SOYBEANS IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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In this research project, I am analyzing the economic importance and cultural perception of soybeans in the United States and Germany during the twentieth century. In both societies, the soybean became highly important commercially but inspired little cultural enthusiasm. I explore the reasons behind this indifference by focusing on the actors who, though mainly interested in soy’s economic potential, participated in its cultural translation from Asia to the West.

While the soybean has been used as a foodstuff in Asia for several thousand years, its large-scale use in Europe and America dates back only a century. The Western interest in soy stemmed not from its nutritional value but rather from its oil content. Soybean oil can be employed in the manufacture of a wide range of products, including soap, margarine, plastic, lubricants, paint, rubber, and even explosives. During the first half of the twentieth century, the soybean became increasingly important in the world market. Germany and the United States became major consumers of soy in the 1920s, relying mainly on Japanese suppliers for Manchurian-produced soy.

At the same time, agricultural experts in the United States recognized the potential of the soybean as a crop to revive the fortunes of the country’s hard-pressed farmers. Soy cultivation was actively promoted by the federal government during the New Deal and received a strong stimulus from war-related political and economic concerns in the 1940s. By the end of World War II, American farmers were supplying more than two-thirds of the world’s demand for soybeans. Soy became the United States’ most important cash crop, surpassing even cotton. Yet the soy plant remained invisible and unappealing to the general public; it never attained anything like the iconic status of cotton, corn, or wheat as a symbol of rural America and of America’s agricultural bounty.

Several individuals, companies and institutions will figure in my project as cultural translators. In the 1930s, for example, soy-enthusiast Henry Ford threw soy parties and supported research in producing plastics from soy derivatives. Striking as figures like Ford and some of the other soy champions were, however, they played only...
a limited role in bringing about the large-scale use and cultivation of soy. More decisive were the German and American oil mills, which were responding to governmental policies. In the 1920s, Germany’s tariffs on vegetable oils discouraged the import of oils from France and the British Empire and gave a boost to demand for Manchurian-grown soybeans. As a result, Germany became Europe’s largest importer of soybeans and leading exporter of soy products. Similarly, the decision of the United States War Production Board to limit the use of certain oils to military purposes spurred the use of soy for margarine and soap, which in turn provided incentive for expanded soy cultivation.

Although soy oil found a ready market in Germany and the United States as a substitute for other oils in short supply, finding a market niche for the protein-rich by-product of soy oil production – known variously as soy cake, meal, and flour – proved more difficult. In the United States, the Department of Agriculture and several American soy companies made concerted efforts to promote soy flour among housewives for household baking and cooking. Little came of those efforts, though. Supplying protein rather than carbohydrates, soy flour did not fit into American eating habits. Soy was increasingly stigmatized as ersatz product associated with economic hardship and scarcity. Ingenious as the attempts of American companies to market soy protein to consumers in the 1940s and 1950s were, they ultimately failed. Instead, it found use almost exclusively as an animal fodder.

In Germany and the United States, soy was long seen as a substitute commodity and often associated with crises. This hypothesis suggests that an approach that combines the tools of cultural and economic history is most promising for analyzing the differing practices of acceptance and rejection of a certain good.