

**Review of David Meek 2020. *The political ecology of education: Brazil's landless workers' movement and the politics of knowledge*. West Virginia University Press. ISBN: Cloth 978-1-949199-75-8, Paper 978-1-949199-76-5, Ebook 978-1-949199-77-2. Paperback or Ebook (US\$28.99), Cloth (US\$99.99)**

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In *The Political Ecology of Education* David Meek, who is an assistant professor of Global Studies at the University of Oregon, presents an in-depth analysis of the role of education among social movements in Brazil. Meek uses a critical food systems pedagogy approach to analyze how education has operated among the Landless Workers Movement, or MST, the largest agrarian Latin American agriculturally focused social movement. MST uses the tactic of occupation on unproductive land by landless people. Meek's book is comprised of eight chapters, divided into two parts. Part One, chapters One through Four, focuses on conceptions of the world by the various members within the MST settlement of 17 de Abril in the state of Para in northern Brazil, including educators, students, adults, and children. The second part, chapters Five through Eight, is an examination of the interconnection of several forms of agroecological based learning in the region over multiple years.

In Chapter One, Meek gives the reader a history of the MST movement, some of the legal background that informs its tactics, and some of the elements that form the political ecology of education. He includes "the importance of political economy, the relations between political circumstances and environmental degradation, and the interconnections among political institutions" (p. 13). Additionally, the reader learns about the background of the founding of 17 de Abril as an agrarian reform settlement. This settlement was founded in 1997 following the massacre of nineteen landless workers by military police in 1996 who were occupying highway PA-150 in El Dorado dos Carajas, Para (p. 3), and the movement received land from the government amidst mounting pressure both domestically and internationally to create settlements and to reform land policy (p. 26). This background helps inform the reader about the regional and practical inequities of education in rural Brazil and the importance maintaining the sustainability of the movement.

In Chapter Two, Meek discusses the often-divergent values of knowledge and land management amongst educators in 17 de Abril's rural schools, and the associated tensions that these create. Meek details a struggle between the aspiration that the MST's agroecological practices are sustainable, and the use of land to make a living that, history shows, is often environmentally degrading. Meek also ties this tension to agricultural extension systems and their agents, who encourage cattle ranching as opposed to subsistence farming. He concludes that "the community had lost its food sovereignty, its ability to produce" (p. 61) and had also increased its reliance on imported goods.

Chapter Three discusses the conflicting perspectives of education within the community. Some residents and educators in the settlement feel that students should be prepared for lifestyles and political outlooks that are not necessarily in line with the educational and food sovereignty goals of 17 de Abril at its outset, while others push for more localized and experiential education that is less aligned with national standards, where "educational sovereignty can, in certain contexts, advance food sovereignty... to help their members develop agroecological skills, critical analysis of agrarian change, and experience with cooperative forms of organization" (p. 71). This struggle is waged as control and direction of the school changes when new educators come in, often from regions that do not share the same struggles and with educational principles that are not in line with the vision of the settlement's founders. These struggles play out in both the school and the community as newer teachers and residents of the settlement often do not participate in or prioritize the current and historical political aspect of the school, and often do not encourage their students to participate. Meek notes this internal struggle as the façade of the school itself seemingly changed year to year, during his visits from 2009 to 2015, as the priority of the educators shifted regarding local life and educational needs – to remain an *escola do campo* or become an *escola da cidade* – a school of the land or an urban school.

Chapter Four focuses on the perception of the youth in the community about the viability of staying with the settlement, or leaving to seek other opportunities. Meek describes the outlooks faced by youth as they relate to work, politics, involvement in the movement, and raising a family. Education alongside real experience can inform the decision to stay or leave. In this sense, Meek points out how "education can serve

as either a depeasantizing or repeasantizing force" (p. 118) dependent on the prioritization of skills applicable to outside life, agroecology, diversification, or monocropping and ranching. The options perceived by community members are seen as addressing a need in some cases, and in others to support the decision to change lifestyle.

Starting with Chapter Five, the second section explores agroecological knowledge in the region. Meek discusses the scaling up and development of a "regional movement for critical food systems education" (p. 136). Historical experience, new opportunities for food systems education, and political and public policy all contributed to the development of agroecological teaching practices at multiple educational levels, and in various locations within the region.

Chapter Six examines the spatial boundaries between society and the state as they relate to the production of agroecological knowledge and the decolonization of education and land. Meek draws these connections through case studies that focus on the relationships between social movements and public universities, and their relationships with federal land-governing institutions. These relationships are connected, as the decolonization of education and land are both traditionally controlled by the wealthy. They are, however, essential for the MST movement. Meek uses the metaphor of 'breaking down fences' to describe the movement's goals in two ways: "the literal breaking down fences to access land... and in the common perspective that education is produced in authoritative places" (p. 176). The cases reinforce the relevance of place in the political economy of education, pointing out the contrast between colonized valorization of urban life and education, and the decolonized valorization of rural and land-based education.

The interconnection of formal and informal learning for 17 de Abril is the focus of Chapter Seven. Meek describes how the politics of place interact with residents' ability to be politically active through a story about his participation in informal learning at the MST's Oziel Alves Perreira pedagogical encampment. The chapter, however, includes a discouraging outlook, an emergence of the perception of the encampment's youth as "one in which collective grievances have been satisfied and there is no longer a need to be politically active" (p. 202). This results in declining participation, and a concern for education's ability to stem the depeasantizing flow in 17 de Abril.

The book concludes with a follow-up conversation with a couple of MST participants who remained active after their time at 17 de Abril. These individuals were able to avoid the colonizing effects of education through their participation in political and movement activities. These remained a driving force for their participation beyond the settlement. Meek also defines and revisits some of the policy and grassroots implications of 'success' based on this study, using the stories of Diana and Fabio who persisted with their interest in expanding the movement to other settlements. They seized the opportunity to find fresh energy and commitment to social change to provide an opportunity to lead and educate in the spirit of 17 de Abril.

Meek's book is a strong contribution to the field of political ecology and would be a useful text for scholars, undergraduate, and graduate level courses in food studies, geography, rural sociology, social movement studies, education, and of course, political ecology. Meek's study of the 17 de Abril settlement is engaging as it balances well researched and sourced principles of political ecology and education with a historical grounding, and a relationship-building approach through lived experiences and interactions with the settlement residents.

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