

SOY AND AGRO-FOOD TRANSITIONS

Austria from a Multi-Level Perspective, 1870s-2020s

Project duration: March 2022 – February 2025

FWF project number: P35531

General research question

How did knowledge transfer, commodity chains and regulatory institutions interact in soy's emergence from niche to mainstream in the context of agro-food transitions in Austria's inter- and transnational setting since the 1870s?

Soy and agro-food regimes

Soy's journey around the world was a paradoxical development: the cultigen simultaneously acted as a protagonist of the 'Western diet', rich in meat and dairy products, and its antagonist, endorsing alternative vegetarian and low-meat diets. Yet, the development of the 'soy paradox' was neither deterministic nor linear; on the contrary, soy's emergence as a global commodity was a rocky road. Before soy became part of the mainstream, it emerged in several niches as a novel solution to specific problems in different branches of the economy.

We argue that the emergence of soy and its implementation in agriculture and nutrition involved suitable arrangements of knowledge, commodification, and institutions.

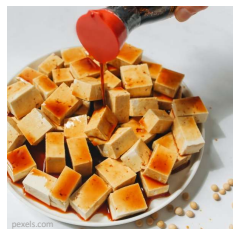
These arrangements were closely tied to agro-food regimes and their internal and external pressures, which fostered or hindered the diffusion of technological and social innovations in agro-food systems. The project aims at reconstructing the – partly successful, partly failed – transitions of soy from niche to regime levels, as exemplified by the case of Austria.



Agricultural
production



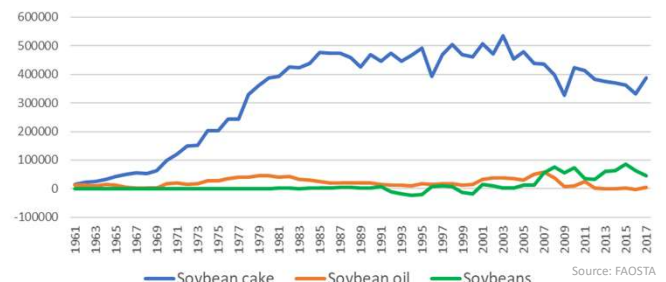
Trade &
processing



Food
consumption

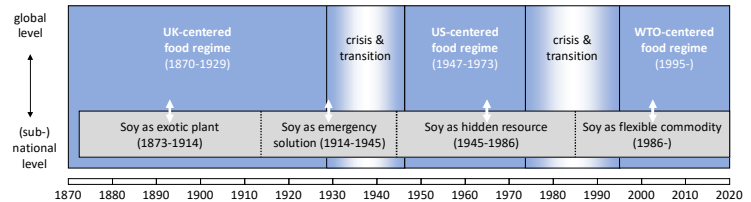


Austria's trade balance in soy products, 1961-2017
(tonnes)



In the last 150 years, Austria has emerged as both trader and producer of soybeans. Today, Austria is the fifth biggest producer in the EU. Most of the supply of soybeans is used for animal feed manufacturing and other forms of processing. Only a relatively small – but growing – amount is converted into foodstuffs. It is the strong link to the meat industry which associates soy with social and environmental issues, such as land grabbing, deforestation, declining biodiversity, GMOs, and agrochemical excess. However, soyfoods can play an important role in the creation of a more sustainable food system.

Episodes



Methods

The project rests on an innovative combination of **Transition Theory/Multi-Level-Perspective**, **Food Regime Analysis**, and **Commodity Studies** enabling the reconstruction of the complex dynamics of agro-food regimes and their transitions.

Despite its historical and sociological direction, the project contributes to current debates on sustainability and climate change.

The project will integrate long- and medium-term developments (i.e., regimes and their transitions) as well as medium- and short-term episodes (i.e., up- and downscaling of niche innovations) through five methodological strategies:

- **Transnational connections** (Austria as a node of a global soy web)
- **International comparisons** (similarities and differences of Austria and other countries)
- **Actor-network approaches** (with a focus on knowledge transfer)
- **Commodity chain analysis** (with a focus on commodification)
- **Critical discourse analysis** (with a focus on institution building)

Project team

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