TOWARD A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE THREAT OF GMOS

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IN A PREVIOUS ARTICLE (*Biodynamics*, Spring 2011), I suggested that meeting the challenge of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) was going to require of the food movement a more comprehensive vision of our goals, more dynamic strategies, and much more extensive collaboration among for-profit and non-profit sectors of the food movement. The purpose of this article is to elaborate on those ideas in order to begin to flesh out the features of a more holistic approach to the threat of GMOs.

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SIGNS OF PROGRESS

First of all, I am extremely pleased to report that, since writing my last article, several new coalitions have formed to work on the issue of the labeling of products containing genetically modified ingredients. One of these is the Right2Know coalition, which just sponsored a historic march to Washington, D.C., and the other is the Just Label It coalition that will build on the march through a host of strategies. What stands out about these efforts is that they are bringing together both the for-profit and non-profit wings of our movement and that they are focused on a positive agenda—namely consumers' right to know—and not simply on an anti-GMO agenda. And yet, for all the promise of these new efforts, there is much work to be done, some of which I wish to articulate here.

SEVEN CONDITIONS FOR THE PROLIFERATION OF GMOS

As a basis for the development of a holistic approach to GMOs, I would like to list what I consider to be seven key "conditions" that appear to be necessary for the spread of GMOs in our culture. My aim is not to be comprehensive; I'm sure each reader could think of other conditions or of different ways to articulate these. My desire is simply to begin to sketch the larger landscape that I think we have to understand and address if we truly want to meet this challenge.

GMOs require for their proliferation:

1. A materialistic, mechanistic, utilitarian way of looking at nature, the universe, and the role of science.

2. Companies with a profit motive above all else and immense sources of capital.

3. Researchers willing to patent their work and an effort to limit the options available to farmers in terms of plant and animal breeds.

4. A government that subsidizes industrialized agriculture, funds GMO research at universities, promotes trade policies that foster over-production of grains for export, and upholds bad patent laws, weak environmental regulations, and weak labeling requirements.

5. Food companies, distributors, and retailers who do not care about the presence of GMOs in their products, on their trucks, or in their stores.

6. Farmers who have forgotten the true vocation of the farmer or who lack the support to explore alternatives.

7. Consumers who lack a deeper understanding of food and nutrition and of the impact of their food choices on the planet or who lack the support to explore alternative ways of cooking, eating, and shopping.

What I hope this list of conditions can awaken is a sense of the incredibly diverse efforts necessary to truly address the GMO problem, as well as a sense of the diverse efforts that are already taking place, whether or not the individuals involved think of themselves of GMO activists. Thus we could complement the above seven conditions by a list of all those working to address the challenge of GMOs. These include:

1. All those who are working to advance a holistic, post-materialist understanding of the world and of the purpose and practice of science.

2. All those who are working to revision capitalism, start mission-driven businesses, and channel capital away from the conventional stock market into social and ecological ventures.

3. All who are working to protect the bio-diverse legacy of our plant and animal species and all researchers working through traditional breeding techniques to develop this legacy.

4. All public servants, activists, and others working to reform government policies, agencies, and programs.

5. All entrepreneurs who are starting, managing, and working for alternative, GMO-free food companies, distributors, and retail stores.

6. All organic and biodynamic farmers, and all those working to train and support organic and biodynamic farmers.

7. All consumers who are growing their own GMO-free food and buying organic, biodynamic, and GMO-free food, and all those working to educate consumers and empower them to vote with their pocketbooks.

Thus, from one perspective, we could say that our movement already has a holistic set of strategies to meet the challenge of GMOs. What we need now is to learn how to strengthen, harmonize, synergize, and leverage these efforts in a fashion sufficient to meet the powerful forces that stand behind the proliferation of GMOs.

Unfortunately, the players active in these diverse areas, generally speaking, rarely have the opportunity to gather and think together deeply and strategically. This is the shadow side of our wonderfully diverse and de-centralized food movement: fragmentation. This is essentially the reason why so many people could be so against GMOs and yet they continue to take over more and more of our lives. We could, therefore, perhaps add an eighth condition for the proliferation of GMOs:

8. GMOs require a fragmented food movement that is not effectively working together to create a powerful ecosystem of cultural, political, and economic strategies in support of a new food system.

To elaborate on this analysis and tease out some practical and strategic implications, I would like to contemplate more deeply the first condition listed above, namely, the idea that:

GMOs require a materialistic, mechanistic, utilitarian way of looking at nature, the universe, and the role of science.

This is perhaps the most unseen condition for the spread of GMOs and, from a certain perspective, the most important to address. For the fact is that GMOs begin with ideas in people's heads, which in turn are the result of a certain way of looking at the world, which has evolved over hundreds and hundreds of years in western civilization.

The precautionary principle[1] aside, we must realize that this particular challenge is not one that can be addressed legislatively, lest we want to argue for the right to control what and how people think! The only real solution to this problem lies in the energetic fostering of a new way of seeing the universe and in demonstrating new and practical scientific methodologies and technologies that flow from this new worldview.

In general, I would suggest that our movement has not been strong in this kind work. Typically, it is more the right wing of our political and economic world that recognizes the power of ideas and that invests heavily in "think tank" work precisely for the purpose of generating ideas

[1] "The precautionary principle or precautionary approach states that if an action or policy has a suspected risk of causing harm to the public or to the environment, in the absence of scientific consensus that the action or policy is harmful, the burden of proof that it is not harmful falls on those taking the action.

This principle allows policy makers to make discretionary decisions in situations where there is the possibility of harm from taking a particular course or making a certain decision when extensive scientific knowledge on the matter is lacking." ("Precautionary Principle," Wikipedia, available at www.wikipedia.com.)

that they hope will, in the long term, shape cultural, social, and economic realities. As Michael Schumann has pointed out, the left wing has invested more in "projects" than in ideas.[2] This is something that must change.

The article by Stephen Talbott in this issue, and the work of the Nature Institute in general, is a beautiful example of just this kind of activity. Nothing, in the long run, will be more effective at pulling the rug out from under the GMO industry than (a) shining a light on the fact that the scientific assumptions on which it is based are fundamentally flawed and (b) demonstrating the great strides that can be made through a new science and new technologies that are cognizant of the fullness of reality.

This work is also important because it is focused on something positive, namely advancing new scientific methodologies and technologies, rather than simply "being against GMOs." This focus of advancing positive alternatives has been the keystone of our movement. We did not wait for the government or the universities or the market to condone alternative agriculture. Rather, a number of pioneering individuals went out and simply did it, creating new kinds of farms and proving that it could be done. Likewise, we must transform ourselves from a movement that is simply against GMOs to a movement for a new worldview, a new science, and new technologies that can bring life rather than death.

From an anthroposophical perspective[3], we can go even a step further and recognize that, behind the thought forms of materialistic, mechanistic, reductionist science, there actually stand spiritual realities, spiritual beings that wish to hold back the further evolution of humanity. We are all interwoven in these spiritual realities and, therefore, each of us must do the necessary spiritual work to liberate ourselves, ever more deeply, from the distortions of materialism. This is precisely why non-violent community marches combined with singing and prayer have proven so powerful in the civil rights movement and in other places around the world. The true activist realizes that he or she is engaged in both an inner and outer battle; a battle that can only be won when the forces of love, compassion, moral power, and intellectual clarity have reached a certain maturity in the community that is working for change. When our spiritual work and spiritual maturity combine with the other practical forms of work described above, then, I believe, we can foresee the day when significant progress in the battle with GMOs will begin to be made.

Strategically, I have thus touched on several ideas for advancing the work of the food movement in general and the effort to meet the challenge of GMOs specifically:

1. Creating forums that bring together the diverse players in the food movement in order to generate new and creative ideas, collaborations, and strategies on the cultural, economic, and political levels.

2. Helping establish and grow think tanks and research institutes where new ways of looking at nature, new forms of research, and new technologies can be actively developed and advanced.

3. Actively promoting the results of such think tank work to order to emphasize the positive vision of our work and in order to undermine the spiritual power of the ideas that stand behind the GMO phenomenon.

4. Using marches, conferences, artistic work, and spiritual practices to in order to remember, awaken, and strengthen the spiritual foundations of our movement.

In a future article I hope to elaborate still further on these themes.

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[2] Schumann, Michael, "Why do Progressive Foundations Give too Little to too Many?" *The Nation*, (Jan. 12, 1998), available at www.tni.org/archives/shuman/nation.htm.

[3] Anthroposophy is the name of the spiritual teaching of Rudolf Steiner that stands behind and informs biodynamics.