

Consumption as Politics in the Biotech Era: The Limits of Consumer Sovereignty

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[I]t is ourselves as consumers who stand in a central relation to all the economics of the world, like a king in his kingdom.... That we are not kings, but serfs in the mass, is due to our failure to think and act together as consumers and to realize our true position and power.¹

On September 17, 2002, Greenpeace Canada launched its "Greenpeace Shopper's Guide."² Like the organization's "True Food Shopping List" south of the border, the Shopper's Guide provides consumers with the information they need in order to avoid genetically engineered (GE) food when they visit their local supermarkets.³ Reviewing over 1000 products, the guide lists those that do and do not contain genetically modified ingredients. The Guide in Canada and the List in the United States are Greenpeace's answer to both the Canadian and American governments' failure to follow other jurisdictions (such as the European Union, Australia and Japan) in legislating mandatory labelling of food products containing genetically engineered ingredients. Labelling has been at the centre of the controversy over the introduction of genetically modified organisms in agriculture. A diverse array of organizations around the world has formed a powerful lobby against the use of such organisms, and the threat of consumer pressure against so-called "Frankenfood" has been this lobby's primary tactic. This situation presents itself as a curious paradox. On the one hand, the politics of consumption has clearly become global in scope; the January 2000 conclusion of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety is testament, in part, to the ability of the anti-GE food lobby to mount a coordinated worldwide campaign. On the other hand, the goal of the lobby is to ultimately make such concerted political pressure unnecessary, or at least secondary in importance. At the end of the day, the consumer's choice is the intended point of political articulation. It is this tremendously local and *private* decision, multiplied millions of times and informed by educational propaganda about the health risks of GE food, which is

¹ Percy Redfern, *The Consumer's Place in Society* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1920), p. 12.

² The Greenpeace Press Release is available at <http://action.web.ca/home/gpc/alerts.shtml?sh_itm=ec03e2efa7abb686cbb77c078a09ad23>.

³ The True Food Shopping List is available at <<http://www.greenpeaceusa.org/ge/>>

understood as the real leverage for stopping the GE food juggernaut. Hence, while the anti-GE food lobby may have brought the controversy over genetically engineered food crops to the level of global political debate – a debate which has been wide-ranging in its treatment of the question – it in fact seeks to meet its ends by reducing the issue to one of individual health and consumer rights.

Indeed, with the campaign against GE foods, the consumer rights movement seems to have experienced a significant resurgence. In many respects, defending the right of consumers to make informed choices seems appropriate in this era of economic globalization. As governments rush to sign-on to international trade agreements that restrict their ability to make sound social, environmental, and public health policy, coordinating political action around the simple power of consumer choice appears to offer a concrete form of resistance against the overwhelming influence of global capital. But this kind of political strategy is not without its pitfalls, and it deserves to be thoroughly interrogated. Does the articulation of consumer rights provide an adequate basis for confronting the tough questions that are raised by the ongoing development of biotechnology by multinational corporations? Should it be consumers who ultimately decide if and how scientists might employ their rapidly increasing powers to manipulate the building blocks of life? Finally, what are the implications of encouraging individuals to understand their political agency in terms of their spending power?

Two distinct avenues of critique are employed to answer these queries. The first avenue questions the efficacy and scope of consumer politics on the grounds that (a) it oversimplifies the political world, narrowing the range of issues open to collective action and inadequately responding to the complexity of these issues; and (b) it eschews a more fundamental critique of capitalist market relations, even playing into the hands of capitalism's logic by valorising the consumer identity. The second avenue of critique constitutes a more radical challenge to modernist formulations of politics. As such, it displaces many of the arguments made in the context of the first line of criticism. Indeed it is meant to supersede these arguments, though not to replace them entirely. This second avenue of critique is based on reading consumer activism as an effect of the doctrine of sovereignty, which can ultimately be tied back to seventeenth century political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. Under the logic of this doctrine, inclusive political deliberation and action is eschewed in favour of a secure political order. By articulating the challenge to GE foods in the language of consumer sovereignty or consumer rights, the important political questions regarding the pursuit and application of scientific knowledge are marginalized or

deferred. Instead of becoming issues of collective debate and action, these questions are transferred to the private realm of personal choice. In order to address this problem I will draw upon the work of Hannah Arendt and Warren Magnusson to suggest a more dynamic and substantive model of political life, one which offers an alternative to the sovereignty politics of consumer rights.

The purpose of my analysis is not to suggest that there is nothing political about the global articulation of consumer rights against the power of multinational corporations. Nor do I mean to imply that this kind of politics is doomed to be unsuccessful in achieving some of its goals. Indeed, it would be trite not to recognize the accomplishments of consumer activism, both in the contemporary battle over GE foods and in other contexts around the world. What I do want to suggest, however, is that embracing a politics of consumption carries with it certain dangers, above all the threat of a serious narrowing of our political perspective and the foreclosure of a more radical questioning of our current trajectory of development. The increasing use of biological engineering technology in agriculture (and in many other spheres of life) undeniably raises fundamental questions of various kinds. Now, more than ever, we need a vibrant political sphere in which to make collective decisions about the direction of scientific inquiry and the application of scientific knowledge to shape the world that future generations will inherit.

The Limits of Public Interest Liberalism

The consumer revolt against GE foods is only the most recent in a long lineage of consumer-based political action. Bread or grain riots were characteristic forms of protest during the early phase of capitalism's development,¹ and organized consumer cooperation of various kinds has existed at least since the mid nineteenth century.² The immediate roots of the GE food revolt are more recent. This is a movement that would have been at home in the 1970s, at the zenith of the consumer rights movement in the United States. It is a classic battle of the consumer against the corporate bully, over an issue of public health. Given the obvious similarities between the anti-GE food lobby and its predecessor, it is illuminating to examine the logic

¹ For an explanation of the phenomenon, see E. P. Thompson, *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), p. 185-258.

² Martin Purvis, "Societies of Consumers and Consumer Societies: Co-operation, Consumption and Politics in Britain and Continental Europe c.1850-1920," *Journal of Historical Geography* 24 (1998), p. 147-169.

of this earlier movement's political strategy. Perhaps the best way to do this is to examine the political vision of Ralph Nader, whose crusades for corporate and government accountability on a whole range of issues have undeniably defined the character of the consumer rights movement across North America. Nader's name has become synonymous with a certain kind of activism, which articulates its goals in terms of the "public interest." His recent candidacy for President, at the helm of the Green Party, speaks to the enduring appeal of his political vision within activist circles.³ Understanding the failings of Nader's "public interest liberalism" can go a long way to highlighting the potential pitfalls of relying on consumer choice as the centrepiece of the anti-GE food lobby.

Perhaps the most fundamental criticism to be made of Nader's political vision is his conflation of the public interest and the interest of consumers, in which the latter exhausts the scope of the former. This formulation effects a serious narrowing of the range of issues open to popular political action. In Nader's universe, the only political identity shared by all, as a basis for collective action, is that of the consumer. Hence, public interest liberalism does not seem to provide ontological support for tackling political issues that do not lie directly within the sphere of consumption, such as those associated with labour, race, or the environmental crisis. Concern about this narrowing of the political domain led Robert Holsworth to ask the following, as he evaluated the state of American politics at the end of the 1970s:

How accurate a depiction and explanation of our political condition have Nader and other public interest reformers provided? Will the politics of public interest reform serve as an adequate model to meet our political needs in the future?⁴

In particular, Holsworth was concerned about the perceived challenge of an immanent ecological crisis. We can equally see how public interest liberalism leaves us poorly equipped to confront other serious political problems at both national and international levels.

The contemporary use of consumer boycotts by environmental and human rights organizations suggests that the tools of public

³ It would be an oversight not to note, however, the clash between Nader's sensibilities and those of the grass-roots democratic organization of the Green Party. See Greta Gaard, *Ecological Politics: Ecofeminists and the Greens* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998).

⁴ Robert D. Holsworth, *Public Interest Liberalism and the Crisis of Affluence: Reflections on Nader, Environmentalism, and the Politics of Sustainable Society* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980), p. 3.

interest advocacy may be useful beyond the context of consumer protection, having a potential application in a broader range of political struggles. But even if its scope can occasionally be stretched beyond its normal parameters, consumer activism remains a questionable means of tackling complicated political issues. Consumer choice is a blunt political tool. Based on a binary decision (to buy or not to buy), it could hardly be otherwise. In addition, the mobilization of consumer boycotts works best with cognitively simple and emotionally appealing issues that may be distilled into catchy messages for slick advertising campaigns.⁵ In such campaigns there is little room for the complexities of political deliberation. Between the yes/no nature of consumer decisions and the oversimplifying tendency of consumer boycott publicity, the result is a form of politics that often has unintended consequences where the effects of consumer decisions are ultimately felt. The boycott of the fur industry in the 1980s provides a good example. Economically marginalized northern indigenous communities, that had come to depend on the trade in furs, were left without a source of livelihood when the market for furs collapsed. The boycott of French wine as a protest against French nuclear testing provides a similar case, in which wine makers suffered damages on behalf of their government – even if they too opposed its nuclear policy. In both these cases, consumer-based political action took the place of political action that might have been more sensitive to the nature of the issues at hand and the impacts of consumption decisions on producers. In the case of furs, making fur unfashionable is only part of the political equation, and an outright elimination of trapping is probably not a realistic objective. Working with northern communities to help diversify their economies, and to encourage more humane forms of trapping, is the altogether neglected other half of the equation. Public interest liberalism does not provide the tools necessary for a political course that requires engagement in the long-term work of community economic development and negotiation between different cultures.

Beyond the narrowness of scope and oversimplification that characterize public interest liberalism, there are more fundamental problems with making a simple equation between the interests of consumers and the public interest. What are the implications of a political strategy which displaces the traditional political subjectivity of citizen with that of consumer? In the context of politicized consumption, politics is contaminated by the market at least as much

⁵ Monroe Friedman, "On Promoting a Sustainable Future Through Consumer Activism." *Journal of Social Issues* 51:4 (1995): 197-215.

as the market is subjected to political deliberation. In the mass advertising campaigns of consumer politics, individuals simply become consumers of politics. They never exit the familiar world of advertisement – the world of the consumer identity. Participation in a campaign, a piece of the "political" action, becomes another commodity for sale. In this way, the equation of consumer interest with public interest threatens the absorption of politics into the market.

This state of affairs should be worrisome for theorists of all political stripes, except perhaps neoclassical liberals. It should be particularly concerning for left wing political thinkers, for whom the alteration or elimination of the capitalist market is a central goal of political action. Of course, it might be possible to imagine a severe curtailment of the capitalist market through consumer organization. Ideologues in the co-operative movement have been inspired to see the consumer subject position in a politically radical light, due to the fact that it is universally experienced and hence may be the basis for a collective consciousness of resistance.⁶ Public interest liberalism, however, does not belong to the more radical tradition of consumer activism that is found in the co-operative movement. For Nader and his followers, the very idea of presenting a radical challenge to market forces appears to be absent. According to Holsworth, this absence is directly tied to the political ontology of the Nader vision:

His equation of the consumer interest with the public interest has been the conceptual means by which Nader and other public interest activists have been able to be stridently critical of corporate influence without becoming officially committed to a radical political economy.⁷

Indeed, Nader himself has taken pains not to appear too radical, even arguing that his political project is directed towards making the market work more effectively:

It's a disservice to view this as a threat to the private enterprise system or big business.... It's just the opposite. It's an attempt to preserve the free enterprise economy by making the market work better; an attempt to preserve the democratic control of technology by giving government a role in the decision-making process as to how much or how little safety products must contain.⁸

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Quoted in Holsworth, p. 13.

Holsworth's conclusion is that Nader's vision "implicitly accepts the conventional wisdom that our lives as consumers should be the standard by which the quality of life is determined."⁹

Twenty years later, the conventional wisdom that Nader accepted has become even more deeply embedded in our social consciousness. It is not alarming for social scientists to claim that consumption is "the structuring principle of our societies."¹⁰ Indeed, the term "consumer" has successfully replaced other longstanding terms of reference in a wide range of areas, most notably social policy. Educational institutions, hospitals, government agencies, and even police forces, have widely adopted a change in language, such that patients, students, clients and publics are uniformly dealt with as consumers. This change has occurred as publicly funded services have increasingly been subjected to market forces, in the interest of increasing efficiency and productivity in service delivery.¹¹ In addition, competition is touted as a means to better meet the needs of service users, by giving them greater freedom of choice.¹² Of course, it is not difficult to see the assumptions of liberal economics behind these changes: the market knows best. Indeed, the rise of "consumer citizenship" has clearly occurred as part of the more general demise of the welfare state and the shift toward neo-liberal regimes of governance.¹³ Hence, while a world of citizen consumers might be the goal of public interest liberalism, it is also the outcome of capitalism's re-entrenchment. With such a confluence of ends, it is hard to see public interest liberalism as anything other than the political handmaiden to a capitalist socio-economic order.

The failings of public interest liberalism are clearly visible in the campaign against GE foods. On the surface it appears to be dramatically successful in bringing popular political power into the global arena. But its political project is really quite limited, and relies on a slick advertising campaign. The language of the campaign,

⁹ Holsworth, p. 120.

¹⁰ Sulkunen et al, *Constructing the New Consumer Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 2.

¹¹ Wendy Larner, "A Means to an End: Neoliberalism and State Processes in New Zealand." *Studies in Political Economy* 52 (1997): 7-38. For further examples in health care, see Christa Altenstetter and James W. Björkman (eds.), *Health Policy Reform, National Variations and Globalization* (London: MacMillan, 1997); Richard Saltman and Casten Von Otter (eds.), *Implementing Planned Markets in Health Care*, (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1995).

¹² Larner, p. 27; Saltman and Von Otter, p. vii.

¹³ Larner, p. 27; see also, Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller, "Political Power Beyond the State: Problematics of Government." *British Journal of Sociology* 43:2 (1992): 173-205.

exemplified by use of the term "Frankenfood," has conformed to the same catchy but shallow rhetoric characteristic of its predecessors. Furthermore, the imagery presented by demonstrators and disseminated in campaign literature (protestors cloaked in biohazard suits, a Frankenstein version of Tony the Tiger¹⁴) suggests that it is the narrow concern of consumers for their own health which has been the source of public discontent, and not a more sophisticated appreciation for the whole gambit of socio-economic, environmental and ethical issues raised by the use of genetically engineered crops. Moreover, the campaign in no way seeks to challenge the basic economic influence of multinational corporations. Nor has it led to any significant debate about the direction of modern science. This is end-of-pipe politics at its best (or worst). The crucial questions – about the power of multinational companies like Monsanto and Dow Chemical, the consolidation of industrial agriculture, the plight of independent farmers around the world, and the increasing power of science to make fundamental alterations to the natural order – remain unasked in any meaningful public forum. Meanwhile, the consumer is once more exhorted to choose to be an active member of the market society. Such choice and action, however, depends on reliable knowledge – hence the anxiety over labelling. The suspicion that foods are not what they seem to be, that the flesh of the tomato itself cannot be trusted, is of grave import to the consumer. With the restoration of full disclosure, choice will be recovered and all will be well again.

Consumer Sovereignty: Recycling Hobbes

The anxiety felt by the consumer when the capacity for choice is foreclosed by a lack of knowledge is more than a simple response to the perceived threat from foreign genetic matter. And the assertion of individual sovereignty in the market – of the consumer's right to know and to choose – has roots that are much older and deeper than either the political project of public interest liberalism or the latest wave of neo-liberal market discipline. In fact, both the anxiety and the articulation of sovereignty in response are characteristic of the modernist political project as a whole. One of the most enduring formulations of this project can be found in the 17th century writings

¹⁴ In Greenpeace literature urging consumers to boycott Kellogg's products Tony, holding a test tube full of green liquid and a cob of corn, is portrayed with a grey complexion, yellowed teeth, crazed eyes and Frankenstein electrodes on his temples. The image can be viewed on the Greenpeace U.S. web site: <<http://www.greenpeaceusa.org/features/kelloggstext.htm>>

of Thomas Hobbes, particularly in his most famous political treatise, *Leviathan*.¹⁵ Hobbes's blueprint for the modern state is constructed on a set of assertions about the "state of nature" – a hypothetical condition of collective existence that assumes the absence of any central authority. This is a state of complete freedom, in which the fact of permanent insecurity leads each individual to seek ever greater means to protect his or her person. The irony is that each person's search for a means of protection constitutes the very threat from which every other person is seeking protection. The result of this self-perpetuating condition of insecurity is ultimately a permanent war of each against all.

Hobbes's solution to this state of perpetual war is the foundation of a sovereign authority – the Leviathan – to which each individual surrenders all rights. This is the condition for establishing a political order in which individuals may in fact obtain a meaningful kind of freedom. That is, free from the war of each against all, they may take up other pursuits. The problem with Hobbes's formulation is that his Leviathan is vested with so much power that relatively little space is left for the individual freedom that is supposed to be gained when the state of nature is banished. It remained for Locke to convert Hobbes's Leviathan into a theory of liberal government, where the state's sovereignty is limited by the individual's corresponding sovereignty to enjoy the fruits of private property. Whether following Hobbes or Locke, however, the basic formulation is the same. There are two orders of sovereignty, the state and the individual, each guaranteed by the other, and the latter a microcosmic version of the former.¹⁶ As long as each retains its sovereignty within its respective domain, the problems of the state of nature can be avoided.

The individual's rightful domain of sovereignty, if we follow Locke and his other liberal successors, is the market. And it is the sovereignty of individuals in the market, each seeking to meet his or her own needs and wants, which classical political economists, like Adam Smith, perceived as the essence of the capitalist system. Given this lineage in political philosophy, it should not be surprising that the goals of public interest liberalism and the ideology of neo-liberalism should have so much in common. There is a fundamental convergence between capitalism's need to reproduce itself – and

hence its need to enforce market discipline – and the individual's need to anchor his or her political identity in the notion of consumer sovereignty. Any threats to this sovereignty are threats to both the capitalist order and to the political enclosures that hold the chaos of Hobbes's state of nature at bay.

The two quotes at the beginning of this essay both express the fundamental spirit of the principle of consumer sovereignty. The first, dating from the 1920s, provides a vivid image of the consumer as a scaled-down (but no less potent) version of Hobbes's Leviathan, who stands "in a central relation to all the economics of the world, like a king in his kingdom."¹⁷ The second leaves no doubt that the GE food lobby locates its political roots in the same sovereignty principle. This is articulated even more explicitly in the following passage:

[F]ood biotechnology violates procedural protections of consumer sovereignty.... Consumer sovereignty, a principle especially valued in this country [the United States], requires that information be made available so each individual or group may make food choices based on their own values.¹⁸

The emphasis in the article, from which this passage is drawn, is on the ethical freedom of consumers, rather than their personal health or satisfaction as consumers. But the effect is the same. In fact, the emphasis on personal ethics points directly to the manner in which the principle of consumer sovereignty obscures the political nature of the questions raised by agricultural biotechnology. It is simply not necessary to engage in public debates about whether or not science should be pursuing a particular path of technological development. As long as the individual consumer's opportunity for ethical choice is preserved, public debate is unnecessary.

Following the modernist formula, the anti-GE food lobby pairs its concern over individual sovereignty with that for state sovereignty. Developments in the world economy over the past fifteen to twenty years have led to an apparent decline of state sovereignty in areas as diverse as monetary policy and environmental regulation. Anxiety over this development is perhaps behind the revival of consumer-based political movements in the 1990s. If sovereignty in one sphere is seen to be flagging, every effort must be made to shore it up in the other. The displacement of sovereignty from one sphere to the other, however, has certain limits. Individual sovereignty depends on the state as its guarantor. This dependence is consistently visible in most

¹⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Richard Tuck (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Further exploration of this line of thought can be found in Warren Magnusson, "Hyperspace: A Political Ontology of the Global City," in Richard V. Ericson and Nico Stehr (eds.), *Governing Modern Societies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

¹⁷ The passage is quoted in Purvis, p. 147.

¹⁸ Paul B. Thompson, "Food Biotechnology's Challenge to Cultural Integrity and Individual Consent," *Hastings Center Report* 27:4 (1997), p. 34.

consumer-based political activism, and the lobby against GE foods is no exception. The labelling of food products at the end of the pipe depends not only on the ability of states to legislate labelling rules within their national territories, but also upon their capacity to regulate the trade of goods across their boundaries in such a way that GE and non-GE commodities can be differentiated. By providing a mechanism in international law which allows such differentiation to take place, the labelling rules in the Cartagena Protocol constitute a small but important recovery of state sovereignty, at least with respect to this particular aspect of international trade law. It remains for national governments to translate this into a similar shoring-up of individual sovereignty, through the legislation of domestic labelling requirements for food products.

The Limits of Sovereignty Politics

Sovereignty has apparently functioned adequately as the fundamental principle of political life for the past several hundred years. But even if it was an appropriate answer to the problems faced by Europe in Hobbes's era, we no longer occupy that set of historical conditions. It is a mistake to think that the sovereignty principle continues to hold the answers to our contemporary problems. To understand this, it is first necessary to appreciate the sacrifices which are entailed in the imposition and maintenance of sovereignty – both at the level of the state, and of the individual. Hannah Arendt made the following assessment:

If men wish to be sovereign, as individuals or as organized groups, they must submit to the oppression of the will, be this the individual will with which I force myself, or the 'general will' of an organized group. If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty that they must renounce.¹⁹

Arendt does not speak of freedom in the liberal sense. Indeed, the liberal conception of freedom, as we have seen, is closely tied to the notion of sovereignty. Arendt's concept of freedom is much more difficult to nail down, but it revolves around the possibility of human action in a public sphere. This public sphere is located in the political realm, which is another way of saying that what is special about politics is its public character.²⁰ To establish a state of sovereignty, then, is to renounce the possibility for political action, to close off the public sphere. Echoing Arendt, Warren Magnusson suggests that

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 165.

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). See pp. 22-78 for a discussion of politics as a public phenomenon.

sovereignty thinking "is based on the belief that we can somehow expunge politics from the centre of human affairs and replace it with some sort of fixture."²¹ The principle of sovereignty is to preserve this fixture at all costs: "it orders political conflict so that the centre remains secure."²² Indeed, politics is like a caged beast, always threatening to break free and unleash chaos. "Without discipline, politics is what threatens the centre that must hold."²³

It is not surprising that the ideology of sovereignty is so hostile to politics. The history of political philosophy – and that of western civilization – is a record of various attempts to rid the civilized world of the difficulties associated with collective human existence. This hostility to politics began with Plato. With one stroke Plato gave birth to the philosophy of the political art and simultaneously proposed to rid the world of the competition and instability that characterizes political life, calling instead for the benevolent dictatorship of philosopher kings. Theorists like Arendt and Magnusson, who seek to rescue politics from the Platonic impulses of western civilization, appeal to the appreciation for conflict and flux in human affairs which is found in the work of Plato's successor, Aristotle. Sheldon Wolin, another theorist who attempts to revive an Aristotelian appreciation for political life, emphasizes Aristotle's recognition that human civilization is prone to constant "growth, change and movement." Given this, politics finds its essence, not in the carefully planned perfection of Plato's republic, but in "action within a situation fraught with change, accident, and contingency."²⁴ Rather than rejecting change and contingency as dangerous, and seeking to construct an edifice for politics that super-imposes order and stability upon human affairs, Aristotle incorporates the vagaries of political matter into his vision of political action. Arendt and Magnusson follow Aristotle in his appreciation for diversity amongst political actors. Arendt remarks that "unitedness of many into one is basically antipolitical."²⁵ And Magnusson charts a course of theoretical investigation that points toward "the multiplicity of the political," where the diversity of actors and dimensions of human affairs is reflected in a myriad of interconnected political spaces.²⁶

²¹ Warren Magnusson, *The Search for Political Space* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 45.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1960), p. 59.

²⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 214.

²⁶ Magnusson, *The Search for Political Space*, p. 44.

The imposition of sovereignty is a Platonic answer to the challenges posed by collective human existence. It forecloses the possibility of action in the public sphere, privileging the maintenance of a hierarchical order of sovereign entities instead of political engagement. This state of affairs is of concern from the perspective of human freedom, in the sense that Arendt imagines it. It is also distressing from a much more “practical” perspective. The sovereignty doctrine takes the raw material of politics and expels it from the civic body, sending it into exile beyond the reach of public discourse. This is clearly what has happened in the case of consumer sovereignty and the GE food lobby. Appealing to the power of consumer sovereignty is in many ways an easy answer to the need for mobilization against the increasing use of biotechnology in agriculture. But it is an answer which leaves the important questions off the agenda. Are we willing to accept the risks of environmental degradation associated with agricultural biotechnology? What are the social implications of a further centralization of agricultural know-how in the labs of multinational corporations? What should be the role of human artifice in relation to “nature”? Labelling moves us no closer to answering these questions. Nor does it remove the urgency of asking them. While preserving the individual’s right to protect him or herself from the health affects of genetically modified food ingredients, labelling by no means guarantees that genetically engineered agricultural crops will become a thing of the past. Rather, labelling promises the *integration* of GE products into the existing food system and hence the *normalization* of biotechnology as fundamental to agricultural production.

Conclusion: Politics and Agricultural Biotechnology

Fifty years ago, Hannah Arendt opened her landmark work of political philosophy, *The Human Condition*, with a warning about the direction of human development. She suggested that “future man... seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself.”²⁷ The genetic engineering of food crops for industrial agriculture certainly seems to embody an instance of this rebellion. Of course, we might trace our dissatisfaction with the existence we have been given back thousands of years, to the first development of tools. Furthermore, agriculture is essentially a human effort to

improve upon nature’s offerings. But we are at a new step in technological development, which promises to revolutionize the power possessed by humanity for the manipulation of naturally existing life. Humans have now acquired tools that were previously available only to God (or chance). It has finally become possible to make the world anew.

As she contemplated the potential of her “future man,” Arendt rightly emphasized the possibility for choice. We have the opportunity to ask ourselves “whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction.”²⁸ Arendt went on to argue, however, that this is not a question which the technological innovators themselves – the scientists – can answer. Rather, it is one which must be answered by the human collectivity. Hence, she was convinced that the question of direction “is a political question of the first order.”²⁹ The problem which she confronted, however, was that “the ‘truths’ of the modern scientific world view, though they can be demonstrated in mathematical formulas and proved technologically, will no longer lend themselves to normal expression in speech and thought.”³⁰ It was this disjunction, between our ability to do and our ability to think and speak in a meaningful way about what we do, which Arendt perceived as perhaps the greatest danger facing humankind:

If it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is.³¹

Arendt’s warnings, and her assertion about the possibility of making collective choices, offer a particularly appropriate perspective from which to think about the questions surrounding genetic engineering.

There is no doubt that genetic engineering is our greatest present source of “gadgets,” and the disjunction between knowledge and thought has perhaps never been greater than it is with genetic science. To the majority of the non-scientific community, the techniques of genetic engineering, which can introduce genes from one kingdom of life to another – putting fish genes into tomatoes, for instance – seem like occult magic. Even more perplexing, the engineered products are apparently identical to their predecessors; only the scientists who

²⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 2-3.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

have created these new organisms are capable of identifying them. With these limitations, we have become dependent upon scientists to discriminate for society at large, because only they possess the ability to do so. Indeed, it is probably safe to say that most people are not even sure what they are supposed to fear about genetic engineering. GE foods are still, for many, only understandable as the shadowy form of a “boogie-man” who looms from the darkness. Labels would allow people to see the monster’s tracks, but they are hardly a sufficient basis for thinking and speaking in a meaningful way about the questions surrounding our newfound abilities to alter the building blocks of life.

This lack of public access to the technical knowledge necessary for public deliberation about genetic engineering is certainly concerning. Perhaps more important, however, is the lack of political vocabulary and space in which the social, environmental and ethical implications of this technology might be discussed. In the case of vocabulary, it seems that we are simply incapable of articulating questions of a political nature in a manner which breaks free from the principle of sovereignty. Even when our language seems absurd and misplaced we continue to use it. The advocacy of consumer rights in the revolt against GE foods is a clear case of such misplaced vocabulary. Though many people share a common concern about genetic engineering, they are able to articulate this concern only in terms of their shared identity as sovereign consumers. The problem is that there is little political language that would allow the challenge to biotechnology to be catapulted into a public arena of debate. We are incapable of articulating the way in which the question of biotechnology is one which should concern society as a whole, rather than as a composite of sovereign parts. The linguistic points of reference which might allow the birth of a post-sovereignty politics have not been integrated into our vocabulary, or have yet to be articulated.

Just as the vocabulary necessary to tackle questions such as those posed by biotechnology has not yet evolved, appropriate political space is also absent. We lack the points of collective contact in which a truly public discourse might occur, allowing for inclusive deliberation over the trajectory of human development. The sheer direct of human population in the present day precludes the kind of direct participation in political life that was possible in ancient Athens, which has been the inspiration for theorists such as Arendt. But surely this does not mean that inclusive and meaningful political engagement is an impossibility. We fail to imagine where new political spaces might be located because the doctrine of sovereignty keeps our thinking locked into the blueprint of representative

democracy. As Magnusson argues, electoral sovereignty “is the equivalent of consumer sovereignty in the domain of the state.”³² Rethinking and recreating political space means redefining politics, and rethinking democracy.

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to speculate in depth about the possibilities for novel political vocabularies and spaces, but some clues about where to start are located precisely where the argument begins: in the success of the anti GE food campaign at coordinating global political action on this issue, with clear results in terms of international and national policy regimes. While I am highly critical of the ends to which this mobilization has been put (i.e. labelling, consumer choice), the sheer fact of the mobilization itself is testament to the political energy that exists for collective action on a range of different scales, from the local to the supra-national. Interpreting this collective action in the light of Arendt’s assertions about freedom as action in a public sphere, we can observe that organizations like Greenpeace increasingly have the capacity to speak to something like a global public. When we look more closely at this capacity to speak we see that it is really a *plurivocal* capacity, and that it is realized in the context of many *different* publics. The anti-GE food lobby does not speak like a sovereign state, but rather as a network of political actors whose existence is defined by something like the opposite of the sovereignty concept. In this global social movement (and others are similar) there exists a diversity and fluidity of speech and action, based on a loose set of common goals articulated in relation to a wide range of other political and economic actors, from state governments to local grocery chains. Magnusson has suggested that it might be possible to understand this confusing set of political relationships in terms of a global urban “hyperspace.”³³ He urges recognition of the possibilities to create new political spaces within the complexity of the global city, possibilities that are foreclosed in each retreat to the sovereign state or individual.

Whatever we call this new non-sovereign space of global political action, it is not sufficient to simply celebrate its existence. The challenge is ultimately to forge some kind of collectivity amidst this diversity of political alliances, speakers, actors, and publics. Arendt’s exhortation to actively choose our collective future suggests a vision of common humanity, of a capacity for coherent action on a grand scale for the sake of a universal good. In Arendt’s opinion, political action is fundamentally tied to the existence of political

³² Magnusson, *Hyperspace*, p. 87.

³³ *Ibid*, pp. 100-103.

community, to the ability to act in concert.³⁴ There is an obvious tension here. How could it be possible to form a lasting basis for concerted action without endowing an institutional framework with some degree of inalienable political right? To put this dilemma in concrete practical terms, even if it is true that sovereignty is inimical to politics, how can we possibly conceive of political action in the present without reference to states as the primary bearers of political community and hence as the most obvious tools for collective action? This tension could certainly be lamented as irreconcilable: either we have collective action without politics (the sovereignty option) or we have activism without collective action (the politics option). On the other hand, the tension could be understood as a productive space for ongoing reflection and action, out of which new political vocabularies and practices may emerge.

To return to the context of the movement against GE agricultural crops, it is clear that states, and groups of states like the European Union, are the best sites within which to seek substantive action on the issue. Legislating mandatory labelling is one kind of collective action, but it means choosing sovereignty over politics, and hence forgoing the tension described above. Instead, the social movement against the use of GE agricultural crops could demand broad national debates about agricultural policy, politicizing the whole corporate food production model. In this way, the non-sovereign space of a global social movement could become the impetus for substantive collective deliberation both within and across national borders, and hopefully would lead to collective action in many different spheres that would address a range of issues around the development of biotechnology. This hybrid form of political reality, comprised partly of actors that function according to the logic of sovereignty, and partly by networks of actors that operate in a global political hyperspace, is the context within which the anti-GE food lobby already operates. If not for the anxiety or nostalgia that leads this

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), pp. 143-155. Arendt sees this capacity to act in concert as the basis for power, which she distinguishes from strength, force and violence. In the absence of power, or the potential for collective action, there can be no meaningful political space.

movement to seek anchorage in the figure of the sovereign consumer, it might already be showing us the potential of our emerging hybrid political landscape.