

Monocrops and monoculture: the loss of Food Sovereignty

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An old proverb tells us that the worse kind of blind man is the one that does not want to see; this in itself should be sufficient reason to reject the current situation in Argentina brought about by the promises made by the Green Revolution, Biotechnology and the agroindustry.

Nonetheless, information is controlled by the flows of large amounts of money into the pockets of journalists and the media. Shrewd businesses talk of Corporate Social Responsibility, and the “innocent collaboration” of many NGOs (such as the national Fundación Vida Silvestre - FVS¹, and the global Worldwide Fund for Nature -WWF) have created a vision within the societies, squeezed into the urban areas, that soya is the best thing that could happen to Argentina. Today, spaces such as football fields, the parklands of old ranches, the lands around agricultural colleges, and charitable societies, are all suitable spaces for the extension of the green soya desert; fences have disappeared and paths are just ribbons of asphalt through the soya monocultures.

We would be lying if we failed to acknowledge that this summer (2006/07) maize, which had been greatly displaced during the summer season (as is soya), has returned and covers large expanses of land. It has even been extended into strips and combined with soya in an attempt to improve the very serious problem of land degradation, a situation which has been denied for over a decade. What we want to emphasise in this chapter is the strong influence that has been exerted on society in order for it to accept the monoculture model – although we refer specifically to soya, currently the monoculture of eucalyptus is having equally dramatic effects.

Acceptance of the soya monoculture as “inevitable, and the only way forward...” is accompanied by words of advice like “the plant itself is not a bad thing...we should not demonise it...” These kind of statements have allowed society to quietly accept that 200.000 small and medium sized farmers have been evicted from their lands, that less than 10% of the population live in rural areas (this does not imply that they are in rural employment), that there are 24 new settlements (shanty towns) in the City of Buenos Aires¹, and that in each of these settlements, 8 out of 10 inhabitants are migrants from the countryside¹.

With the overwhelming advance of this ideological monoculture, the political parties – whether right, centre or left - only managed to double the stakes, by racing forward with the production of agrofuels or by demanding greater budgets for social disputes.

¹ FVS is the Argentinian chapter of the WWF.

The scenario

The Grupo de Reflexión Rural has alerted public to the causes of the national crisis by means of three book publications and a great number of reports. This was never “solely” a rural crisis: in August 2001 we published **Transgénico y el Fracaso del Modelo Agropecuario** (GM crops and the Crash of the Agricultural Model) ^{III} and in 2003 **Estado en Construcción** (A State under Construction) ^{IV}. In these publications we continued to describe the influence of “*biotechnology at the source of the catastrophe which is destroying Argentina*”. This was a time when the economic index was showing a certain level of recovery, although this was not being reflected in an improved distribution of wealth.

With the new Kirschner government, we carried out a review of the State Construction, and by adding the findings of this review to these new experiences, allowed the country a time of “grace” whilst we awaited the change in the rural model. This is the reason why we entitled the new publication: **Estado de Gracia, Estado en Construcción** (State of Grace, the State under Construction).

Through our publications we have drawn attention to the eviction of farmers, particularly small and medium sized agricultural producers who were being left behind by the increases in scale of production. This continues to be the appalling reality within the Argentinian countryside – a reality which consists of the sacrifice of the weakest, and which has led to a concentration of land ownership by large “sowing pools” - the new way that contractors do business. This is occurring on a greater scale than before, and now also involves large amounts of capital from bank funds (sourced from outside the agricultural sector)^V. The greatest transfer of agricultural land of the last century took place during the 1990s. On the same level, the majority of the old oligarchy was being substituted by an new oligopolic and prebendal business class. As we foretold, an effect of this model was the disappearance of a substantial number of small producers, whilst approximately 13 million hectares were seized to various parts of the financial system because of outstanding debts. The massive emigration of rural workers in the 1990s can also be attributed to this rural catastrophe. In the Chaco region alone, the mechanisation of cotton harvests implied that each machine was responsible for the displacement of the equivalent of 300 labourers. The “sowing pools” turned producers into tenants of their own fields. The new technological packages which integrated direct sowing, machinery of increasingly greater coverage, herbicide, and GM soya from Monsanto created an agriculture without farmers.

With the disappearance of the small and medium sized producers there has been a disappearance of important areas dedicated to a variety of crops which were once characteristic of the Argentinian diet. There were reductions in the size of the cultivated areas for rice (by more than 44%), maize (by more than 26,2%), sunflower (by more than 34,2%), wheat (by more than 3%), and there was a tenfold decrease in the cultivation area for cotton. Areas such as San Pedro in the Province of Buenos Aires lost 50% of their orchards and nursery plantations to soya cultivation^{VI}.

Six years after the introduction of soyaRR, the figures provided by the cost of living index for 2002 allow us to compare the research and our own findings. The statistics from INDEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos) show that the products with the highest increment in price were:

Products	Price rise (%)
Dried lentils	272,7
Corn oil	218,9
Wheat flour	162
Peas (canned)	157,5
Sweet potato	152,2
Potato	138
White rice	130,1

Source: Ambito Financiero, Tuesday 7th January 2003, p 4.

Argentina is a traditional exporter of foods, in particular beef and wheat. At the time of writing (March 2007), there has been a suspension of meat exports, and the government has even suspended exports of wheat which had already been ordered, all because of the lack of national provision of these foods.

Francisco Loewy, a campaigner for the values of Argentinian rural life, describes the same situation and highlights the paradox in his book **La Encrucijada** (the Crossroads)^{VII}: *“even though there is an increase in productivity, the Argentinian countryside is losing its human presence. The majority of the population of the interior are languishing, whilst the fringes of the urban areas are so overcrowded that there is no space left, there are very few opportunities for employment, nor any adequate infrastructure. The material and human costs of this problem are far greater than the agricultural subsidies received from industrialised countries.*

There are still pockets of agricultural producers, their families and their cooperatives resolutely resisting these destructive forces. We are at risk of losing the last remnants of culture and traditions of agricultural work. Our economists do not take these values into account. They can't be found within their textbooks. They do not calculate the staggering social and environmental costs of the obsessive demographic changes that are taking place, or the seriousness of their consequences. The emptying of the countryside advances, and this places a stranglehold on Argentinian society and its economy".

The soya model continued its devastating advance (700.000 hectares of expansion per year) right to the present day. We now have over 15.000.000 hectares under cultivation, from which we expect a crop of 45.000.000 tonnes. According to politicians, the rural model is the export of low value goods, the concentration of land, and the depopulation of the rural environment. Of the 25 million hectares sown with annual crops, 20 million are owned by less than 2.000 companies. The extended and intricate network of contractors of agricultural machinery, the local distributors of goods, the cultural and social life which was part of the small livestock farming communities and the rural villages have all disappeared, leaving behind immense tracts of empty land.

Our country has become a laboratory for experiments rural genocide. The 500 or more villages which have either completely disappeared or are in the process of disappearing provide examples of this. It is possible that Argentina has seen one of the largest recorded migrations of rural populations to the fringes of poverty surrounding the urban areas. The effects of this progressive loss of significant national cultural values and traditions have a direct effect on the political and social life of Argentina. This is reflected in the progressive weakening of civil society.

These settlements of the new urban poor intensify the sub-human conditions caused by social fragmentation and violence that is experienced in the majority of towns, not just within the Province of Buenos Aires but also in the remainder of the country, where land clearances and the disappearance of regional economies continue to afflict the populations as they did in the 1990s.

During the final days of 2006, within the context of "Chinese rates of growth" the government decided to highlight in the weekly edition of Perfil on the 24th of December 2006^{viii} that, according to the National

Survey on Nutrition and Health in Argentina, 34% of infants under 2 years of age suffered from anaemia. This brings us to the sorry conclusion that national growth is also 'anaemic'.

A detailed review on nutrition, with special emphasis on children, has recently been published. The report analyses the cognitive deterioration of children living in poor conditions, and the sociologist, Daniel Petetta is the author of chapter two "The epidemiological evolution of urban poverty in Argentina: the impact on indicators of demography, education and employment". The introduction to this chapter explains that *"in truth, although the idea of poverty cannot be strictly incorporated into the medical understanding of illness, the dimensions that this phenomenon has taken in Argentina in terms of size and severity, puts it on par with the major crises experienced by this country during its two centuries of history... According to INDEC, more than half of the population was living below the poverty line between 2002 and 2003"*^{ix}.

This scenario is composed of a number of elements, but the description of these is beyond the scope of our current remit. What is important is to provide a thorough description of the power of the monocrop model and how it generates a *monoculture* of collective awareness, how it considers the use of large-scale agriculture for the production of commodities, environmental deterioration, the loss of food sovereignty, the eviction of the rural labour force, and the demise of local development as inevitable. Within this context, "tension between development without growth and growth without development, the public administration (whether community or local government)... only collect" renouncing their traditional role as the interface between global growth and local development^x.

As another step towards monoculture, if this were possible, the current administration is in the forefront of the promotion of agrofuels^{xi} and presents the industry as a source of employment and the processing plants as an element of environmental stewardship. As always, they rely on the support of multinational companies and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). It is unfortunate that today one of the most commonly heard remarks is "Full tanks, empty bellies." In this adventure, maize monocultures for the production of ethanol, and soya and other non-food crops such as castor oil and jatropha are favoured above all else.

The monocultures of science

Science today “does not investigate that which is not profitable”. If we follow this train of thought, genetic modification has been converted into the focal point for research projects funded by the National State, and such modifications will always have the production of “commodities” for export as their final objective. It is within this monoculture of Argentinian consciousness that soya is unleashed, not to put an end to hunger and to fight against European subsidies, but for the simple reason that, within the “direct sowing” system of agriculture it is the most profitable crop and needs the least manual labour. GM soya has displaced crops requiring intensive manual labour and has relegated these to the margins. Today, these crops are grown by immigrants, many of whom are illegal and originate from neighbouring countries, particularly from Bolivia.

Following IDB guidelines, the private and State-run agricultural faculties have lowered their academic levels to such an extreme that some disciplines, such as horticulture and other traditional “crops” which were traditionally run as annual courses now take place over two months. There is also an insistence that post-graduate courses, which are normally dedicated to the advancement of thoughts and ideas, should be based around direct sowing and agribusiness.

National research institutes are subject to Convenios de Vinculación Tecnológica (CVT – Technological Association Agreements), which are a euphemism through which the businesses can use those employed by the State and the State’s resources to carry out their own research, and from which they alone will reap any benefits.

Any knowledge held by the nation’s farmers relating to crop rotation, crop management, appropriate machinery, knowledge of the weather, organisation of tasks through the year, or pest control, has all been systematically ignored and removed from the lectures.

Figure showing soya monoculture in Argentina

“The monoculture of soya in Argentina represents large investments for exports and generates a business that...benefits a few AGD, Cargill, Nidera, Bunge, Vicentin, Louis Dreyfus, who sold off a record 11,650 million dollars in 2005...destroys the environment and agricultural diversity by promoting land clearance and favouring a farming model without farmers.....evicts and makes people ill because of crop spraying. Farmers and villagers are evicted and pressed by groups of paramilitaries employed by the soya growers...monopolises and contaminates. Monsanto is the exclusive owner of GM seed patents and the producer of the only herbicide that can deal with soya pests without killing the crops...GM REPUBLIC – WEALTH FOR SOME, DESTRUCTION, POVERTY AND EVICTION FOR MANY”

EL MONOCULTIVO DE SOJA EN LA ARGENTINA

Representa los mayores ingresos por exportación y genera un negocio que...

...BENEFICIA A POCOS

N **AGD**
NIDERA



BUNGE **Vicentin**

Louis Dreyfus

Quienes liquidaron durante el año 2005 la cifra récord de 11.650 millones de dólares.

...DESTRUYE
EL AMBIENTE

y la diversidad agrícola, al fomentar el desmonte y propiciar un modelo de "agricultura sin agricultores".



...DESALOJA Y ENFERMA,

por las fumigaciones del herbicida. Campesinos y pueblos originarios

son expulsados y reprimidos por grupos paramilitares defensores de los intereses sojeros.



MONOPOLIZA Y CONTAMINA

Monsanto es la propietaria exclusiva de la patente de las semillas transgénicas y fabricante del único herbicida que combate las plagas sin dañar los cultivos.



REPUBLICA

TRANSGENICA

RIQUEZA PARA ALGUNOS, DESTRUCCION,
POBREZA Y DESARRAIGO, PARA MUCHOS

The students at the agricultural colleges see their classrooms surrounded by soya in the summer, and “chemical fallow” in the winter. Is it possible that proposals for a life in the countryside which includes crop diversity and follows the principle that “small is beautiful” could attract the students when the college in which they are being taught is financially supported through soyaRR crops? Could we ask the students coming out of these colleges to challenge this hegemonic way of thinking and ask them to be the Don Quixotes who take on the task of returning to the countryside?

Monocultures and Food Sovereignty

Argentina changed from being the grain barn of the world to being a mono-producer of GM soya for forage. The country ceased to produce food for its own population and began to produce the commodities demanded by the world market. Today, the uncontrolled expansion of this monoculture is beginning to cause serious problems, such as poverty, unemployment in rural areas, and the destruction of crops directly linked to the traditional diet, such as the potato, sweet potato, lentils, peas, various types of maize, and vegetable produce. But soya is the ‘deposit box’ for the profits from exports which contribute around US\$6.000.000 per year to the public treasury, and which at this time no government can do without. This money is indispensable to the social plans to contain poverty, and which at the same time, domesticate and subject these to openly client-based social policies. These are the funds that, in the hands of the “leaders” (urban commanders) are used to generate a cohort of voluntary “assistants” for public gatherings, and to ensure secure votes in elections in “part-payment” for the social assistance plans.

Foreigners without the necessary documentation are not eligible for state benefits for various reasons, and are usually exploited both in towns and the countryside. What is certain is that *“40% of the producers from Quintero in the Province of Buenos Aires, the most important area for horticulture in the country, are Bolivian. Around 88% of Bolivians living in Quintero rent their lands, and 12% are landowners. The manual labour employed is also Bolivian, and in many cases, they originate from the same areas as their employers. This fact repeats itself without any major variations throughout the horticultural belts surrounding the major Cordoban towns of Mendoza, the Alto Valle del Rio Negro, Neuquen, Chubut and the borderlands of Salta and Jujuy. This fact is part of the complex community interrelations and is the source of the plan to emigrate”^{xli}.*

Monocultures, the agri-industry, knowledge and Land Reform

The sowing pools, and in a lesser way, the trusts that are the legal entities that the monoculture model has imposed and which have no particular interests in land ownership, even if they displace farmers and their crops. In the words of a champion of the “new managers” of the countryside: *“I am a farmer but I don’t own any land, neither do I own tractors or harvesters. This is the nation’s greatest innovation. Unlike the rest of the world, in Argentina today you don’t have to be the son of a farmer or a rancher to be a farmer. You need a good idea and money. Then you can rent the land, and you are a farmer. This is an extraordinary and democratic process giving access to the land, where the ownership of the land is UNIMPORTANT; what matters is the ownership of knowledge”.*

This is a quote by Gustavo Grobocopatel, the same person that has just signed an agreement worth millions to grow *Bolivian GM soya* (SIC) in Venezuela^{xiii}. This should be a serious cause for concern for peasant organisations that continue to demand “Land Reform”, particularly when the corporations feel that the important issues are the power of knowledge – that is, patents, royalties, and the possession and management of technological packages.

A conclusion and a proposal

There is an urgent need to think about proposals for agricultural models for our continent. This is for a number of reasons, the main one being the way that Globalised Capital is being imposed on us by the multinationals. This places our country into a new environment of colonialism which determine the primarisation of our economies and the production of commodities on a massive scale. This new dependency also leads to the appropriation of natural resources, devastated ecosystems and severe impacts on rural populations. We need to search for the intellectual elements which will allow us to visualise and face up to these neo-colonial situations, and that will allow us to re-think the relationship between the towns and the countryside in these times of globalisation. We also need to show that the advance of the agribusiness and industrial agriculture models using GM crops are not as inevitable as we have been led to believe, or because of the way they that pedagogic colonisation has helped them to become naturalised. Agribusinesses imply an aggressive stance towards our cultural identity, the uprooting of our populations and our dietary heritage, and a risk to our immediate chances of survival within a society that has been colonised by the Corporations.

We believe that the campesinos - indigenous communities and the many small producers and sectors from the towns that are united in their desire for a life in the countryside - all naturally strive towards the preservation of the ecosystem and its basic components. But there is an increasing and relentless pressure from consumerism and its dependence on raw materials, the temptations posed by 'so-called' cutting edge technologies, and the demand posed by exports and urban living. It is therefore urgent to set criteria and paradigms for liberation and local rural development. Prioritise Ways of life that allow us to recover self-esteem in rural and land-based work, at the same time as we create models of production that are more in tune with Nature, and which facilitate the recovery of knowledges and the wise use of the resources which have been lost on a daily basis during the long process of cultural assimilation.

Towards the end of the 20th century the collapse of the USSR took place, Zapatism was on the rise in Mexico and was having an impact on large anti-global demonstrations taking place in cities all over the world, and there was a resurgence in Latin America of a rural movement which was independent from any political party. This movement strove to generate important proposals, such as Food Sovereignty. Over the past ten years this resurgence of rural experience has demonstrated its power and its weaknesses. In fact, it is prominent within popular campaigns, although in a defensive and subordinate role to the progressive urban ideologies.

Looking back at the Leninist slogan "*Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country*", we can see that the victory of this type of Marxism - later converted into a world view - marked out a continuity and loyalty of consciousness, and proposals from the world's oppressed. This took place during the height of 19th century European science with its materialistic positivism and its mechanistic tunnel vision of evolution. Their Eurocentric viewpoint attempted to organise reality within their own parameters and, from leftist positions, they took part in the advances of colonialism on the fringes of the world throughout the 20th century.

Sadly, those options included turning their backs on Ecology and taking charge of an single mandate: the domination of Nature. This inheritance is still evident in the progressive and leftist thinking that we live with, and need to have dialogue with on a daily basis. It is impossible to imagine that the Latin American left has not yet warned us of the importance of environmental conservation, or of the importance of environmentally-friendly local development, or the value of healthy food, or living a

lifestyle that is more in harmony with our environment. It would not take much on our parts to understand that the left still value the old paradigms which support progressive thought, and their constant choice for the large scale, employment, and the complete certainty of unlimited progress – like the 20th century love affair with chimneys as a symbol of industrialisation.

Today, our continent is living through a diversity of governments, including populists, renovators or even reformers, and in some cases socialists, generally they are all anti-imperialist. Because of a strong persistence of 1970s ideologies and their Marxist thought processes, it is evident that the anti-imperialism aimed against Bush and anything North American does not include the North American way of life which is promoted through films and advertising, nor does it include the large Corporations that we do business with - without suffering any great pangs of conscience. Our elite leaders are globalised anti-imperialists, and they continue to rely on unlimited progress and consider that, due to a lack of a tenacious bourgeoisie, they are the old revolutionaries who today play the role of progressive officials taking forward the tasks of Capitalism, even though capital investment is in the hands of the international corporations.

Yesterday, Lula eagerly signed contracts with Bush for the transfer of technology for ethanol production. Tomorrow Tabare will probably sign a Free Trade Agreement to ensure the entry of Uruguayan produce into the USA. If the Left is going to share many of the same development paradigms with the political and neoliberal Right, it will generally make the global processes of new dependencies be viewed as irrelevant and not considered as politically important. The monoculture models, the massive production of commodities, biotechnology and GM seeds, chemical mining for cyanide processing, forestry plantations for cellulose, the massive-scale feeding of GM soya to intensively reared animals, the advance of the frontiers of industrial agriculture over farmlands and native forests, the conversion of local produce into links of long integrated agri-food chains. Any of the above may be considered as positive or negative aspects, but one always has to pay the price which inevitably comes with modernisation.

The campaigns for the defense of Ecology mobilize ever greater numbers of communities that have suffered devastating policies, but they have not yet been able to gain access to the agendas of political parties or governments. Meanwhile, the campesino movements struggle in confusion. They fluctuate between the growing stranglehold that is

imposed on them by agribusiness policies and the often outdated ideological frameworks of their leaders, which makes them frame these situations almost exclusively in a perspective of social claims.

One only needs to recognize that the situation is extremely complicated, and that the way to confront a complex situation is through complex thoughts. But, for many, this is not an easy thing to do, as it would involve re-learning and re-thinking the situation, and possibly incorporating new paradigms. Perhaps the best way forward is to provide a basis that justifies the reasons why we struggle for innovation and to find our own methods for development, based on our tradition and American thought processes. Establishing this would bring us to a re-evaluation of Culture as a manifestation of identity within the existing framework. Rodolfo Kusch, an American thinker who is indispensable for this re-thinking, said that European thought and philosophy included North American thought, because it is only a transplant of Europe in America: *"European philosophy is a constant search for the Self, and at the same time an enormous incapacity for recognising Being, which has been lost throughout the length of European history"*. He also added: *"The American is change, a prolonged state of Being that does not allow the reaching of the Self"*. The **ability to define one's Self whilst being in the Being of America**, would allow us to unravel and define the original models. Those models need to emerge from the being of the campesino and the American Indian within their American land, and the investigative task should find them, identify them and do no more than explain them.

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