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Review: Precautionary Tools for Reshaping Environmental Policy, by Nancy J. Myers and Carolyn Raffensperger (eds.)

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**How to Avoid Regret**

If someone discovered a pollution-free source of power tomorrow, we would seize upon it as the solution to global warming, without thinking twice. But that’s how we got into our present environmental plight. There’s gotta be a better way—and there is: As Nancy Myers and Carolyn Raffensperger explain, we need to adopt the precautionary principle. (Myers, Communications Director of the Science and Environmental Health Network (SEHN), authors or co-authors all but one of the first eight chapters, and two of the remaining seven.)

The precautionary principle dictates that when harm might occur, we proceed cautiously and err on the side of safety. As commonsense as a platitude—“Look before you leap. First, do no harm. Better safe than sorry. Prevention is the best cure” (4)—it seems a no-brainer. Myers acknowledges that something similar led to regulatory legislation in the 1960s and 70s. But its application encounters resistance in the US. As one Bush administrator said, “We consider it a mythical concept, perhaps like a unicorn” (119).

This book details the care and feeding of this mythical beast.

Part I provides a “tool chest” for precautionary approaches, such as: “heeding early warnings” and “asserting the public trust role of government” (29). Part II presents a checklist and examples of community groups implementing the tools of Part I. Part III addresses situations that call for precaution, such as mad cow disease, the ravaging of the oceans, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

One subtext is the place of the United States in a global community. The book focuses on American attitudes, in part because other countries have more readily used the principle to safeguard their citizens and environment. An appendix lists protocols and treaties in Europe and elsewhere that incorporate the precautionary principle to address pollution and genetically modified organisms (GMO). But the federal courts, Raffensperger demonstrates, have been swayed away from public protection.
One cause of the decline of public safety in America, despite its government of, by, and for the people, is the “thinness” of our democracy: “we vote in elections, pay our taxes, and generally stay out of the way” (46). Such a state “is notoriously weak in protecting both individuals and the commons in cases in which economically profitable activities may have harmful side effects” (47). To rein in the corporate power brokers requires citizens actively involved in the decisions that affect their lives and communities. Herein lies the value of the various tools, for intervening.

The volume offers strategies to replace poor decision making with good: by creating consensus and forming connections across social divides. To achieve such links requires being explicit about our desires and goals, and willing to raise difficult questions. Such questions uncover unexpressed values, find better alternatives, help make decisions clear, if not easy. Reframing issues and looking at them in terms of a larger picture often alters the solutions that seem appropriate.

The final section’s essays on real-life instances make a damning case for the need to adopt the principle. These in-depth analyses hammer home humanity’s capacity to act less destructively--and our atrocious record of failing to use that capacity.

The question of whether to extract methane from coal beds in the Midwest results in a fine chapter by Myers and Joshua Slov. The authors demonstrate the drawbacks of conventional cost-benefit analyses, which mask complications with reductive assessments. The advantage of the precautionary principle is its dispassionate acknowledgement of the difficulties as a basis for sound decision-making.

This book offers guidance on how to consider alternatives. It needs to be in every public library, and will be useful for anyone involved in a community who cares about environmental policy—which should include us all.

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