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The Import of Importing and Unnatural Acts: The Political Psychology of Bioengineered Plants

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Title: The Import of Importing and Unnatural Acts: The Political Psychology of Bioengineered Plants

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Abstract. This article describes political psychological aspects of opposition to the importing of bioengineered plants.

There is political uproar throughout Europe over the planting of rapeseed oil crops from bags of Canadian seed that inadvertently contained less than 1% of genetically modified seed--probably designed to increase resistance to weed killer. European newspapers are employing terms such as "tainted" and "contaminated" to describe fields where the seed was sown. Environmental groups are agitating to track down the farmers who bought the seed and then to burn down their fields before the crops mature and produce pollen that could blow to and then affect other plants. Concurrently, the Prince of Wales has lectured via the British Broadcasting Corporation that bioengineering may violate the "'sacred trust between mankind and our Creator.'"

One significant element of the above discourse is that the products of bioengineering are somehow more "unnatural" and/or less "natural" than those that are not bioengineered. But is this necessarily the case? First of all, plants subject only to the vagaries of Nature--assuming Nature does not encompass bioengineering--still are subject to genetic modification. Some of this modification is spontaneous mutation or other seemingly arbitrarily phenomena that themselves are dependent on some environmental constraints that, in turn, can be affected by the pursuits of humankind. Second, the bioengineering prowess of humankind may itself be considered part of Nature, in that humans have been able to develop the prowess...well, naturally, apparently without some deus ex machina contrivance from interplanetary aliens who, by the way, could also be construed to Nature as opposed to something "unnatural."

Another significant element of the above discourse is the conflation of the "unnatural"/"natural" distinction with the "other"/"self" distinction. The malignity of the "other" and the benignity of the "self" mirror one of the earliest and most primitive phases of psychological development--one that can be reverted to during interludes of psychological stress. A pathological variant of this reversion is when the psychological "other" as a foreign entity seems to invasively enter the "self" and even threatens to poison or devour it. Such a noxious psychological content is present in some psychoses and parallels and even serves as a foundation for an inveterate, economic protectionist's view of imports in general--be they commodities, services, currency, social trends, or cultural products.

Obviously, health and environmental issues need to be posed, monitored, and addressed by bioengineers, policymakers, and citizens throughout the world. However, the type of discourse related to the European rapeseed oil crops borders on the paranoid and the delusional. Unfortunately, this discourse purports to be about the body, but it really is about the mind. (See Kunzendorf, R. G., Hartmann, E., Cohen, R., & Cutler, J. (1997). Bizarreness of the dreams and daydreams reported by individuals with thin and thick boundaries. *Dreaming: Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams*, 7, 265-271; Loewenthal, K. M., Goldblatt, V., Lubitsch, G., Gorton, T., et al. (1997). The costs and benefits of boundary maintenance: Stress, religion and culture among Jews in Britain. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 32, 200-207; McNeil, D.G., Jr. (May 19, 2000). Europeans learn they're

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inadvertently growing genetically altered plants for canola. The New York Times, p. A15; Waska, Robert T. (1998). Hate, dislike, and disinterest. *Journal of Melanie Klein and Object Relations*, 16, 389-405; Zlotnick-Woldenberg, C. (1997). An object-relational interpretation of Thomas Mann's "Death in Venice." *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 51, 542-551.) (Keywords: Bioengineering, Canada, Europe.)