Introduction

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Latin America's agriculture has been one of the economic sectors most negatively affected by the neoliberal reform set off in the 1980s. In most countries, a broad program of agricultural liberalization was launched under pressure from the United States and supranational organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Economic liberalization generally included the unilateral lifting of protectionist policies, the opening of agricultural markets by lowering or eliminating tariffs and quotas, the privatization and/or dismantling of government corporations for rural credit, infrastructure, commercialization, and technical assistance, the end or even reversal of land reform policies, and the radicalization or reorientation of food policies focused on the internal market toward an export-based agricultural economy. These extensive reforms had profound, often negative, consequences for the agricultural sectors of Latin American countries and for a high proportion of agricultural producers. Impacts have been compounded by the fact that reforms in Latin America were not accompanied by a corresponding liberalization of agricultural trade and production in advanced capitalist countries, which continue to heavily subsidize and protect their farm sectors with billions of dollars, thus placing Latin American producers at a competitive disadvantage. "Neoliberal globalism" is what we call the ideology driving this set of reforms, both to describe their content and to highlight the fact that such policies can be changed with a different outlook.

The biotechnology revolution of the 1990s, which has inundated the countryside of some countries and supermarkets around the world with transgenic crops and other new products, was superimposed on the reforms brought about under the impetus of neoliberal globalism. From their beginnings at the laboratory stage in the 1980s, agricultural

biotechnologies generally and genetic engineering in particular were described as potent tools for sustainable development and for ending famine, food insecurity, and malnutrition. It is well known that such problems are disproportionately concentrated in developing countries, which also happen to have large proportions of their population engaged in agriculture. Because of modern agriculture's technological bias, however—focused mostly on enhancing the productivity of large, specialized, capital-intensive farms—most developing-country peasants and small-family farmers have been rendered “inefficient.” Millions have become excluded as producers by the new agricultural policies and technologies. All too often peasants and farmers have been transformed into wage workers for the capitalized farms, and countless have enlarged the ranks of the unemployed. Many of these people have participated in the growing trends toward international migration, separating family members for extended periods of time or permanently from their communities.

Yet, for millennia, peasant farmers have been directly responsible for preserving vast amounts of plant biological diversity. In fact, given the vagaries of nature, developing countries possess the largest plant biological diversity on earth, as well as the largest problems of soil depletion and environmental degradation. Input-intensive, capitalized farmers cannot preserve biological diversity, as modern agriculture has a clear bias toward monocropping based on modern plant varieties. Ironically, plant breeders producing these modern varieties depend on the availability of plant genetic diversity offered and preserved by small peasants. If the latter become extinct, so will the raw materials for further plant breeding. Adding agricultural biotechnology to this scenario, combined with the policies associated with neoliberal globalism, can only exacerbate the trends of social polarization and environmental degradation.

The first wave of studies about socioeconomic and environmental impacts of agricultural biotechnologies in the 1980s and 1990s used a prospective approach, because the products at stake were still in a laboratory stage; only a few medical applications entered the market in the 1980s. By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, a multiplicity of agricultural biotechnologies has been implemented on farms around the world, with the highest concentration in the Americas, North and South.

This book offers the general and specialized public a solid collection of empirically based studies written by social scientists. Represented disciplines among contributors are anthropology, economics, geography, political science, and sociology. Yet each chapter adopts an interdisciplinary perspective about the concrete socioeconomic and environmental

impacts of agricultural biotechnologies in Latin America. These studies capture both the central issues that have come about with the application of agricultural biotechnology, and emerging alternatives for a sustainable agriculture.

In the general chapters on Latin America (1–4), the authors provide the theoretical and historical background to locate biotechnology in the context of modern agriculture and neoliberal globalism, the experience of the Green Revolution, the issues associated with global governance of biosafety, and the perils for smaller countries of relying on “absentee expertise” for shaping local legislation. A variety of national experiences (Chaps. 5–10) are then addressed, from widespread adoption of transgenic crops in countries such as Argentina, or somewhat restricted adoption as in Mexico, to the creation of a zone free of genetically modified organisms in Brazil that was ultimately bulldozed by neoliberal policies in 2004. Social-movements and bottom-up perspectives, as well as a research agenda for future research, are offered in the last two chapters.

Rather than being journalistic accounts, or predominantly normative or prospective in orientation, the chapters in this book are based on empirical evidence and emphasize interdisciplinary socioeconomic analysis. Most of our findings are rather somber. Yet there are also signs of emerging alternatives. We thus hope that our modest contribution to understanding such trends and alternatives will help activists and policy makers to transform this somber reality in a socially and environmentally sustainable direction.

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Food for the Few

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