

Reimagining Food, Farming and Humanity: Ecomodernism's Dystopia

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"Ecomodernists offer no solutions to contemporary problems other than technical innovation and further integration into private markets which are structured systematically by centralized state power in favour of the wealthy..." - Chris Smaje

In 2017, the then Monsanto Chief Technology Officer Robb Fraley [argued](#) that his company made a mistake in not reaching out to the public about genetically modified organisms (GMOs) when they first appeared on the market in the 1990s. He felt consumers had been unduly swayed by an anti-GMO movement and the industry got its PR campaign wrong first time around.

Fraley said the industry and universities currently involved in rolling out genome editing technology have done a much more extensive communication to both the public and key regulatory and policy makers. The industry's message is that gene editing can precisely delete and insert genes in an organism's DNA and presents no risks.

However, there is sufficient research indicating that the technology is [error prone](#), the effects of editing are not controllable and there is no simple pathway between gene and trait. Gene editing has unexpected outcomes and risks, and unintended mutations and off-target effects occur.

These issues have been noted in various articles, reports and papers which are listed on the [GMWatch website](#). Even intended modifications can result in traits which could raise food safety, environmental or animal welfare concerns.

Various scientific publications show that new GM techniques allow developers to make significant genetic changes, which can be very different from those that happen in nature. These new [GMOs pose similar or greater risks than older-style GMOs](#). Despite gene editing being touted by the industry as 'precision breeding', it is [anything but](#).

In addition to these concerns, [researchers](#) say that what we can expect is just more of the

same – GM herbicide-tolerant crops and increased herbicide use.

However, the industry is seeking the unregulated commercial release of its new technologies.

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) has ruled that organisms obtained with new genetic modification techniques must be regulated under the EU's existing GMO laws. But there has been intense lobbying from the agriculture biotech industry to weaken the legislation.

Since the ECJ decision in 2018, top agribusiness and biotech corporations have spent almost €37 million lobbying the EU. They have had 182 meetings with European Commissioners, their cabinets and director generals. More than one meeting a week.

Little surprise then that the EU Commission's secret policy scenarios show full GMO deregulation [is on the cards](#) with the commission considering ending safety checks, traceability and GMO labelling for GM foods, seeds and crops.

Regardless of this, is there any need for GMOs in the first place? It seems to be a technology in search of a problem. [An important article](#) by PC Kesavan and MS Swaminathan in the journal Current Science says there is sufficient evidence to question the efficacy of GM crops in terms of yields, pesticide usage, the effects on farmers and on the environment, etc.

An important article not only because of the evidence it drew upon but also because of the status of both authors, especially that of Swaminathan, considered the father of the Green Revolution in India.

The two scientists argue that GM technology is supplementary and must be need based. In more than 99% of cases, therefore, they say there is no need – time-honoured conventional breeding is sufficient.

Dystopian vision

We need to bear this in mind because there is a disturbing view emerging of a future based on a ecomodernist perspective and a techno-utopia founded on GM crops, lab-engineered 'food' and 90 per cent of humanity being crammed into mega-cities.

Academics write reports and books on this vision, but among the high-profile foot soldiers promoting it are the likes of The Guardian's George Monbiot and industry-funded GMO lobbyist Mark Lynas.

The following forms an ecomodernist [vision of the future](#) (translated from Dutch) and appears on the RePlanet.nl website:

"In 2100, the planet is home to around ten billion people. More than 90 per cent of these live and work in the city, compared to 50 per cent in 2000. Around the city are large farms full of genetically modified crops that achieve four times as high a yield as at the beginning of the 21st century."

It goes on to state:

"Beyond the farmland begins nature, which now occupies most of the surface of our planet. Whereas in 2000 half of the earth's surface was still in use by humans, today

that is only a quarter. The rest has been returned to nature. Both biodiversity and CO2 emissions are back to pre-1850 levels. Hardly anyone is in extreme poverty anymore.”

Those pushing for this transition want large-scale government interventions to help ‘the market’ achieve the goals set out, including massive government investment in “game-changing innovations in precision fermentation and biotech” (precision fermentation = lab engineered ‘food’).

Very much like the type of ‘stakeholder capitalism’ we hear so much about from the World Economic Forum and like-minded bodies when they discuss the ‘climate emergency’ and ‘resetting’ economies and societies in line with market-driven ‘economic, social and corporate governance’ targets.

What this really means is governments becoming junior stakeholders and facilitators, paving the way for private capital to carve up the planet as it sees fit – imperialism repackaged and rebranded with a veneer of ‘green’, or in this case – feeding the world.

The ecomodernists regard their solutions as ‘progress’ – as progressive – as if their vision is the only vision worth considering because it somehow represents the pinnacle of human evolution. Such a view of human development is arrogant, ahistorical and unilinear.

If history teaches us one thing, it is that humanity ended up at its current point due to a multitude of struggles and conflicts, the outcomes of which were often in the balance. In other words, as much by chance as design.

We need look no further than Robert Brenner (*Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe*, 1976) and Barrington Moore (*Social origins of dictatorship and democracy: lord and peasant in the making of the modern world*, 1966) to appreciate this. Their research was based on broad comparative sociological analyses of the cultural, historical, agrarian and economic factors and (class) conflicts that led to the rise of different forms of modernity and social structures.

Their work has important implications: the ecomodernist vision for the future should not be accepted as a given – as some predetermined fixed endpoint. There are alternative visions, potential outcomes and resistance that can challenge the world these elitists have in mind.

In 2021, for instance, the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems released a report with ETC Group, which set out a very different future for food systems, people and the planet.

The report asks: what if the initiative is reclaimed by civil society and social movements – from grassroots organisations to international NGOs, from farmers’ and fishers’ groups to cooperatives and unions?

It imagines what a ‘long food movement’ could achieve by 2045 if these movements succeed in collaborating more closely to transform financial flows, governance structures and food systems from the ground up.

The ecomodernist vision is ahistorical in another way too. Back in 2015, farmer and writer Chris Smaje [wrote](#) that a word you will not find in the ecomodernist vocabulary is inequality. While there are glancing references to poverty, poor people and poor nations, in the

ecomodernist vision of modernity, poverty is equated with a lack of modernisation.

He says:

“There is no sense that processes of modernisation cause any poverty... There’s nothing on uneven development, historical cores and peripheries, proletarianisation, colonial land appropriation and the implications of all this for social equality. The ecomodernist solution to poverty is simply more modernisation.”

[Smaje also explains](#) why the ecomodernist notion that nobody wants to farm, and everybody wants to move to the city meshes neatly with neoliberal ideology.

He also argues that alternative visions are not about ‘oppressing’ people by keeping them in villages and engaging in subsistence farming:

“It’s about choosing policies that best support people’s realistic aspirations – all people’s, both rural and urban. The EM, and other keystone ecomodernist works like Brand’s Whole Earth Discipline, are conspicuously silent on global economic governance policies. They say nothing about the IMF, the WTO, the free flow of global capital and the constrictions on the flow of global labour.”

In other words, if you deliberately run down the farming sector, say via trade policies, and withdraw key extension service that support farmers and do away with guaranteed minimum support prices for crops, then there’s a good chance rural dwellers will flow to cities to live in a slum in the hope of a better life.

People do not necessarily ‘choose’ to move out of farming. They are very often forced out and their land appropriate. We see this in India at this time, where resistance is already fertile.

And it has to be because the intention by global agricapital and the World Bank is to displace hundreds of millions from the countryside, amalgamate their land and move them into cities. The nation’s agri-food sector is to be restructured for the needs of global supply chains and global agricapital.

In 2016, UN reporter [Felix Creutzig](#) said Delhi’s population will be 37 million by 2030:

“The emerging mega-cities will rely increasingly on industrial-scale agricultural and supermarket chains, crowding out local food chains.”

If unchallenged, the outcome will be a country reliant on industrial agriculture and all it entails – lab engineered items, denutriented food, monolithic diets, the massive use of agrochemicals and food contaminated by hormones, steroids, antibiotics and a range of chemical additives.

A cartel of seed, chemical and food manufacturing and processing companies with total control over the food production and supply chain in India and throughout the globe.

And it will be total. Big global biotech corporations like Bayer and Corteva are extensively patenting plants. Such patents on plants would restrict farmers’ access to seeds and impede breeders from developing new plants as both would have to ask for consent and pay fees to the biotech companies.

Mute Schimpf, food campaigner at Friends of the Earth Europe, says of the big biotech giants:

“They will be lining their pockets from farmers and plant breeders, who in turn will have a restricted access to what they can grow and work with.”

This is ‘ecomodernism’ in action. It goes hand-in-hand with elite interests who will rake in enormous profit as they seek to control every aspect of food, farming and, indeed, life.

In India, we see various tactics at work to bring this about – the deliberate strategy to make smallholder farming financially nonviable (depopulating the countryside), attempts to dismantle public distribution systems and minimum support prices, the relentless drive to get GM food crops cultivated, the data-gathering Agristack initiative overseen by Microsoft and the increasing capture of the retail sector by Walmart, Amazon, Facebook and Google (all described in the ebook mentioned at the end of this article).

Mumbai-based [Research Unit for Political Economy](#) says the Indian government is trying to establish a system of ‘conclusive titling’ of all land in the country, so that ownership can be identified and land can then be bought or taken away. As farmers lose access to land or can be identified as legal owners, predatory institutional investors and large agribusinesses will buy up and amalgamate holdings, facilitating the further roll out of industrial agriculture.

The Agristack (data-gathering) initiative will be key to the formation of a land market.

In this brave new world, notions of [food sovereignty](#) and seed sovereignty have no place. A case of you will own nothing, be happy and eat a diet of genetically and biochemically engineered ‘food’ – junk food to complement existing [junk food](#) that claims hundreds of thousands of lives across the globe annually.

‘Food’ courtesy of giant ‘fermentation’ vats and farms manned by driverless machines, monitored by drones and doused with chemicals to produce crops from patented GM seeds for industrial ‘biomatter’ to be engineered, processed and constituted into something edible. An AI-driven, corporate-controlled ‘solyent green’ dystopia where the marketplace has been eradicated and a handful of companies and e-commerce platforms control the global economy.

But resistance is fertile. The farmers’ protest in India led to the repeal of corporate-backed legislation that would have accelerated the trends described above, and, as Vandana Shiva notes, more than 150 community seed banks have been established in the country – local seeds, adapted to local cultures which provide better nutrition and are more resilient to [climate change](#).

[Shiva says](#):

“At the [Navdanya Farm](#) and [Earth University](#), we have trained more than one million farmers who now practice organic agriculture based on biodiversity and without the use of synthetic chemicals. The shift from globalisation driven by multinational corporations to a progressive localisation of our economies has become an ecological and social imperative, essential for food sovereignty.”

She concludes:

“Food sovereignty means feeding ourselves real, genuine, biodiverse food and freeing ourselves from the false promises of artificial food.”

Of course, Monbiot, Lynas and the agri biotech sector are dismissive of the ability of organic agriculture to feed the world and of a world described by Shiva, which rejects corporate dominance and new forms of imperialism.

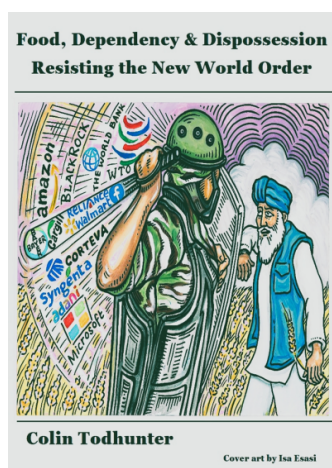
Their anti-organic, pro-synthetic food stance should be seen for what it is – fearmongering (the world will starve without GM agriculture) and pro-corporate ideology and an adherence to centralised power, which flies in the face of [firm evidence](#) that indicates organic supported by an appropriate policy framework is more than capable of addressing the challenges ahead.

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Read Colin Todhunter’s e-Book entitled

Food, Dispossession and Dependency. Resisting the New World Order

We are currently seeing an acceleration of the corporate consolidation of the entire global agri-food chain. The high-tech/big data conglomerates, including Amazon, Microsoft, Facebook and Google, [have joined traditional agribusiness giants](#), such as Corteva, Bayer, Cargill and Syngenta, in a quest to impose their model of food and agriculture on the world.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is also involved (documented in ‘[Gates to a Global Empire](#)’ by Navdanya International), whether through [buying up huge tracts of farmland](#), promoting a much-heralded [\(but failed\) ‘green revolution’ for Africa](#), pushing [biosynthetic food](#) and [genetic engineering technologies](#) or more generally [facilitating the aims of the mega agri-food corporations](#).

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