

The thorny, moral debate over patenting life

By Pierre-Olivier Savoie

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MONTREAL (CUP) - By allowing companies to patent DNA, society is encouraging a system of social domination that fits neatly into a capitalist structure, says a United States anthropologist.

In a recent debate held at McGill University, Chaia Heller said society must question the ethics of biological patenting.

"At what point do we find it repugnant and odious to own something?" she said. "Nothing is sacred anymore."

Heller, who teaches at the Institute for Social Ecology in Plainfield, Vermont, said we have been conditioned to accept capitalism's system of private property.

That is why, she argued, society sees no problem with a company receiving royalties for developing new cells to cure diseases.

"At what point do we draw that cultural line and decide that the elaboration of capitalism is too much?" she asked.

Christian Cawthorn, a patenting professional who participated in the McGill debate, counter-argued that without patents, companies could not survive.

Patents, said Cawthorn, allow companies to protect themselves against others who would

like to steal information that is to their advantage.

"If companies can't patent an invention, they just let the information die because they can't make any profit off it," he said.

Private companies have progress reports, argued Cawthorn, so if after two or three months the research is going nowhere they just drop the project.

"It's sad, but research has always been driven by the economy," he added.

Cawthorn also said a major breakthrough would be to patent taxol, a megamolecule very difficult to synthesize, which could help cure cancer.

Taxol sticks to cells and stops their proliferation by refraining cancer's endless cell division.

If companies could patent taxol's synthesis, said Cawthorn, there would be much more research in trying to find new ways of recreating this living molecule.

But Heller said this argument simply justified the commodification and appropriation of information by promising to "cure


all diseases." She believes this leads to deceit because - according to her - 97 per cent of all diseases are stress, economics or environment-related.

Cawthorn replied that when an idea is patented, the information is still available to everyone and thus helps the scientific community move forward.

"Coca-Cola was never patented, and Pepsi tried to reproduce the same taste for so many years," he said. "Now they've given up and are saying that different [than Coke] is better."

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