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## Odd Coupling of Political Bedfellows Takes Shape in the New Biotech Era

By JEREMY RIFKIN

**R**arely do political groups on the opposite ends of the spectrum come together in pursuit of shared goals. But the current debate over embryo stem cell research as well as the debates over patents on life, genetically modified foods and “de-

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signer babies” are fundamentally reshaping our political landscape. Social conservatives and left activists are beginning to find common ground on a range of biotech concerns. If this continues, conventional politics could be torn asunder in the Biotech Era.

The thread that unites these two groups is their belief in and commitment to the intrinsic value of life and their growing opposition to what they perceive as the purely utilitarian perspective being extolled by scientists, politicians and market libertarians. To be sure, the social conservatives and left activists differ in the life issues they embrace. The former crusade for the rights of the unborn and rail against infanticide, child abuse and euthanasia. The latter speak out on behalf of the poor, women, animals and the global environment.

But as we move from the Age of Physics and Chemistry to the Age of Biology, we are likely to see a coming together on specific issues of these two historically antagonistic groups. That’s because while the Industrial Age divided people

based on beliefs of how best to control the means of production and ensure that the fruits of industry were broadly shared, the Biotech Era separates those who champion the intrinsic value of life from those who favor a purely utilitarian approach to life.

In this new age, the intrinsic value people say that it’s wrong to reduce biology to coded information and assign a mere commercial value to all life processes. The utilitarians say that any vitalistic notion of life is a throwback to religious mysticism. If the processes of life are amenable to design, customization and mass production, then they should be available to customers as products and services, say the utilitarians. In the years ahead, individuals, families, communities and nations will decide on the various applications and uses of biotech therapies, products and services based on where they position themselves ideologically on the intrinsic versus utility value spectrum.

The emerging connection between social conservatives and left activists already is apparent, if a bit uncomfortable for the two groups. For example, the social conservatives disapprove of using embryos to harvest stem cells for medical research, arguing that it is tantamount to taking a human life. Left activists, on the other hand, are more ambiguous about the status of the embryo because of their commitment to a woman’s right to choose whether to bring a baby to term. Still, they would argue, for the most part, that an embryo has some inherent status and should not be regarded as a mere utility or

commodity. Both sides come together in their opposition to the cloning of human embryos for re-

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search and for producing spare human body parts and are united in their opposition to commercial control over the process.

Similarly, social conservatives and left activists both oppose the granting of patents on genes, cells, tissues, organs and organisms—but for different reasons. One side says that life is God’s creation and therefore not patentable. The other argues that the building blocks of life are discoveries of nature and therefore a common legacy, not the private preserve of giant life science companies.

The genetic foods issue also has brought together social conservatives wary about tampering with God’s handiwork and left activists worried about destabilizing ecosystems and spreading genetic pollution.

Finally, on the subject of so-called designer babies—children whose genetic traits are chosen by their parents at the in vitro stage—social conservatives believe that

this is playing God and therefore unethical, while anti-biotech activists see it as the first step into a brave new world divided by biological castes. Both oppose the emergence of a commercial eugenics civilization.

The point is, although social conservatives and left activists view the world in different ways, their perspectives often converge at the end of the day.

This is not to suggest that there are not fundamental differences between the groups on a number of issues. But with regard to some of the most important questions facing society today, it’s likely that both these groups will break ranks with their traditional political affiliations—social conservatives with neoconservative market libertarians and left activists with social democratic parties. Meanwhile, the traditional animosities between neoconservatives and neoliberals likewise are diminishing as each finds they have more in common, including their shared belief in utilitarian values and market forces.

Of this much we can be sure: The Biotech Era will bring with it a different constellation of political visions and social forces, just as the Industrial Age did. The current debate over embryo and stem cell research already is loosening the old political allegiances and categories. It is just the beginning of the new politics of biology.

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