

The Hungry Sheep Look Up And Are Not Fed

James John Bell

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“But what can they hope to gain by attacking the only company that devotes itself exclusively to pure foods?”

“My guess...Maybe collect data on as many slip-ups as possible—in an operation that size, some stuff must leak through now and then which isn’t as good as the advertising claims—and use these as a pistol to hold to the company’s head.”

—John Brunner, *The Sheep Look Up*

Recent undercover testing of seafood in supermarkets, like Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s, conducted by environmental groups discovered an “unreported national crisis” in mercury-contaminated fish. “The public health threats of mercury-contaminated seafood, particularly swordfish, are too great to ignore,” explains Doug Israel, Project Director for the Turtle Island Restoration Network, “All retailers, as well as the public health agencies of every state, have an obligation to protect the public from harmful mercury ingestion.”

Laboratory results from secret testing procedures performed on samples of fresh swordfish taken from numerous fish retailers have revealed dangerously high levels of methylmercury. Already, children under fifteen and women of childbearing age in 41 states are warned not to eat fish because of mercury poisoning in our lakes and rivers caused by pollution from dirty coal-fired power plants. Recent Bush Administration Clean Air Act exemptions allow the nation’s oldest, dirtiest power plants and factories to expand without installing air pollution control equipment—meaning this food safety threat can only get worse.

Secretly testing food from organic and grocery chain retailers to see if it is in fact healthy sounds like part of the plot to a science fiction novel. In fact, just such a novel was written back in 1972—*The Sheep Look Up*—by British author John Brunner, right when the modern environmental movement was taking off. His story is set in a future America—where the radical environmental movement (closer to Earth Liberation Front, than Earth First!) has swelled to over a million strong, corporations run America, and her puppet of a President called Prexy is a dead ringer for Dubya.

Brunner’s warnings are sobering—in his future America the President blames every chemical spill, toxic dump, and resulting contaminated food supply not on the companies responsible, but on “terrorists.” American food companies are trying to dump their engineered food on Africa and it is causing people to go mad. The radical environmental movement’s founder, Austin Train, is being hunted by the State as he plots with others a revolution to save what’s left of the Earth. Long out of print, its apocalyptic predictions for America now eerily coming true, *The Sheep Look Up* will be back in circulation this June, published by Ben Bella Books.

Anarchist & Hacker Cookbooks

“Okay, so it’s true these mothers have turned prairies into dustbowls and used the sea for a giant sewer and laid concrete where there used to be forests. So stop them! Don’t just let them walk over you, crush you face-down into the dirt! Crush them first!”

—John Brunner, *The Sheep Look Up*

“As far as there are any guides for science fiction writers wanting to make their near-future societies credible, the rules of thumb that have proved most reliable in my experience are these,” lectured John Brunner near the end of his life. “Take it for granted that the government will disregard long-term dangers such as those affecting the environment—in order to cling to power; that the citizenry will do the same because thinking is too much like hard work; and when the handful of Cassandras are proved right, they will be held to blame and very likely stoned or shot” This describes well the plots of his best-known works.

Four books of Brunner’s would stand out. Like horsemen of the Apocalypse, they all charged onto the scene between 1968 and 1975—*The Sheep Look Up* (industrial pollution, food safety), *Stand on Zanzibar* (overpopulation), *The Jagged Orbit* (military industrial complex and race relations), and *Shockwave Rider* (computer privacy and government control).

Only two books share the same character—the dumbfounded US leader Prexy—but the “subject matter” of all four books revolves around the American driven doomsday economy with its corporate and government minions. Brunner’s tales would eventually take root in reality itself, and considering all the real world mischief that they inspired, one would think he was actually writing undercover resistance manuals as science fiction.

“There’s an episode in which the adopted son of a childless millionaire is kidnapped and held to ransom against 20,000 water purifiers to be issued gratis to the poorer population of California,” Brunner recalled about a plot line in *The Sheep Look Up*. Some believe he inspired Field Marshal Cinque of the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) to kidnap the millionaire heiress Patty Hearst in 1974. The SLA held her for a \$2 million ransom that was to be paid to the poor. “High-profile kidnapping was so obvious an idea in the circumstances that I refuse to be blamed,” Brunner said.

In 1988, Robert Morris Jr., a graduate student in computer science at Cornell, unleashed an experimental, self-replicating, self-propagating program and injected it into the Internet. Brunner was blamed. This time there was hard evidence. The student’s mother identified *Shockwave Rider* as her son’s primer on writing computer viruses. The now legendary computer worm—the first ever of its kind—counted as its casualties many universities, research centers, and military installations around the globe.

When asked about his role in the boy’s crime, Brunner responded, “I hope it is an awful warning to the people who have assumed blithely that they can run a modern society on the basis of secretive, computerized information.” Brunner defended Morris as if he was Nickie Haflinger—his character from his book *Shockwave Rider*. They would go on to inspire generations of computer hackers.

John Brunner’s homebrew of ecological resistance in *The Sheep Look Up* has much in common with the Earth Liberation Front (ELF). Born in 1992 at the inaugural UK Earth First! gathering in Brighton, England, the Earth Liberation Front has spread around the planet. When some Earth First!ers decided to disavow non-violent acts of sabotage, called monkey wrenching, in order to build a more mainstream radical environmental movement, ELF came out of the forests to pick up the wrench. Underground non-violent acts of sabotage are claimed by “elves” that operate in secret.

On November 17, 2002, *The New York Times* reported that in Virginia, “vandals used a corrosive cream to etch the letters ELF on the windows of 25 cars and three fast food restaurants...Thirteen windows at each of two McDonald’s and 25 windows at a Burger King, all in Richmond’s affluent West End, were damaged beyond repair. Around the same time, vandals used a similar substance to scar the surfaces of 25 SUVs at a West Richmond dealership...vandals hacked two SUV’s with hatchets in a suburban subdivision and left notes on each saying it was the work of the front”

These apparent ELF actions are right out of the first chapter of *The Sheep Look Up*, “...cars had their windows opaqued with a cheap commercial compound used for etching glass, and slogans were painted on their doors. Some were long: THIS VEHICLE IS A DANGER TO LIFE AND LIMB. Many were short: IT STINKS! But the commonest of all was the universally known catch phrase: STOP, YOU’RE KILLING ME! Then...they turned to the nearby store windows and obscured the goods on offer with similarly appropriate slogans.” There are dozens more such guerrilla tactics revealed as Brunner’s eco-revolutionary tale unfolds, and as the Earth takes more damage, so do the corporations responsible. It appears Brunner’s fiction has become fact once again.

And Foul Contagion Spreads

“Unto the last dawn of man you have cursed us, O Father. Our Father. Our Father Which art in Washington, give us this day our daily calcium propionate, sodium diacetate monoglyceride, potassium bromate...”

—John Brunner, *The Sheep Look Up*

In November 2002, Greenpeace activists unfurled a banner on a Nebraska silo containing 500,000 bushels of soybeans contaminated by genetically engineered, drug-producing corn. The banner read, “This is your food on drugs. Ban genetically engineered drug-crops.” The genetically engineered drug that contaminated these soybean stocks is a protein that is intended to vaccinate pigs. Greenpeace brought attention to this huge, contaminated food mound to expose the inherent dangers in growing drugs in one of our nation’s most important staple foods. The industry of biotechnology uses genetic engineering to break the natural boundaries that exist between species. A fish and a strawberry will not breed in nature, but in the laboratory, scientists can take a gene from a fish, insert it into a strawberry, and essentially create an entirely new organism. Genetic engineering can mix together genes from animals, plants, and even humans.

“Biopharming” is an experimental application of genetic engineering in which crops, like corn and soybeans, are engineered to produce high concentrations of drugs—pharmaceutical proteins and chemicals—that they do not produce naturally. Animal “pharms” use cloning and genetic engineering to harvest drugs, and even human organs, from animals. Biotech companies today breed genetically-modified chickens, for instance, that produce insulin, and other new drugs, based on human proteins manufactured inside the whites of their eggs. Environmentalists and scientists, including the US National Academy of Sciences, have repeatedly warned biotech companies like Monsanto that growing drug-producing crops in open fields would inevitably contaminate our food supply.

You Are What You Have To Eat

“Over the past few weeks thirty-five million people have been sick for a week or longer. Factories, farms, and kinds of public services have been shut down or cut back.”

—John Brunner, *The Sheep Look Up*

When crops fail and people start falling ill from the food and the pollution in *The Sheep Look Up* Prexy blames it on terrorists, “It is my sad duty to inform you that our country is in a state of war...not a war with bombs and tanks and missiles, not a war that is fought by soldiers gallant on the field of battle...but a war that must be fought by you, the people of the United States. We have been attacked with the most cowardly, the most monstrous, the most evil weapons ever devised by wicked men. We are the victims of a combined chemical and biological attack.” The actual corporate culprits, of course, go unnoticed.

Unfortunately the villains in *The Sheep Look Up* are very real. Monsanto’s contribution to the world and the story include: Saccharin, Agent Orange, DDT, Dioxins, and PCBs. Brunner is familiar with the legacies of Monsanto, and other industry giants like DuPont and Dow Chemical. He delivers many direct challenges to them through the voices of his activist characters, “And I presume on the eighth day God called you and said, ‘I changed my mind about insects!’”

Genetically engineered ingredients, such as BT corn and RoundUp Ready soy, are already in 60 to 70% of the food on American grocery store shelves. We have become the subjects of a large-scale experiment on our health and our environment by the biotech industry and the giant corporations, like Kraft, that use their products.

‘Gene Spills’ in America are Called ‘Aid’ in Africa

“I guess the nearest analogy would be with cheese,” said Mr. Bamberly.”

—John Brunner, *The Sheep Look Up*

Kraft Foods is the largest food company in the US, and the second largest in the world. They are a lot like the Puritan Foods giant in *The Sheep Look Up* who advertise their food being safe and wholesome. The Trainites—Brunner’s

radical environmentalists in the story—secretly test Puritan’s food to see if they’re lying about its safety. What they discover is just the tip of the iceberg.

Environmentalists from the Genetically Engineered Food Alert are doing something very similar—they have been secretly testing Kraft’s products. These brands are found in 99% of U.S. households, and many of them, such as Taco Bell taco shells, Boca Burgers, Lunchables, Post cereals and Stovetop Stuffing have been found to contain untested and unlabeled genetically engineered ingredients.

After StarLink corn a biotech variety not approved for human consumption—was discovered in Kraft’s products by Larry Bohlen of Friends of the Earth (FOE) in the fall of 2000, the company recalled millions of boxes of Taco Bell taco shells. FOE’s secret tests cost the biotech industry billions, as skittish investors pulled out and foreign markets were closed to US exports. They feared more such biotech blunders.

American taxpayers, as a result of biotech’s failures, are personally subsidizing the agricultural biotech industry. This totals in the billions. As a result the biotech industry is working with entities like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Group of Eight (G8) to remove foreign barriers and laws, saying they’re “restrictions to free trade.”

House Ways and Means Chairman Thomas and Senate Finance Chairman Grassley, in separate sets of remarks in January, called for action against the European Union before the World Trade Organization (WTO) for its position on genetically modified US food. Thomas recently visited several southern African nations that trade conventional crops with Europe. He offered a harsh assessment of European trade policies, calling it a “horrendous anti-humanitarian move.” Grassley said he favors a WTO dispute settlement case as a way to pry open the markets of the 15 European Union member countries. They both wish to take the Europeans to court in the WTO to challenge laws restricting genetically modified food. If they had their way, European food safety regulations would be as ineffective as America’s laws.

Federal food safety law in America hasn’t even caught up with biotech. The United States has eight different agencies regulating biotechnology under 12 different laws—none of which were passed with biotechnology in mind. These laws are all 30, 40 and even 50 years old—biotechnology wasn’t even invented yet. The biotech lobbyists want to keep it that way too.

Biotechnology “regulation” is heading down the same road as hard-rock mining, where the 1872 Mining Law—think pick and shovel days—still regulates an industry that has advanced to using massive cyanide heap leach extraction methods and now levels whole mountains. The rate at which biotechnology (and the coming *deus ex machina* of nanotechnology) is being adopted by our society—without regard to our safety or the political, cultural, and economic ramifications mirrors the development of nuclear power and weapons.

The Battle of the Story

“Filtermasks? We evolved on this planet; why should we have to strain its air before we fill our lungs? Steam cars? Why cars at all?”

— John Brunner, *The Sheep Look Up*

The points of environmental destruction (nuclear dumps, clear cuts, oil spills, toxic pollution) have now become singular—climate change permeates and impacts all points of the globe; invasive species and biotech contamination are quickly replicating out of control; mercury and numerous other toxins are now found in just about everyone. This is our world now, and it is also an accurate description of the state of ecological crises in *The Sheep look Up*.

It’s becoming clearer and clearer that our environmental problems are spiraling beyond the limits of any single points of intervention as well. Although the framework of place-based campaigns confronting single issues will continue to be important to the mainstream environmental movement, they remain inadequate, to stop the global disruption of these macro-issues. The only way to target environmental destruction at this scale is to target the underlying cultural narratives and assumptions that prop it up. Brunner understood that humans structure information through narrative—that stories shape our perception of reality. Science fiction, Brunner believed, had “a refreshing readiness to question our taken-for-granted assumptions.”

Environmentalists, as they struggle to reach the public and policy makers, can learn a lot from Brunner in how to make their “awful warnings” penetrate and reshape the dominant culture. Brunner wrote that such a dystopian tale requires one crucial element, “the element in question being, of course, a dramatization of the theme which escapes the risk of being didactic and involves the reader in the fate of the characters to the point where he cares what becomes of them.”

Too often, environmental activists tell merely the story of the battle. Those didactic facts how many marched, the number of arrests, the endless litany of issue-based data, the problem, the solution, the policy fix, the lawsuit, on and on—fail to articulate core values or reach people in their own terminology. Thus, the majority of people remain spectators because the battle doesn’t directly touch their lives. In order to open the cultural space for a true social change movement to grow, the essential piece is not the story of the battle, but rather the battle of the story—target the culture from within and rewrite its code. *The Sheep Look Up* turns the story of corporate America upside down and sets it aflame-allowing us to reclaim our stories in the process.

James John Bell is writer/director for the non-profit environmental communications firm Sustain (www.sustainusa.org). He recently wrote the introduction for the 2003 reprinting of John Brunner’s science fiction novel *The Sheep Look Up*. Portions of this essay were excerpted from his introduction. On his website (www.LastWizards.com), you can find more info on topics presented here.

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