Dinner at the New Gene Café: How Genetic Engineering Is Changing What We Eat, How We Live, and the Global Politics of Food
Bill Lambrecht
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“GM Foods: Miracle or Menace?” Amid the daily reports on homeland security and airport security, it is sometimes difficult to recall that for the vast majority of the world’s citizens, the most pressing issue is food security. Globally, twenty-eight people die of hunger-related causes every minute of every day.1 In many parts of the developing world (and shamefully, throughout the United States, as well), food shortages are often a problem of distribution or lack of purchasing power; this is not always the case in much of sub-Saharan Africa,2 where food productivity per capita has actually fallen by 20 percent over the past four decades.3 In Zambia, famine and fear have recently collided, as millions of people go days between meals while the government refuses to accept the thousands of tons of corn donated by the United States, citing concerns over the almost certain presence of genetically modified (gm) kernels.4 By the 2000 planting season, over half of the soybean and corn and almost two-thirds of the cotton grown in the United States was genetically engineered, almost all of it to resist herbicides or insect pests (p.9). But American farmers and consumers are finding themselves increasingly isolated in their sanguine views about the safety of gm foods.

In his provocative account of hubris and the stunning globalization of food and protest, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch journalist Bill Lambrecht pulls no punches as he unveils the miscalculations of an industry intent on spreading a gospel of abundant food and full life through agricultural biotechnology. Lambrecht sets out to prove his contention that “Monsanto has genes for manipulation and secrecy in its corporate being” (p.245), and to open his readers’ eyes to the controlling role corporate giants play in food in American culture. The result is a masterful exposé, investigated with the thoroughness of the seasoned, first-rate reporter that Lambrecht is.

Starting in the early 1990es, the agricultural biotechnology industry began emphasizing the potential benefits to the Third World as a way to justify its budding commercial interests in plant genetic engineering. In particular, industry leaders such as Monsanto expected the “how will we feed the growing world population?” argument to play well in European countries (p.185), which devote a far higher percentage of their gross domestic product to development assistance than does the United States.5 But what they vastly underestimated was the growing disenchantment with American capitalist hegemony. As Lambrecht adroitly points out, the “company that gave the world Agent Orange” (p.249) found itself in the untenable position of being unable to tout the benefit of gm crops as a way to decrease pesticide use, since they manufacture and market the pesticides, too (p.255).

Lambrecht’s apparent schadenfreude in Monsanto’s humiliation over the Terminator technology notwithstanding, his report is relatively balanced, and he does highlight a few cases where the anti-Genetically Modified Organism (gmo) rhetoric is misleading. His narrative reads a little like newspaper copy, complete with human-interest details about the farmers, executives, and activists he interviews, and sound-bite-laced short essays that don’t always coalesce as chapters of a single opus. However, the book, which initially comes across as somewhat pedantic, soon takes off; although not a quick read, it’s engaging to the point that it’s hard to put down. Lambrecht explores each of the major controversies, from the possible deleterious effects of Bt-corn on Monarch butterflies (“the Bambi of the insect world” [p.78]) to the concern over Cry9 contamination of Taco Bell’s shells, which have made gmos front-page fodder. In a series of short vignettes interspersed throughout the book, entitled “Plantings,” Lambrecht reveals that he has planted illicit gm soybeans in his home garden to do his own little field test, and like any good mystery writer, he soon has us wanting to
turn to the last page to see how the story turns out. His conversations with farmers, and the glimpses they provide into the factory farming that keeps Americans satiated, and, increasingly, overweight, are a must-read for all of us who harvest our dinner with a shopping cart.

One of the many strengths of this book is the author’s pointed political insight stemming from his years of experience as a Washington correspondent. Lambrecht clearly has his ear to the rail when it comes to contemporary protest movements, and his leitmotiv is the role of saboteurs and the World Wide Web in increasing consumer awareness and stimulating national debate. Lambrecht’s in-depth analysis of Monsanto’s debacle in Europe makes for fascinating reading and is probably the best part of the book. As he illustrates, the deft use of tv and full-page print ads to convince the public of biotechnology’s contributions to quality of life appears to have succeeded in the United States. But the campaign failed miserably with the Europeans, who felt the need for tangible benefits to balance potential risks, yet perceived benefits only to farmers and to corporate pockets (p.247). Lambrecht does an excellent job of portraying the way in which the emerging “revelations of (government) complicity” (p.223) in the mad-cow crisis led to a complete loss of faith in any assurances of food safety the British regulatory agencies could have provided. Yet his portrayal of the grass-roots movement is far from one-sided, as, for example, when he draws attention to the irony of protesters demanding that GM crops be assessed to ascertain possible environmental risks even as they destroy the fields planted for exactly this purpose (p.241).

John Ashcroft has accused the European Union of hiding behind fear to maintain its protectionist trade barriers (p.237). What both he and, for a long time, Monsanto, failed to realize is that the European uprising against GMOS, focusing on reasonable concerns about the potential impact on biological diversity and other ecological risks, extends well beyond a “nuts ’n’ berries” fringe population. For with the proliferation of fast-food outlets in every major European city, our compatriots on the other side of the Atlantic have come to associate America with junk food (p.247), and their unease with GMOS reflects important differences in the way Europeans and Americans view just food, but farmland: Europeans live check-by-jowl with their agricultural land, taking Sunday walks through the fields and pastures that lie within half-hour train rides of their city dwellings. They appreciate the limited nature of their countryside and place a high priority on concerns about long-term environmental consequences. The United States, in contrast, was settled in the spirit of manifest destiny; when the land began to give out, the pioneers just went further west. As far as many Americans are concerned, natural resources are synonymous with national parks, and the American breadbasket is a featureless expanse of land, punctuated by Big 8 football stadiums, that keeps the denizens and the lifestyles of the “other” coast safely distant. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that some of the most active resistance to GMOS within the United States is arising in states like Vermont, where untainted pastoral vistas and wholesome food products, flowing from both cows and sugar maples, are the coinage of the realm, and where, in the March 2002 town meetings, twenty-eight towns passed resolutions opposing GMOS, while eight more voted to ban or actively discourage the planting of GM crops (p.247).

There is much to be learned from this book about how we as a society could construct a better food system. Lambrecht provides us with a wonderful glimpse into the citizens’ conferences that European parliaments employ to gauge public opinion, and uses the Cry90 Taco Bell contamination story to decry what he considers the unreasonably lax regulatory status quo. For, as Lambrecht and others have pointed out, the government is missing the opportunity to assess potential risks to the ecosystem by failing to monitor field plantings. Likewise, although there is at this point no concrete evidence of threats to human health, we can’t track possible health risks if GM foods are not labeled and separated. At the same time, the Cry90 experience demonstrates the virtual impossibility of completely segregating GM and non-GM food. It is estimated that 70 percent of all products in US supermarkets contain GM components. The author muses about whether the GM controversy will lead to war between the established food industry and the organic alternatives (p.153). Indeed, American farmers’ fears about lack of acceptance have already led to decreased planting of GM corn in the past couple of growing seasons (p.29). Biotech interests argue that organic farming advocates exploit these uncertainties for their own profit (p.234). While it is true that free-range chickens will not feed the world, it has also recently been documented, in the premier journal Science, that despite its lower productivity, organic farming entails significantly lower input costs and leaves the soil healthier than conventional farming practices (p.286). It is virtually a given that foreign genes introduced
into an ecosystem by a GM crop will spread to other related plants, and that pests will evolve resistance to whatever toxins are engineered into the plants they rely on for sustenance.\(^9\) But it is equally certain that in the time it took to skim this book review, a group of individuals larger than your circle of close friends and relatives, each of them a child of two other individuals and with hopes for the future, will have died of inadequate nutrition. Per Pinstrup-Andersen, executive director of the International Food Policy Research Institute, has argued: What right do we have to block access of resource-poor farmers to the technology (p. 304)? As Lambrecht’s narrative of the Irish potato blight so aptly demonstrates, the real danger is in over-reliance on a single variety of any crop, whether genetically modified or not (p. 227). The extensive planting of Bt-cotton in China has dramatically decreased pesticide use, which should result in health benefits for millions of farmers.\(^10\) The unfortunate arrogance of the agricultural industry behemoth has created a skeptical—even downright hostile—climate for scientists working on enhanced nutritional content, or on tolerance to the conditions of drought, soil salinity, and/or extreme temperature that constrain productivity on so much of the world’s marginally arable land.

Biotechnology will not provide all the answers, or even a large number of them. But it is one tool among many that can make a difference, if scientists in developing countries are able to apply it in ways that address the needs of their local cropping systems. In a world where 80 percent of the world’s population lives on 15 percent of the world’s wealth,\(^11\) the technology-rich nations need to show their solidarity with resource-poor farmers by spreading know-how, not assumptions and exploitation. As Lambrecht quotes one elderly English gentleman at an anti-GM protest near Oxford, “More food has to come from the heart of man, not from chemical operations” (p. 222). ⊗

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