

Lecture by Les Levidow, 2 March 2007: COEXISTENCE OR CONTRADICTION? GM Crops versus Alternative Agricultures in Europe

L.Levidow@open.ac.uk

Les Levidow is a Senior Research Fellow at the Open University, UK, where he has been studying the safety regulation and innovation of agri-biotechnology since 1989. This research encompasses the European Union, USA and their trade conflicts. These developments provide a case study of concepts such as regulatory science, sustainability, European integration, governance, transnational civil society and organizational learning. Research funding has come mainly from the European Commission and the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). For details of research projects and publications, see Biotechnology Policy Group webpages at <http://technology.open.ac.uk/cts/bpg.htm>

He is co-editor of several books, including *Science, Technology and the Labour Process* (1983); *Anti-Racist Science Teaching* (1987); and *Cyborg Worlds: The Military Information Society* (1989). Also co-author of *Governing the Transatlantic Conflict over Agricultural Biotechnology: Contending Coalitions, Trade Liberalisation and Standard Setting* (Routledge, 2006). He is Editor of the journal *Science as Culture*.

General area of research

New Genetics, Modern Biotechnology, Technology Studies and Sustainability

Abstract

Agricultural biotechnology (agbiotech) has intersected with a wider debate about 'sustainable agriculture', especially in Europe. Agbiotech was initially promoted as an alternative which would avoid or remedy past problems of intensive agriculture, but such claims were soon challenged. Agbiotech has extended the dominant agri-industrial paradigm, while critics have counterposed alternatives corresponding to an agrarian-based rural development paradigm.

Amid controversy over environmental and health risks in the late 1990s, an extra issue emerged: the prospect that genetically modified (GM) material would become inadvertently mixed with non-GM crops. In response the European Commission developed a policy framework for 'coexistence' between GM, conventional and organic crops. This policy has aimed to ensure that farmers can freely choose among different production systems, which would develop side by side, yet specific proposals for coexistence rules favour some choices over others.

Such rules have been contested according to different policy agendas, each promoting their model of future agriculture. Moreover, a Europe-wide network of regional authorities has promoted 'GM-free zones' as a territorial brand for green, localised, high-quality agri-food production, whose diverse qualities depend upon symbolic, immaterial characteristics. This alternative has been counterposed to the agri-industrial production of global commodities - symbolised by the European Union, especially its product authorisation procedure for the internal market.

'Coexistence' policy was intended to mediate policy conflicts over GM crops, yet it has become another arena for contending agricultural systems, which may not so readily co-exist in practice. Wherever an agrarian-based rural development paradigm gains local support, its alternative agricultures are in contradiction rather than coexistence with GM crops.

Attached file

[Coexistence or Contradiction?](#)

Publication (pdf 572,84 KB)