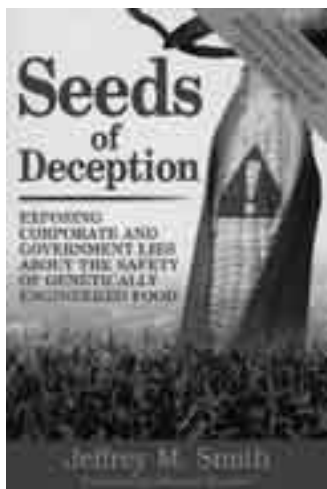


## Seeds of Deception

### Exposing corporate and government lies about the safety of genetically engineered food

by Jeffrey Smith

Green Books, UK, 256 pp.



We are told that eating genetically modified (GM) food is safe. Even amongst organisations and individuals campaigning against the planting of GM crops, there is little talk about the health implications of eating GM food because in these early years of GM releases, there has been little evidence that campaigners could call on (no coincidence). And yet, if it became clear that GM food does pose a danger to human health, that would be the end of it. Why is there so little information about the health implications of eating GM crops? Because there are no problems? Because the evidence is being sat on? Because no one has bothered to look?

Jeffrey Smith answers these questions and many more in his new book, *Seeds of Deception*. This book is easy to read, flowing effortlessly through seemingly well researched stories. It isn't sensationalist: it doesn't need to be. Although some of the stories about animals choosing not to eat GM products appear a little implausible, overall the evidence holds together very well. The main

focus of the book is the US. But for our many *Seedling* readers this will be an important reference as it is the same US endorsement of GM products that is being used for the continuing planting of GM crops around the world.

At the heart of the book lie several recurring themes:

- The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the agency which controls the release of GM crops, is fraudulent and weak.
- Biotech corporations interfere in the regulatory process and use corruption to meet their aims.
- There is strong scientific evidence to show that GM can be dangerous.

The first chapter *Suppressing the evidence*, is the remarkable and well known story about Arpad Pusztai and his GM potatoes. After discovering a link between GM potatoes and a damaged immune system in rats in 1998, Pusztai was forced to retire by his institution, and his findings were suppressed. What is so frightening about this story is the obvious political interference both from high level politicians and 'eminent' scientists. Smith also tries to explain just why such institutions and individuals are so quick to condemn evidence like Pusztai's. The answers all point to money and the struggles scientists face in attempting to do unbiased research.

The second chapter asks "*What could go wrong?*" Although this chapter is scientifically accurate it is also easy to read and understand. Smith describes a number of aspects of GM technology which clearly show that GM food is

potentially very dangerous. GM technology is a clumsy process and based on the false premise that one gene generates one unique protein (see p11). Now that we know there are under a third of the number of genes that there should be for this to be true, we have been forced to recognise that one gene makes a variable number of proteins, sometimes several thousand. So inserting a gene may also lead to the creation of other foreign proteins, which will have many possible consequences. Smith discusses in details the role of spliceosomes, add-on molecules, chaperone proteins, insertion carcinogenesis, horizontal gene transfer, antibiotic resistance, where the gene is exactly located, gene silencing, environmental influences (which turn genes on and off), the use of promoters (forcing a gene to stay on all the time), sleeping viruses, and many other phenomena.

Smith examines the use of the recombinant (GM) bovine growth hormone (rBGH) which can increase milk production by up to 15%. The evaluation of rBGH by the FDA was a farce and rBGH was approved for commercial release in 1994. It is only after ten years of unofficial 'testing' on the public that the real health impact of rBGH is starting to leak out, and it looks like Monsanto (which has already cut production dramatically) may drop rBGH production altogether.

What is striking in this chapter is industry's heavy influence on the FDA (and also Health Canada - the Canadian equivalent). Scientists have been "*threatened, harassed, and denied promotions in retaliation*" for their work. Even farmers who sign pledges not to use rBGH have been threatened with legal action by Monsanto, which argues that labelling products as rBGH-free would "*deceive consumers*" by suggesting that one kind of milk is safer than another.

... cont'd on p 28

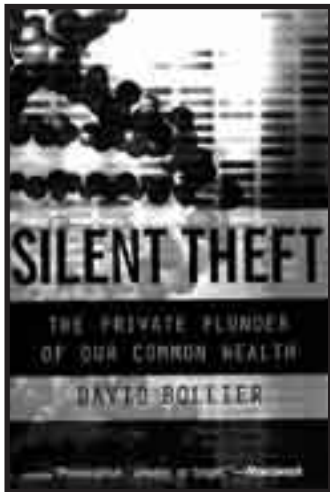


## Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of our Common Wealth

by David Bollier

Routledge, 2003, 272 pp.

reviewed by Brewster Kneen



*“The leaves, the roots, the trunk, the orchard, and the ecosystem? It is our Western conceit to focus on the apple.” - David Bollier*

Little by little the ground we stand on – or thought we were standing on, both tangibly and intangibly – is being stolen from us, fenced off, and converted into private property. Under the corporate regime of market and trade, the elements of our environment, long taken for granted as being *public domain*, are being commodified and privatised. Ownership claims litter the countryside, the air-waves and even the ‘genetic’ codes of living organisms, seeds and software. They pollute forest tracts and arctic wilderness. Yet so mesmerised are North Americans with ‘property rights’ that we focus only on the apple: who owns it, its genes and its brand, and how it is marketed, while we ignore, or remain ignorant of, the wider context that makes the apple possible.

In *Silent Theft* David Bollier presents a highly readable and comprehensive (but far from exhaustive) survey of the broad and

deep realm of public domain and of the contemporary processes of privatisation. He comments that the process of stealing the public wealth has gone so far, and so deceitfully, that *“we no longer see the commons, and thus no longer understand its meaning.”*

Why the theft of public property goes largely unchallenged is a question that implicitly and explicitly pervades the book. Bollier’s answer to this question lies in the individualism and materialism of the people of the United States to whom his book is clearly addressed: *“We are so accustomed to thinking about the individual and so focussed on ‘property’ as tangible things owned by individuals – this is mine – that we have trouble understanding some of the most important wealth we own is collective and social in character.”*

The remedy, says Bollier, lies in developing *“a new language of the commons,”* and he uses the word *commons* to denote what James Boyle refers to as the *public domain*<sup>1</sup>. I much prefer *public domain* as I think it suggests a much broader range of possible ways of organising ‘ownership’ than does the word *commons*<sup>2</sup>. This distinction, which Bollier does not seem to recognise sufficiently, is a significant shortcoming of the book. On the other hand, I can understand why Bollier might want to simplify the argument for the sake of gaining a wider audience.

Clearly it is Bollier’s hope that readers preoccupied with property and markets might be led to recognise that even in their own daily lives there are, in fact,

experiences of exchange and relationship that defy the logic of the market. To do this he develops the notion of *“gift economy”*, giving rightful credit to Lewis Hyde<sup>3</sup>. Bollier’s expression of a gift economy is less poetic than Hyde’s: *“A market-dominated society is not likely to cultivate the sense of trust and shared commitments that any functioning society must have.”* The point, of course, is that a market-dominated society ceases to exist as a society. The competitive individualism that is the foundation of the western notion of market, coupled with the dogma that everything can be owned, excludes the possibility of trust and shared commitment, to say nothing of gratitude. To the contrary, the acquisitiveness required by The Market mandates a corrosive dissatisfaction: there can never be enough.

*“Because of the bonding power of gifts and the detached nature of commodity exchange, gifts have become associated with community and with being obliged to others, while commodities are associated with alienation and freedom. . . It seems no misnomer that we have called those nations known for their commodities ‘the free world.’ The phrase doesn’t seem to refer to political freedoms; it indicates that the dominant form of exchange in these lands does not bind the individual in any way.”* (Hyde, pp 66-7)

As Bollier comments, *“Participants in the commons do not have a compulsion to produce and consume ever-growing quantities of output in order to sate culturally defined ‘scarcities.’ Social stability and interdependence are more urgent priorities.”* (p.186)

Bollier has clearly set out to reach people who suffer a narrow and highly ideological social context and must be gently led to see that there is more to the world – even their own daily lives – than can



be contained within the notion of private property and market relations. In doing so, Bollier does an admirable job of illustrating just how much of 'American' life, culture and economic activity is now, in effect, consuming itself, along with the 'natural resources' upon which it relies, in a frenzy of privatising the commons. Bollier devotes a good half of *Silent Theft* to a survey of a variety of stolen public goods ranging from water, coal, minerals and other mining products, oil, forests and rangelands, to publicly funded military and university research, to airwaves (radio, TV internet), civic spaces and culture sold off (or appropriated) as commercial advertising vehicles.

To make his argument, Bollier goes so far as to describe generic drugs (off-patent, identified by composition not brand) as a commons in comparison with the patent (brand name) drug industry. I'm afraid this creates more confusion than sound argument, since both generic and patent drug industries are corporate in structure and dedicated more to profit than public good. This becomes quite obvious when the commercial drug industry, both proprietary and generic, is compared to traditional medicinals and healing practices, but then Bollier is writing entirely within the dominant culture of North America, not the diverse cultures within North America, much less worldwide, and this is

one of my primary criticisms of the book. There are a multitude of non-commercial, non-ownership commons to be found throughout the world. On the other hand, the major imperial and colonising power in the world is the US, and the rest of the world cannot rest until the US understands itself as one society among many, not the model for the rest to follow.

I would argue that 'commons' refers to specific and limited-access public good responsibility/use regimes, while 'public domain' should refer to much broader unlimited access responsibility/use regimes. (Bollier introduces the helpful term "*social practice*" in reference to the management of unowned common assets.) Thus a well-defined coastal fishery or *ejido* farming community could be identified as a commons while a national park or a highway would be identified as public domain. However, at this time the public culture of North America is so far from being able to recognise the necessity and vast richness and diversity of what has historically constituted the public domain, that a start has to be made somewhere on reconstituting and language and validity of the public domain. As it is now, "*According to natural-rights traditionalists, there is private property (sole ownership) and there is commons (open access) and not much else in between.*"

It is time to acknowledge that there are a wide variety of

foundational myths upon which diverse communities and societies base their social practice. The primacy of individual property rights (corporate or personal) is the exception, not the rule. Bollier has provided a useful introduction to this major social issue for North Americans – as well as for other cultures struggling for survival in the face of the American Monoculture.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> "The Second Enclosure Movement and the Construction of the Public Domain", *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Vol 66, Nos. 1/2, 2003, [www.law.duke.edu/journals/66LCPBoyle](http://www.law.duke.edu/journals/66LCPBoyle); see also, James Boyle, *Shamans, Softwares, & Spleens – Law and the Construction of the Information Society*, Harvard Uni. Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> See Brewster Kneen, "Redefining 'Property': Private property, the commons and the public domain", *Seedling* January 2004, p 1, [www.grain.org/seedling/?id=258](http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=258)

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift – Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Vintage, 1979, 1983.

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## ... a web of lies (from p 24)

The depressing corruption that permeates the FDA and its policies on GM foods is an ongoing theme. Smith brings the story down to individuals working in the FDA and their association with industry and highlights several examples of the FDA supporting biotech applications for new GM crops and products.

This book is about the US (and a little on its puppet state, the UK), but is of paramount importance to countries all around the world. The endorsement of a GM product by the US heavily influences others,

usually to the tune of '*We are all eating it, so why can't you?*' Read this book and stop GM entering your country by rejecting US assertions that GM food is safe.

For more information, go to [www.seedsofdeception.com](http://www.seedsofdeception.com)

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