

Workshop

“The use of pesticides in agriculture: a study in reluctant regulation”

November 24, 2023

Sala degli Stemmì, Villa Salviati

European University Institute (EUI), Florence, Italy

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Outline

The use of synthetic pesticides in agriculture is a contentious topic. Many observers are concerned about the negative effects of pesticides on biodiversity, while others argue in favor of using pesticides to achieve food security. A recurring issue of contention is the question of how to regulate the use of pesticides, with NGOs and some governments lobbying for strict, global rules and many private companies opposing international regulation that might inhibit sales.

In recent years, historians working on agriculture, the environment, development, and international governance have started to study the origins of these debates, pointing out that contemporaries were aware of the health and ecological risks associated with the use of synthetic pesticides much earlier than originally assumed, namely in the 1930s and 1940s. International organizations played an important role as fora in which experts from different national and disciplinary backgrounds discussed approaches to managing these risks. For a long time, the global concern with food scarcity and the trust in the power of science gave the upper hand to those arguing in favor of the use of pesticides. When, in the late 1960s, the dramatic effects of extensive pesticide use on human and non-human beings and on the environment could no longer be denied scientifically, a first set of regulatory mechanisms came into existence. At the time the European Community (EC) took the lead – not because of a more enlightened position on the toxicity of pesticides but due to institutional concerns emanating from the EC’s Common Agricultural Policy and the legacies of colonial and imperial trade relations.



At this workshop, we aim to bring together scholars working on the use and regulation of synthetic pesticides in agriculture since 1945. Rather than focusing exclusively on the historical angle, we want to bring together scholarship on the effects on synthetic pesticides on biodiversity and health, on the pesticides industry, on trade relations, and on global governance and international organizations. In doing so, we aim to challenge the top-down, institutional perspective inherent in many existing studies and direct new attention to those actors in direct contact with pesticides: peasants, farmers, rural laborers, industrial workers, producers, and consumers. We assume that class, race, and gender relations have played and continue to play a key role in how risks associated with pesticides are discussed and perceived, and that it is important to incorporate the social and cultural perspective inherent in such discussions more systematically.

Key questions we are interested in discussing are:

- How have different groups of actors (lobbies, farmers, consumer organizations) participated in and contributed to international debates on pesticide use and the risks associated with synthetic pesticides?
- What kind of scientific expertise has been used and mobilized in these debates, and which of it has been contested or dismissed by whom? Which actors have succeeded in establishing expertise relevant to regulation, and why?
- How have the concerns and needs by those in direct contact with pesticides (farmers and agricultural workers, but also consumers) figured in expert discussions about regulation, and what have been the limits to these considerations?
- Against the background of ongoing regulation efforts, how have companies engaged in producing, marketing, and selling pesticides? More generally, how have economic considerations and trade interests figured in these discussions?
- How have concerns about human health and well-being been related to the effects of pesticides on the non-human world, and which understandings of the environment have informed the different positions on pesticide regulation?

Program

9.30 *Welcome and introduction*

9.45 Pesticide use and its discontents: The past of the present, part I

Sabine Clark (University of York)

Regulating pesticide use in Britain before Silent Spring

José Ramón Bertomeu Sánchez (University of Valencia)

Regulating pesticides in Francoist Spain (1942-1965): Autarky, fascism and the making of ignorance

May-Brith Ohman Nielsen (University of Agder)

The Poison Commission: The work and logic of the Department of Agriculture's Poison Commission and the State Pesticide Authority as sources to explain delays in pesticide regulation. Norway 1945-1992

11.15 Coffee break

11.45 Pesticide use and its discontents: The past of the present, part II

Anu Krishna (Ruhr University Bochum)

Sensing toxins: Embodied experiences of chemical harm

Marianna Fenzi (Université de Lausanne)

The only good bug is a dead bug: Are insects and other pests at war with us?

12.45 Lunch break

14.15 Regulatory efforts and mobilization, part I

Amalia Ribi Forclaz (Graduate Institute) and Corinna Unger (EUI)

Progress versus precaution: International organizations and the use of pesticides, 1940s-1970s

Alessandra Arcuri (Erasmus University Rotterdam)

Unspeakable: On the law and politics of pesticides in the EU



15.15 Regulatory efforts and mobilization, part II

Valentin Thomas (Sciences Po Lyon)

Deadly hazard without risk? Transnational jurisdiction struggle and production of ignorance on environmental and occupational carcinogens

Mario Pagano (University of Amsterdam)

Mobilising after authorising NGOs, judges and pesticides in the EU

16.15 Coffee break

16.30 *Concluding comments, followed by a final discussion*

Joanne Scott (EUI) and Anna-Katharina Wöbse (Bremen)

17.30 End of workshop

20.00 Dinner for workshop participants

