

The tragic “Poison Package”: lessons for Brazilian society and Public Health

O trágico Pacote do Veneno: lições para a sociedade e a Saúde Coletiva

El trágico “Paquete del Veneno”: lecciones para la sociedad brasileña y la Salud Colectiva

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Bill of Law (PL, for its acronym in Portuguese) n. 6,299/2002 has been called the “Poison Package” in a joint dossier prepared by the Brazilian Association of Public Health (Abrasco) and the Brazilian Association of Agroecology (ABA) and delivered to the National Congress in late May 2018. The bill is tragic and emblematic for analyzing the country’s current political and institutional scenario based on the socioecological and public health problems caused by the country’s prevailing agricultural development model. Since the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, the Federal Government and the National Congress have accelerated changes in public policies and legislation that adhere to the “market” agenda, this strange entity in the neoliberal ideology that orients economic globalization and defends financial investors and powerful transnational groups.

Essentially, PL 6,299 combines several other bills circulating in the National Congress from 1999 to 2017. It assumes the primacy of agribusiness’s economic interests rather than defending health and the environment, starting with the replacement of the concept of agrototoxic (as pesticide is defined in the legislation to highlight the danger to human health and the environment) with the term “phyto-sanitary products”. It removes from Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency (Anvisa) and Brazilian Institute of Environmental and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama) various attributions in the licensing process, while expanding the regulatory powers of the Ministry of Agriculture. PL 6,299 replaces *Law n. 7,802* of 1989, known as the Agrototoxic Law, an important milestone in the process of Brazil’s re-democratization and in the political link between collective health and environmentalism, with broad support from labor unions, social movements, and sectors of civil society. The Poison Package dismantles this wide legal framework and prevailing institutional structure in the country, which had only failed to make further progress because of the gap between the legislation and the practice by institutions. The gap reveals intense contradictions generated by the economic, political, and media forces that sustain the agribusiness model.

The pesticides issue gained national attention in 2008, when it was announced that Brazil had become the world’s leading pesticides consumer. The year 2011 witnessed the creation of the Permanent Campaign against Pesticides and in Defense of Life, convening numerous social movements, unions, NGOs, universities, and research institutions. That same year saw the release of the documentary *Poison is on the Table*, by filmmaker Silvio Tendler, and in 2015 the book *ABRASCO Dossier: A Warning on The Impacts of Pesticides* was published ¹. In addition to the *exposés*, these initiatives present

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the feasibility of family and agroecological farming as an alternative for producing healthy foods and building a more just, democratic, and sustainable society.

Whether by a virtuous or tragic circle, the recognition that health depends on social, ecological, cultural, and spiritual relations in order to materialize, inspired the area of Health and the Environment in Abrasco ² and fostered the approach by academic groups to socioecological issues, environmental conflicts, and social movements in the last 20 years. In the case of agribusiness and pesticides, the social collectives and movements participating in the resistance and alternatives are mainly the peasants, family farmers, indigenous peoples, quilombola communities, rubber-tappers and Brazil nut gatherers, and artisanal fishers, among others, in addition to feminism in its struggle against the patriarchy. There are also urban movements for conscientious consumption, healthy eating, urban agriculture, and agroecological fairs.

Various initiatives have raised Brazilian society's awareness of the problem, but they have always had to face the powerful agribusiness lobby and the bancada ruralista (corporate agriculture caucus), which took advantage of the country's political and governmental situation to pass PL 6,229. The law is a terrible setback, since it runs contrary to the defense of human rights, health, and nature. The latter position is defended by numerous organizations and institutions besides Abrasco and ABA, like the Brazilian Society for the Advancement of Science (SBPC), Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz), the Brazilian National Cancer Institute (INCA), environmentalist and consumer defense organizations, and even government agencies like Anvisa and Ibama. Even the non-binding online consultation conducted by the Chamber of Deputies showed that 90% of people opposed the bill.

Even with strong public pressure against the bill, including numerous public figures and entertainers, on June 25, 2018, the Special Committee, in a heated session, voted by a wide majority to approve issued by the bill's rapporteur, Congressman Luiz Nishimori of the center-right Party of the Republic (PR) from the State of Paraná. With this approval by the Special Committee, the bill does not have to be reviewed by the permanent committees and can be brought up quickly on the Order of the Day on the House floor, for the definitive vote. If the bill passes, the only hope for opposition in Congress and civil society organizations contrary to the Poison Package will a class action suit before the Brazilian Supreme Court, claiming the bill's unconstitutionality.

Nearly 30 years since passage of the Pesticides Law, the same time since enactment of the "Citizens' Constitution" of 1988 and the Organic Laws on Health, passed in 1990 and that regulated the Brazilian Unified National Health System (SUS), we Brazilians are suffering an about-face in our civilization. We are backstepping in relation to numerous other countries on the planet with greater ecological and health awareness, where pesticides have been curtailed, as measured by overall consumption and area cultivated with pesticides, alongside more incentives for eating healthy, organic, and agroecological foods, and without decreasing crop yields or economic gains.

How has Brazil managed to use such huge volumes of pesticides, and why is the country moving now to pass such backward legislation? In our search for answers, I believe we enter into the very essence of the social, ecological, and health crises that are part of a broader crisis, one of civilization.

In the case of pesticides, the connection to the broader crisis has to do with the development model of neo-extractivist countries ³ from the Global South, exporters of agricultural and mineral commodities. As explained by Guilherme Delgado ⁴, the support for agribusiness (and for mining and steelmaking) was essential for the positive trade balance since the turn of the century, thanks largely to the so-called "China effect" that sustained commodity prices. Several Latin American countries thereby managed to reduce their foreign debts, and the more progressive ones expanded their redistributive social policies. According to Delgado, although specialization in primary exports pays off in the short run, it is a hazardous trap: it does not solve foreign dependency and meanwhile aggravates the deficit in other sectors that would otherwise have the potential to be more just and sustainable ⁴.

In the case of agribusiness, export monocultures like soybeans explain chemical dependency ⁵, unavoidable in homogeneous ecological systems that concentrate world food production in a few plant and animal species, with long markets that distance and alienate consumers. Industrial agriculture wages a war against nature, where biodiversity becomes a pest to be destroyed. It is no coincidence that the first pesticides appeared in World War I, and that such "innovations" later became one of the pillars of the "Green Revolution" that promised to eliminate hunger in the world.

The concept of Food Empires coined by van der Ploeg ⁶ is helpful for understanding globalized capitalist agriculture. The latter consists not only of large landowners, but also the transnational companies acting in the global market and constituting the global food regime with strong monopoly power over the production, processing, distribution, and consumption of foods. Food Empires also include such industries as fertilizers, pesticides, transgenics, and other inputs, in addition to giant supermarket chains. The environmental destruction, disease, and death caused by all these economic activities are seen as mere "collateral damage", market externalities that may eventually be reduced. However, the issue is much larger and more complex than an agribusiness caucus made up of backward big farmers with slavocrats' mentalities.

At the turn of the 21st century and with the Workers' Party (PT) occupying the Presidency of Brazil, a complex and contradictory political pact was created. The corporate agriculture caucus more than doubled its numbers between the 1999-2002 legislature and 2015-2018, even as the agribusiness trade balance more than quintupled. All this concentrated power sought legitimacy through multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns like "Agro is Pop, Agro is Tech, Agro is Everything" created by the Globo Network.

To enable a policy of alliances, guarantee governability, and ensure continuity in the fiscal surplus, President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva accommodated antagonistic political forces in two cabinet ministries: the all-powerful Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Supply (MAPA), linked to agribusiness, and the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA), with a far smaller budget. Despite the contradictions, since 2003 the PT's Administrations created or expanded important public policies to support family farming, agroecology, and healthy eating, like the National Program to Strengthen Family Farming, the Food Procurement Program, and the National School Food Program. Even with criticisms, various social movements connected to family farming and agrarian reform supported the Ministry of Agrarian Reform. Many organizations were hopeful with the launching of the National Plan for Agroecology and Organic Farming in 2012, but the plan was never fully implemented, and the promised National Program for the Reduction of Pesticides was never released.

In the final years of President Dilma Rousseff's Administration, her relationship with Senator Katia Abreu (Democratic Labor Party – PDT, from Tocantins State) was emblematic. Senator Abreu, a leader of agribusiness, remained faithful to the President until her impeachment. We can draw an analogy with a marriage in which the spouses circulate in parallel worlds. On the one hand, they respect the expected moral and institutional side of the relationship, in this case economic growth, alongside the pacification of social tensions through the fight against hunger and the distributive social policies (although limited in scope). However, they simultaneously live with the worst of all worlds, with violent conflicts raging in the countryside, land disputes with assassinations, poisoning nature, workers, and consumers, protests by small farmers and social movements, and genocide and epistemicide against peasants and indigenous and quilombola peoples.

How can such a marriage possibly survive, and for how long? How can a government like that of the PT's preserve institutional "normality" for so long, torn between two such contradictory models for agriculture and society? It is not easy to answer such complex questions; I intend to propose some food for thought for readers.

From the perspective of Political Economy, the expansion of capitalist industrial agriculture in a national or regional industrial context depends on how accumulation is produced, how crises and conflicts are generated and dealt with, and how the counterhegemonic resistances and alternatives are built. Political Ecology ⁷ expands the scope of Political Economy by incorporating into the analysis the ecological and territorial dimensions of the concept of environmental conflict, according to which, the dispute in sectors like agribusiness and mining involves resources like land, water, territorial control, material and symbolic ways of producing and living, all of which result in the prevailing social metabolism. The underlying issue in such disputes involves the defense of life and common goods versus the control and commodification of nature and bodies. This is the central knot in the crisis of democracy and the development model in Latin America.

There are at least three strategic options for the expansion of agribusiness in the Brazilian context. The first is the incorporation and subordination of family farmers by the agribusiness chain, including the weakening of agrarian reform and social movements like the Landless Workers' Movement (MST). This battle was waged relentlessly by agribusiness throughout the PT's Administrations,

although it encountered limits and resistance. The second strategy is to increase the cultivated area by encroaching on indigenous and quilombola lands and/or those protected by environmental legislation. This battle was and still is waged by the most backward and violent sectors of agribusiness, but it suffered a recent defeat in the Supreme Court, which declared the constitutionality of *Decree n. 4,887/2003*, regulating the official recognition of quilombola lands. Unfortunately, it was an isolated victory in otherwise difficult times for democracy and human rights in Brazil. The most recent annual report by the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) highlights the increase in violence in the countryside and in clashes over water use ⁸.

A third strategy is to increase the productivity of the cultivated area, and this is where the Poison Package comes in. Agribusiness claims that pesticides are essential, but what goes unsaid? Monocultures are chemically dependent on pesticides, since industrial agriculture needs to eliminate biodiversity in order to plant or raise a single species. It's about a science of controlling to dominate rather than the conviviality for the good living or well living, a basic principle of peoples that live in harmony with nature. For these peoples, the notion of common goods is an integral component of their cosmovision, economy, and knowledges.

The chemical dependency of agribusiness comes at a heavy price, and not only due to the purchase of pesticides and transgenics. After all, who pays for the disease and death from contamination? Or for environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity? The sad answer, expressed in the highly valued language of numbers, lies in what economists call negative environmental externalities, that is, the costs paid by society as a whole and by the most heavily affected social groups, and not by those that benefit directly from such commercial transactions.

According to a study published in 2009 ⁵, in the worst-case scenario, the annual cost associated with acute poisoning could reach 149 million dollars in the state of Paraná alone. For each dollar spent on pesticides, upwards of USD 1.28 would be spent on medical care resulting from workers' poisoning and sick leave. And this does not include the far higher costs associated with chronic diseases like cancer or the costs of environmental degradation. Another study ⁹ analyzed pesticide use in Brazil as an example of a "pollution paradise". For example, if Brazil were to spend proportionally the same as the United States on pesticide control and inspection, the estimated amount would be BRL 14 billion (roughly USD 3.5 billion at the current exchange rate) or 5.8% of Brazil's agricultural GDP, a far higher amount than is spent today. In addition, the tax breaks provided to pesticides (absurdly classified as "agricultural inputs" as if they were tractors or farm implements) represent a tax waiver of nearly a billion dollars based on Brazil's 2006 *Agricultural Census*. In other words, much of the economic vigor of agribusiness is achieved by failing to tabulate the destruction of lives and nature. In the 1970s, the military dictatorship turned Brazil into world champion of work-related accidents, and now PL 6,299 proposes to make the country "pollution paradise".

The Poison Package and the current setbacks in policies for health, environmental protection, and indigenous and quilombola lands reveal the subaltern and colonized behavior of a relevant share of Brazilian agribusiness and other conservative sectors of Brazilian society. Such setbacks have to do with the demise of the alliance with the PT and support for the political, legal, and mediatic coup under way in the country, which involves more complex geopolitics. It is not a matter of opposing Brazil's agriculture, but of remembering that economic and social development should be achieved with respect for life, human health, and the environment, as well as for the rights of indigenous peoples, quilombolas, and small farmers.

In the end, what is at stake is a broader struggle about producing economic, scientific, and technological development with more ethics, respect, and solidarity. For intellectuals like Boaventura de Sousa Santos ¹⁰, the neoliberal ideology and the commodification of life intensify the modern Eurocentric project in its most inhumane and exploitative side by merging capitalism and colonialism as ontological and political axes that create the conditions for the unbridled release of financial flows. This has allowed nature and human beings to become things, and things to become animate subjects. Thus, merchandise, money, and capital are transformed into social subjects that decide on the life and death of all human beings, the planet, and future projects ¹¹, with the expansion of dystopias and restrictions on utopian dreams. Without reflecting on these issues, we will continue to reedit the dilemmas of the PT's administrations, even in the name of critical thinking, including in relation to future elections.

Public Health needs to reinvent itself to deal with such huge challenges. Drawing again on the marriage metaphor, we need to discuss our relations: with whom, how, and why we relate, as theoretical references, methodologies, the state, or society? What purpose does our research serve, and how do we engage in – or avoid – the most relevant social struggles? To what extent are poisons and conflicts of interest corroding our principles and practices, among other reasons because they are often not made explicit, due to the pragmatic demands of political coalitions and financing of institutions, academic groups, and NGOs? To answer these questions is a pressing task for the progressive forces and intellectuals that seek *corazonar*¹², a more ethnical and integrated thinking-feeling of Andean origins that competes with the shallow, productivist visions predominating in academia, even within Public Health itself.

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