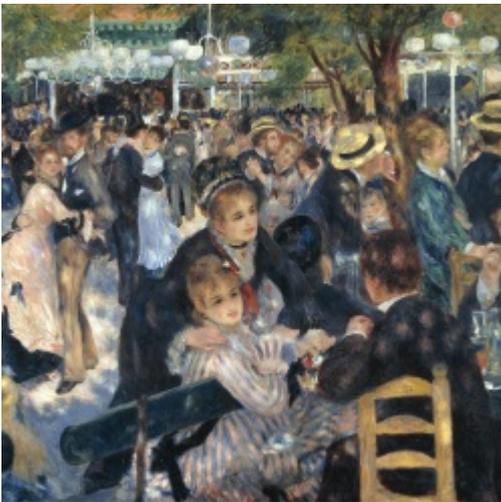


Virtue Signaling in Europe Blocks Technology and Progress



By Marcel Kuntz — November 17, 2020

For decades, using rational arguments, scientists failed to convince European politicians of the importance of biotechnology, including gene editing. The reason is that Europe is convinced it is on the side of great virtue.



Credit: Public Domain/Wikipedia [1]

Why is Europe persevering in restricting the use of agricultural biotechnology and why does it renounce its benefits? On the other hand, why did the USA only marginally limit the deployment of biotech crops and choose to benefit from these technologies? My latest article in *Frontiers in Bioengineering and Biotechnology*, entitled “Technological Risks (GMO, Gene Editing), What Is the Problem With Europe? A Broader Historical Perspective” (doi: 10.3389/fbioe.2020.557115), attempts to answer these questions.

Plant transgenesis was a joint invention from both European and American laboratories in the early 80’s. Public research laboratories on both continents have since used the technology extensively. Private companies also. Europe has financed extensive risk evaluation research programs, which did not reveal any scientific reason for not using transgenic plants in agriculture. However, it is as if in Europe one considers that when you have not found a problem, it is because you have not looked for it enough, and therefore a disaster is just waiting to happen. Although the European Commission officially defends a science-based approach, this is not at all what

happened in reality.

The question is: why did Europe and the USA choose completely opposite policies? The central idea of my article is that to understand it, we have to consider the deep ideological context, which itself is inherited from a broader historical background. Europe and the USA partially share a common history, but only partially, and this makes a huge difference.

Europe's Dream of 'No Tragedy'

During the last century, Europe suffered from two devastating World Wars, the mass crimes of two totalitarian states, the inhumane nature of their concentration camps, and several genocides. In contrast, although involved in both World Wars, the USA was not devastated by them in the way Europe was.

It is understandable that the European nations were deeply longing for a political organization which would avoid repetition of such tragic events. European integration was proposed, and a consensus emerged that to avoid the morally reprehensible events of the past, "Big Principles" such as *Democracy, Rule of Law, Human Rights, etc.* should prevail and also be exported to the rest of world. Although the European leaders who experienced the War knew that History was tragic and always would be, this has changed progressively from the 60's onwards. What I describe as a postmodern ideology now considers these "Big Principles" as central to European policy, which should no longer be based on power and which would reflect on its past with extreme guilt.

I use the image of a pendulum which swung from Western imperialism to Western Guilt, from universalism of Western culture to cultural relativism.

Postmodernism Imposed on Science and Technology

The central thesis illustrated in my article is that this postmodern ideology was also imposed on science and technology, and that the European dream of "no tragedy" has translated into a dream of "no technological risk."

Here also, Big Principles became central, especially the European "Precautionary Principle." But here as well, these new Big Principles went too far, basically blocking useful technologies. Here also, the pendulum image is useful to illustrate the swing from the Modernism of the Enlightenment (characterized by – perhaps excessive – belief in Truth, in Reason, in Progress, and optimism about science and technology) to Postmodernism (with its cognitive relativism, pessimism about technology and, consequently, risk evaluation and management becoming ideological and political).

As human beings, scientists from the Western world are also influenced by the mainstream postmodern guilty conscience. Often scientists do not react to the ideology that views these tragedies as consequences of the Enlightenment and its "imperialistic" thought, as Postmodernism does. Many scientists tend to display their repentance over historical events for which they are not personally responsible for. One can cite accidents (such as the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India), careless use of pesticides, and past failure in risk assessments. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki also led to a major change in the way we look at science. These events

have fueled critical views of technology in the postmodern era. This new reflection on technology has also found support from postmodern sociologists and philosophers who contributed to impose a new moral dogma apparently embedded in positive values, such as information, education, research, or an imperative of “transparency” and “responsibility.”

As the GMO case has shown in many countries, this postmodern ideological context has favored the proliferation of various forms of activist science and expertise, and consequently the dilution of established scientific facts, with most European research institutions not daring to react to it. The postmodern promotion of adversarial debates over scientific processes has not appeased opposition to science by Green or other environmental parties and ideologically-related organizations, but has rather led to the radicalization of such activists.

The Main Difference Between the European Union and the USA

Postmodernism is also rampant in the USA and is expressed for example as political correctness. However, a crucial difference is that the EU was not created on might, and Europe’s ambition is limited to soft power, while the USA chose to become “*a European-style imperial power*” and industry is crucial for this goal. The EU has instead given absolute priority to consumers and perceived environmental care, based on good intentions, but has indulged itself in excessive regulations for ideological reasons.

Conclusions

For decades, using rational arguments, scientists failed to convince European politicians of the importance of biotechnology, including gene editing. The reason is that Europe’s position is decked out with its “Big Principles,” and Europe is convinced it is on the side of great virtue. In this context, it was illusory to hope that gene editing products would not be considered as GMOs. Rather than more science-based arguments, EU scientists should maybe rather invoke other “Big Principles” of superior virtue.

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