

Call for papers



The pesticide industry under the gaze of the social sciences: producing, promoting, defending

4th Conference of the SHS-Pesticides network,
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The Social sciences and humanities (SHS)-Pesticides network was created in February 2020 to better understand and promote research in the humanities and social sciences on pesticides. The fourth workshop will be held on the 21st and 22nd of March 2024 in Paris on the theme of "pesticide industries". The study days organized by this network allow to take into account the diversity of the approaches on the question, and to facilitate the sharing of information among social sciences scholars working on pesticides.

Argument

The massive use of pesticides in agriculture has been the subject of numerous works in the humanities and social sciences (SHS). These works share a central observation: the development of pesticides throughout the world is based on the investment and strategies of companies – most often private – that manufacture, circulate and encourage the diffusion of these products at the same time as they promote agricultural development models that depend on them. If, most often, this observation is an element of the context of investigation of SHS research, it is also the starting point of explorations dedicated to the functioning and the role of the pesticide industry, to the understanding of its production and commercial strategies, and its capacity to orient public regulation and uses.

However, compared to the volume of research conducted on pesticides, investigations focused on the pesticide industry are not numerous. In particular, French-speaking works or works led by French teams directly documenting the role of the industry remain rare, as shown by their near absence in the various editions of the SHS-pesticide days organized over the past three years. This is all the more striking since the influence of the pesticide industry is at the heart of many investigations conducted by journalists and NGOs involved in public controversies on this issue.

For its fourth edition, the SHS-Pesticides network wishes to encourage collective work on this empirical object: the "pesticide industry". The term used here is left voluntarily broad and vague. It refers not only to companies that directly manufacture active substances and/or products marketed as pesticides, but also to all the organizations that explicitly contribute to making this manufacture and marketing possible: the laboratories to which the multinationals of the agricultural chemical industry delegate their research or their tests, the law firms or public relations firms that defend their interests, the professional associations that represent them in international bodies, the companies that distribute pesticides... All of these organizations can be understood as constituting the "pesticide industry". This definitional vagueness reflects our concern to encourage scholars to work on their on-going research in the light of this reflection on the "pesticide industry". Above all, it denotes the need not to close down discussions on the functioning, role and influence of the pesticide industries too quickly by basing the analysis on fixed definitions of the boundaries of these industries: for example, do the research laboratories financed by multinational chemical companies, who play a central role in the process of market authorization, belong to the "pesticide industry"? There are many ways to answer this question, which imply theoretical, empirical and political choices.

Lines of investigation and communication

The expected communications on the "pesticide industry" may be based on multiple theoretical and disciplinary orientations. Three dimensions of the activity of pesticide industries could structure the exchanges during the workshop.

Producing

One of the main activities of the "pesticide industries" is the production of chemical substances (active ingredients, adjuvants...), objects (cans, spraying equipment, modified seeds, etc.) and services (agricultural advice, weather information, merchandising, etc.) related to the use of these substances. The Humanities and Social sciences contribute to the better understanding of these activities, by taking into account the political, economic and technical logics that drive them.

Several historical works have focused on the emergence of agricultural supply firms and the development of their markets in competition with or without the support of public agricultural research and development organizations (Bertomeu-Sánchez 2019; Castonguay 2004; Fourche 2004; Jas 2021; Palladino 1996; Rasmussen 2001; Russell et al. 2001). In political economy, numerous publications have focused on the industrial and market strategies of supply firms and the place of pesticide manufacturing and sales activities within them. These works have described the different phases of concentration of agricultural supply firms, which have seen, for example, the seed-producing industries move closer to the pesticide-producing industries since the 1970s (Assouline 1989; Bijman and Joly 2003; Hayenga 1998; Lemarié 2003; Musselli Moretti and Secretariat 2006; Quezada 2004) in order to secure their revenues, anticipate the expiration of their property rights and secure new markets (Clapp 2021). Those works highlight the fact that pesticide production is currently a highly concentrated sector of activity, in the hands of a few multinationals, which are themselves largely dependent on pension funds and speculative market logics that favor political choices of short-term profitability. They also highlight the need to take into account the variety of companies that manufacture and sell pesticides and the not always aligned nature of their interests: for example, the development since the 1980s of companies specializing in the manufacture and marketing of "generic" pesticides, whose patents have fallen off, represented by distinct professional organizations (e.g. Agro-care and not Croplife), is an important factor in the evolution of the structure of pesticide markets and industrial strategies (Assouline 1988; Jansen 2017). Following those lines of inquiry, it would be interesting to deepen the understanding of how markets and industrial logics work, taking into account more recent developments (e.g., the development of biocontrol (Aulagnier and Goulet 2017) or the emergence of new actors from the Global South (Biggi et al. 2021; Galt 2008; Shattuck 2021)).

While the ways in which pesticides are marketed are well documented, the ways in which they are actually produced remain an almost unexplored field: how is work organized in the chemical factories that manufacture the components of pesticides? What are, for example, the rules of protection for workers in the chemical industry in the European Union? How are the laboratory and field tests necessary for the marketing of new products carried out today? How are the standards of use (safety data sheets, labels) of products constructed by the industry? Is their development subject to compliance with national or international standards or rules? How are they made accessible in the different socio-cultural worlds? How do the links between the pesticide-producing industries and the organizations (traders, cooperatives, etc.) that sell or resell them unfold in practice? On these questions, publications are rare, certainly because of the difficulty for researchers in social sciences and humanities to access to empirical data. Only the most visible and mediatized situations seem to be investigated, such as industrial accidents (e.g. the Bhopal accident, which gave rise to multiple analyses to "understand the accident") (Eckerman 2005; Fortun 2001) or the most contested production territories (e.g. Hawaii, an area used intensively for testing pesticide products) (Brower 2016).

Promoting

The development of pesticide use in the 20th and 21st centuries is linked to multiple elements. Against reductive explanations that would only see it as the automatic consequence of direct influence strategies of the pesticide industries – more or less honest (from lobbying to corruption)–, most social science researchers insist on the multiplicity of forms that this influence could take. They emphasize that its effectiveness must be analyzed and understood over time, as "*emprise*" (Jas 2021) supported by multiple actors who receive and promote the social and technological promises of these products, beyond the industrialists alone (public authorities, agricultural union organizations, technical organizations, etc.). There are multiple ways of exploring the production and circulation of these promises.

One can analyze the arguments mobilized by the pesticide industries in the market, regulatory or expert arenas in which they promote their products directly or indirectly, or seek to limit the constraints that weigh on their marketing and development. These arguments are multiple, and may refer to the major virtuous objectives of pesticide use: from the fight against world hunger (Glover 2010) to "sustainable development" (Champion and Gendron 2004; Fouilleux and Goulet 2012; Shattuck 2021), including the fight against infectious diseases or against global warming (Cloteau 2022). They can also refer to the improvement of the concrete conditions of use of pesticides in order to reduce their negative impacts (on the economic, health or environmental levels). One well-documented example is the concerted initiatives of pesticide manufacturers to promote the "safe use" of the products they market in the face of concerns about their effects on workers' health, at the international or national level (Ansaloni 2017; Murray and Taylor 2000). From this perspective, social science research relies not only on the analysis of the framing discourses deployed by industries to assert their interests, but also on the circulation of individuals, financial resources, and technical tools that accompany the deployment of these framings and that are at the heart of national and international lobbying activities.

Other studies have focused on the promises made by the pesticide industry in the form of scientific or expert arguments on the effectiveness or danger of pesticides. The aim is to document the strategies of production of scientific knowledge and expertise deployed by the pesticide industries to access the market and facilitate the circulation and marketing of their products. While, for several decades, scholars have highlighted the influence of these actors on the agronomic research system that accompanied the development of pesticides (Prete et al. 2021), researchers have more recently focused on the deliberate strategies used by the pesticide industries to produce ignorance (Fabbri et al. 2018; Jouzel 2019; Dedieu 2022). They follow on from works on ignorance production on other substances (tobacco, asbestos, lead, etc.). Like the latter, they have been able to rely on the documents made available during the major American trials (Monsanto Papers, Toxic Papers, Poison Papers, etc.¹) involving pesticide-producing organizations and their allies (law firms, public relations agencies, etc.), which often work with similar strategies in the service of multiple industrial clients. They focus both on documenting industrial investments in order to influence scientific researchers, research

¹ <https://www.toxicdocs.org/blog/the-poison-papers-come-to-toxic-docs/>
<https://www.thenewlede.org/paraquat-papers-media-library/>

agendas or expert agencies (Fontans-Álvarez et al. 2018), but also more generally on the political and technical norms that frame pesticide regulation (Demortain 2018).

Defending

The promises of the pesticide industry have been contested since the beginning of their diffusion by many actors: environmental organizations, scholarly associations, investigative journalists... The social science works documenting these international and national mobilizations against pesticides are very numerous today. In France, in particular, several studies have described the involvement of environmental and workers' associations in denouncing the risks of these substances and their effects. While these mobilizations carry a rich critique and raise the responsibility of multiple actors involved in the dissemination of pesticides, they often place at the heart of their discourses and claims the responsibility of multinational pesticide-producing firms, and some of them in particular (Bayer-Monsanto) (Jouzel and Prete 2014; Prete and Cournil 2019). The exploration of the dynamics of responsibility attribution remains to be explored further, taking into account both their social conditions and their political effects.

Pesticide industries develop defensive strategies in the face of the criticisms directed at them. Obviously, they defend themselves in legal and judicial arenas where their responsibility is questioned, for example by challenging the legitimacy of certain institutions to judge cases (Boix and Bohme 2012) or by invoking the threat of prosecution to put pressure on public or private actors (Bray et al. 2022). While there are many analyses of these proceedings in which the law is the vehicle for political confrontation over pesticides between industries, public actors, and citizen organizations, several perspectives remain to be explored further. Existing works are indeed primarily interested in the legal strategies deployed by activists opposed to pesticides and explore in less detail the construction of legal strategies for the defense of the pesticide industries. Moreover, they often focus on the American common law context, due to the existence of a research community that crosses legal and social analyses more broadly and to the greater accessibility of empirical data. It therefore remains to be finely documented how, in other legal contexts (in France, Europe or elsewhere), industries mobilize the law to defend their interests, by directly initiating proceedings, or more indirectly, in the shadow of the law (by threatening to resort to it, by working upstream to influence the definition of the legal categories that structure the regulation of pesticides, etc.) Among the questions to be explored: what is the contribution of the pesticide industry to the work of international organizations that produce soft law such as the FAO or the OECD? Do the practices and rules implemented in international organizations guarantee the traceability and visibility of these industries' international strategies?

A more visible way for the pesticide industry to defend itself against its opponents is to take over the media space and to broadcast the promises attached to the products it markets, but also to respond to the opposition it faces. Research has been carried out on the communication practices of the pesticide industry aimed at prescribers of these substances (Villemaine 2017), and, more generally, at the general public. Some studies have focused on the strategies of firms to enlist agricultural organizations in the defense of their interests via technical or political associations (Mayance 2020). Others have attempted to describe and analyze promotional discourses (particularly agribusiness advertisements) and the dominant framings they carry (Kroma and Butler Flora 2003). Structural changes in the media economy are transforming the communicative strategies of industries. For example, the emergence of social networks has encouraged them to invest resources to bypass the traditional prescribers of scientific

information and reach the lay public directly (Foucart et al. 2020). It would be interesting to continue these analyses to better understand the evolution of the communication practices of the pesticide industries by taking into account the variety of media, types of information, and types of target audiences.

Working on industries, a particular context of investigation in SHS?

The study days will be an opportunity to explore these three avenues of research. They will also be an opportunity, in a more transversal way, to reflect on the particular methodological constraints one faces while working on the pesticide industry. Working on the pesticide industry poses a set of difficulties that are all the more acute for researchers whose primary resource is archives. Some historians have recently questioned the distortion of our knowledge due to the asymmetry in access to state archives and company archives (Mitman, 2021). This question also arises in geographical terms. How do we counteract the myopic effects of not having access to business and industry records and data in other contexts than those of liberal democracies? While China has become the world's largest producer of pesticides, our attention still remains largely focused on the historical countries of the agrochemical giants (BASIC, 2021; Galt 2008). Moreover, while pleas for the opening of archives may seem futile in view of the lobbying practices and secrecy cultivated by the large firms, the conservation policies of these private archives and the deployment of historical narratives specific to these industries could nonetheless constitute a subject of study in itself. The workshop could address this issue and be a place where legislation on access to archives as common goods is collectively discussed. This call for papers also intends to encourage reflexive contributions on the particular approaches or methods that should be developed to document the strategies and practices of private organizations, whose activities are particularly opaque and controversial. In this respect, it is interesting to note that many of the most in-depth investigations publicly available today on the pesticide industry are not produced by academic research teams but by other actors: national or international NGOs (Génération futures, PAN, Corporate European Observatory, Public eye, etc.), activist journalists or investigative reporters (in France, for example: Marie-Monique Robin, Fabrice Nicolino, Stéphane Foucart, Stéphane Horel, etc.) The conference can be an opportunity to reflect on the articulation between these different modalities of knowledge production. It will be a space for discussing the methods of investigation on the pesticide industries.

Proposals

Proposals for papers should be sent in the form of an abstract of about 400 words, in French or English, with a presentation of the author(s) (status, institution, research topics, e-mail address) to the following persons Giovanni Prete (prete@univ-paris13.fr) and Eve Bureau-Point (eve.bureau-point@cnrs.fr).

Calendar

Opening of the call for papers: December 2022

Deadline for receipt of proposals: On October 31, 2023

Notification of decision: On November 15, 2023

Submission of a 5-page paper for the selected candidates: On January 7, 2024

Conference: 21&22 March 2024

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