

# Book Review

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**Hetherington, Kregg. *The Government of Beans: Regulating Life in the Age of Monocrops*.  
Durham: Duke University Press, 2020, 296 pages.**

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Thinking about agriculture, states, and colonialism together offers great insight into this age often referred to as the Anthropocene. This is what Kregg Hetherington's book *The Government of Beans: Regulating Life in the Age of Monocrops* does marvellously well. While the book talks some about the beans themselves, it centers on soy's interactions with things that seem to exist apart from soy in Paraguay—borders, the regulatory state, landscapes, and *campesino* communities. This approach is indicative of Hetherington's understanding of soy as a “hyperobject” (Morton 2013)—widely distributed, agential, and unknowable. In other words, soy's effects across its borders—on landscapes, campesinos, and the state—are deep and wide-ranging. Drawing on his long history of ethnographic engagement in Paraguay, Hetherington is able to both display soy's vast, inscrutable presence and offer a powerful and situated indictment of the ways that monocrops can devastate the communities and landscapes they displace and the governments that attempt to control them.

Most concretely, *The Government of Beans* traces the many ways that “*la soja mata*” (soy kills)—a slogan of rural activists. There is the “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) of soy's toxic pesticides that poison landscapes and sicken campesinos in ways that are largely illegible within medical and judicial systems. There is soy's replacement of cotton as the dominant crop. And then there is the way that this replacement destroys campesino livelihoods and governmental promises of rural welfare and citizenship, which were long attached to cotton in rural Paraguay.

While Hetherington's analysis has a lot to say about and will be of great interest to students of Paraguayan and Latin American politics and history, it is also an essential contribution to critical scholarship on the Anthropocene. Soy deviates from and destroys cotton's labour-dependent promise of rural welfare, Hetherington shows. Yet soy also reinforces, at great speed and great scale,

cotton's Green Revolution-focus on intensified production and the colonial and genocidal displacement of Indigenous peoples and forests that come with it. This is what Hetherington terms "agrobiopolitics," a concept that both draws from and critiques Foucault's biopolitics. Reflecting on the accepted separation of humans and "nature," Foucault did not think much about food production, Hetherington argues, despite its centrality to biopolitical governance. Attention to crops like soy and cotton offers a powerful way into the entwined histories of settler colonialism and monocrop-linked deforestation—a key dynamic of the environmental devastation of this era.

*The Government of Beans* also includes engaging political ethnography, examining the ways that soy and its regulation are central to and yet undermine the Paraguayan state. The book explores how regulating soy is part of how the state seeks to establish sovereignty in areas far from its capital city. In vivid ethnographic detail, Hetherington shows how this can happen in small, seemingly unimportant bureaucratic decisions made by government agents in their visits to the monocrop. The minutia of measurements, sampling, and documentation, Hetherington shows, are bound up in the unstable and often unsuccessful exercise of sovereignty on soy's frontier.

More broadly, the book offers an account of the rise and fall of one of Latin America's leftist governments in the first two decades of the twenty-first century—that of President Fernando Lugo, who governed from 2008 until a parliamentary coup in 2012. Lugo's administration sought to use the state to regulate the environmental and social harms of soy and to promote a certain kind of rural citizenship (what Hetherington calls "regulatory" citizenship)—convinced, like many, that the state could be not just the cause of environmental and social problems but also their solution. Following the fraught and thwarted efforts of state critics-turned state bureaucrats, Hetherington terms this "the Government of Beans," which he contrasts with the "Soy State" that had essentially facilitated soy's spread. Contributing to scholarship on extractivism in Latin America (Gudynas 2021), Hetherington explores the tensions and continuities between the Government of Beans and the Soy State, which ultimately facilitated the former's dismemberment. Like some other governments of the Latin American left, Lugo's administration was undone by its inability to replace or otherwise extricate itself from the clientelist and monocrop-promoting bureaucracies that proceeded it.

Hetherington's writing is one of the book's great strengths. He makes the details of things like monocrops, bureaucracy, and measurement lively. Readers

come to understand, for example, the import and controversy surrounding the existence (or not) of a comma. Use of the first person plural, for example, “[b]ut our story is still missing...” (27) and “[w]e’re not in a position to understand...” (92), is effective in making the story of soy into a narrative that readers want to follow. Moreover, introducing the wide range of “characters” implicated in Paraguayan soy effectively reveals soy’s long and not entirely coherent presence. The book will be engaging for those interested in ethnographic writing that experiments with capturing heterogeneity, disjointedness, and multiplicity.

The book is comprised of seventeen short chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion, divided into three parts. Part I introduces soy from multiple perspectives, including the retelling of the 2003 death of a campesino child, Silvino Talavera, after he was doused in pesticides, which spurred rural organizing. Among its chapters is the wonderfully titled Chapter 6—The Vast Tofu Conspiracy—which looks at soy’s conspiratorial presence everywhere, including in the food we eat. Part II centres on the failed governmental effort to regulate soy, situating the Lugo regime as part of the leftist turn in Latin America and the optimism of that moment about the potential of government to address social and environmental harms. Chapter 11 is a key part of this project, ethnographically explicating the potential and limitations of measurement as an act of “tactical” sovereignty. Part III elaborates Hetherington’s concept of agrobiopolitics, revealing how it lets us understand what he calls the “the age of monocrops,” with the rise and fall of the Government of Beans as one example. Here, Chapters 15 and 17 are particularly effective at revealing how soy does not just replace cotton but also builds upon and intensifies its ecological and human “killing practices” (2012). Together, these chapters trace how “specific forms of thriving always depend on specific sorts of killing” (207). Through Hetherington’s adept analysis, monocrops and their regulation reveal how life and death are interwoven in the Anthropocene.

## References

- Gudynas, Eduardo. 2021. *Extractivisms: Politics, Economy and Ecology*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.