
This book is the second edition published 16 years after the initial publication of First the Seed. The purpose of the first publication was to provide a social history of both the scientific and commercial aspects of plant improvement. The book outlined the story of how plant breeding and seed production became a means of capital accumulation. In addition to providing a social history of plant improvement, the author described the new opportunities with what was generically called “biotechnology” and provided a look into the future social impacts of the new technologies. There has been significant progress in the use of the new technologies in the past 16 years and the author provides, in this second edition, a review of this progress in light of his earlier predictions of the possible positive and negative aspects of biotechnology. This edition, as did the first edition, concludes with a strong request for scientists and policymakers to strengthen public agriculture research to meet the human needs of the twenty-first century.

The book is divided into 11 chapters: (1) Introduction, (2) Science, agriculture, and social change, (3) The genetic foundation of American agriculture, (4) Public science ascendant: plant breeding comes of age, (5) Heterosis and the social division of labor, (6) Plant breeders’ rights and the social division of labor: historical perspective, (7) Seeds of struggle: plant genetic resources in the world system, (8) Outdoing evolution: biotechnology, botany, and business, (9) Directions for deployment, (10) Conclusion, and (11) Still the seed: Plant biotechnology in the twenty-first century. A central theme throughout the 11 chapters is the critical role that seed play in agricultural development. The author makes a very strong case for seed as the most fundamental agriculture input and the importance of examining the social consequences of human endeavors to preserve and improve seed genetic resources. A historical review of scientific progress in the improvement of plants is done in the context of the social changes that resulted from this progress. A major topic addressed throughout this book is the division of labor between the public and private institutions involved in the preservation and improvement of plants and the social consequences of this division. The progress in biotechnology and the author’s opinion of the social consequences of this progress are covered in Chapter 11. This chapter covers in detail the controversy surrounding the development and release of transgenic crops now commonly referred to as GMOs (genetically modified organisms). This coverage includes the international seed markets as well as the issues of GMOs in the ongoing international efforts for the preservation and utilization of plant genetic resources. The author provides great coverage of the opposition of the past few years to the involvement of the private sector in the development and deployment of GMOs.

In all chapters, the author makes extensive use of scientific references and quotes by experts. One very helpful approach used was to provide a thorough summary and conclusion at the end of each chapter with a final summary in Chapter 10. It was most interesting to read the author’s projections of future progress in plant improvement and the expected social changes with the current distribution of labor among the public and private sector institutions involved in this endeavor.

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