “see” the harms of soy and glyphosate while simultaneously undermining their ability and willingness to speak up. When asked about the impact of agrochemicals and reproductive health, women only shared their fears and worries “in murmurs and whispers” (95). In addition to gender, whiteness and middle-class status also contributed to inaction in Santa María. This “conspiracy of silence” compelled women to repress their voices, and machismo was the “dominating axis” that consistently and actively alienated women from specific work and experiences (96, 106). Alienation was also a factor for women in the industry. For instance, the one woman agronomist who Leguizamón interviewed said that most of her “girlfriends [who are also] agrarian engineers” worked in commercial positions in sales (104).

The final chapter shifts from silence to protest, highlighting the power of urban social movements, namely the Grupo de Madres (Madres) and the Grupo de Reflexión Rural (GRR). Six years after the government officially endorsed the expansion of GM soybeans in 1996, the Madres began raising awareness about the high cancer rates in their neighborhood caused by spraying glyphosate. Their activism reached new heights throughout the following decade. Locally, Madres got two city ordinances passed

against agrochemical spraying in 2005, and by 2009, they helped convince the president to create a national commission on the impact of glyphosate on public health. In 2012, one of their members, Sofía Gatica, won the Goldman Prize for International environmental justice. Rather than compare maternal activism in Santa María and Ituzaingó Anexo, Leguizamón underscores that both silence and social movements failed to curb soybean's rhetorical and actual power. Although Madres, GRR, and the Asamblea Malvinas made serious and meaningful strides against soy development, their victories were fleeting, local (urban), and alienated. The author by no means discourages the brilliant and inspirational work of women activists; unfortunately, they are not the seeds of power in Argentina.

Leguizamón's work will interest scholars of Latin American studies, gender studies, environmental studies, and food studies. *Seeds of Power* does a phenomenal job of integrating history, sociology, and ethnography into accessible and meaningful prose. It compliments other studies in the region on soybeans and the political economy of agricultural booms by Kregg Hetherington, Mariano Turzi, and LaShandra Sullivan. Like Alyshia Gálvez's *Eating NAFTA*, Leguizamón interweaves macro and micro studies to better understand how monocrops and their countless, everyday products cause personal and structural harm in our neoliberal world. *Seeds of Power's* analysis of how patriarchy simplifies agricultural development and decision-making in ways that are conducive to monoculture is especially compelling. Leguizamón also cogently illustrates the nature of power, control, and silence in a rural soy town in Las Pampas since the early 2000s. Lastly, her analysis of technocratic knowledge and leasing operations devaluing landownership and labor is equally memorable.

Seeds of Power does not have shortcomings as much as it has openings for continued study; these final questions reflect the study's richness. For starters, Leguizamón is clear that whiteness simplified decision-making in Las Pampas. But did adherence to race and class identities change amid military violence and neoliberalization in the 1970s and 1980s? Similarly, did proximity to whiteness and wealth play a similar or different role in urban social movements? How did Euro-descendant farming and mythologies in Las Pampas change through the Great Depression, Green Revolution, and the Dirty Wars? Did the military and settler violence undergirding soybean expansion change over time? Leguizamón wonderfully highlights continuities in environmental injustice across nearly two hundred years. However, when did ruptures occur, and did they matter? For instance, the contrast between soybean expansion before and after the rise of GM soybeans in 1996 could be

explored further. If GM soybeans have a unique relationship with glyphosate, then did genetic modification also accelerate dispossession in distinct ways after 1996? Was it just a matter of scale, or did other differences arise? Lastly, beyond human experience, how do other animals and plants experience soybean expansion? Given that GM soybean fuels one of the highest national deforestation rates, how have other species adapted to multi-species environmental injustice?