May 4th, 10:00 AM - 11:30 AM

The Dispute Over Seeds: Indigenous and Peasant Struggles for Food Sovereignty in Chiapas, Mexico.

Carol Hernandez-Rodriguez

Portland State University
The Dispute Over Seeds: Indigenous and Peasant Struggles for Food Sovereignty in Chiapas, Mexico.

The Experience of the Project Guardianes de la Madre Tierra y las Semillas (Guardians of Mother Earth and Seeds)

Carol Hernandez-Rodriguez
Ph.D. Candidate in Sociology
PROBLEM STATEMENT

• Native seeds have become a key contested resource in contemporary capitalism.
  (Shiva 2015; Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2012; Peschlaner and Otero 2010, 2013; La Via Campesina, 2009)

• In line with international legislation regulating Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) over seeds, Mexico has passed several federal laws regarding the research, production, sale and use of certified seeds and Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs).
  (CECCAM, RDM and La Via Campesina, 2009 )
• These international and national laws establish, through the commodification of seeds, the foundations for a new facet of what Harvey (2003) terms “accumulation by dispossession”.

• This research project explores the implications of these developments for indigenous and peasant communities in Chiapas, Mexico, whose food sovereignty depends on the conservation and reproduction of native seeds.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

• 1. How do neoliberal policies in the agrarian system impact the food sovereignty of indigenous and peasant communities in the Global South?

• 2. How are indigenous and peasant communities in Chiapas contesting neoliberal policies and strengthening their food sovereignty?
METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

• Multi-Sited Ethnography (Marcus, 1995)
  – participant and nonparticipant observation
    • volunteer in a local NGO
  – 60 semi-structured interviews
    • 39: community members
    • 21: NGO staff, activists, scholars
  – document analysis
PROYECTO GUARDIANES DE LA MADRE TIERRA Y LAS SEMILLAS (GUARDIANS OF THE MOTHER EARTH AND SEEDS PROJECT)
The Area of Research: Chiapas, Mexico
The Regional Context

• Seed certification and introduction of GMOs
• Agribusiness
• Conservation and carbon market projects
• Extractivism
• Regional integration areas and “free trade” agreements
• Indigenous movement (EZLN + Indigenous Theology)
• Low intensity war and militarization
Seed Certification and Introduction of GMOs

International and National Legislation regulating research, production, certification, sale and use of seeds and GMOs:

- 1991 UPOV Convention (International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants)

- 1996 Federal Law on Plant Varieties

- 2005 Federal Law on Biosecurity and GMOs

- 2007 Federal Law on Production, Certification and Commercialization of Seeds
THE PROJECT:
Guardianes de la Madre Tierra y las Semillas

• Emerged in 2015 after the Congress of Mother Earth organized by the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas (2014).

• 154 Tseltal, Tsotsil, and Cho’l indigenous and Mestizo families from 25 communities in the areas Norte and Los Altos in Chiapas.

• Focuses on agroecology, food sovereignty and the defense of native seeds and community land.
Communities: General Characteristics

- Communal land tenure
- Small land holdings per family (1-10 acres)
- Poor quality land for agriculture
  - Physical location
  - Highly degraded due to: agrochemical practices + poor crop rotation + deforestation + polluted water bodies
- Subsistence agriculture + complementary paid work
- Poverty and extreme poverty
- Low food security
Communal Land in Mexico
Communal Land in Chiapas

Objectives

• Overarching objectives of project:
  – Defend community territories and native seeds
  – Strengthen food sovereignty in communities
  – Address the processes of environmental devastation in communities
Specific objectives:
1. Promote the transition from agrochemical to agroecological practices
2. Preserve native seeds through:
   • creation of community native seed houses
   • preventing the use of GMOs and Certified Seeds
3. Diversify crop production and food consumption
   * collective organic vegetable gardens
   * diversified agroecological milpa
4. Generate knowledge co-creation dynamics
5. Empower women and young people
Some Outcomes and Findings
Methodology Development and Political Context Analysis Workshops
Systematization and Exchange of Knowledge and Practices in Indigenous Languages
(Peasant to Peasant Methodology)
Native Seed Inventories in Indigenous Languages

Communities preserve an average of 250-280 native seed varieties
First Native Seeds Community House
Focused on Corn, Beans and Chiles
Collective Organic Vegetable Gardens
Focused on Women and Young People
Small Labs for Agroecological Practices
Planning Land Optimization and Crop Diversification
From the Traditional to the Agroecological Milpa
Conclusions
• **Food Sovereignty is a multidimensional concept**

• **The intersection of:**
  – Seed and territorial sovereignty
  – Food security
  – Agroecology
  – Recovery and preservation of traditional knowledge
  – Women’s and youths’ empowerment
  – The *Lekil Kuxlejal-Ich’el ta muk’* or the collective process of building a harmonious and dignified live

• **Communities conceptualize Food Sovereignty as a crucial axis in building community self-determination.**
POR LA DEFENSA DE LA TIERRA Y EL TERRITORIO

LA TIERRA ES DE QUIEN LA TRABAJA.
Lekil Kuxlejal-Ich’el ta muk’
REFERENCES


Contact Information

Carol Hernandez-Rodriguez
Ph.D. Candidate
Sociology Program

hcarol@pdx.edu