

# This is the age of biology

Left and right are finding common ground in opposition to a utilitarian view of life

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It is a rare occurrence in history when political groups, formerly at odds with one another on very basic public policy issues, suddenly realign and come together in pursuit of shared goals. The current debate over embryo stem cell research, as well as the debates over patents on life, genetically modified foods, designer babies, and other biotech issues, is beginning to reshape the whole political landscape in ways no one could have imagined just a few years ago.

Although reluctant to acknowledge it, both social conservatives and left activists are beginning to find common ground on a range of biotech-related concerns. If the convergence continues to pick up momentum, conventional politics could be torn asunder in the biotech era.

The threads that unite these two groups are their belief in and commitment to the intrinsic value of life and their growing opposition to what they perceive as a purely utilitarian perspective on biotech matters being extolled by scientists, politicians and market libertarians.

To be sure, the social conservatives and left activists differ in the "life issues" they embrace and champion. The former crusade for what they regard as the rights of the unborn, and rail against infanticide, child abuse and euthanasia. The latter speak out on behalf of the poor, women, our fellow creatures and the global environment.

But, as we make the great transformation from the age of physics and chemistry to the age of biology, we are more and more likely to see a coming together - on specific issues - of these two historically antagonistic groups. That is because, while the industrial age divided people from right to left based on beliefs of how best to control the means of production and ensure that the fruits of industry are broadly shared, the biotech age separates people along a different spectrum, with those who champion the intrinsic value of life on one pole and those who favor a purely utilitarian approach to life issues on the other.

The former say it is wrong to reduce biology to the lowly status of coded information and assign a mere commercial value to all the life processes that make up the living world. They would argue that life is not just a resource. The latter say that any "vitalistic" notion of life is a throwback to religious mysticism or romantic yearnings.

Now that the processes of life are amenable to design, customisation and mass production, they should be made part of the commercial arena and available to customers as products and services. Increasingly, in the years ahead, individuals, families,

communities and nations will make decisions 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 is already apparent, despite the fact that neither group is really comfortable sharing a common agenda. 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 research and for the purpose of producing spare human body parts, and are united in their opposition to commercial control over the process.

Similarly, social conservatives and progressive activists both oppose the granting of patents on genes, cells, tissues, organs and organisms. The former argue that life is God's creation, not a human invention, and therefore not patentable. The latter argue that the building blocks of life are "discoveries of nature" and therefore a common legacy and not the private preserve of giant life science companies.

The genetic foods issue has also brought together social conservatives wary about tampering with God's handiwork and left activists worried about destabilising ecosystems and spreading genetic pollution. The social conservatives see genetic foods as a threat to traditional rural ways of life, while the activists fear that GM foods will undermine cultural diversity.

Finally, on the subject of designer babies, social conservatives believe that designing our offspring is playing God and therefore unethical, while anti-biotech activists see designer babies 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 that, although social conservatives and left activists view the world in different ways, their perspectives are often mutually compatible at the end of the day.

This is not to suggest that there are not fundamental differences between the groups on several issues. There are and will continue to be so. What is equally true, however, is that on some of the most important questions facing society at the dawn of the age of biology, it is likely that both these groups will increasingly break ranks with their traditional political affiliations - the social conservatives with their alliances with neo-conservative market-libertarian parties, and the left activists with their alliances with social democratic parties.

Of course, it is also worth noting that the traditional animosities between neo-conservatives and neo-liberals are likewise diminishing as both find they have more in common than not, 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 very different constellation of political visions and social forces - just as the industrial era did. The current debate about embryo and stem cell research, patents on life, GM foods and designer babies is already loosening the old political allegiances and categories. It is just the beginning of the new politics of biology.

- Jeremy Rifkin is author of *The Biotech Century* (Penguin).