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THE FRANKENFOOD MYTH: HOW PROTEST AND POLITICS THREATEN THE BIOTECH REVOLUTION

BY **HENRY I. MILLER AND GREGORY KONKO**

PRAEGER PUBLISHERS, 296 PAGES, \$39.95

HENRY I. Miller and Gregory Conko are true believers in the power of biotechnology in agriculture to improve life as it generates bounteous profits for innovative companies with the vision to invent and develop "superior" genetically modified (GM) plants. The fly in their ointment is overly zealous government regulation stimulated by vocal and paranoid bio-skeptic activists whose alarmism impedes biotech companies from feeding a hungry world.

They make many valid points. It is indeed a crime against humanity that some African leaders, egged on by radical European Greens, decided to let their people starve rather than distribute corn they deemed "toxic" because it had minor genetic modifications. But if the authors hoped to convince the masses that so-called "Frankenfoods" are as safe as crops that have been modified through natural cross-breeding techniques, their book doesn't quite make the grade.

Miller and Conko write as if it is irrational to worry that there may be a qualitative difference between developing seedless watermelons through selective breeding on one hand, and introducing genes from unrelated organisms, such as splicing bacterium DNA into a tomato plant to make it more pest-resistant, on the other. And rather than methodically demonstrating why gene-spliced foods really are safe, the authors often write as if their forceful assertions alone are sufficient to convince readers that it is so.

It isn't. I'm an agnostic on the GM food issue who wants to be convinced. But after reading "The Frankenfood Myth," I remain on the fence.

This is not to say that the authors' consternation isn't just. For example, their critique of the "precautionary principle," under which biotech companies have been forced to demonstrate almost to a metaphysical certainty that their GM foods are safe before being permitted into the marketplace, is both passionate and compelling. But, they also ignore the truth of the old maxim: "Just because you are paranoid doesn't mean that they are not really after you."

The excessive reticence on the part of regulators that they bemoan did not arise in a vacuum. Corporations have too often covered up known safety problems with their products in order to pass regulatory muster. Their failure to adequately grapple with this history undermines the authors' argument.

Moreover, Miller and Conko's ideological resentment of even the most rational concerns about GM crops limits their effectiveness. For example, plants can be genetically modified to produce substances that could be harvested for medicinal purposes, an approach known as "biopharming" that is rightly lauded by the authors.

But, given the potentials for company-crushing lawsuits and/or a catastrophic loss of consumer confidence should biopharmed substances enter the food chain and cause harm, it is not irrational or anti-biotech for the food industry to insist that non-food plants be used when making such products. Nor is it "cowardly capitulation," as the authors angrily assert, for Gerber to forgo using GM foods in its products based on customer preferences — even if baby food made from biotechnologically altered crops would indeed be superior.

Readers who care a lot about regulatory processes will unquestionably enjoy "The Frankenfood Myth." And indeed, much of what the authors advocate is worth considering. Unfortunately, their fixation on the arcane and their overheated ideological resentments make it unlikely that a general audience will adopt a sense of righteous indignation that the authors hope to ignite.

Wesley J. Smith is a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute and a special consultant to the Center for Bioethics and Culture. His current book is "Consumer's Guide to a Brave New World."

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