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Notes From the Field

The Expansion of Transgenic Soybeans and the Killing of Indigenous Peasants in Argentina

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Abstract

In the last two years, four activists of peasant and indigenous organizations have died in the context of land conflicts in Northern Argentina. This article examines the expansion of genetically modified soybeans and the political alliances of national and provincial governments to understand these events. The focus is put on the recent killing of a peasant activist in the province of Santiago del Estero, the media coverage of this event, and the reactions of popular organizations. The case represents an example of the “dark side of the boom” of the recent expansion of agribusiness in South America.

Keywords

Peasant Movements, Land Conflicts, Genetically Modified Crops, Environmental Damage, Argentina

Cristian Ferreyra was in his mid-twenties when he was killed on November 16 2011. He was a member of MOCASE, the *Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero*, a peasant social movement in the province of Santiago del Estero, in northern Argentina. MOCASE was created in the early 1990s to defend peasants’ land rights and has since become the largest peasant organization in Argentina. In the late 1990s, MOCASE was instrumental in creating a national alliance of peasant organizations in Argentina, the MNCI (*Movimiento Nacional Campesino Indígena*, the National Indigenous-Peasant Movement). MOCASE is also an active member of CLOC (*Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo*, the Latin American Coordination of Agrarian Organizations) and of the transnational peasant alliance *La Via Campesina*. Together with other peasant and indigenous organizations from Argentina and Latin

America, MOCASE participates in the global campaigns of *La Via Campesina*, opposing land grabbing, pushing for agrarian reform, and denouncing the risks created by corporate agriculture and its use of genetically modified seeds and pesticides.¹

The struggle of MOCASE is fought both in the global arena and in the rural communities where peasant families try to make a living from small-scale agriculture. Peasant and rural workers in Santiago del Estero survive growing crops for self-consumption, and breeding goats in communal lands. During the last decade, MOCASE members have sustained a dispute with agribusiness companies that, in their attempts to expand soybean production, have been deforesting the province and evicting peasant families from the lands they have been occupying for generations. On November 16 2011, two armed men showed up in the humble house where Cristian Ferreyra lived with his wife and two children, in a rural community near Monte Quemado, in northern Santiago del Estero. The two men, security guards hired by an agri-businessman, shot Ferreyra and Darío Godoy, another MOCASE activist, and beat Ferreyra's wife and a family friend. Some hours later, Ferreyra bled to death on the way to the local hospital.

The death of Cristian Ferreyra has not been an isolated incident. In the last years, four activists of peasant and indigenous organizations have died in the context of land conflicts in northern Argentina. In October 2009, Javier Chocobar, an activist of an indigenous organization was killed in the province of Tucumán. In March 2010, Sandra "Ely" Juárez, another peasant activist in Santiago del Estero, died of a heart attack while resisting an eviction. In November 2010, the police shot and killed Roberto López, a member of an indigenous organization in the province of Formosa, for claiming rights to lands that were taken away from the *qom* people. As of yet, no one has been prosecuted for these crimes. Four people were detained for the killing of Ferreyra, but it is still not clear if justice will be done.

How do these conflicts for land play out in the current economic and political situation of Latin America? During the last decade, progressive governments took power in Venezuela, Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia. Emerging after a phase of heightened mobilization and with close ties to social

movements, these governments reoriented national policies to attend to the demands of working class segments and popular sectors of the population. This political process precipitated the waning of neoliberal policies in the region (see Barrett et al. 2008; Hershberg and Rosen 2006; Oliva Campos et al. 2012; Weyland et al. 2010). While these governments severed their ties with global financial institutions (e.g. IMF, World Bank), they also gave continuity to an economic strategy centered on export-oriented commodities, taking advantage of high international prices (Levitsky and Roberts 2011:10-11; Weyland 2009). The underbelly of this process is that soybean production (in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay), mining (in Bolivia, Peru, and Argentina), and oil drilling (in Ecuador and Venezuela) has been spurring violent conflicts with deadly consequences for members of popular social movements.

For nearly a decade now, the exploitation of natural resources has been pitting transnational corporations and national companies (interested in agribusiness, mining, and oil drilling) against local citizens, peasants, and indigenous populations, who live on territories where these activities make terrain. These conflicts have brought about a series of violent confrontations throughout the region: the deaths of seventeen people (eleven peasants and six policemen) during a shooting in Curuguaty, Paraguay in June 2012 that were followed by the ousting of President Lugo;² at least three protesters were shot dead in July 2012 during the repression of demonstrations against mining in Cajamarca and Celendín, Peru;³ and police violently repressed indigenous organizations marching in Yucumo against a projected highway crossing the TIPNIS (an indigenous territory and national park) in Bolivia in September 2011.⁴

Cristian Ferreyra can be seen as case of as a worrying trend in current Latin America, where struggles regarding natural resources result in the erosion of social and civil rights. Put another way, conflicts over natural resources in Latin America negatively affecting human rights offer an opportunity to combine political ecology (drawing insights from political economy, ecology, and the social sciences [Greenberg and Park 1994]) and the study of contentious events (i.e. “discontinuous, public, and collective claim-making: occasions on which people break with daily routines to concert their energies in publicly visible demands, complaints, attacks, or

expressions of support” (Tilly 2006:49).

This article is based on archival research, interviews, and secondary data. I combined a close reading of newspapers stories reporting the case of Cristian Ferreyra with ethnographic reanalysis, “which involves the interrogation of an already existing ethnography *without* any further fieldwork” (Burawoy 2003: 646) . In other words, I did not go back to field sites, but instead, revisited my data (field notes, interviews, and newspaper accounts) culled from previous research (see Barbetta and Lapegna 2002; Lapegna 2011).

THE EXPANSION OF GM SOYBEANS AND THE “DARK SIDE OF THE BOOM”

In Argentina, conflicts over land and territories (and their deadly consequences) are closely connected to the recent expansion of genetically modified (GM) soybeans. GM soybean production was introduced into Argentina in 1996 in the context of the country’s adoption of “free market” policies. The elimination of barriers to the importation of agricultural supplies (seeds, agrochemicals, and machinery) and the promotion of export commodities favored the adoption of GM seeds and agrochemicals commercialized by global agribusiness corporations (e.g. Monsanto, Nidera, Syngenta). GM soybeans were quickly adopted by Argentine agribusiness and rapidly expanded in the Pampas, an export-oriented area in the center of the country characterized by its commercial agriculture.

Since the mid-1990s, the production of GM soybeans in Argentina has skyrocketed. In 1997-1998, 18.7 million tons of soybeans were produced; by 2006-2007, that production rose to 47.5 million tons (SAGPyA 2007). In 2007, it was estimated that more than 90% of the soybeans produced in Argentina were genetically modified (SAGPyA 2007). As a recent USDA report declares, “No other Latin American country embraced Genetically Modified Crops (GMO) as wholeheartedly as Argentina” (Yankelevich 2006:3).

By the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, GM soybean production in the Pampas region had reached its limit in terms of land availability and began to expand to other regions of Argentina. Farmers and investors bought and/or rented (cheaper) land in the northern provinces. Soybean production mushroomed in a “Soy Rush” of sorts, with cultivation reaching road shoulders and plants

being sowed on the outskirts of rural and semi-rural towns. Soybean production today represents one-fourth of Argentina's exports, but there is a *dark side of the boom*. The expansion of GM soybeans has had at least three main negative consequences: intensified economic concentration, serious environmental damage, and the eviction of peasant and indigenous families.

First, the rapid and extensive expansion of agribusiness increased the economic concentration of agro-food systems (i.e. the wealth created was appropriated by a smaller number of people and companies). This concentration is reflected in a comparison of the agricultural censuses of 1988 and 2002. In 1988, there were roughly 421,000 farms, occupying 30.8 million hectares (76 million acres). In 2002, 333,000 farms occupied 33.5 million hectares with agrarian activities (82.8 million acres) (INDEC 1988 and 2002). Nearly 88,000 farms, or one-fifth, (20.8%), were pushed out of business in the 1990s. Other negative consequences at the socioeconomic level include the loss of agricultural jobs and the decreased diversity of food production in Argentina. Regarding the first, a comparison of the censuses of 1988 and 2002 shows a 25% reduction in the proportion of agrarian workers (Rodríguez 2010), a process mostly driven by the expansion of GM soybeans (which need fewer agricultural workers than conventional crops). It is also calculated that the diversity of crops in Argentina has been reduced by 20% because of the expansion of GM soybeans (Aizen et al. 2009; see also Domínguez and Sabatino 2006).

Second, the expansion of GM soybean production has created a series of environmental problems. With the diffusion of GM soybean production from the Pampa to other regions of the country, deforestation has increased dramatically. Between 1998 and 2002, thousands of hectares of native forests were destroyed: nearly 118,000 hectares in the province of Chaco, 160,000 hectares in the province of Salta, and 223,000 hectares in Santiago del Estero –291,000 395,000 and 551,000 acres, respectively (Montenegro et al. 2004, quoted in Pengue 2005). At the agronomic level, the use of pesticides has increased exponentially, creating serious complications such as the appearance of herbicide-resistant weeds (Pengue et al. 2009), the depletion of soil nutrients (Pengue 2005), and the degradation of soils (Casabe et al. 2007). At the end of the 1990s, 42% of the pesticides

used in Argentina were utilized for the production of GM soybeans (Pengue 2004). On average, soybean growers in Argentina apply glyphosate (the herbicide used in GM soybean production) 2.3 times per year whereas farmers in the United States make 1.3 applications per year (Benbrook 2003). In 1997-98, 28 million liters of glyphosate were used in Argentina; in 1998-99, this quantity increased to 56 million liters, and the application of glyphosate reached 100 million liters in 2003/04 (Benbrook 2005; Pengue 2004).

A whole set of weeds that resist glyphosate have sprouted in Argentina's countryside, prompting farmers to apply even more toxic agrochemicals (see Papa 2002; Vitta et al. 2004; Puricelli and Tunesca 2005; Faccini 2000). The massive and uncontrolled use of herbicides has also caused contamination in water streams, creating "a large-scale, unplanned, ecological experiment, whose consequences for natural ecosystems, and aquatic environments in particular, are poorly understood" (Perez et al. 2007; see also Jergentz et al. 2004). Journalists have reported cases of agrochemical drifts affecting the health of local populations in the provinces of Formosa, La Pampa, Entre Ríos, Santa Fe, Santiago del Estero, Córdoba and Chaco. Peasants, small farmers, and indigenous communities have to put up with the quotidian violence of being sprayed with agrochemicals damaging their crops and threatening their health.

Third (and closely connected to the killing of Cristian Ferreyra), the expansion of the agricultural frontier—a process due primarily to increased GM soybean production—has prompted the eviction of peasant and indigenous families throughout Argentina (Barbetta 2005, 2009; Domínguez et al. 2006; REDAF 2010). In the case of the Santiago del Estero province, this process has drawn the attention of human rights' advocates (see UPC-UNESCO et al. 2009) and national authorities. As far back as 2004, the national Ministry of Human Rights warned about the presence of armed groups forcing the eviction of peasant families. An official report issued by the Ministry concluded: "The problem of land ownership and possession is one of the main human rights issues in the Santiago del Estero agenda, since the indiscriminate advance of the agricultural frontier via soybean production is a threat not only to real possession rights but also the environmental assets of rural communities" (quoted in Giarracca and Teubal 2006).

PROGRESSIVE NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS AND THE CONSTRAINTS OF REALPOLITIK

Néstor Kirchner, one of the Peronist candidates of the *Partido Justicialista* (PJ), became president of Argentina in 2003 bringing an institutional normalization to the deep economic and financial crisis endured by the country in 2001-02. Kirchner's administration transformed both the macroeconomic policies and the political landscape of Argentina by breaking away with the neoliberal policies of the 1990s and reorienting the PJ along a left-of-the-center position, while forging international alliances with left-wing leaders of Latin America.

The national administrations of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007), and of his wife and successor, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (hereafter CFK, who became president in 2007 and was reelected in October 2011) have deployed a series of overall policies aimed at redistributing income in favor of workers and popular sectors. In building their powerbase, these administrations had the national unions and several social movements as key allies drawing political and electoral support. Néstor Kirchner and CFK's condemnation of human rights crimes committed during the dictatorship of 1976-1983 buttressed human rights organizations and their demands (see Levitsky and Murillo 2008).

The national governments of both Néstor Kirchner and CFK, nonetheless, have had a less progressive record when it comes to their alliances within the political system. First, both have relied on the PJ and its political machine for electoral support.⁵ Second, their administrations associated with provincial governors in order to garner votes in the national congress. Some governors have been in office for decades, relying heavily on patronage and political machines to maintain power and firmly controlling provincial legislatures and the judiciary. Provincial governors also discourage protests and autonomous social movements (see Moscovich 2012:47). As two scholars with extensive experience in the Argentine political system summarize:

“Because most legislators owe their nomination to a provincial boss rather than the national

party leadership, discipline within the PJ's legislative bloc hinges to a considerable degree on the president's ability to maintain the support of governors. Thus even powerful Peronist presidents...have governed in coalition with—and with the negotiated consent of—party bosses” (Levitsky and Murillo 2008: 20).

In northern Argentine provinces governors and party bosses have thus built veritable “authoritarian sub-national regimes” (Gibson 2006; Cornelius 1999; cf. Behrend 2011). More often than not, governors, provincial party bosses, and their families double as business partners of soybean growers, agribusinessmen, and large landowners.

The province of Santiago del Estero is a case in point. A peasant leader described the political context of the province in these terms:

Here, for instance, in [a rural community], the doctor [appointed by the provincial administration] has to bring ten people on voting day otherwise he gets fired. His brother, cousin, whatever party they belong to, they will go to vote [for the incumbent] so their relative doesn't lose his job. And there's also electoral fraud; here the deceased always vote [political brokers use their IDs to cast ballots]. And, regrettably, all the dead vote for the incumbent!”⁶

Furthermore, Santiago del Estero has a poor human rights record. During the 1990s, the provincial government organized an undercover system of surveillance stuffed with former military and policeman who were active during the military dictatorship of 1976-1983. The province of Santiago del Estero, in short, presents a political matrix of authoritarianism (see Dargoltz et al. 2006; Ortiz de Rozas 2011). This has not prevented a strong alliance between the province's political bosses and progressive national governments. Gerardo Zamora (governor since 2005) boasts about the resounding

electoral victories (over 80% of the votes) Néstor Kirchner and CFK have obtained in Santiago del Estero.

GM SOYBEANS AND THE DEADLY EXPANSION OF THE AGRICULTURAL FRONTIER

The administrations of Néstor Kirchner and CFK tapped into the revenues produced by GM soybeans by giving continuity to the export taxes implemented after the Argentine peso was devalued in 2002. The exports of the soybean agro-industrial complex (soybeans, oil, and flour) alone constitute nearly one-fourth of the total exports from Argentina, worth close to 14 billion dollars (INDEC 2007). After the financial collapse of 2001, much of the investment and savings in Argentina turned to agricultural production. The administrations of Néstor Kirchner and CFK taxed agricultural exports, using these revenues to fund redistributive policies and welfare programs, building what some call an “export-oriented populism” (Richardson 2009).

In 2008, CFK sent a bill to congress to modify the export tax on soybeans, adjusting its taxable percentage to the ups and downs of international prices, opening a fierce debate in congress where the bill was overturned. This opened a political opportunity for the mobilization of medium to large landowners’ organizations that, supported by media conglomerates represented by the main national newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, created a coalition demanding a total elimination of export taxes (see Giarracca and Teubal 2010; Newell 2009). While this dispute revealed the differences between the national government and large agribusiness interests regarding the appropriation of the wealth created by soybean production, the environmental and social consequences of GM soybean production were never part of the discussion. In September 2011, CFK launched an “Agro-food Strategic Plan 2010-2020,” which has the goal of increasing agricultural production and exports; thus, the negative consequences of the “soybean rush” will most likely worsen rather than reverse.

The case of Cristian Ferreyra in Santiago del Estero exposes the deadly consequences of the “soybean rush” and the complicity of soybean growers, provincial administrations, and the judiciary power. Human rights activists claim that eight months before the killing, the

businessman accused of instigating the attack against MOCASE members enclosed a large tract of land (more than 8,600 acres), leaving peasant families without access to the local school. The provincial Ministry of Education paid no attention to the protests about this situation. The local judge never responded to complaints about the presence of armed groups harassing peasant activists and local families. After the killing of Cristian Ferreyra, peasant organizations and popular movements organized demonstrations in Santiago del Estero, Córdoba, and Buenos Aires to demand justice. A representative of the Catholic Church qualified the case as “a bloody example” of the “escalating violence” against peasants and indigenous groups “by soybean growers and agri-businessmen” (Aranda 2011).

THE MASS MEDIA: LIES, SILENCE, AND SELF-CENSORSHIP

In the days after the killing of Ferreyra, provincial and national media revealed not only the connections between media conglomerates and the interests of agri-business in Argentina, but also the self-censorship in the “progressive media” that supports the current government.

On November 17, *El Liberal*, the main provincial newspaper in Santiago del Estero, initially (mis)reported that the death of Ferreyra was the result of “a confrontation” (*un enfrentamiento*) between peasants and the aggressors.⁷ The newspaper suggested that the peasants were to blame, mentioning that Ferreyra and his brother-in-law “prevented a woodcutter from doing his work.” The ensuing news came closer to the truth and reported that Ferreyra was shot in cold blood, yet the newspaper never retracted its initial misinformation. It is also noteworthy that the newspaper never mentioned that Ferreyra was a member of MOCASE and did not even mention the name of the peasant organization. The newspaper only made a very brief mention of the demonstrations in Santiago and Buenos Aires calling for justice.

The two main national newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, gave brief accounts of the killing on November and the demonstrations.⁸ The minimal importance given to the events should not come as a surprise, considering that these media conglomerates have close connections to the organizations of soybean growers (Giarracca and Teubal 2010; Newell 2009; Lapegna 2007). A more

startling revelation was the self-censorship applied by the newspaper *Página 12*. This newspaper has a “progressive” orientation, giving space to stories and in-depth reports on a variety of social movement initiatives and human rights issues. Since Néstor Kirchner took power in 2003, *Página 12* has also been an outlet for the policies of the national government and tends to portray the administration in a favorable light.

Darío Aranda is *Página 12* journalist who covers news regarding peasant movements and indigenous groups and has published a book on the genocide committed against the indigenous population of Argentina (Aranda 2010). He was in charge of reporting on the November 18 mobilizations in Buenos Aires that were prompted by the death of Ferreyra. Aranda wrote a story to be published in *Página 12* on November 19, which the editor read and approved. The opening paragraph read:

“The MNCI, National Peasant Indigenous Movement [a national organization of several provincial social movements] pointed out four levels of responsibility: agri-business, Governor Gerardo Zamora, the provincial judiciary power, and the national government. The spokesperson of the MNCI was explicit: ‘We make a public announcement, we will go after the governor, he is responsible for the repression. There will be no more killings in the countryside of Santiago.’”

Aranda was bitterly surprised when he realized, the day after, that that paragraph was not printed in the newspaper’s edition. Someone in the newspaper decided to censor those opening lines. At the same time, the workers of Télam (the state-owned news agency) also denounced pressures and censorship when covering the killing of Ferreyra and the demonstrations.⁹

“AGRI-BUSINESS TOOK ANOTHER PEASANT LIFE”

“Killed by agri-business. Cristian is alive, the struggle continues” (*Asesinado por el agronegocio. Cristian vive, la lucha sigue*) was written on the banner at the forefront of the demonstration staged by peasant and indigenous organizations in Buenos Aires on November 17 2011 to demand justice. Besides MOCASE, human right groups, leftist parties, popular movements, and peasant organizations from the MNCI (National Peasant Indigenous Movement) supported the march. Similar demonstrations took place in Santiago del Estero and in the province of Córdoba. Diego Montón, a leader of MNCI, summarized the sentiments and ideas of many protests participants: “Agri-business took another peasant life, this time of a young activist. Connivance is not possible with agri-business, its logic is of death and profit, it is a model where there is no room for life.”¹⁰ Cristian Ferreyra’s death adds another victim to a regrettable list, which includes three indigenous peasants who have been killed in Argentina in the last two years. Although four people have been arrested for the crime, it remains to be seen if Cristian Ferreyra will become the latest victim on a growing list of unpunished deaths in rural Argentina.

These human rights’ violations encapsulate the current dilemmas faced by progressive governments and social movements in Latin America. On one hand, Latin American governments supporting a progressive agenda at the national level have been tapping the wealth produced by the exploitation of natural resources and extractive industries. This strategy, however, mostly benefits transnational corporations, large national companies, and concentrated sectors of the economy. The wealth produced by companies in the territories where rural communities, peasant families, and indigenous peoples live and work hardly trickles down and often results in the erosion of human rights (as illustrated by the death of Cristian Ferreyra). On the other hand, many popular and grassroots social movements support national governments that, on the whole, aim to reverse the regressive policies implemented during the decades of neoliberal globalization. This, in turn, puts social movements in a difficult position when provincial and regional elites allied with national governments condone or support human rights violations in the territories where social movements’ constituents live

and die. Further research intersecting the insights of political ecology and social movement studies can thus shed light on the challenges posed to human rights violations in contemporary Latin America.

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Endnotes

1. On *La Via Campesina* see Borrás 2008; Edelman 2012; and Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2010. On the MOCASE see Barbetta 2005; Dargoltz 1997; Durand 2005.

2. See Stefanoni 2012.
3. On conflicts about natural resources in Peru see Bebbington et al. 2008; Hughes 2010; Himley 2012. On the recent protests see “Emergency in Peru after 3 killed in mining clash” *The Seattle Times* July 3 2012. Retrieved July 3, 2012 (http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2018593387_apltperuminingprotest.html).
4. On this conflict see Achtenburg 2011 and Laing 2012. A news report can be found here: <http://www.pachamamaradio.org/26-09-2011/bolivia-bolivia-violenta-represion-a-la-marcha-indigena-por-el-eltipnis.html>
5. On political machines and clientelism in Argentina, see Auyero 2000; Levitsky 2003; Brusco, Nazareno and Stokes 2004.
6. Interview to MOCASE leader, see Barbetta and Lapegna 2002.
7. “Un muerto y un herido tras una trágica discusión en Copo” *El Liberal*, November 17 2011. Retrieved November 18, 2011 (<http://www.elliberal.com.ar/ampliada.php?ID=18783>).
8. See “Detuvieron al supuesto asesino y piden la captura de un empresario por el crimen del campesino en Santiago del Estero” *Clarín*, November 18 2011 http://www.clarin.com/politica/Detuvieron-empresario-campesino-Santiago-Estero_0_593340895.html; and “Detenciones por el crimen del campesino” *La Nación*, November 19 2011. Retrieved November 19, 2011 (<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1424634-detenciones-por-el-crimen-del-campesino>).
9. See press release “Censorship,” available at http://www.anred.org/article.php3?id_article=4617
10. See “Reclamo de esclarecimiento y sanciones” *Página 12*, November 19 2011. Retrieved November 19, 2011 (<http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/sociedad/3-181602-2011-11-19.html>).

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