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THE FIRST WORD

WHAT PUBLIC DEBATE?

Debate. Scholars of the late Middle Ages called it an argument or disputation. Solemn doctors wrapped in velvet, vair, and ermine hurled quotations of authority at one another, thunderbolts of Aquinas or Aristotle, Augustine or Galen. (Bertolt Brecht recreated one of history's most telling disputations for the *Life of Galileo*. The scientist challenges the doctors of the church to trust their eyes, to look through his telescope and see Jupiter's moons for themselves. His inquisitors refuse. They know, they say, that Jupiter had no moons; any evidence would be a satanic snare. The scene is still a paradigm for policy debates with partisan laymen.)

Yet, calls for debate, here and elsewhere, whet the appetite for such an austere ritual combat. The calls for a public debate satisfy the hunger for the forms of democracy. And through debate, one hopes to resolve nagging questions of export policy, manufacturing standards, environmental release, interspecies gene transfer, human gene therapy.

For all the lip service, true public debate on biotechnology has been notably scarce of late.

The Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC) received only 17 responses (many of those from people in the field) to its proposed *Points to Consider in the Design and Submission of Human Somatic-Cell Gene Therapy Protocols*. All told, six major government agencies (OSTP, NIH, NSF, USDA, FDA, and EPA) received fewer than 150 comments on their *Proposed Coordinated Framework for the Regulation of Biotechnology* issued last winter.

Meaningful debate, when it happens, seems to happen among professionals—often at carefully structured conferences open by invitation only. Or, of course, in the pages of learned journals and political broadsides. Only one recent letter-writing campaign—which produced 250 pleas to reject Jeremy Rifkin's proposed ban on interspecies gene transfer—even begins to resemble a true grass-roots reaction to biotechnology.

One wonders, too, whether true public debate on biotechnology, if it came, would be sunk in the fear and ignorance of New York City's current jangle over admitting children with AIDS to public schools.

Perhaps the biotechnologists have done their job of persuasion. A Northern Illinois University (DeKalb) study, commissioned by Monsanto, polled some 800 "religious, environmental, and science policy leaders." The survey revealed "a high level of confidence that biotechnology will increase food production and reduce disease without major risk to society."

More than 70 percent, according to a university release, expected major advances in agriculture. Some 64 percent indicated that current regulations are about adequate; and most favored field tests within current guidelines. (The wording of the report suggests, however, that nearly half were not in favor of field-testing, though only 14 percent reportedly said they were opposed.) Nineteen percent said that current regulations needed to be strengthened. Over all, most of the religious and environmental leaders (and three-quarters of the scientists) believed that genetic engineering is more likely to do good than harm.

The White House has recently proposed a federal coordinating committee for biotechnology—a panel of government officials which would, in closed meetings, set scientific standards for the five agencies that fund or regulate biotechnology (see this month's "Dateline" section). Does such a proposal make sense in what appears to be the public atmosphere of acquiescence?

It is still much too early to vote cloture on public debate, though, even if scientists themselves seem too often to speak for a "public" that is otherwise absent. Foes of genetic engineering claim that the technology has outdistanced the public's capacity to respond. Legislators say they continue to get mail on biotechnology—even if the letter-writers don't seem to show up at open forums. Whatever the reasons, those in the field must continue to give non-scientists a chance to speak—and listen—to scientific decision-makers at all levels. To cut off the public, even a recalcitrant public, is to invite a mistrustful backlash.

Biotechnologists should continue to listen to ringing calls for public debate. But they have a right to ask for evidence of real public participation. One can only hold up both ends of a conversation for so long.

—Douglas McCormick