Organic versus inorganic: an important distinction, but not for obvious reasons

Lee Silver, Professor of Molecular Biology and public policy at Princeton University, offers a concise and highly critical look at the scientific and cultural history of the distinction between organic and inorganic, GMO versus non-GMO — essentially the distinction between natural versus unnatural and the freight these terms carry. This is all the more relevant in the wake of California's Proposition 37, which was built upon a supposition that this is a meaningful and important distinction with health implications. Silver begins:

> Before the 18th century, scientists and non-scientists alike assumed that the material substance of living organisms was fundamentally different from that of non-living things — organisms and their products were considered organic by definition, while non-living things were mineral or inorganic.

Silver's stance can also be seen as a culmination of a growing body of evidence that, at the very least, questions if not outright denies many of the benefits presumed to accompany "natural" foods, or the threats posed by "unnatural" foods. This, in turn, may be the cultural pendulum swinging back from the birth of environmental movement in the 70s. In September, NPR examined the questionable health benefits (or lack thereof) offered by organic foods. Michael Pollan, a figurehead in the food movement, was asked what he thought of these findings. He was somewhat dismissive of the meta-study on which the NRP story was based, focusing instead on related factors like pesticide use and exposure to make the case for organics.

Regardless of whether or not organic or natural or non-GMO foods may be healthier or safer, however, Silver makes a strong case for the positive potential of genetic modification. We need GM crops, modern genetic techniques are a very valuable part of our toolkit — a sentiment shared by the late Norman Borlaug, Nobel laureate and "father of the Green Movement. The fixation on whether something is organic or not, Silver argues, is distracting us from whether something is good or not. To this end, Silver takes a hard stance against what he sees as a socio-economic climate hostile to GMOs:

> In the current social and economic climate, much of the critical research required to turn promising [GM] results into viable products is simply not pursued. As a result, anti-GM, organic food advocates may be indirectly responsible for avoidable deaths of future children.

View the original article here: What Is The Meaning Of "Organic" (And Inorganic) Food?