

## Opinions

# Are you anti-GMO? Then you're anti-science, too.



By **Michael Gerson** Opinion writer May 3 at 8:04 PM

In keeping with our era of ideological boycotts, I will no longer be purchasing [Kind](#) bars. Or [Barilla](#) pasta. Or [Triscuit](#) crackers. Or [Del Monte](#) diced tomatoes. Or [Nutro](#) dog food.

A one-person boycott, of course, is really just a change in your shopping list. But the companies that produce these brands are guilty of crimes against rationality. All advertise on their packaging, in one way or another, that they don't contain GMOs — genetically modified organisms. Walking down the aisle of my supermarket, I could have picked many other examples. Some food companies seem to be saying that GMO ingredients are not even fit for your dog.

My boycott is rooted in the fact that there is no reputable scientific evidence that direct genetic modification — instead of slower genetic modification through selective breeding — has any health effects of any kind. None. Here is a [2016 analysis](#) of about 1,000 studies by the [National Academy of Sciences](#): “The committee concluded that no differences have been found that implicate a higher risk to human health safety from these [Genetically Engineered] foods than from their non-GE counterparts.” The NAS was joined in this judgment by the [Royal Society, the French Academy of Science and the American Medical Association](#).

ADVERTISING



So why has [Europe essentially banned GMOs](#)? Why do many American food companies treat them like toxins?

Mark Lynas's new book, "[Seeds of Science: Why We Got It So Wrong on GMOs](#)," tells the story from a unique perspective. [Lynas](#) was an early anti-GMO activist in Britain — participating in everything from late-night crop destruction to delivering a [pie in the face](#) of Danish statistician Bjorn Lomborg. The logic of Lynas's conversion is an implicit challenge to both the American right and the left. In an earlier book, "[Six Degrees](#)," Lynas took a deep dive into climate science (winning the Royal Society's 2008 [Science Book Prize](#) in the process). He found the scientific consensus on climate change to be compelling. But he found the evidence for the safety of GMOs to be at least as strong. "I couldn't deny the scientific consensus on GMOs," [he writes](#), "while insisting on strict adherence to the one on climate change, and still call myself a science writer."

It was, he says, "a decisive turning point in my life." But the public debate on GMOs turned in exactly the opposite direction. Just as scientists were becoming more confident in the safety of GMOs, global anti-GMO activists, led by Greenpeace, were making the issue a hot potato (including a genetically modified insect-resistant [potato](#) cultivated in Canada). On the strength of myths (that using genetically modified seeds somehow resulted in [suicides among Indian farmers](#)) and deception (tying GMOs to [autism or cancer](#)), supermarket chains, food companies and eventually governments were frightened into anti-GMO stances. In the developing world, anti-GMO activists spread rumors that GMO consumption resulted in homosexuality and [infertility](#).

Lynas has carefully avoided writing a screed. He shows considerable patience for the worldview of his former allies: a preference for the small and natural, a fear that agricultural technology results in centralization and increased corporate power.

I have less patience. There is more than a hint of cultural imperialism when Westerners — grown fat on the success of modern farming — lecture subsistence farmers on the benefits of heirloom breeds and organic methods. The greatest need among farmers who spend part of the year hungry is increased productivity. Plant varieties engineered to resist [cassava brown streak](#), [banana bacterial wilt](#) or [maize lethal necrosis](#) can be a matter of life or death. New, drought-resistant crops will be essential as the climate continues to change. And crops designed to resist insects require the use of far less insecticide — which reduces the risk of pesticide poisoning.

As with the anti-vaccination movement, a contempt for science can have a human cost. The risks are very real when societies become detached from reality.

The anti-GMO movement is best described as a religious belief. Such beliefs have their uses. Theology can determine the values we bring to the world, but it can't be allowed to dictate our facts. The anti-GMO packaging of Triscuits has the same factual basis as the claim: "No plants or animals produced by evolution were used in the production of this product." It is the victory of anti-reason. As close as your nearest supermarket.

On left and right, our theologies need to be tethered to empiricism. Our deepest beliefs should help navigate reality, not determine it.

Meanwhile, my dog and I will be shopping in the non-irrationality section.

Read more from [Michael Gerson's archive](#), [follow him on Twitter](#) or [subscribe to his updates on Facebook](#).

**Read more:**

[Mitch Daniels: Avoiding GMOs isn't just anti-science. It's immoral.](#)

[The Post's View: Chipotle's GMO gimmick is hard to swallow](#)

[The Post's View: Scientists refute the scaremongering about GMOs](#)

[The Post's View: We don't need labels on genetically modified foods](#)

[The Post's View: Genetically modified crops could help improve the lives of millions](#)

 **919 Comments**

---

Michael Gerson is a nationally syndicated columnist who appears twice weekly in The Post.

 Follow @mjgerson

---

The story must be told.

Your subscription supports journalism that matters.

**Try 1 month for \$1**

---