Ontological politics in practice: Understanding antagonistic framings of GMOs, science, and the public in Flanders

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In 2011, a consortium of scientists and a multinational company conducted the first GMO field trial in Flanders (northern Belgium) since a decade. This field trial, which involved potatoes that were genetically modified to attain resistance to phytophthora infestans, triggered antagonistic public protests. Opponents of the trial advocated its destruction, in response to which a coalition of scientists instigated a public campaign to ‘save our science’. This paper studies how coalitions of proponents and opponents of (the freedom to conduct) the trial framed the GMO trial, and each others’ stakes in it. Based on analyses of grey literature and 16 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from all coalitions, the paper argues that the coalitions were actively involved in an ontological politics centring on the performativity of the field trial. These politics turned the GMO field trial into a ‘fire object’ that ontologically changed as it moved from one epistemic assemblage to another. The paper concludes that this ontological – rather than epistemological – discontinuity hindered a public debate on two core issues underlying protests against the trial: the socio-political embeddedness of scientific knowledge, and a scientific culture of handling non-knowledge. As a result, the different coalitions missed opportunities to enhance mutual reflexivity, not only or principally concerning the pros and cons of socio-technical innovations as GMOs, but more fundamentally concerning the social position of post-sovereign science.