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How can we approach the global history of monocultures in a connected way, transcending the imperative of statistics?

The problem

By considering the relationships and scales involved in the production and consumption of soy, I analyse the paradoxical relationship between the search for sustainable uses and unsustainable soy production, making the EU, Asia and Latin America socio-environmental and historical laboratories that interconnect on micro and macro scales. I address detours as a fundamental part of the macro-analysis and historical narrative because the classical approach of international commodity trade relies heavily on the idea that demand is imperative to controlling production.

Core interest

Soy and the products that result from it are excellent examples for tracing demand, production and intercontinental marketing networks. They reveal how forests and savannas are sacrificed for vegetable oils and proteins, while large port and road infrastructures were built to transport soy.

global dis:connect

From a historical perspective, European imperialism connected soybeans to the West during the 17th and 18th centuries, stimulating research into the protein properties and industrial applications of soy. Later, the geopolitics of the Cold War stimulated the disconnection of traditional populations from their lands with the expansion of plantations during the 1960s-1980s, culminating in the rise of genetically modified soy in the Global South. Finally, is the 21st century a historic moment of combined connection, reconnection and disconnection in soy demand and planting?

Preliminary results

Detours are excluded from historical narratives or are considered secondary. The examples I use demonstrate that most of the soy production and consumption chain display detour processes in the form of enticing indigenous leaders to exploit communal lands; laundering poisoned soybeans for human consumption; trafficking in banned pesticides, among others. These examples demonstrate how commodity-production relationships involve elements that not even governments or activists are aware of.

