

LIFE BECOMES AN INDUSTRY

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Book review: "Redesigning Life? The Worldwide Challenge to Genetic Engineering". Brian Tokar, ed. Zed Books, 2001. 440 pages.

The governments and corporations that promote the commercial applications of genetic engineering assure us that this new technology will be a boon for all. The pro-biotech discourse- so full of praise for free enterprise and modern science, as well as endless statements of good intentions- offers us novel drugs and genetic therapies that will cure cancer and all other known ailments; and edible superplants that will put an end to world hunger. We are told that it is nothing less than a technological quantum leap towards a future of abundance and prosperity, where everyone will gain and nobody will lose. Whatever risks and technical glitches we run into will be a small price to pay for the progress of humanity.

But some don't share the euphoria, and have doubts about the alleged benefits, safety and necessity of this new technology. "Redesigning Life?" is one of the most complete and up to date overviews of the diverse objections against biotechnology. This compilation of essays was conceived and edited by biologist Brian Tokar, who teaches at the Institute for Social Ecology. The far-sighted Tokar, longtime Green activist and author also of "The Green Alternative" and "Earth for Sale", was sounding the alarm about biotech long before most environmental and civil society organizations were even concerned about it.

Agribusiness corporations, food processors and supermarket chains are ill-advised to take the growing movement against genetically modified (GM) foods lightly, as if it were some passing fad. One opinion poll after another has shown that most North American and European consumers believe that labeling foods as GM has the same effect as labeling them with a skull and crossbones. In response to this massive consumer rejection, whole supermarket chains in Europe have already decided to go GM-free. Farmers are not happy either. In November 1999, a coalition of 30 US farm organizations, including the American Corn Growers Association y la National Family Farm Coalition, warned that farmers that plant GM crops are risking their economic future and the future of agriculture.

Activism has gone far beyond boycotts and straight into civil disobedience. Greenpeace activists have destroyed GM crop shipments and have used their ships to prevent the passage of American freighters loaded with GM corn and wheat into European ports. In England and Germany, clandestine commandos have uprooted GM plants. Some do it in broad daylight, and turn their actions into festivals of resistance, with processions, music and costumes. Sometimes they occupy uprooted GM fields for weeks at a time, not unlike peace activists did in the US Navy firing range in the Puerto Rican island-town of Vieques, between 1999 and 2000.

In 1998, members of France's Confédération Paysanne (Peasants' Confederation) entered a warehouse containing five tons of GM corn and destroyed it by spraying it with water. When the US threatened the European Union (EU) with trade sanctions for refusing to import American GM products, French farmers responded by flooding local McDonald's restaurants with manure and rotten fruit. One of the little-known reasons for the World Trade Organization 1999 Seattle conference's failure was the EU's refusal to give in to US demands regarding GM foods.

What is this massive worldwide rejection of biotechnology all about? To dismiss these protests as the doings of ignorant and fanatical technophobes, as the mainstream media would have us believe, is a poor service to a public that is hungry for information and answers.

The eight essays in the book's first section, "Our Health, Our Food and The Environment", show that the objections to genetic engineering have more than enough scientific footing. Biologist Martha Crouch explains why biotech will not feed the world or save the environment, while Vandana Shiva takes on the much-celebrated GM "golden rice", touted in the mainstream media as the solution for vitamin A deficiency. Collaborators Ricarda Steinbrecher, Jennifer Ferrara and Mike Dorsey expose the technology's inherent dangers, and Beth Burrows and Jack Kloppenburg Jr. talk about biotech's incompatibility with sustainable farming.

The second section, "Medical Genetics, Science and Human Rights", deals with the uncomfortable subjects of cloning and human gene manipulation, and links the endeavor to alter the human genome to the pseudoscientific agenda of eugenics. Zoe C.

Meleo-Erwin takes us to the macabre world of the new reproductive technologies; and Alix Fano, of the Campaign for Responsible Transplantation, makes a most convincing case that xenotransplantation (the use of animals for spare organs for humans) will result in a public health disaster of untold proportions. Marcy Darnovsky speaks out against the genetic "enhancement" of human genes, and Sarah Sexton questions the wisdom of turning to human cloning to solve the world's health woes.

The third section, "Patents, Corporate Power and the Theft and Knowledge of Resources", deals with the political and economic implications of genetic engineering. Special emphasis is given to indigenous peoples, who play a central role in this global controversy. Hope Shand, of the ETC Group, provides an overview of the corporations that form the "Life Industry", and Victoria Tauli-Corpuz and Mike Dorsey explain what the biotechnology revolution has in store for the world's indigenous peoples. In her essay "Biopiracy: The Theft of Knowledge and Resources", Vandana Shiva denounces corporate bioprospecting as just another form of plunder.

If it weren't for its fourth section, titled, "The Worldwide Resistance to Genetic Engineering", "Redesigning Life?" would be no more than an obituary for our planet. This final section presents a broad overview of actions being undertaken all over the world to stop biotech and to create sustainable, healthy alternatives. Jim Thomas tells about the wacky adventures of activists in the British Isles, while Vandana Shiva tells about efforts to protect India's farmers and biodiversity from corporate takeover. In his essay, "Resisting the Engineering of Life", Tokar shows that Americans haven't exactly been the quiet ones in the global challenge to genetic engineering.

http://www.social-ecology.org/learn/library/tokar/redesigning_life.html

Ruiz-Marrero is a Puerto Rican journalist. His articles have appeared in Corporate Watch, EcoNet, One World, IPS, the New York Daily News, NACLA Report on the Americas, Genewatch, Alternet, The Ecologist, the Earth Island Journal and other publications and web sites worldwide. He is also a Research Associate at the Institute for Social Ecology, and a Fellow at the Society of Environmental Journalists and the Environmental Leadership Program.