Glyphosate regulation and sovereignty politics around the world

Guest editorial by Tom Widger

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In 2015, Sri Lanka became the first country in the world to ban glyphosate, the active ingredient in Monsanto's Roundup and the world's most widely used herbicide. The decision followed concerns the chemical was behind an epidemic of chronic kidney disease that since the 1990s has killed thousands of rice farmers. That same year, the World Health Organization ruled glyphosate a 'probable carcinogen', prompting the European Parliament to postpone the reapproval of its EU licence. Over the next few years, more than 40 other countries announced bans, with others placing limits on public sale and domestic use. However, while environmentalists celebrated these developments as a win for people and the planet, EU member states voted in November 2017 to extend their commercial license for five years (Hessler 2020). In 2018, Sri Lanka reapproved the chemical's use in the country's tea plantations.

Why these failures to ban glyphosate? For the past six years, I have followed regulatory efforts in Sri Lanka and the EU, and, more recently, in Vietnam, Malawi and Colombia. My research shows that industry pressure on national governments and international institutions provides part of the answer – as does farmer reluctance to give up a herbicide they regard as cheap and effective. German multinational Bayer's takeover of Monsanto in 2016 complicated any attempt to ban it outright in the EU. Adding to this complication is the argument that glyphosate could play a role in allowing the EU to meet its carbon release targets (it enables planting without ploughing).

Since its introduction in 1970, glyphosate has become deeply entwined in the workings of the world system and coupled with American power. In Colombia, it is sprayed as part of US-sponsored coca eradication programmes, with the proposed ban representing a direct challenge to US foreign policy in the region. With the express backing of the US government, Monsanto moved quickly to contest the Sri Lanka and Vietnam bans so as to prevent what one company employee called a 'domino effect' where other countries might follow suit. Referencing the history of US intervention in Southeast Asia, the metaphor illuminated how glyphosate regulation is emerging as a site of contestation in sovereignty politics.

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Anthropologists Bryant and Reeves (2021: 3) ask whether 'sovereignty may be best understood as a concept mobilizing as-yet unfulfilled communal desires'. If so, what kind of desire does glyphosate invoke? Anthropologists have shown how environmentalism and nationalism make easy bedfellows. This is especially true in post-colonial, post-socialist and postwar contexts where territorial 'purification' occurs on material and symbolic levels. I find the metaphor of the 'threshold' helpful here. Thresholds can comprise a nation's borders, the boundaries of a body or the dose at which a chemical becomes a poison. All three meanings have relevance for understanding how modern states engage with the materialities of poison control. Regulation requires efforts to define and police exposure thresholds in a world where chemicals travel across borders through trade, application and residual drift. Pollution control plays with the polyvalence of poisons as literal and metaphorical markers of undesirable agents infiltrating the biological body and body politic. This may be through establishing territorial thresholds over which incomers are not invited or asserting exposure thresholds beyond which certain elements must not grow.

I have been particularly interested in the role played by glyphosate in generating threshold anxieties in Sri Lankan and European politics. In both contexts, the herbicide has emerged as a critical actant in asserting state control over borders and bodies at a time of sovereign upheaval. In Sri Lanka, since the civil war ended in 2009, government efforts have been directed towards fostering a 'new' national identity. In Europe, a decade of mounting economic, social and political crises since the financial crash of 2008, culminating in the UK's decision to leave the EU in 2016, found expression through public challenges to the bloc's pesticide approval processes. As a result, Sri Lankan and European debates over glyphosate have become, at root, disagreements over how relationships between biological bodies and the body politic are understood.

Regulatory drives in Sri Lanka and Europe emerge from diverse social and medical theories of bodies and environments. Summarised simply, my work shows how in Sri Lanka this includes the Ayurvedic concept of the 'open' body comprised of shared substance, and in Europe the allopathic concept of the 'closed' body sealed off from other bodies. Meanwhile, theories of the Sri Lankan body politic draw from a nationalist concept of the newly bounded postwar nation-state, whereas in Europe they derive from the ideal of the supranational state defined by the free movement of goods, capital, services and people between unbounded member states. It follows that in Sri Lanka, the challenge represented by glyphosate regulation has been how to establish the island's borders to control the flow of poisons for the protection of open bodies. In the EU, the problem is different: how to prevent the flow of toxicants at the level of closed bodies so political borders can remain open.

In Sri Lanka, the nation's threshold follows the contours of the body's threshold. The kidney disease epidemic responsible for the glyphosate ban centres on the north-central province of the island – the cultural heartland of the majority Sinhala Buddhist community. For nationalist groups, this has meant the chance to exploit an apparent association between glyphosate understood as a threat both to Sinhala bodies and to Sinhala claims over the island. In scientific and political discourse, kidneys have emerged as a fleshy microcosm of the Sinhala body politic – a funnel and filter for all of the nation's poisons. To support the ban is to support Sinhala nationalism; to oppose the ban is to reject Sinhala hegemony within the island *and* Sri Lankan independence on the global stage as a sovereign nation. The consequence has been the transformation of toxicology into an instrument of sovereignty politics.

The government's focus has turned to policing the island's thresholds. Immediately after the glyphosate ban, old smuggling routes used to import weapons during the war were now used for the importing of glyphosate. The porosity of the nation's borders and its association with separatism highlighted how poisonous in-flow has long posed an existential threat to the Sinhala nation. Among the Sinhala farmers I worked with, *not* buying black-market glyphosate became a patriotic act. However, the biggest challenge to the ban came from the material risk it posed to the tea industry. During the glyphosate ban, plantations switched to a different herbicide, MCPA (2-methyl-4-chlorophenoxyacetic acid), outlawed in several of Sri Lanka's most important export markets. When Japan discovered trace amounts of that chemical and swiftly suspended tea imports, the Sri Lankan government argued it had little choice but to reapprove glyphosate. Sri Lanka's dependence on the free out-flow of

commodities to markets governed according to their own regulatory logics highlighted the limits of pesticide regulation as a statement of national independence.

In contrast, between the open borders of the European supranational state and the closed bodies of European citizens exist three intermediaries: the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the European Chemicals Agency (EChA) and individual member states. While the EFSA and EChA hold responsibility for conducting safety assessments of active ingredients like glyphosate, member states assess formulated products' safety in their national markets. In practice, however, individual countries rarely ban molecules approved at the European level. In response to regulatory failings over glyphosate, in 2018, the European Parliament investigated this division of labour. It argued that a commitment to 'open' science was needed if an 'open' democratic Europe was to thrive. Since then, EU risk managers have told me how navigating sovereignty politics has become an essential part of their work. In addition, agency heads have sought to capture European diversity by including broader member state representation in scientific teams and even accepting a role for anthropologists. Ultimately, however, glyphosate's fate remains tied to what is politically palatable. As one official told me, 'Glyphosate could be banned tomorrow if the risk threshold was lowered.'

For Euro-sceptics, meanwhile, the ability to exercise sovereign control over regulatory processes has become one more reason to reject closer union. Unsurprisingly, glyphosate played a role in the ongoing saga of the UK's departure from the European Union. In 2016, 'Vote Leave' campaigners promised farmers that an independent UK would not implement a European ban on glyphosate. At the same time, they pointed to Europe's complex regulatory structures as evidence that Europe could or would not protect its citizens from harmful chemicals. Following the Conservative 2017 general election victory, the environment minister and lead Brexiteer Michael Gove boasted that the UK government now enjoyed the power to ban a raft of agrochemicals the EU still allowed. Yet after the transition period ended in January 2021, the government reapproved EU-banned neonicotinoid pesticides linked with bee colony collapse disorder and lifted EU limits on glyphosate use. So, Gove's Brexit promise of chemical sovereignty instead turned into deregulation of the agrochemical sector and an in-flow of poison.

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Chemicals travel globally, permeating national boundaries to recast the role and reach of governments as protectors of human health and the body politic. Here, governments, scientists, activists and citizens struggle to agree on the scope of sovereignty while control over the political, body and dose thresholds increasingly diminishes. Bodily and national 'purification' therefore become ever more fraught the more the world is polluted. The call to 'take back control' of toxic flows is as oppressive as it can be emancipatory. As participant-observers within and of threshold anxieties, anthropologists are well placed to contribute perspectives on how poisons give form and meaning to life in this seemingly inescapable Chemical Anthropocene.

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Commented [WT1]: should this be a footnote, or on the side bar?

Bryant, R. & M. Reeves 2021. Toward an anthropology of sovereign agency. In *The everyday lives of sovereignty: Political imagination beyond the state* (eds) R. Bryant & M. Reeves. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

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