

Gerson: The misguided anti-GMO trend

By MICHAEL GERSON

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Pass any Chipotle these days -- and it is my gastronomic preference to pass rather than enter -- and you will see signs claiming credit for removing ingredients that contain GMOs (genetically modified organisms) from the menu. It is the first big chain to do so, and probably not the last. The business press has pronounced it "a savvy move to impress millennials" and a "bet on the younger generations in America."



This milestone in the history of fast-food scruples (and of advertising) is also a noteworthy cultural development: the systematic incorporation of anti-scientific attitudes into corporate branding strategies. There is no credible evidence that ingesting a plant that has been swiftly genetically modified in a lab has a different health outcome than ingesting a plant that has been slowly genetically modified through selective breeding. The National Academy of Sciences, the American Medical Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the World Health Organization have concluded that GMOs are safe to eat. This scientific consensus is at least as strong as the one on human-caused climate change.

Yet Whole Foods promises "full GMO transparency" by 2018. Its website emphasizes "your right to know." But you will search it in vain for any explanation of how or why GMOs are harmful, because an actual assertion would not withstand scrutiny.

Evidently your right to know does not include serious scientific arguments. Chipotle's Co-CEO Steve Eells set out his rationale this way: "They say these ingredients are safe, but I think we all know we'd rather have food that doesn't contain them."

"They" say. "We" know. It brought to mind an argument made by Dan Kahan of Yale in the journal *Nature* concerning global warming. If you are, say, a Republican in the Deep South, your capacity to confront global climate disruption directly is vanishingly small (assuming you think it is a problem). And the cost of bucking your neighbors on the issue may be considerable. They are likely to view you as an oddity or a turncoat, and to question your judgment on other matters. So the decision to conform to the views of your cultural group or team, while not heroic, is not irrational. (The same argument could be made about the team comprised of enlightened corporate CEOs.)

"The trouble starts," says Kahan, "when this communication environment fills up

with toxic partisan meanings -- ones that effectively announce that, 'If you are one of us, believe this; otherwise, we'll know you are one of them.'"

This use of scientific opinion as a cultural signifier is evident in the vaccination debate. A certain kind of trendy parent believes that everything natural is preferable, forgetting that natural levels of mortality from childhood diseases are high. It is the same ideological impulse -- the belief that nature is pure and artifice is unwholesome -- that causes corporate leaders to spout pseudoscientific nonsense about GMOs, while employing the issue as a cultural marker.

While it may be rational for people to conform to the views of their team, the problem comes when those individual decisions are tallied up. As opinions on climate have become a cultural identifier, the prospects of legislative action on the issue have faded. When it comes to vaccines, herd ideology can disrupt herd immunity, leaving kids with dangerous and preventable diseases.

What is being lost as GMOs become a trendy identifier? Directly, probably not much. Genetically altered plants -- which resist drought and disease, control pests without the spraying and runoff of chemicals, allow no-till farming, prevent soil erosion and limit greenhouse gas emissions -- are too wildly popular with farmers to be stigmatized out of existence. About 90 percent of the corn and soybeans grown in America are GMOs.

But Chipotle, Whole Foods and those who follow their example are doing real social harm. They are polluting public discourse on scientific matters. They are legitimizing an approach to science that elevates Internet medical diagnosis, social media technological consensus and discredited studies in obscure journals. They are contributing to a political atmosphere in which people pick their scientific views to fit their ideologies, predispositions and obsessions. And they are undermining public trust in legitimate scientific authority, which undermines the possibility of rational public policy on a range of issues.

Whatever the intention of those involved, embracing pseudoscience as the centerpiece of an advertising and branding effort is an act of corporate irresponsibility.

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Email: michaelgerson@washpost.com

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