
An engaging progress report by an economic and cultural geographer tackles the number one issue related to utilisation of plant genetic resources today. The era of free and unencumbered access to new crop varieties appears to be passing (Koo et al. 2004). This development in intellectual property (IP) raises concerns about its implications for food production and human health. New global regulations are reshaping our cultural and natural environments. This work involves an investigation of the role that global institutions (World Trade Organization, United Nations, World Bank) play in constructing new commodities (genetic resources, cultural products, and types of specialized labor) and in modifying the market economies to which they give rise. Debates about the function of the nation state and how its sovereignty is undermined by the emergence of these new global institutions are examined. Cross-cultural analysis of alternative forms of environmental regulation illustrates the culturally embedded nature of knowledge production. Indigenous folk, social movements, and NGO’s now play key roles in contemporary geo-political conflicts.

The history of the development of global regulatory institutions and regimes in the post-WWII period, their intended purposes and operational structures, are followed by theoretical debates about the ‘transboundary’ nature of environmental issues and of the need for a global approach to their control. Case studies on genetic resources and IP rights, commodification of cultural property, food safety governance, and global regulation of specialized labor markets illustrate the impact that their regulations are having in shaping local environments. Henry Shands, head of the USDA’s Genetic Resources division, suggested that DNA extraction techniques are advancing so rapidly that it is now even possible to use dried herbarium specimens as sources of replicable DNA. This development has created consternation amongst the holders of scientific and academic collections.

Parry investigates why these impacts are so geographically uneven and considers what powers nation states and non-state NGOs and indigenous groups have to mediate these effects through alternative, localized, systems of regulation. Koo et al. (2004:1,297) point out that concerns over IP seem to be diverting policy attention from more fundamental negative trends, notably, the slowdown of investment in agricultural R&D worldwide, especially research targeted to poor people’s food crops. This weakens domestic capacities to conduct agricultural R&D in many poor countries, especially throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Parry’s outsider status provides her an opportunity to speak out without reprisal. It is undeniable that this subject is riddled with contradictions and qualms. All plants have genetic potential. There is a need to rank species according to the likelihood of exploitation, based on objective criteria. Gene bank collections of genetic resources must genuinely be accessible to all. Sites must be selected carefully. Access must not be denied for geopolitical reasons.

Are farmer’s rights and benefits lost in bureaucratic considerations? Read Wolfgang’s (1995) report on challenges to patents on native technology from constituents of the neem tree. Who benefits under benefit sharing? The central government, or the descendants of those farmers whose efforts at crop selection and breeding over hundreds of generations, led to well-adapted landraces? Suppose farmers whose successful discoveries are out of favor with the central government, their current status is problematic, or those are residents scattered in refugee camps or incarcerated as prisoners of conscience?

Annoyingly, footnotes force readers to refer repeatedly to notes at the end of the volume. There are numerous typographical errors: spelling, hyphenation, superscripts, incorrect placement of information in tables, etc.

Parry tackled a difficult subject with adroitness. She does not preach, but reports the facts and leaves readers to draw their own conclusions. Her compilation may irritate some; it will certainly provoke discussion. This book is essential reading for all researchers involved with plant genetic resources—including field botanists, botanical gardens, gene banks, breeders, chemists, pharmacologists, and everyone interested in using plant germplasm—because it critically assesses one of the fundamental issues of our times.

LITERATURE CITED