

Biotechnology: Public and Private

by René Riesel¹

Some months ago a team of French psychiatrists was asked to evaluate the motivation of the opponents of genetic engineering. Curiously, this reassuring news was not widely reported. Nor does anyone seem to have noticed the remarkable self-imposed discretion of the devotees of transgenetics with respect to the doings of their enemies. Only on the rarest of occasions do they let slip some faint condemnation of the over-sensitivity, the old-fogeyism or the obscurantism of the anti-GMO crew, or mutter under their breath that the dissenters' virulent hatred of progress is really a matter for the psychiatrists. True enough, the most exemplary aspect of the first campaign waged in France against genetic engineering – a campaign that began with the Nerac sabotage of January 1998 and ended with the Montpellier action of June 1999, and included ten or so destructions of experimental crops and brief occupations of the premises of Novartis, the CIRAD (Centre for International Co-operation in Agronomic Research for Development) and the INRA (National Institute of Agronomic Research) – lay in its renewal of the Luddite tradition. Considering that some participants are eager to downplay this aspect, no doubt because they need to forget the implications of what they have got caught up in, it is probably worth recalling the bases of this modern-day Luddite madness.

It may seem odd at first that the campaign came to an end without ever destroying *harvests*, but this is easy to explain. In Nerac a very small number of farmers found themselves at the forefront of one of the rare practical rejections in this country of the innovation of plant necro-technology (which at that time the genetico-industrial complex expected to impose easily, banking on ready acceptance by farmers). The aim was unambiguous from the start: to “denature” State-authorized transgenic seeds inside a *factory*, and so prevent their sale.² At Montpellier matters were even more clear-cut: the Inter-Continental Caravan of Indian farmers purely and simply destroyed experimental rice plants being grown in a facility belonging to CIRAD, a government research organization specializing in “co-operation” with countries considered developmentally backward. A fact unknown at the time of the operation is that the wrecked research was wholly or partly funded by the European Union. This is surely much more significant than the anticipated co-production role of Hoechst-Rhone-Poulenc-Aventis, who are openly allied with CIRAD within Genoplante.³

During this period we envisaged not attacks on French silos containing harvested grain, but rather the monitoring of consignments of imported transgenic seeds. This was not out of some sort of protectionism, but because – as a positive result of the Nerac action – harvests had

¹ This is a very slightly abridged version of an article that first appeared in *L'Ecologiste* #1 (Autumn 2000) under the title “OGM: ‘La Démocratie moderne, cette soeur de lait de la technoscience...’ ” Reprinted in Riesel's *Declarations sur L'Agriculture Transgénique et Ceux Qui Pretendent S'y Opposer* (Editions Encyclopédie des Nuisances, 2000). Translated into English by Bernard Cooper and Michael William and published in *Against the Engineering of Life* (Venomous Butterfly Publications, Portland, OR, no date). Uploaded to the *NOT BORED!* website (notbored.org) in 2005. Footnotes by the English publisher, except where noted.

² The method used was the admixture of non-transgenic maize grains. Comically enough all the commentators, blinded by technophilia, parroted the word “denature” without noticing its paradoxical quality; unfortunately this is no laughing matter.

³ *Translators' note:* Genoplante is a plant genomics program set up in 1999 by a combination of public and private “scientific interest groups” in France.

been restricted to a twenty-fifth of their planned size; at the same time crops were even harder to trace in that their locations, for which Novartis became responsible in 1998, were just as secret as the experimental parcels of the CGB.⁴ This also explains why there was no destruction of “commercial” transgenic crops.

We were not there yet. Given the balance of forces, two priorities imposed themselves: first, reducing our extreme isolation by trying to precipitate a snowball effect that would multiply acts of sabotage (success in this regard was extremely limited, as we have seen); secondly, taking what had been started to its logical conclusion by moving from guerilla actions against private companies to the first, inevitably frontal offensives against government research. Not the *intangible* sort of government research that some unique virtue sanctifies and absolves of all responsibility in the world as it is, but real government research caught with its hand in the cookie jar of what it actually produces. This had got off to a very good start in the CIRAD action, and in a distinctly more confused way in Ariège two days earlier, with the destruction of CETIOM-INRA rapeseed (*colza*) at Gaudies.⁵ At last the question of the status and function of research relative to the development of this society was beginning to be posed *directly* – and not just biological research either, although the biotechnologies of death are, it is true, particularly illuminating in this respect.

Up until now we had done no more, at best, than denounce the mercenary character of government research, pointing the finger at a few ways in which this research works hand in glove with the mercantilism of the private-sphere poisoners. The method chosen, namely direct action, perturbed some. At bottom, though, the most vulgar boosters of the nanny State, of fair-play capitalism, or of the permanence of the industrial system could still feign not to understand or affect to believe that our *uncivil* behaviour somehow lent support to their arguments. In a word, no tenet of progressivist dogma was so much as scratched – least of all infallible science still defying eternity from its dusty tomb.

All the “citizens”⁶ were still free to trot out their old saw according to which it is only the use to which some technical application is put that “causes the problem,” whether that application happens to be DDT, high-speed trains, river-polluting polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), agent orange, asbestos, cloning, Monsanto’s Round-Up herbicide, the Internet, cell-phones, nuclear power, or you-name-it. Once the alarm has been raised, all that is required is to take more security precautions in the future; to reinforce the institutions of modern democracy – stepsister to techno-science; to help governments take decisions; to assert one’s independence; and so on and so forth – with everything becoming more *participatory* by virtue of opinion polls, referendums and “consensus conferences.” In this way an end will be put to the aberrations of “neoliberalism.” Last but not least, “good” genetically modified organisms will thus become acceptable, however little they may be “public” in any sense of the word.

Apart from sporadic wrappings-up of the Pont-Neuf by Greenpeace commandos, tele-activism courtesy of Ecoropa, petitions from myriad pressure groups, and a few investigations, lawsuits and trials, nothing – no actual *movement* – followed in the wake of the aforesaid acts of

⁴ CGB: *Commission du Génie Biomoléculaire* (Biomolecular Engineering Commission), responsible for monitoring – and concealing – these experiments. There is also a “biovigilance” committee whose job it is to assess the risks of commercial cultivation.

⁵ CETIOM: *Centre Technique Interprofessionnel des Oleagineux Metropolitains* (Interprofessional Technical Centre for Oil-Producing Plants in Metropolitan France).

⁶ See “*Des organismes génétiquement modifiés et du citoyen*” (Concerning Genetically Modified Organisms and the Citizen), by “A Few Enemies of the Transgenic Brave New World” (January 1999). Available from ACNM, BP 178, 75967 Paris cedex 20, France.

sabotage. Two years went by before a few militants summoned the courage to dress up as vegetables and go and *negotiate* with supermarket managers for permission to *inform consumers* by actually distributing leaflets among the shopping carts!

Nothing, meantime, had intruded upon the corporatist cackle of public-sector researchers, so safely ensconced behind their government seal of approval and forever bemoaning the Stalino-Gaullist golden age (whose return, as has of course been scientifically proven, depends solely on increased government funding for research). They realize, of course, that in accordance with the wishes of the most modern voices they must accept a broadening of their role. This will naturally include consultation services to the decision makers, but above all it will involve the new functions of *valorization* and *communication* – related, obviously, to what used to be called vulgarization, but even more closely tied up with *social acceptance* in the Telethon sense; consider the encores that greeted the sole known French and State-sponsored demonstration of the “immense promise held out by gene therapies,” as performed on two bubble-children by a medical team at Necker Hospital (Paris). A few weeks earlier, moreover, Axel Kahn, celebrated moral conscience of Aventis and of INSERM (French National Institute of Health and Medical Research), had been careful to stress, when the first scandals over this ever so promising discipline broke out in America, that “what is in question in the United States are practices. Not scientific principles.”⁷

As a modern echo of the Luddite cry “Enoch made them, Enoch shall break them!”⁸ the profane CIRAD operation, no less than the Nerac action, took aim at a centre of the *production* of genetic chimaeras. This time, however, the intervention took place upstream – at the *intellectual stage* of production, so to speak, if the word can be said to apply to the nature and conditions of the work of CHSs⁹ and other menials of technoscience, be they specialists in agro-toxicology or not. Forcing the door of the laboratory strictly so called amounted to provisionally entrusting meal moths and leaf-rollers with sole responsibility for resisting that *intentional genetic pollution* which the necro-technological onslaught has already turned into a fact of life in the larger laboratory that our environment has been turned into, a laboratory which – to borrow the dreadful words inspired in Guenther Anders by the nuclear industry – is “coextensive with the globe.”¹⁰

We deliberately chose a target that was a centre of both material and ideological production. We were banking on the possibility that the resulting turbulence in the “research community” might prompt the odd defector to declare him or herself, and at least initiate a critique of the institutionalized confusion between research and development that would clarify the role of techno-scientific research in the lockstep forward march of hyper-industrialization and artificial over-socialization. In this hope we were disappointed.¹¹ But direct action has in

⁷ *Libération*, 10 February 2000.

⁸ *Translators’ note*: “Great Enoch” was “the heavy hammer made by Enoch and James Taylor, who also made ... shearing-frames” (G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The Common People* [second edn, London: Methuen, 1946], pp. 186-87).

⁹ CHS: *chercheur hors statut*, researcher without title. These aspiring researchers are the manual laborers of government laboratories.

¹⁰ Anders, *De la bombe et de notre aveuglement face à l’apocalypse* (Marseilles: Titanic, 1995), note 15.

¹¹ [Note added July 2000:] A first answer to our hopes may perhaps be detected in the nighttime sabotage, on June 26 last, of an INRA forcing-house in Toulouse. The phraseology of a pamphlet left behind at the site by the saboteurs, titled “Scrupulum” and signed “Seekers in the Night,” would seem to suggest familiarity with the research milieu: “Even knee-deep in liquid manure, the researcher refuses to trust the evidence of his senses.... He believes that if something can be done it must be done...” Repeated rebukes of private sector funding (talk of “so-called public services,” etc.) tends to support this thesis, though the evidence is not conclusive.

common with classic scientific method that it too seeks the practical verification of preformed hypotheses; and we had another, less naive ambition, one deriving from more basic principles: to test hypotheses that one cannot help formulating on the rising rate of illiteracy and false consciousness among research staff.¹² In view of the apparatus that has been set up for the *teaching of ignorance*,¹³ which has given rise among other wonders to the researchers of the genome industry, such testing of the situation was clearly in order.

As many as five hundred ranking researchers signed a collective “Open Letter to Citizens” whose drafters stated: “On the one hand we are asked to furnish data for the assessment of agro-environmental risks; on the other, our research in process is destroyed!!!” The text notes that “The researchers of the public sector have been assigned the task of gathering experimental data on the environmental impact of transgenic plants,” and concludes by asking, “Is there some misunderstanding?” A short time later a hundred and forty-two of the signatories’ colleagues, “without presuming as citizens to impose their views on civil society,” claimed that they were nevertheless justified in saying that “it is certainly society that needs the findings of this kind of research if it is to frame the rules that it means to impose on the cultivation of transgenic plants.” A Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT)-INRA statement darkly predicted “stormy weather ahead,” the time being now over when, as in the last several years, “public agronomic research fulfilled its role by pursuing basic research on the possibility of using transgenic plants for agronomic and agro-alimentary purposes.” Lastly, a CFDT-INRA communiqué issued in connection with a promotional remake in April 2000 of the rapeseed destruction at Gaudies, complete with schizophrenic Greens and State-decorated representatives of ATTAC,¹⁴ declined “absolutely to condemn the use of GMOs” and added its voice to the chorus of denouncers of the “obstruction of the progress of a kind of knowledge sought in direct response to a social demand ... despised by those who destroy these experiments....”¹⁵

Our mummified government researchers are devalued in their own eyes, poorly remunerated for their expertise, and disqualified by their decisive contribution to the “silent revolution” – to the export of the green *counter-revolution* and to the results thereof, censured not only by their paymaster but also by their paymaster’s public opinion; and if they get hot under the collar about being *seen* to change masters, with the advent of public-private consortia of the Genoplante variety, it is only because they have largely resigned themselves to the fact that their function, society itself, their boss, and even their illusions on all of these have already

¹² For authors as well acquainted with the subject as Bruno Latour and Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond this is not a hypothesis but an established fact, especially in so far as illiteracy is concerned.

¹³ If we may take the liberty of borrowing Jean-Claude Michéa’s excellent formulation without sharing all his views; see, among other works, his *L’Enseignement de l’ignorance et ses conditions modernes* (Castelnau-le-Lez: Editions Climats, 1999).

¹⁴ Present on this occasion were Jean-Luc Benhamias, national spokesperson for the Greens, and François Dufour, vice-president of ATTAC, recently enrolled in the Legion of Honor. [*Translators’ note*: ATTAC: *Action pour une Taxe Tobin d’Aide aux Citoyens*, Action for a Tobin Tax in Aid of Citizens. Named after the American economist James Tobin, who proposed taxing speculative financial transactions, ATTAC sees itself as a citizens’ movement or association striving “to reconquer ground lost by democracy to the financial sphere” and opposing any further cession of state power to investors and business interests.]

¹⁵ See *Libération* for 23 June and 8 July 1999; CGT-INRA statement of 6 July 1999; CFDT-INRA statement of 19 April 2000. At the trial arising from the Nerac action, the CFDT of Lot-et-Garonne had gone much farther, associating itself formally with the prosecution of those accused of “incontrovertible injury to the tools of the trade [and to] the exercise of the freedom to work of the employees of an enterprise.” The mystifying CGT-INRA statement of 24 April 2000 is also well worth a look.

had to change. Whence their immoderate reliance on self-suggestion and apodictic or circular arguments.

They needn't worry: it is plain enough that researchers are model citizens par excellence. It is not merely that, like all good consumer-actors, they take their citizenship for a walk at every possible legitimate opportunity, voting according to their convictions, informing themselves with that aim in mind, consuming in perfect lucidity, not to mention joining civic, cultural and athletic associations, entrusting the State with the education of their offspring as early as possible, and so on. They do better still, going so far, in their laboratories, colloquia and publications, as to eschew all discussion of their mission, which by its very nature serves scientific and human progress, as well of course as the dissemination of the national scientific culture; for it should be borne in mind that this mission is assigned to them by a hierarchy all the more empowered to do so for having been appointed by a political class which – short of contesting the superiority of the democratic system itself – must be deemed a pure emanation of the sovereignty of the people. Furthermore, whenever perplexity assails this parliamentary representation or its executive arm in connection with some technological innovation or other, does it not fall as a matter of course to a researcher (or at least to a research director) to offer society a suitably multidisciplinary account of the benefits that may be expected to flow from it?. And incidentally, in the controversy over genetically modified organisms, was this not the goal of consensus conferences?

Notice that nothing at all in the pleadings of these experts – low as they are on the totem pole, and hardly steeled to the need not to let the cat out of the bag – nothing so much as hints at the notion, the indeed *perfectly absurd* notion, that one day the recommendation might be made, *by experts*, that the fertile field of research and specialization opened up by genetic engineering be closed; or that a single *decision-maker* could ever conceivably accept such a fanciful suggestion. That this should be so is itself information of capital importance, for it encapsulates *everything needing* saying about all those technical, economic, ecological or ethical debates where *social questions* are purportedly allegedly being addressed. And, being of capital importance, it has of course gone unnoticed, just like most of the spectacle's public secrets, never so well kept as when they are made blindingly obvious. But for this very reason its revelation has to be counted one of the most eloquent *experimental findings* of the Luddite exactions and operations described above – those “commando actions” and “other combats” conducted by “a few Manichaeic manipulators”¹⁶ who make no bones about their inability to oppose genetically modified foods without opposing the world that produces them.

We live in a time when the triumphant industrialization of the world has largely persuaded our contemporaries that the entire future of the human race resides in the uninterrupted continuation of this process. There are those here or there who are busily convincing themselves that transformations of wage-labour, the filtration and recycling of industrial pollutants, the biologists' revenge upon the physicists, considered together with the swamping of the masses under information technology and any other conceivable means of making life artificial, are just so many harbingers of a *post-industrial era*. Carried to its inevitable logical conclusion, this attitude implies that humanity can be deprived of all rear support, and stultified to the point where of its own accord it abolishes the very last traces of any other conceptions of life. Careful scrutiny reveals that this is precisely the agenda of interactive submission concealed by the veils of the *economistic critique* of the economy as propagated, on a “precautionary” basis of course, by the boosters of anti-globalist speed-thinking. In reality there

¹⁶ To quote Alan Weil of CIRAD.

is no possible common ground between these mental contortionists jabbering about “commodification” while at the same time claiming to have discovered the economy’s *universal ambitions*,¹⁷ and those who firmly intend to revive reasons for overthrowing that economy.

These last can do no less than renew the connection with “the anti-industrial subversion of that *unknown revolution* that since the Luddites and the *canuts* runs like a secret thread through the history of social struggles.”¹⁸ Nor, by extension, can they avoid saying why they see the sabotage of necro-technologies as a resurgence of the shearing-frame breakers, and why such action “finally provides canuts [and Luddites] with the justification that they in their time were not quite able to conceive of.”¹⁹

In the crepuscular dawn of industrial society, the Luddites could hope in a material sense to halt the invasion of the machines that denied their craft and replaced it with the “shoddy work” of mass production: they could break those or threaten to do so. For our part, though we may enjoy the dubious advantage of two centuries of hindsight and clear knowledge of the industrial extremes to which workers were subjected for long years in the twentieth century, we cannot nourish any comparable hopes with respect to genetically modified plants. Those who claim that it might be possible to “survive” genetic modification (in what condition? one might ask) are lying, or fooling themselves, or don’t know what they are talking about, or all of the above. We shall not survive genetic modification even in the way in which some people still dream of surviving the ravages of nuclear power: by cohabiting for a few millennia with radioactive dumps, crumbling sarcophaguses, marine dead zones in the Baltic, and so forth. We had better get ready to keep an accounting – beginning forthwith and continuing until the end of time – of the mutagenic effects, direct and infinitely recombinable (and not confined to the plant world), of a genetic pollution of plants whose irreversibility is about the only thing certain that may be said about it.

Even as the credulous are being entertained with precautionary “decisions” of the European Parliament, or of the Cartagena Conference on biosafety and international trade, and assailed by government and corporate propaganda about the use of genetically modified foods in the home, the happy-go-lucky meddling with every living thing accelerates – and it speeds up all the more where knowledge of the spheres concerned is virtually nil: plants strictly for industrial use, strategic viruses, animals with human organs – the mind boggles. And medical research, all shame long forgotten at never admitting that its sole aim is to contrive our adaptation to a pathogenic society, now envisages the deployment of gene therapies to produce, on the model of the improved animals of industrialized husbandry, *new human beings* who will *demand* to be continually treated as sick because they will have been persuaded never to despair of being repaired throughout their lengthy *survival*.

The Luddites and we are separated by an epoch, at times exhilarating for our side, during which the poor, gravitating en masse from the fields to the factories and the struggle against wage-labour, came to believe – like many a millenarian movement before them – that the only problem was to burn down the castle, to expropriate the expropriators, that the world would promptly change its foundation if the economy were set right side up, if the means of production

¹⁷ “The particular task of bourgeois society is the establishment of the world market, at least in outline, and of production based upon the world market. As the world is round, this seems to have been completed by the colonization of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan” (Marx to Engels, 8 October 1858).

¹⁸ *Encyclopédie des Nuisances, Remarques sur l’agriculture génétiquement modifiée et la dégradation des espèces* (Paris: Editions de l’Encyclopédie des Nuisances, 1999), p. 16.

¹⁹ Riesel, “Declaration before the Agen Court,” 3 February 1998, in *Declarations*, p. 101.

and their technical supports, which “belonged to all,” were simply reappropriated: selection and reassessment of their use could safely be left until later.

Aside from the fact that it is happily no longer possible to bask in the messianic illusion of an ineluctable shift from the reign of necessity to the reign of freedom, we have also had to come to terms with the liberation in human beings of extremist tendencies towards submission as soon as totalitarian systems, well enough equipped ideologically and technically, could neutralize the old conditions of exploitation and domination, which still allowed for humanizing tendencies. All the same, human communities antedating modern totalitarianism, or surviving on its fringes, cannot be said either to have fully realized themselves or to have ended up in an industrial universalism. They have been obliged, simply, to renounce the exploration of alternative avenues once open to them. The last historical opportunities to take such avenues get fewer when, the better to erase their memory, the superlatively well equipped totalitarianism of the democracy of commodities prepares to colonize, not just the body and the mind, but the most intimate reaches of all life.

It must be made clear that there can be no “getting through” either genetic modification or any of the other biocidal technologies propagated by an unshackled economy until we have overcome our need to submit to the blandishments of technology and industry and believe in scientific promises of uninterrupted progress. This is the only conceivable escape route. And it leads out of this society. Not that reform is impossible, far from it: it goes on every day as a way of staving off the catastrophe with which the society continually threatens us. The point is that the catastrophe is real. It is the normal *modus operandi* of an industrial world for which it has become profitable to announce that each of its advances precipitates permanent dislocation and collapse; and to stress that there is even worse to come, that we should fear unprecedented disasters, and be ready to cope with them. Be ready, above all, to keep taking it in the neck. This is why it would be especially illogical to reject the intra-economic crisis-theory of the mechanistic Marxists, with its boom-bust cycles so propitious for the final proletarian onslaught, only to embrace a socio-ecological messianism predicated on a general outbreak of peace and love on every level (technological, climatic, nuclear, financial, viral, etc.), which would suddenly ruin the prospects of the dominant system by launching the rag-tag remnants of humanity upon the reconquest of who knows what paradise lost. Since we know that the catastrophe lies within the realm of the possible, we have no choice but to refuse in practice to take it into account. Striving to put it off, even speculating on the tactical opportunity it might offer – these are merely ways of collaborating with the effort already in hand to reach a final solution to the human question.