

Perhaps what we have is reminiscent of the early 19th century Luddite movements concerned about new industrial technologies and their social impacts. What we are seeing with regard to GMOs is lightly different in that the interference with life itself has far more significance than the mechanisation of the workplace as the new technologies can entail that a few individuals and organisations will have access to such enormous powers over nature that they could fundamentally shift the trajectory of life and society as a whole. The evidence of this trend, proponents would argue, is reflected in the amount of State resources being invested in the new powers of genetic engineering, the privatisation of life-sciences research, greater vertical integration in the corporate sector and industry, and the patenting of various life forms and genetic information as witnessed by the patenting of gene sequences based on information generated from the human genome project.

Ownership over life and who we are by influencing what and how we produce food, the health treatments we receive, helping us reshape our bodies and minds is what is at the essence of the GMO debate and resistance that is often overlooked. These are pertinent issues, which cannot simply be dismissed hallucinations of a 'loony' fringe. Even the most literate and educated constituencies are beginning to ask good and relevant questions about where all this technology is finally taking us. They are also concerned about the ethical dimensions that these new technologies raise, and whether we have managed to develop an appropriate ethics that could prevent the same eugenic frenzy of the early 30's in the US and Europe, of which the most unsavoury form took hold during the era of the Nazi's?

South Africa is in need, like the rest of the world, to re-look at the nature of technology, how choices over technology are made, and ways to improve public involvement in determining the relevance of technology. As the outcome of the Consumer Institute's recent Conference (29.10.99) on "Gene Technology-Food for Thought" has shown, we are still far off in dealing with these issues in a mature manner. For now both the pro and anti lobbyists for gene technology, are building ever increasing high walls and distances between themselves and the rest of the public. Given this stalemate and jaundiced discussions perhaps the State has the responsibility to inject leadership, that is, if it is the same State we trust to be neutral and honorable of democratic traditions.

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Postmodernism and GMOs

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A touch of madness is beginning to bedevil both pro-and anti-Genetically Manipulated Organism (GMO) lobbyists largely because none is willing to listen to the other. The debate is not just about GMOs, but the issue is symptomatic today of an emerging international trend of postmodernism that is ready to engulf South Africa as it has done so in Europe. This postmodernism is skeptical about the idea of objectivity, that there is a single truth that power is always neutral and just, or that authority and bureaucracy always works in the general interest of the public. So if a pro-GMO proponent such as Jennifer Thomson at the University of Cape Town argues that GMO foods will alleviate poverty and hunger, why should her tall-tale be more objective than others who say she is lying and that GMOs will lead to more harm than good? Why should her status as scholar and scientist give her more authority and monopoly to decide what is right and wrong? Postmodernists would argue that there is no fundamental basis for having more access to truth, accept that those who have power, privilege and the means are in a position to dictate the nature of this argument, and how many truths are more important and valid than others.

The GMO issue is fundamentally about whether scientists, corporations and the State have unilateral rights to extend the powers and domain of new technologies given the context of democracy that prevails here, as it does in Europe or the United States. The very same undercurrent that is evident in the GMO debate is playing itself out in the recent fracas over whether the building of Pebble Bed Modular Nuclear Reactors is necessary and the right way to go. In this case, Eskom is demonstrating similar corporate insolence; silence and non-responsiveness to public request for information as we find with companies pushing the genetic engineering bandwagon because high profile politicians and state officials have given these technologies their blessing. Such blessings breed callous attitudes towards the public and the right to object is dismissed by corporate scientists and heads as anti-science, anti-development and jobs, and irrational.

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