

Paul de Brem

► Pierre-Benoît Joly l'a dit, les débats relatifs aux sciences de la vie ont été nombreux en France, ils ont été nourris et ont pris des formes diverses et riches, depuis le bar des sciences, la conférence de citoyens, le débat public. Ces débats ont été organisés en général par des institutions dédiées. Ils se sont tenus dans notre pays, pays centralisé, où les décisions se prennent souvent en haut, avec une faible expérience de la démocratie participative. Ils ont connu des moments houleux, notamment sur les sciences de la vie. Quelle est la situation dans des pays aussi différents que le Brésil, les États-Unis, la Suisse ? Quelles formes prend le débat dans ces pays ? ◀

Brazil is a young country with an impressive growth rate when compared for instance to other European countries. Science, of course, is taking a greater place in your country, in this rapidly developing nation. Does this young nation feel the need for a public debate on life sciences and on the innovations in this field? I will develop the Brazilian perspective, which is not as rich in terms of experiences as in France or in other countries of the European Union. At the beginning, the Senator spoke about a crisis of trust in science and technology. We are not facing this type of crisis, so I will explain the context in Brazil over the last few years, focusing mainly on GMOs (Genetically modified organisms). There are in fact recent developments in science and technology, especially in the areas of biotechnology and nanotechnology, which have generated new challenges with regard to definition of the decision-making process on controversial issues. Over the last two decades, requests for changes to make science more democratic have been received from many areas. There is also a kind of consensus crystallised in the literature about the political value of public deliberation. This looks like a necessary element in the new scientific governance, but how to understand the specificities of national context without falling in a kind of nationalistic methodology?

Session 2

Le débat sur les sciences du vivant, une exception française ? Expériences et regards étrangers

Breaking the consensus on the « participatory turn »: the Brazilian case in the light of the cosmopolitan perspective

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In relation to the GMO conflict, I found very enlightening the perspective from Sheila Jasanoff, where she did comparative research between the UK, Germany and the United States with regard to GMOs. She reports that GMOs suggest a relationship between the inventiveness in the field of life sciences on one side and in the field of politics in the search for new ways of evaluation, regulation and government and the production process of genetic engineering on the other side. These suggestions also raised an important aspect which is relevant for understanding national specificities in relation to these conflicts. That



is the concept of civic epistemology. It is defined as how knowledge now has come to be perceived as reliable in political settings and how scientific claims, more specifically authoritative patterns, put different civic epistemology concepts analyses, the credibility of science in contemporary political life as a phenomenon to be explained and not to be taken for granted.

In a very schematic way, we have the possibility of saying that in relation to GMOs in the US, there was no significant reaction from the public. Many countries of the European Union reacted, and like in France, the implementation of a process of science democratisation and also the precautionary principle. In Brazil, the situation is peculiar because there was a reaction, but without democratisation and without search of ways to allow the public to be able to problematize these innovations.

The debate took place in a very restricted arena and involved mainly political parties, NGOs and scientists. This is part of the civic epistemology of Brazil because after the constitution of 1988, there is a kind of NGO-isation, a proliferation of NGOs in society, due to the stimulation of the Constitution to establish civil participation in decision processes. Subsequently, a multitude of public spaces were created, like participatory budgets, etc., that were very popular. Apparently they are very popular abroad, but are no longer popular or well accepted in the Brazilian context.

A variety of social movements emerged, transcending electoral participation. Civil society began to designate non-governmental organisations as being able to negotiate with the State, and the emergence of the so-called third sector and their multiplication characterised the social domain. We have NGOs put as legitimate interlocutors for the State insofar as they have a specific knowledge that arises from the past or present with some social sectors, such as women, youth, environmentalists, etc.

NGOs tend to consider themselves as representatives of civil society because they express some kind of diffused interest to which they give voice. However, this happened without necessarily having or establishing a link with whom they consider to be representing a kind of professionalisation of social movement that sometimes includes traditional political practices, such as clientelism or cooptation.

I will now focus on the research I participated in, concerning a comparative approach in relation to GMO crops. The work was organised by a group of Durham University in the UK – Phil Macnaghten, Susana Carro-Ripalda and others. Social, cultural, economic factors needed to be included. This research was funded by the John Templeton Foundation. A book about this research will be published next year called *Governing Agricultural Sustainability*. We have a special chapter in relation to Brazil and some questions that were put in this research are “How can we identify the interbred position and compare the perspective of relevant actors who have a stake in GM crop development and implementation of governance? What institutional conditions are necessary for a democratic process of deliberation?” This involved comparative research, including Mexico, Brazil, the one I participated in, and India. Through the comparative perspective, the objective was to highlight the distinctive political, anthropological

and cultural dynamics to the debate in these three countries. The field research involved different aspects; some of which will be detailed. There were focus groups, demographic fieldwork, participant observation in a lab, stakeholder questionnaires and finally a national workshop where the preliminary results were presented and discussed with the main stakeholders. This took place last year in May. We had the problem that many NGO representatives did not want to participate any more. They were out of the debate, as will be explained. I identified some phases in the Brazilian controversy in relation to GMOs that started in 1998 when the National Technical Committee on Biosafety decided to approve Monsanto’s Roundup Ready herbicide to GM soy. There were some dissonant voices and, indeed, a few days before this commission took the decision, the Federal Court upheld a case brought by Greenpeace and a consumer rights organisation against this approval, drawing on the interpretation of the precautionary principle in this new Constitution of 1988. The ruling established that this moratorium should continue until October 2003.

After that moratorium, there was a kind of proliferation of the social. A lot of participants from the civil society, yet organised participants, established very heterogeneous coalitions, one in favour and one against GMOs. The political coalition against the option of GMOs involved a lot of NGOs, political parties, social movements and part of the judiciary too. This mix of social actors can be understood as a discourse coalition. In the coalition in favour of GMOs, we have more or less the same representatives assuming a position, different actors, but mainly farming associations. After 2002, when the workers’ party government assumed power, there were also some representatives and ministers from the Lula Government.

After that, we saw phase two and a lot of provisional measures and the dominance of the Consummated Act. The farmers started to adopt in a widespread way GMOs that were smuggled from Argentina. The south of the country became really significantly in favour of GMOs, mainly among farmers. This was Monsanto’s strategy and it was very successful. The Lula Government needed to take these provisional measures to allow the crop of GMOs, although there was the moratorium, and later another provisional measure to allow the planting of GMOs with the argument that there were not enough non-GMO seeds.

We need to consider that this discussion was only taking into consideration conventional soy beans and not organic production. The use of pesticides anyway was very important in both productions, although the



argument in relation to GMO seeds is that they should use less glyphosate, but recently it has been shown that this is not the case because of the problem with resistance.

During this period, there was a discussion about the biosafety law that was finally approved in 2005. With this victory of the pro-GMO coalition, this meant a complete defeat of the coalition against GMOs. After 2005, many things happened, such as the increased rate of approval of GMOs by this biosafety commission, although there were some conflicts inside the commission, but not enough to stop the approval. In 2001, for example, Greenpeace withdrew its campaign against GMOs in Brazil. That showed how weak the coalition became, and not only did approval increase, but since 2005, the rate of growth of GM crops increased dramatically so that Brazil became the second-largest GMO producer after the United States.

The research with focus groups showed some aspects that were not very much considered in Brazilian literature and so we worked in five focus groups with professionals. In these experiences that took place in Florianopolis where I live, we noticed little public enthusiasm for GMO foods and suspicion about the situation. We have been betrayed because we were not informed about the situation.

As an example, concerning labelling, although enforced by the biosafety law, the food industry association is against it and there is no enforcement of this law. Some actions of Greenpeace resulted in the use of a label: a yellow triangle with a black T. The T is for transgenic, but many companies use the T as “tested and approved”. This is misleading information for the public. There may be the T and then in the middle “Approved”; there is a non-GMO case with certification too.

We noticed a great trust in the government, a strong trust in public universities but no trust in the media, seed companies of course and in NGOs because they are considered to be defending their own side and not the public interest. Regarding the situation in the laboratory, we found a very traditional perspective about excluding laypeople and maintaining all the discussions between the experts. It was a very traditional position with a lack of reflexivity regarding their own work, their own responsibility for the innovations being carried.

The field research was very interesting. It lasted three months with all these actors. It was conducted also in the west of Santa Catarina, where there is significant agribusiness and family farming. The farmers had a very pragmatic position. There are significant technical advantages because the time spent in the field is significantly reduced and

some actors felt marginalised. But what was interesting of this part of the research is the conflict between farmers and technical experts, blaming one another for the weed resistance. The technical experts said that farmers were greedy, planting one crop after another. Farmers said, “No, we are doing our best but they are not giving us the correct advice.”

Coming to a conclusion, the public debate is really settled. We need to consider this now because although there appears to be the kind of situation where there is a closure of the controversy, new problems related to weed resistance can still occur. In democratic societies, there is a growing expectation that experts and scientists have a responsibility towards society and this is translated by the scientists we interviewed as being exclusively in favour of a national development and national progress.

In the Brazilian case, we have a highly technocratic approach to science-based public policy making. We need new categories to analyse the complexity of national specificities considering some risks I developed concerning direct participation, direct democracy. We have the problems of Venezuela where this discourse has been used. So how can we contextualise this discourse of public participation or audience participation without falling into a populist perspective, allowing decisions already taken and weakening what is important in this representative democracy? ♦

LIENS D'INTÉRÊT

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TIRÉS À PART

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