

NEW SCIENTIST BUYS THE MONSANTO SWEETENER

Colin Tudge argues that Monsanto's new life-saving GM soya is not all that it seems – and respectable magazines should be more critical

New Scientist tells us with huge enthusiasm that Monsanto is planning to produce GM soya that is rich in the essential fatty acid, omega-3. This, it tells us, could among other things have saved the lives of 84,000 of the Americans who died of heart attack in 2005. A mere 400,000 hectares of this GM soya – planted in North America, not at the expense of Amazonia – could provide enough for the whole world. Furthermore, *NS* assures us, this new crop will take the strain off the world's much beleaguered ocean fish, which now are a principal source of omega-3. So is this, they ask, (October 31 2009, p 5) “A golden age for modified crops?” Surely this new bean “will have critics of genetic modification tying themselves in knots”. Lest we should miss the point the leader writer concludes, “Providing cheap access to a proven superfood and relieving pressure on fish stocks are worthy objectives. Only a Luddite would disagree” (and Luddites, it takes to be self-evident, are bad people).

I used to work for *New Scientist*. It wasn't always like this. Unreconstructed technophilia wasn't its style. It used to be critical – it put the apparent advances of science into their political, economic, and social context, or at least tried to: asked if things were *really* as the PR departments would like us to believe.

In this instance the editors might have asked for example, “Is it actually *true* that those 84,000 Americans died from heart attack specifically because they lacked omega-3? Is the American diet particularly deficient in omega-3, or is it horribly unbalanced, with too much of some things (sugar, salt, saturated fat, caffeine, etc) and a general lack of micronutrients and paravitamins, aka “neutraceuticals”?” Or then again, if the world at large (as opposed to the US in particular) is really in serious need of more omega-3, is GM soya really the best way to provide it? Will it really save the world's fish – given that the fishing industry is no more geared to the nutritional needs of people at large than farming is, but to short-term profit? (and fishermen find it just as hard to service the massive debts on their industrial trawlers as farmers do to pay the mortgage on their ludicrously overpriced land).

In a follow-up article on page 14 *NS* tells us as if it was a truth universally acknowledged that GM has brought “economic benefits for farmers” -- but it does not ask, as a critical enquirer surely should, “Which farmers?”

And, “Are those farmers richer because they benefit humankind, or because the world economy in general now favours such technologies?” And, “What about the farmers driven out of business by the temporary success of their industry-supported neighbours?” And so on.

Governments on the whole – certainly Britain’s – like GM technology because farming in its traditional state seems altogether too complicated, socially and economically as well as technically. A quick fix seems Heaven-sent; especially when it’s controlled by a few company boards who are easy to deal with, and is profitable to boot – actually adding to GDP and the hence to economic “growth”. Yet the brand leaders, Monsanto and Syngenta, have not had things all their own way this past few years because people at large, smelling rats, have objected, and politicians are not yet able to ignore the electorate completely. To a large extent, as *NS* itself points out, the objections have been political: people at large don’t like to feel that their food supply is controlled by a few big companies, armed with technologies that only they can deploy. Monsanto and Syngenta, then, need to win the moral argument: to put the objectors on the back foot.

Both companies have rallied to the cause. Syngenta has given us “golden rice” – rice that contains a gene that produces the yellow pigment carotene, which is the precursor of vitamin A. Many thousands of children each year are blinded through lack of vitamin A so how can that be bad? But carotene is found in all dark green leaves and yellow fruits and roots and hence is one of the commonest organic compounds in nature. Spinach, carrots, papaya (which grows like a weed in the tropics) – all are first rate. You don’t need high-tech rice to supply vitamin A – you just need horticulture; which is what people had before their traditional farms were swept aside by high-tech industrial monoculture, intended not to feed people but to make rich companies richer. Monsanto is now showering us with omega-3 soya. Both innovations are Trojan horses, intended to fool the uncritical – who, evidently, these days, include *New Scientist*. Why employ PR consultants when a respectable magazine with a huge circulation will do the job for you?

Colin Tudge, Wolvercote, November 4 2009.