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# The International Politics of Genetically Modified Food: Diplomacy, Trade and Law

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This book presents a dozen original essays – all careful and well written – edited to consider a range of international influences on policies toward genetically engineered foods and crops. The sources of influence covered include the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, transnational corporations, international NGOs, food aid, policies in both Europe and the United States, the WTO, and international law. The editor is a respected lecturer in international relations at the London School of Economics and a seasoned scholar in the study of biotechnology. Most of the contributors are similarly trained in international relations, political science, or environmental studies, and are from the UK, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, or other parts of the developed world.

This book is marked by a strong point of view. Most of the authors take it as given that genetically engineered foods and crops are somehow more risky to human health and/or the environment than conventional foods and crops. For readers who accept this assumption, the analysis and advocacy in the book falls perfectly into place. Of course the regulation of GMO foods and crops should be much tighter than for conventional foods or crops. Of course Europe's precautionary approach to GMO foods and crops is to be welcomed and internationalised, even if this approach makes the technology nearly impossible to use, and of course the WTO should be criticised for

not accepting the European approach. Of course the transnational corporations that develop and sell GMO seeds should be held at bay by new international agreements, and watched carefully by NGO advocacy networks.

Other readers will question the underlying assumption. A consensus has now emerged among relevant scientific authorities in Europe as well as in the United States that the GMO foods and crops currently on the market are no more dangerous to human health or the environment than their conventional counterparts. This is the stated opinion now of the Directorate for Research of the European Union, the French Academy of Science, the Royal Society, the British Medical Association, the Union of German Academies of Sciences and Humanities, the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. None of these scientific bodies has been able to find any evidence yet of new risks from the GMO foods and crops currently on the market, even though most were placed on the market by the more permissive regulators of the United States rather than the highly precautionary regulators of Europe. This forces us to question the wisdom of internationalising Europe's highly precautionary approach. How much will be lost in the way of future agricultural

productivity – and will some of the world's poorest farmers be among the losers – if needlessly strict regulations on GMOs continue to proliferate?

Some of the contributors to this volume go beyond dubious assumptions about risk to make the even more problematic argument that agricultural biotechnology is spreading globally today as an extension of modernity and capitalism in such a way as to foreclose debates about broader social and ethical concerns. The technology has indeed spread rapidly in the United States and Argentina without much debate, but in the rest of the world the debate has been loud and long – and there has been very little spread. As of 2006, roughly 90 per cent of all GMO crops worldwide were being grown in just four Western Hemisphere states: the United States, Argentina, Brazil, and Canada. In all of developing Asia the only country to have approved a GMO food crop so far is the Philippines (yellow maize, mostly for animal feed). In all of Africa only one country – South Africa – has approved any GMO crops for planting at all, and in many African countries it is now illegal to import GMO maize (the same food Americans have been consuming for more than a decade) even for emergency food aid purposes. Because of unusually strict regulation, most of the world's farmers outside the Western Hemisphere are being forced to pursue modernity and capitalism without any GMOs.

Not all of the contributors to this volume are so quick to ignore the high regulatory hurdles that have now been put in front of

the technology. One particularly clear chapter on the deep incompatibilities that have emerged between the Cartagena Protocol and the WTO does notice, at least by implication, the danger of over-regulation. This chapter comments, '[T]he regulatory decision-making approach embodied in the Biosafety Protocol is entirely reasonable if one views biotechnology-based products as equivalent to hazardous or toxic waste' (p. 209). Another chapter does a nice job of accepting the prevailing disconnect between evidence of risk and perception of risk and goes on to depict the politics of GMO regulation as a polarising 'competition for public trust,' one waged using discursive rather than empirical weapons thereby widening the polarisation.

This book is nicely presented and a valuable resource for GMO sceptics and supporters alike. Both will find chapters that are factually reliable, analytically careful, and conceptually challenging. The GMO critics – especially from Europe – who made up their minds about this technology ten years ago when it was still new and relatively untested will be comfortable with the dogged insistence that there is a big new risk to be managed here. Others more attentive to the emerging scientific consensus on food safety and biosafety will wonder at the doggedness of this perception, but then still learn a great deal about current patterns of international influence.

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