

ASPEKTE DER DISKUSSION UM EIN GENTECHNIKGESETZ CHRISTIAN BRÜNNER

1. Gene technology is a complex, rapidly developing, interdisciplinary amalgam of theoretical and practical methods and disciplines, in which scientific, therapeutic, technical-industrial, economic, ecological and ethical challenges are also in constant collision. Opinion about this ranges from hope for the fight against mental illness, AIDS and cancer to fear of, for instance, the designed human being.

Like everything made by human hands, gene technology has its share of good and bad attributes: it can be applied for the benefit or to the detriment of man, animals, and the ecosystem.

2. Although there are now more than 200 laws and regulations relating to gene technology work, there are loopholes in the legal framework not least in comparison with specialist guidelines in the EC and elsewhere. This applies, for instance, to the release of organisms that have been altered through gene technology. Furthermore, there is a lack of adequate liability regulations. In the final analysis, the constitutional rights of potentially threatened interests are not adequately protected under the law. We therefore need regulations to close these loopholes.

3. I advocate the integration of the various regulations applying to various aspects (e.g. safety, research, applications) into one law, the Gene Technology Law. There are two reasons for this: firstly, avoiding fragmented legislation would contribute to the acceptance of gene technology by the general public (in surveys, 70% considered gene technology to be dangerous; 67% are in favour of legal regulation). Secondly, to reach the best decisions it is now more important than ever to deal with various aspects in an integrative manner, that is, similarly to the way we investigate the consequences of technology. Among the aspects to be integrated I include the ethical responsibility for gene technology work.

4. It is not easy to have a rational political dialogue about the opportunities and the risks of gene technology, and the need for legal regulation, taking into consideration the complexity and material dynamics, the application of gene technology to problems and shortcomings which are not specific to gene technology (e.g., overproduction in agriculture, exploitation of the Third World), and the virulence of "interests" (e.g., healing of illnesses, economic growth, thirst for knowledge, conception of man and of the world). A reasonable discussion will however become all but impossible if, for instance, international concerns threaten to withdraw their gene technology sites from Austria should their wishes not be granted in gene technology legislation; or if horror scenarios are written about cloned people, or "glass" people (who present all their genetic information).