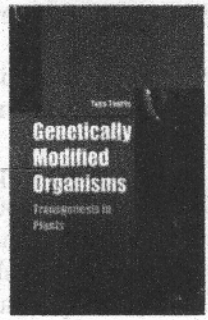

Preface

What some of us will remember most about the turn of this century and millennium is the atmosphere of crisis and polemics linking the most common of our concerns, food and its impact on our health, with the stakes of an ethics that touches our most profound convictions—the ownership of living things through the "patentability" of genes, the possible cloning of human beings, and the uncontrolled dispersal of transgenes. All these processes seem to be possible only through restriction of our individual liberties. This crisis is unusual in that it involves consumers concerned with their comfort, their health, and the future of their children as well as scientists who are aware of the stakes but do not know how to respond to the questioning or anguish of people confronted with new kinds of products.

Is this a true crisis in a society that has suddenly become aware of its moral and judicial destitution in the face of the potential power of scientists, who are themselves sometimes enslaved by industrialists or financiers? Or is it simply the kind of historical convulsion that civilization has felt at every enunciation of a new fundamental principle that challenges the achievements or convictions of its predecessors? Such convulsions occurred in response to the announcement of the rotation of the earth around the sun, universal gravitation, and the equivalence of space and time or of matter and energy. All of these ideas have greatly influenced our modern world view much more than they influenced the way of life of the contemporaries of these discoveries.

Crisis or convulsion? The answer is not easy and demands a certain distance that we do not yet have.

Still, would it not be advisable to take a look that, if not really objective, yet attempts to be at least prudent and honest, at the knowledge we now have access to, a perspective that is still only a preliminary approach to the problem of genetically modified organisms? GMOs are a subject about which everyone seems to agree on a "principle of caution", even though it encompasses widely divergent, even opposing, conceptions. Although, according to this principle, it is advisable to programme certain domains of research with an abundance of caution, we cannot justify an entirely

wait-and-see attitude when the solutions to certain urgent problems, accessible only through this direction of research, may be within the grasp of scientists.

This has happened with certain solutions to problems of hunger and disease throughout the world. There is no progress without risk, but in what cases has there really been progress, and should we not be careful of increasing the risk by rashness or excessive prudence? The crisis, if there is one, has perhaps been best illustrated in the ambiguity of confident detractors of GMOs who simultaneously base an immense hope on gene therapy, when the two processes start strictly from the same principles and technologies.

We cannot eternally justify such an ambiguous position simply on the necessarily subjective consideration of the magnitude of the stakes involved.

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