

Storying the Soyacene

A stylized, dark grey tree graphic with a thick trunk and several branches, set against a light grey circular background. The tree is positioned on the right side of the page, partially overlapping the title area.

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BOOK REVIEW

Claiton Marcio da Silva and Claudio de Majo, eds. *The Age of the Soybean: An Environmental History of Soy during the Great Acceleration* (Winwick: The White Horse Press, 2022).

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We live in a world dependent not only on fossil fuels but also on soy”, argue Claiton da Silva and Claudio de Majo in the first page of the introduction to their edited volume on the global history of soybeans. In *The Age of the Soybean* (2022), da Silva and de Majo brought together scholars from different fields, places and backgrounds to showcase the multiple histories of soy across the planet. This thought-provoking volume illuminates the multi-scalar history of soybeans, who the actors were in its development into a cash crop, and the new entanglements and dependencies emerging from its expansion. The volume is divided into five parts that provide historical overviews of the expansion of the soybean (part 1), the role of soybeans in the development of food chains (part 2), histories of soy that shed light on the multiple environments that soy reached (part 3), transformations in dietary habits and technologies (part 4), and the final part engages with histories of soybean farming (part 5).

The book is among the latest in a series of scholarly publications on the expansion of soybeans and their global history. For instance, Ines Prodöhl (2023) studied the globalisation of the soybean in the first half of the twentieth century³ and Matilda Norberg and Lisa Deutsch (2023) analysed the cycles of soy in the last millennium⁴. In addition, several monographs explore soy histories in diverse locations such as India⁵, the United States⁶, and Paraguay⁷. What distinguishes da Silva and de Majo’s work is their collection of multiple perspectives from different parts of the world side by side. The various sites, cases, and agents analysed in the chapters emerge as mosaic pieces contributing to the ongoing project of documenting the history of soy expansion.

The Age of the Soybean’s structure accommodates the interests of a diverse readership. It provides flexibility for those with specific interests and offers a comprehensive understanding of the multiple historical trajectories of the soybean through the sum of its chapters. Despite occasional repetitions of general facts, the chapters unveil manifestations of global processes in diverse contexts through

³ Prodöhl, Ines. *Globalizing the Soybean: Fat, Feed, and Sometimes Food, c. 1900–1950*. (Abingdon-on-Thames and New York: Routledge, 2023).

⁴ Norberg, Matilda Baraibar, and Lisa Deutsch. *The Soybean through World History: Lessons for Sustainable Agrofood Systems*. (Abingdon-on-Thames and New York: Routledge, 2023).

⁵ Kumar, Richa. *Rethinking Revolutions: Soyabean, Choupals, and the Changing Countryside in Central India*. (Delhi, 2016; online ed, Oxford Academic, 2016).

⁶ Roth, Matthew. *Magic Bean: The Rise of Soy in America*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018).

⁷ Hetherington, Kregg. *The Government of Beans: Regulating Life in the Age of Monocrops*. (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2020).

maintaining a focus on environmental perspectives. This grounds soy expansion in its varied environments and avoids universalizing its effects. Particularly interesting in this regard, is the chapter by Relly and de Majo that analyses the convergence of igneous techniques and soy expansion in South America showcasing the ambivalences of burning as a practice for environmental management. Soy as a moving commodity therefore is the overarching frame that ties these chapters together. However, while the study of an individual commodity is a common theme in works of global history, the focus on soy might blind the researcher to historical developments in the places they investigate in which soy did not feature as a central agent of change and the various commodity streams alongside which soy expanded.

The editors proposed the term “Soyacene” to convey the multiple entanglements and power relations that the expansion of soybeans caused and draw attention to their ubiquitous presence in landscapes and food systems. They acknowledge that as a periodization and concept the Soyacene still needs empirical detail to justify its use. We consider the introduction of the term Soyacene both an asset and a weakness to this volume. By associating the -cene to soy, the editors emphasise soy’s omnipresence and importance in multiple contexts, underscoring the ubiquity of the crop. Yet, the term also aligns soy expansion with the discussions of the universality of human action, periodizations, and proposed geological epochs that have dominated intellectual discussions on other -cenes. These debates, however, are not central in the individual chapters, which focus on assigning concrete agencies to the expansion of soybeans and mapping their trajectories. The chapter of de Brito Rocha et al. on Brazil’s last “agricultural frontier”, for example, highlights specific scientific and political collaborations that enabled soy expansion in this environment and denormalizes the planting of soybeans in the Cerrado region of Brazil. More clarification on the use of this new -cene in relation to the microhistories the individual chapters tell could have situated the book further in discussions on global and situated histories and benefited the proposition of the term Soyacene.

While the chapters are framed as dealing with soy in the period McNeill and Engelke called the Great Acceleration, a problematization or discussion of this periodization would have served to further diversify the volume’s framing. As the book

links the Great Acceleration to the expansion of soybeans across the planet, to some extent, it evokes the illusion of parallelity of the various historical trajectories of soy. This diminishes the importance of the longer developments, such as the development of overseas trade, processing of raw materials and advances in knowledge of agriculture, which contributed to soy expansion but fall outside of this periodization. In addition, the convergence of Great Acceleration and soy expansion might obscure the diversity of agencies behind the spread of soy that did not adhere to a logic of acceleration but operated according to their own temporal rhythms. The chapter on soybeans in Zimbabwe, by Vimbai Chaumba Kwashirai, is a welcome challenge to this paradigm. Kwashirai analyses the take up of soybeans in Zimbabwe, emphasising its role in giving more autonomy to Zimbabwean housewives. This chapter counters the notion that soybean expansion was necessarily connected to accelerated environmental and social degradation entailing the loss of autonomy of smallholder farming families. Instead, local actors are portrayed as able to adopt the soybean to their own advantage and scales, retaining their agency.

Despite its admittedly minor shortcomings, *The Age of the Soybean* provides a rich starting point to investigate the history of soybeans in various places. Its importance, however, extends beyond the study of soy towards new perspectives on rural modernities, global histories and species exchanges that unfolded in multiple seemingly detached sites. Therefore, it is a recommended read for scholars and students in environmental studies, history, food systems, and agriculture.

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