

# The transatlantic dissens between Europe and the United States about GMO's

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## **Abstract**

This is due to the fact, that Europeans differ also culturally in many ways: Starting from eating traditions over societal differences up to cultural differences as a whole. Post-modern views prevail in intellectual circles, science is criticised as an instrument unreflected progress. Back to nature is the slogan and organic farming is becoming a major trend. It is true that the dignity of modernity with all its virtues like liberal democracies, a comfortable life built on highly refined technology are forgotten and even denigrated in an unfair way. Europeans have gone through so many food, HIV blood and BSE scandals, that with the introduction of GM they think: Now those scientists are coming with another lie. It will take years to build up the trust again, years of hard work and dialogue. Scientists should involve in debates with a new spirit, believing in good science, but at the same time also obeying to the principles of the symmetry of ignorance, respecting fears of the population, which has a finely tuned sensitivity about the good and the bad of biotechnology, knowing that biology has lost its innocence. It is also important to notice that a truly European development of transgenic crops has only just begun and it will still take some years to come up with crops adapted to the needs of Europeans, especially in regions with small-scale agriculture still prevailing.

## **Differences in history and culture**

There is no doubt, in the last few years there is growing dissens about various issues between the United States and Europe. After a period of 50 years the second world war and its very special circumstances – the fact that the USA have sacrificed millions of their own soldier's lives to free Europe from its worst dictatorship ever - things change gradually, history seems to be forgotten and the rising power of Europe causes inevitably a new independency from the United States. This is all coming in a time when there are several other factors opening divides in other fields of politics and life in general:

It is only fair to point to the huge differences in history between the two blocks: Whereas Europe has millions of traces and traditions left from local and national history, this is simply not the case in the relatively young United States. This does certainly not mean that there would be basic differences in the quality of cultural activities, because tradition should not be mixed up with culture.

Just have a look at the differences in agri-culture: Whereas in the United States the transition from oldfashioned agriculture has been thorough and basically carried through decades ago, in Europe there are still lots of small centers of traditional agriculture, with all its intricate marketing network. In the United States, the treeless prairie has certainly favoured industrial agriculture, on the other hand there are lots of montaneous regions where small or medium scale agriculture has persisted in Europe.

There are, in connection with agriculture, also lots of other cultural differences to be spotted: The variety of food and the enormous diversity of food production in Europe contrasts dramatically to the relatively uniform situation with McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken shops etc. – although one has to admit that in the big centers of the United States

there is a lot of European (and Extra-European) culture of this sort persisting – and notably gaining ground again – even in rural areas.

This is influencing without any doubt expectations of consumers on both sides of the Atlantic in a different way: While the Americans often prefer fast food, Europeans tend to stick to old habits. Just take the Swiss: They are still fixed stubbornly to the tradition of rushing home over noon to have a rest for two hours including the main meal of the day. Americans often think that this would just be a waste of time and causes unnecessary traffic and thus they prefer a fast lunch.

### **The clash between modernity and post-modernity**

Consider modernity with all its advantages – giving rise to democracy, to enormous progress, to a constantly speeding up process in developing new technologies. Those processes in modernity, related to progress, not contested until recently, have been more accentuated in the USA, less conspicuous and less speedy in Europe. In this context science has risen to the mainstream power, and people were fascinated by all the marvels of new discoveries – just think about the boost space technology has brought. But on the negative side there is the fact that science talks in facts, in a depersonalized “it”-language which often does not care about social and cultural contexts. No wonder that in times of uncontested progress people started to notice the dark side of it, since a certain saturation in modern life cannot be denied: Luxury and decadence are clearly connected to this kind of uncritically welcomed technological progress. It was not until people started to fight against environmental problems that the new movement gained ground and today modernity is put into question.

The rise of post-modernity, especially in Europe, has created a new critical view about technological progress, and at the same time, questions values and norms which hitherto have not been questioned at all. Everything seems to fall apart, anything goes, everything can be seen in relative terms. Science itself is now relativized, often connected to unwelcome progress and is often seen as a negative cause of environmental problems, problems of modern medicine etc. There is a strong trend towards alternative views such as organic farming, alternative medicine.

You can follow up the rise of a new “we”-language, where the collective thinking, the social and cultural context is often much more important than scientific facts.

Modernity and post-modernity are simultaneously existing and causing lots of dispute among representatives. Disputes which are fruitless, since we should, instead of denouncing each other, try hard to find a common platform among opponents. We urgently need discursive decision making processes to solve those problems.

### **The transatlantic dispute on GMO's seen in the light of those cultural differences**

There is no point of cultivating the contrasts and disputing over all the differences, but on the other hand it is also not realistic to force consensus by just ignoring all those differences.

A typical example is the *Precautionary Approach*. It is quite exemplary that the Europeans changed the term swiftly into the ‘*Precautionary Principle*’, which is by no means justified, since all international legislation is using the *Precautionary Approach*. Europeans tend to raise the stakes by blowing up the term into a principle, and even worse: Try to focus it on

the negative side of the technology assessment, as if there would be no risk NOT to introduce GMO's anywhere. It also seems to be forgotten, that the Precautionary Approach has been created within the legislative process of the Convention of the Biological Diversity. And here it was without any doubt built on negative facts, on a scientific analysis of negative environmental trends, with hard data and a plethora of uncontested literature on e.g. toxicological analysis. But at the same time, nobody was able to predict the future trends, so it was highly justifiable to introduce this kind of a precautionary approach system. But in the subsequent Cartagena protocol legislation process this facts where simply forgotten and the precautionary approach related to the introduction of LMO's was solely built on virtual risks. (I do not consider reductionistic laboratory studies with forcefeeding non-target insects with toxic pollen grains of Bt-plants to be clearcut signs of negative trends, they have been contradicted with realtime field studies).

In my opinion the Precautionary Approach should not be abused by opponents of this promising technology to put a halt to the development of transgenic plants by denying field experiments. The Precautionary Approach should be applied as a decision making process with all stakeholders included, a honest decision making process where the different kind of knowledge should be respected, the problem solving process should be conducted in the spirit of a collaborative learning process, which should begin in the light of the symmetry of ignorance, but there should be no room left for denigration of hard scientific facts presented in the process. This kind of decision making process can still lead in certain cases to a unanimously accepted zero solution. In other cases, a free discourse will also reveal elements of a risk balance and also the serious consiceration of a non-application of the technological solution.

### **Towards new and unexpected solutions in modern agriculture**

It is of great importance to see the historical context: We are way out of the phase of a primitive agrarian phase of agriculture, as for the moment, we are still working with industrial methods, which brought us the green revolution, often denounced and seldom fairly judged. Now we need a more knowledte based agriculture, which meets the needs of Equitability and Sociability, and – a still a dream, evolve into a real Agri-Culture in a new sense, where culture itself becomes an important element.

We should refrain from party thinking and refrain from denigrating eachother. There is no use to emphasize the dark side of genetic engineering and organic farming, because in modern *and* post-modern times there it is simply no time left for such sterile disputes. Let us learn from eachother and take the best out of all those wonderfully different agricultural strategies. There are possibilities like Precision Biotechnology and a new Organo-Transgenic Farming, which could lead the way. Why not fight the potatoe blight with the newly discovered resistance genes from well known old potatoe traits, and why not learn with high tech means to farm with less input, and the dream, to mimic old-fashioned farming with a high genetic diversity with modern means of mutational breeding supported by marker genes and transgenes ?

Coming back to the disputes about agriculture between Europeans and Americans this could be the solution, breaking the mould and give it a new thought, forget about the differences in polls and just simply do a better job – here my priorities:

Create a strong European Agency to deal with safety problems of agriculture and food

Initiate research which does not halt at the traditional boundaries which are mainly caused by an unsustainable marketing between the producers of novel and organic food  
Foster the transatlantic dialogue, enhance it with decision making processes of the second generation, which contain a certain guarantee to free the participants from prejudice.  
In recent months there are signs at the horizon which give reason to a certain optimism within the EU structures, and lately also in Switzerland, my home country, which will adopt a new legislation for transgenic organism *not* including the long debated moratorium.