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William Munro

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Professor William Munro teaches Political Science at Illinois Wesleyan University. His new book along with Rachel Shervin of the University of Minnesota is fighting for the future of food activists versus agribusiness in the struggle over biotechnology. He started out looking at why the promise of genetically modified organisms in addressing health issues in food productivity problems generated such virulent opposition and then ended up someplace very different.

Munro: So we started with the activists. And then it became clear to us that we need to be able to understand both sort of sides of the debate. We became really intrigued by the fact that as we looked at these folks they habited such different worlds that didn't interact. Distinct and internally coherent n' non-interactive ways of seeing the world. And so we became intrigued with how this shapes the debate and how it also shapes the sort of struggle of-of agricultural biotechnology.

The world view of those opposed to genetically modified organisms, the activists, you write, began in the protests of movements of the sixties and then strong themes of government, corporate and technology distrust as the generation of activists rooted in the sixties ages out, will the world view of activists ' movements change?

Munro: That's a very good question actually, 'n in some ways that's probably linked to new kinds of cultural changes in the way people think about up holdings [?] and the meaning of food, and you've got in the United States in particular, you've got this new sort of sense of cultural moves towards local and sustainable, and non-industrial food sources. And so, to the extent that becomes a growing trend, the world views of critics are likely to move with that trend. So in some ways the world views will change, but they'll maintain I think strands of continuity, uh particularly around concerns with industrial agriculture and the environmental affairs of the industrial agriculture system.

The world view of agribusiness centers on free trade, feeding the world, and honest profit. In any battle, one of the best practices is to get to know your opponent's mindset. Why haven't most sides figured out where the other is coming from—in over 20 years?

Munro: [laughs] It's-it's actually an extraordinary question. I think, probably one could say that the activists fairly understand what drives business. What is less clear is why the industry has not made sense of the activists. And there are a number of reasons for that I think. Um, one is there is a sort of cultural component to the way in which businesses work that see **this sort of set of [2:35]** values as absolutely common sense. And then there's the side that links progress and technology. And so very often, what people are inclined to—critics-critics, so to speak—are inclined to do, is to dismiss them, as Luddites, as anti-technology, as-uh, not caring very much about the poor, perhaps, rather than to say what is it specifically that drives these folks—and it's very easy to say he's a...(fumbles)...simply, sort of anti-capitalist ideologues. Uh, so, partly

it's that. Partly it's also um, the lead company; in this whole process of gen—of, developing genetic engineering, uh, [cross].

One says that—

One center

Say Center—

[Talking over each other]

Munro: Yeah. Uh, Mun Center has been kind of uh, a particularly sort of uh, aggressive, uh, internal culture action, which in some ways is impressive and in some ways is limiting. Uh, it created blind spots, for the company to simply not understand where it might hit opposition.

What does what you found in examining the **anti-GMO** debate say about all the future of all social movements in the U.S.—how is activism changing?

Munro: That's a good question, and I'm not sure, that, one could look at anti GM activists as a kind of **modal [4:00]**, uh, movement. One thing that they have done, I-I think, uh, and this is to pick up on some uh, trends, uh elsewheres, one of the things about the anti GM movement is it's a—it's a knowledge-based movement. And so, what is quite clear is the way in which we create uncertainties about knowledge, or authoritative knowledge, uh, creates space for-for success, for activists' success, today. And that of course is very much, facilitated, by technology changes, by the fact that although, through the Internet for instance, you can get an enormous amount of information that becomes less and less trustworthy, uh, and more and more contestable, the more you [chuckles] have access to. And so, uh, I think—one of the things, that they have shown, is that a small group of people, really committed people, operating in networks, can be quite-quite effective; a very small group of people who really had an-an enormous impact, on an industry.

William Munro is the director of the International Studies program at Illinois Wesleyan University, and he has co-authored the new book, *Fighting for the Future of Food: Activists versus Agribusiness in the Struggle over Biotechnology*.