

Capture, Smear, Contaminate: The Politics Of GMOs

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When rich companies with politically-connected lobbyists and seats on public bodies bend policies for their own ends, we are in serious trouble. It is then that public institutions become hijacked and our choices, freedoms and rights are destroyed. Corporate interests have too often used their dubious 'science', lobbyists, political connections and presence within the heart of governments to subvert institutions set up to supposedly protect the public interest for their own commercial benefit. Once their power has been established, anyone who questions them or who stands in their way can expect a very bumpy ride.

The revolving door between the private sector and government bodies has been well established. In the US, many senior figures from the Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) industry, especially Monsanto, have moved with ease to take up positions with the [Food and Drug Administration and Environmental Protection Agency](#) and [within the government](#). Writer and researcher William F Engdahl writes about a [similar influence in Europe](#), noting the links between the GMO sector within the European Food Safety Authority. He states that over half of the scientists involved in the GMO panel which positively reviewed the Monsanto's study for GMO maize in 2009, leading to its EU-wide authorisation, had links with the biotech industry.

"Monsanto should not have to vouchsafe the safety of biotech food. Our interest is in selling as much of it as possible. Assuring its safety is the FDA's job" - Phil Angell, Monsanto's director of corporate communications. "Playing God in the Garden" New York Times Magazine, October 25, 1998.

Phil Angell's statement begs the question: then who should vouchsafe for it, especially when the public bodies have been severely comprised? Monsanto has all angles covered.

When corporate interests are able to gain access to such positions of power, little wonder they have some heavy-duty tools at their disposal to try to fend off criticism by all means necessary.

A well-worn tactic of the pro-GMO lobby is to slur and attack figures that have challenged the 'science' and claims of the industry. With threats of lawsuits and UK government pressure, some years ago top research scientist [Dr Arpad Pusztai](#) was effectively silenced over his research concerning the dangers of GM food. A campaign was set in motion to destroy his reputation. Professor Seralini and his team's research was also met with intense industry pressure, with Monsanto effectively [targeting the heart of science](#) to secure its commercial interests. There are [numerous examples](#) of scientists being targeted like this. A [WikiLeaks cable](#) highlighted how GMOs were being forced into European nations by the US ambassador to France who plotted with other US officials to create a 'retaliatory target list' of anyone who tried to regulate GMOs. That clearly indicates the power of the industry.

What the GMO sector fails to grasp is that the onus is on it to prove that its products are safe. And it has patently failed to do this. No independent testing was done before Bush senior allowed GMOs onto the US market. The onus should not be on others to prove they are safe (or unsafe) after they are on the market, especially as public attorney [Steven Druker](#)'s book 'Altered Genes, Twisted Truth' shows that GMOs are on the US market due to fraudulent practices and the bypassing of scientific evidence pointing to potential health hazards.

We therefore have the right to ask whether we should trust studies carried out by the sector itself that claims GM crops are safe? Let us turn to Tiruvadi Jagadisan for an answer.

He worked with Monsanto for nearly two decades, including eight years as the managing director of India operations. A few years ago, he stated that Monsanto "used to fake scientific data" submitted to government regulatory agencies to get commercial approvals for its products in India. The former Monsanto boss said government regulatory agencies with which the company used to deal with in the 1980s simply depended on data supplied by the company while giving approvals to herbicides. As reported in [India Today](#), he is on record as saying that India's Central Insecticide Board simply accepted foreign data supplied by Monsanto and did not even have a test tube to validate the data which at times was faked.

Now that scientists such as Professor Seralini are in a sense playing catch-up by testing previously independently untested GMOs, he is attacked. However, the attacks on Seralini and his study have been found to be based on little more than [unscientific polemics](#) and industry pressure. In fact, in new study, Seralini highlights the [serious flaws of industry-backed studies](#) that were apparently slanted to distort results. It remains to be seen whether he and his team are in for another bout of smears and attacks.

But this is symptomatic of the industry: it says a product is safe, therefore it is - regardless that science is being used as little more than an [ideological smokescreen](#). We are expected to take its claims at face value. The revolving door between top figures at Monsanto and positions at the FDA makes it difficult to see where the line between lobbying and regulation is actually drawn. People are rightly suspicious of the links between the FDA and GMO industry in the US and the links between it and the regulatory body within the EU.



GM represents the so-called "Green Revolution's" second coming. Agriculture has changed more over the last two generations than it did in the previous 12,000 years. Environmentalist **Vandana Shiva** (right) notes that, after 1945, chemical manufacturers who had been involved in the weapons industry turned their attention to applying their chemical know-how to farming. As a result 'dwarf seeds' were purposely created to specifically respond to their chemicals. Agriculture

became transformed into a chemical-dependent industry that has [destroyed much biodiversity](#). What we are left with is crop monocultures, which [negatively impact food security](#) and [nutrition](#). In effect, modern agriculture is part of the paradigm of control based on mass standardization and a dependency on corporate products.

The implications have been vast. Chemical-industrial agriculture has proved extremely lucrative for the oil and chemicals industry, courtesy of oil-rich Rockefeller interests which were [instrumental in pushing for the green revolution](#) throughout the world, and has served to maintain and promote Western hegemony, not least via 'structural adjustment' and the consequent uprooting of traditional farming practices in favour of single-crop export-oriented policies, dam building to cater for what became a highly water intensive industry, loans and indebtedness, boosting demand for the US dollar, etc.

Agriculture has been a [major tool of US foreign policy](#) since 1945 and has helped to secure its global hegemony. One must look no further than current events in [Ukraine](#), where the strings attached to financial loans are resulting in the opening up of (GM) agriculture to Monsanto. From [Africa](#) to [India](#) and across [Asia](#), the hijack of indigenous agriculture and food production by big corporations is a major political issue as farmers struggle for their rights to remain on the land, retain ownership of seeds, grow healthy food and protect their livelihoods.

Apart from tying poorer countries into an unequal system of global trade and reinforcing global inequalities, the corporate hijacking of food and agriculture has had many other implications, not least where health is concerned.

Dr Meryl Hammond, founder of the Campaign for Alternatives to Pesticides, told a Canadian parliament committee in 2009 that a raft of studies published in prestigious peer-reviewed journals point to strong associations between chemical pesticides and a vast range of serious life-threatening health consequences. Shiv Chopra, a top food advisor to the Canadian government, has documented how all kinds of food products that were known to be dangerous were passed by the regulatory authority and put on the market there due to the power of the food industry.

Severe anemia, permanent brain damage, Alzheimer's, dementia, neurological disorders, reproductive problems, diminished intelligence, impaired immune system, behavioural disorders, cancers, hyperactivity and learning disability are just some of the diseases that numerous studies have linked to our food.

Of course, just like cigarettes and the tobacco industry before, trying to 'prove' the glaringly obvious link will take decades as deceit is passed off as 'science' or becomes institutionalized due to the hijacking of government bodies by the corporations involved in food production.

But anyone who questions [the need](#) for GMOs in the first place and [the risks](#) they bring and [devastating impacts](#) they have is painted as clueless and indulging in scare mongering and falsehoods, while standing in the way of human progress. But can we expect much better from an industry that has a record of smearing and attempting to ruin people who criticise it? Are those of us who question the political links of big agritech and the nature of its products ready to take lessons on ethics and high-minded notions of 'human progress' from anyone involved with it?

This is an industry that has contaminated crops and bullied farmers with lawsuits in North America, an industry whose companies have been charged with and most often found guilty of contaminating the environment and seriously damaging health with PCBs and dioxins, an industry complicit in concealing the deadly impact of GM corn on animals, an industry where bribery seems to be second nature (Monsanto in Indonesia), an industry associated with human rights violations in Brazil and an industry that will not label its foods in the US.

A great myth forwarded by the pro-GMO lobby is that governments are freely choosing to adopt GMOs. Any brief analysis of the politics of GM highlights that this is nonsense. Various pressures are applied and agritech companies have captured policy bodies and have a strategic hold over the [WTO](#) and trade deals like the [TTIP](#).

For instance, take the 2005 [US-India nuclear deal](#) (allowing India to develop its nuclear sector despite it not being a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and allegedly pushed through with a [cash for votes](#) tactic in the Indian parliament). It was linked to the Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture, which was aimed at widening access to India's agricultural and retail sectors. This initiative was drawn up with the full and direct participation of representatives from various companies, including Monsanto, Cargill and Walmart.

When the most powerful country comes knocking at your door seeking to gain access to your markets, there's good chance that once its corporate-tipped jackboot is in, you won't be able to get it out.

And it seems you can't. So far, Bt cotton has been the only GM crop allowed in India, but the open field trials of many GM crops are now taking place around the country despite an overwhelming consensus of official reports warning against this. The work of numerous public bodies and research institutes is now compromised as a result of Monsanto's strategic influence within India (see [this](#) and [this](#)).

If global victory cannot be achieved by the GMO biotech sector via the hijack of public bodies and trade deals or intimidation, then the politics of another form of contamination may eventually suffice:

"The hope of the industry is that over time the market is so flooded [with GMOs] that there's nothing you can do about it. You just sort of surrender" - Don Westfall, biotech industry consultant and vice-president of Promar International, in the Toronto Star, January 9 2001.

Open field planting is but one way of achieving what Westfall states. Of course, there are numerous other ways too (see [this](#)).

As powerful agribusiness concerns seek to 'consolidate the entire food chain' with their seed monopolies, patents and GMOs, it is clear that it's not just the health of the nation (any nation) that is at stake but the global control of food and by implication nations.

"What you are seeing is not just a consolidation of seed companies, it's really a consolidation of the entire food chain" - Robert Fraley, co-president of Monsanto's agricultural sector 1996, in the Farm Journal. Quoted in: Flint J. (1998) Agricultural industry giants moving towards genetic monopolism. Telepolis, Heise.

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