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Elizabeth M. Fitting. *The Struggle for Maize: Campesinos, Workers, and Transgenic Corn in the Mexican Countryside.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 320 pp. $84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4938-9; $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4956-3.

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Commissioned by David T. Benac

Adding to the fast-growing literature on understanding the multidimensional nature of commodities and crops is this welcome contribution by Dalhousie University anthropologist Elizabeth Fitting. *The Struggle for Maize* is a deeply researched work, both on broad transnational and local levels, that seeks to show "a few of the ways that corn–as both a food and a crop–is fraught with multiple layers of meaning, and how it has been portrayed by state policy, bureaucrats, activists, academics, and local actors" (p. 232). More specifically, Fitting focuses on the three main elements of central Mexican production: water, labor, and corn itself, and how those work together, or have been affected by, the "neoliberal corn regime" (p. 4). Thus, *The Struggle for Maize* reveals and studies the tension between small-scale agricultural producers, and their uncertainties in trying to survive, and the larger globalized corn markets and commodities regimes that have intensified pressures to change under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other neoliberal economic policies. A huge dimension of those changes has been the introduction from abroad of genetically modified (GMO) maize varieties that have not only polluted the gene pool in the very place where corn developed centuries ago, but that have also wreaked havoc with local production and consumption patterns in Mexico. Fitting's goal, then, for such a project as this was not only to provide the background and larger story to this whole scenario, but also to provide a case study of how the changes have affected one local area in south central Mexico, the Tehuecán Valley in the state of Puebla, and specifically the village of San José Miahuatlán there.

Anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers will perhaps find this case study more useful than historians and political scientists, who will value more from the broader analyses of the neoliberal changes associated with maize in Mexico. The author lived in San José Miahuatlán for a significant period of time, conducting interviews and placing the neoliberal changes in a very local perspective. Fitting's style is also more reflective of anthropologists' and sociologists': social science formatting with parenthetical citations, and heavy use of jargony buzz terms (this reviewer noticed an almost endless string of terms like "market liberalization," "agricultural efficiency," "politics of food," "food regimes," and "food sovereignty"–not that any of those are not important for readers to be aware of, they are; they were just overused in the narrative). Some of the chapters were also too long and repetitive, causing one to wonder about the editorial skills at Duke University Press.

These style points, while unfortunately making the book less readable and marketable to a wider audience than it could have been, however, should not distract too heavily from its important content and messages. There is exceptionally useful data and analysis here on the national and local impact of GMO corn, there are chapters about how neoliberal economic policies have accelerated Mexican immigration to the United States (something that policymakers who support NAFTA but then complain about the problem of "illegal" aliens and vote for things like border walls should be far more aware of!), and analysis of agricultural modernization and its impacts on rural communities. Along the way, Fitting touches on the role of *maquiladora* industries in Mexico and how they have been an option for rural women seeking work in areas negatively impacted by the force of imported (often GMO) corn that has replaced local agriculture. She briefly, but importantly, discusses some of the environmental results of corn monoculture (reduction of intercropping, dependence on chemicals, salinization from increased irrigation, etc.). And she frames all of this material with an analysis of globalization, the transnational nature of "the neoliberal corn regime."

All of this is important for scholars of Mexican agriculture, environment, economics, and society, as well

as for those interested in the transnational connections and impacts of neoliberalism. Fitting's conclusions from her research are well told in the final chapter, and she does not back away from enumerating the harms of NAFTA that she has observed and documented. To her credit, she takes an important stand based on what the book shows are the social and agricultural ills of GMO corn imports into Mexico. But this scenario does not cast the *campesinos* of the Tehuecán Valley as total victims in a larger world plot nor does it glorify an "Indian way" versus contemporary times. Fitting eschews "peasant essentialism"–romanticizing peasants' and indigenous peoples' "cultural alterity, or overemphasizing the similarity of experiences across time and space" (pp. 233-234). Instead, *The Struggle for Maize* deals with the resilience of corn as a crop and commodity *and* as a cultural practice, despite the challenges presented by a globalized economy that has introduced GMO corn varieties into Mexico. Depending on one's point of view, GMO may have accrued some economic benefits here and there in the country (but certainly not in San José Miahuatlán), but the agricultural, social, and environmental harms it has presented, Fitting argues, outweigh those benefits. And her book is successful in showing that, and thus is an important contribution to that ongoing debate.

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