

## **Governance roles at the transnational level:**

A proposed study of the genetic modification debate in the European Union

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31 March 2004

*Application for the  
James Martin Institute for Science and Civilization  
Studentship*

The role of global businesses in the governance of emerging technologies is on the minds of many researchers in today's world (Ancarani 1995; Goldsmith & Mander 2001; Hertz 2002; Korten 1995). It is also, arguably, on the minds of many nation-states and activist groups who see these businesses' power increasing as they continually leverage new technology, but do not see a corresponding increase in the level of accountability and legitimate use of that power. While these groups may be concerned about the greater power that businesses have on the global scene, they are not able to counteract that power as is typically done at the nation-state level, e.g. through regulation and control of the marketplace. Global business organisations play at least as significant a role as nation-states, NGOs, etc. in regards to the development and introduction of new technologies into society. In the absence of a global government, how are organisations that act on an international scale to be held accountable to their governance role, particularly in regards to advancing controversial technologies? This question has primarily been approached from the politics and international relations perspective. There is little literature on this in the business world, where governance is used primarily in reference to corporate governance. To balance research in this area, I propose to analyse governance roles from a conceptual framework more common to sociology than international relations or management research. At the core of this framework is a limited set of rationalities, called solidarities, that define social organisation. While this framework has not been widely applied in the international relations field, it shows great potential for providing an understanding of the creation and justification of governance roles by organisations at the international level.<sup>1</sup> I propose to develop this potential by

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<sup>1</sup> An initial attempt at connecting international relations and Cultural Theory is

focusing on the debate over the introduction and use of genetic modification into the European Union.

A focus on advancing controversial technologies provides a rich ground for identifying different solidarities. Because of the strong political, ethical, and social concerns surrounding the development of these technologies, there is a lot of space for different organisations – each expressing a particular solidarity in a given context – to contribute to the governance of the technologies. I have chosen to focus in depth on a single set of technologies to allow for an emphasis on extending the theoretical grounds on which my thesis will be built. Since organisations may express themselves differently in regards to the development, acceptance, or use of a technology, analysing the debate over one similar set of technologies will help prevent a muddling of which solidarity a particular organisation expresses. A particular set of technologies which have been in the middle of much controversy between states, businesses, NGOs, and the general public in recent years all involve genetic modification.<sup>2</sup>

Genetic modification presents a host of issues that need to be confronted by the different organisations (both state and non-state). It is through the process of confronting the issues, and the other organisations, that decisions on the direction of technology emerge. In a contested terrain with no single organisation controlling the debate, there is a non-linear relationship between confrontation and decisions;

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Verweij, M 1995, 'Cultural Theory and the study of international relations', *Millennium*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 87-111.

<sup>2</sup> Two websites which provide evidence for this controversy are:

<http://gmnation.org.uk/>

<http://www.europabio.org/>

decisions emerge concurrently with the confrontation in which they are enmeshed. In such an environment, what role do organisations have in *governing* the confrontation space, and therefore the advancement of the technology?

To answer such a question, I will need to address what I mean by ‘governance.’ There is controversy over the meaning and use of this term in many fields. In international relations, governance is a term typically reserved for work done by nation-states (Gilpin 2002). In the business world, governance is usually thought of as corporate governance – that is, in terms of how corporations maximise benefits to their shareholders or stakeholders (O’Sullivan 2001; Vitols 2001). Both of these views, however, primarily involve a governing body that oversees the organisation (be it a corporation or a state) and sets the rules. In contrast, at the international level we have a number of organisations that represent ‘diverse sources of rule-making, political authority, and power’ (Held & McGrew 2002). Governance here is not the sole prerogative of any one of the organisations. It is instead an emergent outcome from the contestation of the solidarities that the organisations represent over a particular issue (Thompson 1999; Thompson & Rayner 1998). Each organisation has a role in governing the technology but these roles only emerge through contestation with other organisations. By including the concept of governance in my framework, I am also able to address the issue of accountability. By what methods are the various organisations in the debate held accountable, and by whom?

My conceptual framework for addressing this topic will be built on much of the literature in Cultural Theory, which espouses that there are a limited set of viable ways of life, or *solidarities* (Rayner & Malone 1998; Thompson 1996; Thompson,

Ellis & Wildavsky 1990). These solidarities represent basic assumptions about nature (both human and physical) and how we should interact with it. The set of possible solidarities is built by the integration of the many dichotomous classifications of social organisation that have been developed over the history of social theory. These solidarities are dependent on each other for their own existence, and justify themselves in contra-distinction with each other. Such inter-reliance and contrary justifications provide for interesting developments of the idea of social accountability and governance which have yet to be explored.

Much of the current literature on governance that rejects the state-centric approach focuses on interactions between organisations on a global level. The regional scale, however, also offers opportunities to research how non-state organisations form and use their governance role. I intend, therefore, to focus my thesis on the European Union. The EU provides a limited international arena where both state and non-state actors openly debate the issue of genetic modification. In addition, by focusing on the EU, I will be able to build on my Masters research on the genetic modification debate in the UK.

There are certain qualitative data-collection methods that are well suited to a topic and framework such as this. My analysis will bring out the underlying assumptions that form an organisation's perspective on genetic modification. I will also conduct an in-depth analysis of the interactions between solidarities. These two requirements will be addressed separately. The first will build on my Masters' work on genetically modified crop introduction to the UK and will consist of a series of in-depth interviews with a variety of organisations involved in the debate. My choice of

organisations will depend on how active they are on the international level in interacting with other organisations over the issue of genetic modification; an initial analysis of the strength of their governance role; and considerations of access. Interviews will provide rich contextual information on the organisations that will then be analysed to determine which solidarity's attributes they express on this issue. Through these interviews, I will also determine what each organisation perceives its governance role, if any, to be.

In addition, to gather data on the interactions between organisations (and thus solidarities), I will combine methods of observation, for debates and conferences concerned with this issue, with methods of textual analysis, for debates that have already taken place and documented interactions. The primary purpose of this data is to determine the ways in which different types of solidarity express their governance role and hold each other accountable on the issue of genetic modification. This data will serve as a useful triangulation with my analysis from the interviews, and will also provide for an analysis regarding how a solidarity expresses its governance role and how it is seen by other solidarities.

The question of businesses' role in the governance of advancing technologies is not one that can be definitively answered from any one particular conceptual framework. My proposed research will analyse the creation and justification of governance roles of both state and non-state organisations through a conceptual framework of a limited set of viable solidarities. By doing so, I am placing my work within the broader

enquiry of the democratic governance of technology<sup>3</sup> and I address the role of technology in the international landscape, a key area of emphasis for the Martin Institute for Science and Civilization.

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<sup>3</sup> As discussed at the conference sponsored by the ESRC Science in Society Programme on “The Democratic Governance of Technological Change in an Era of Globalisation” in Lisbon, 23-26 February 2003.

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