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Trends. Altered States and Genetically Altered Products: Psychological Crisis at Cartagena

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The first comprehensive attempt to develop a global treaty that would regulate commerce in genetically altered products has been unsuccessful. Representatives of nation-states meeting in Cartagena, Colombia could not agree on whether and how to require exporters of genetically altered plants, seeds, and some other organisms to obtain approval in advance from an importing nation-state. The psychological issues affecting treaty negotiations proved to be very significant.

First, there were differences of opinion about what constitutes "changes in the environment" that might conceivably reflect harm from genetically altered products and their use. To some sides, "the environment" referred to "macro" changes in gross external parameters. To others the changes could be "micro" and the parameters internal in nature. Still others differed as to what "entering the environment" might mean--as in whether commodities meant to be eaten or processed actually enter into some environmental system. Further differences focused on whether changes within humans qualified as changes in the environment. These last differences might have unfortunately been the byproduct of the social and life sciences' abstract bifurcations of genes versus the environment and nature versus nurture variables.

Second, there were differences in belief systems about the threat from genetically altered products. Some negotiators viewed such products as crimes against God and/or against nature--or as byproducts of playing God, overstepping the human role, of challenging the forces of Nature. Some advanced greater or lesser import to "health threat" as a significant criterion of policy-making as opposed to economic or other threats. Some proved to be "strict constructionists" of conservative science and advocated significant controls until science could demonstrate that a myriad of hypothetical threats were unthreatening. Some seemed to be "strict constructionists" of a more liberal bent and advocated much more flexibility in controls until science could demonstrate that a myriad of hypothetical threats were threatening. And the constructs of "conservative" and "liberal" were themselves subverted or changed into their opposites contingent on the social, cultural, economic, and political heritages of the nation-states of various negotiators.

Third, there were differences in degrees of disingenuousness among negotiators. Through the stalking horse of environmental and health threats from genetically altered products, there were impelling salient interests in (a) presence or absence of biotechnological infrastructures within various countries, (b) competition in agricultural and industrial commerce, (c) free trade and open market ideologies, (d) appropriateness of conflating commerce and environmental issues in a single political treaty, (e) the control of genetic resources, (f) the alleged prepotency of other treaties and sovereignty, and (g) yet other political ideologies.

It is quite apparent that psychological states will need to be altered before coherent global strategy towards genetically altered products can be developed. At present, these states and their technologies of change seem to be much more primitive than those which they must confront. (See Adair, J.R. (1997). The bioprospecting question: Should the United States charge biotechnology companies for the commercial use of public wild genetic resources? *Ecology Law Quarterly*, 24, 131-171; Mannion, A.M.

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(1998). Can biotechnology contribute to sustainable agriculture? *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture*, 11, 51-75; Parens, E. (1998). Is better always good? The enhancement project. *Hastings Center Report*, 28, 17sup; Pollack, A. (February 23, 1999). Biotechnology treaty stalls as U.S. and developing nations quarrel. *The New York Times*, p. A9; Pollack, A. (February 25, 1999). U.S. and allies block treaty on genetically altered goods. *The New York Times*, pp. A1; C4.) (Keywords: Cartagena, Colombia, Genetics, Genetically Modified Organisms, GMO.)