

Edging Towards BioUtopia: A New Politics of Reordering Life and the Democratic Challenge

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Edging Towards BioUtopia will interest farmers concerned about any introduction of GM crops. The book offers insights into the shaping of regulation for the environmental release of GMOs through tracing the roles, responsibilities and decision-making practices within a context of science, big business and politics. It analyses how governments and policy-makers have accommodated this relatively recent technological phenomenon. Overall, the book paints a disturbing picture of how lessons that might have followed the earlier (non-)regulation of chemical and nuclear technologies need to be re-learned with any introduction of genetically engineered organisms. As a recent review in the UK journal *Science as Culture* reflected: “*Edging Towards BioUtopia* goes a long way towards disturbing and discrediting proponents’ rosy picture of a quasi-pastoral, benign yet fecund, genetically engineered ‘futurenatural’ (p. 1).”

The book’s central argument is that a coalition of GM interests and resulting regulatory settings reflect a limited number of (risky) perspectives, and that this raises profound questions about how broader perspectives, such as those of farmers, the prime constituency for the adoption of new agricultural technologies, might be accommodated. I identify this as a ‘central democratic challenge’, as a conflict between ‘biotechnology interests’ (or the ‘bioscientific club’) and the broader publics’ “inherent right to question the creation and use of novel organisms because of the potential adverse social and environmental consequences” (p 3). Overall, the ‘democratic challenge’ addresses the marginalisation of alternative visions and viewpoints of contesting publics, scientists, farmers and bureaucrats that might have been expected to participate in developing the regulatory arrangements. So far, those arrangements favour ‘biotechnology interests’, a situation recently reinforced by the ‘engineered collapse’ of the Victorian and NSW moratoriums on the commercial release of GM canola.

The significance of this book, as the first in-depth study of the topic in Australia, is that it demonstrates in intimate detail—through governmental, university and NGO archives as well as material obtained under Freedom of Information laws, media reportage both local and global, and public relations material—how this has happened. Key regulatory events are traced from the early misgivings about ‘gene-splicing’ experiments and the construction of minimalist self-regulation (Chapter 4), to the consolidation of minimalist self-regulation through institutions, political actions and texts depicting gene technology as safe (Chapter 5), to the rise of dissenting publics, scientists and bureaucrats (Chapters 6, 7 and 8), and to the capture of policy and regulation by ‘biotechnology interests’ crystallising in the *Gene Technology Act 2000* (Cth) and its application (Chapters 9, 10 and 11).

The latter chapters also introduce the contestation of both organic and conventional farmers and new farmer organisations such as the Network of Concerned Farmers and their extended criticism of a regulatory regime that excludes livelihood (or social and economic) issues about contamination of non-GM crops through gene transfer, for example, through pollination, from GM crops. The latter

threat is highlighted through a rather grim assessment of regulatory effectiveness, especially in relation to multiple regulatory breaches involving GM strains of canola released into the Australian environment by Monsanto and Bayer CropScience.

Considering all the evidences, in the epilogue of *Edging Towards BioUtopia*, I outline the need for a new regulatory approach: one involving the public sphere and a broadening of expertise away from GM developers; one that acknowledges subjective judgements in risk assessment; one that also considers the social and economic impacts of biotechnological change, coupled to an ecological understanding of environmental impacts (p 267).

The overall lesson is that a meaningfully open process of social management and evaluation is needed to ensure ‘democracy’ and the viability of agricultural and environmental sustainability. As the *Science as Culture* review noted: “At stake, after all, is nothing less than the course of social—not to mention biological—evolution; the public’s right to make informed choices, and the opportunity to participate in the navigation of appropriate technological pathways to the future.”

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