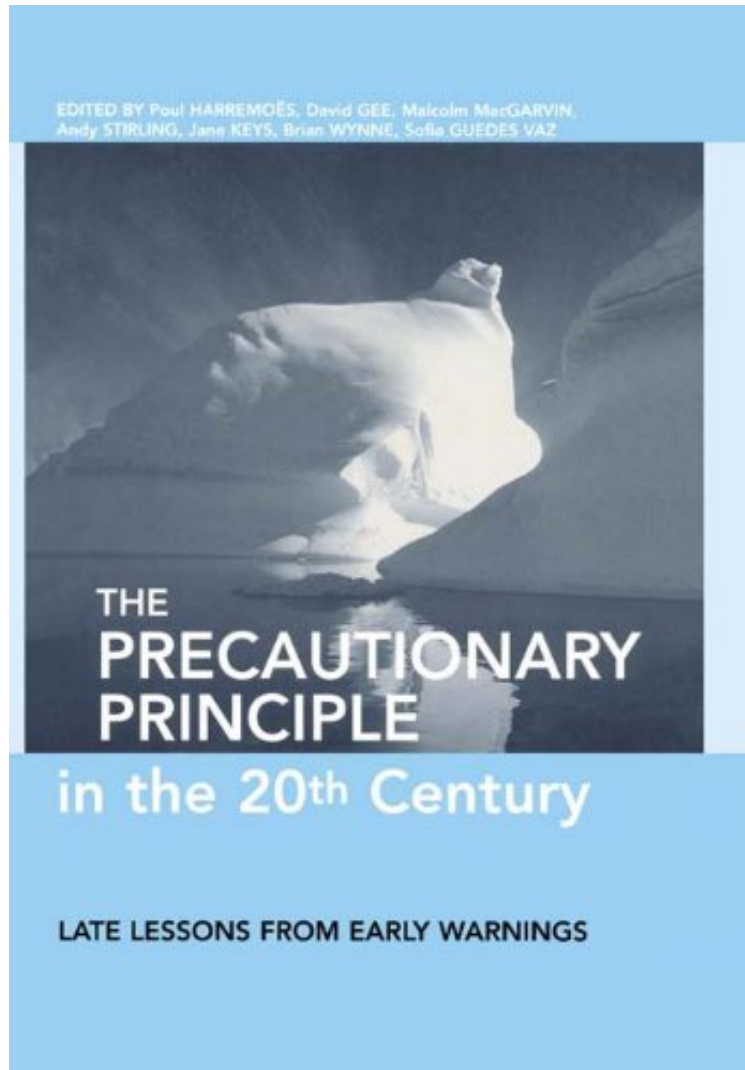


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The Precautionary Principle in the 20th Century: Late Lessons from Early Warnings

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From Routledge : The Precautionary Principle in the 20th Century: Late Lessons from Early Warnings before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Precautionary Principle in the 20th Century: Late Lessons from Early Warnings:

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. A thorough and useful bookBy Doctor GoatsThe book takes a matter-of-fact approach to the subject, getting contributors to give detailed answers to four key questions on specific hazards that were subsequently addressed, starting with when was the first credible scientific warning of potential harm. It's not a light read, and an understanding of the scientific method, chemistry, and statistics will prove

invaluable. The book received a warm welcome in the scientific press, and the quality of the writing shows why. Where there is doubt in research, the book discusses it honestly. It also shows why problems frequently aren't addressed until after financial or health damage has been done, for example the compound (government) system failures that caused the BSE crisis in the UK. Of note is what has been omitted: the low-hanging fruit of (say) second-hand smoking, thalidomide, DDT, and lead in petrol would have made a separate book. Another of the questions asked of the contributors concerns costs versus benefits -- for example, there is a discussion of whether the health (and, ultimately, financial) problems of asbestos were offset by the safety benefits, employment opportunities and so on. Combined with an unbiased and non-accusatory tone throughout the book, it makes an invaluable contribution to a field overrepresented by polemics. 12 of 22 people found the following review helpful. The empowerment of bureaucracy

By Jaap C. Hanekamp

The precautionary principle (PP in short) has become a scientific and political instrument attracting a host of organisations and individuals giving their viewpoints adding to the international discussion. Indeed, how to deal with environmental and human health risks is not a simple matter. Science and technology carry both real benefits and real risks. And a 'better be safe than sorry' strategy -as a translation what precaution is- seems the wisest thing to do. The European Environment Agency (EEA) adds to this discussion by looking into the past. Always a good thing to think historically about risks and technology. The presentation of those historical examples of technology gone wrong leaves one wondering, however, whether or not the scientific representation is up to par. Clearly it is not. However, not to the layman. One needs to be aware of all the scientific ins and outs to spot the possible biases. One example I myself am quite familiar with is the antibiotic case discussed by the EEA (chapter 9 in the downloadable version). Blatant omissions from the scientific discussion (leaving out essential scientific literature) spurs the authors of this chapter to a banal and trivial conclusion (p. 98 of the downloadable version): 'As the risks involved are of uncertain magnitude, the decisions on risk management are particularly difficult. The risk can obviously not be excluded with certainty, nor can it be de-termined as acceptable. In a climate of uncertainty it is preferable to show caution. In this situation decision-making needs to involve precaution, particularly when it is unacceptable, inhuman and unethical to wait for ultimate proof, when human fatalities could be involved.' Of course this conclusion can be drawn for any case, not just this one. Moreover no amount of scientific research will ever result in certainty. The conclusion presented here in the EEA report is not in need of any scientific deliberation. It could do well without ten pages of scientific reviewing, whether or not biased in nature. Furthermore, the authors revert to the fallacy of an appeal to motives in place of support. They regard not invoking the PP as unacceptable, inhuman and unethical. Of course this is beside the point as it has very little to do with the scientific discourse at hand. This brings me to the philosophical side of the issue. Any type of human action or inaction is fraught with uncertainty and therefore prone to the PP. So how to chose? The problem is that risks of one kind or another are on all sides of regulatory choices, and it is therefore impossible to avoid running afoul of the principle. The PP promotes irrational behaviour by the assumption that regulating target risks (the historical examples presented in the EEA study) is overall beneficial and that the costs of risk avoidance with only the specific target risks in view can be met on any scale -which is clearly not the case. Moreover, this asymmetry is enhanced by the fact that those who invoke the PP -the policymakers- do not need to adhere to it themselves despite the fact that any human intervention holds uncertainties for the future. The EEA treats the PP as though it were an exogenous panacea for environmental and social ills. In other words: market risks warrants governmental regulation. But government regulation is not an exogenous solution to environmental risks; it is itself an endogenous and fallible human activity, and as such it can create risks. Risks that are as real as the risks of market (economic) activities: care can cure but care can also cripple. The odd thing is that no discussion what so ever is presented by the EEA on the problems of the PP. Not a single reference to the ever growing scientific literature highly critical of the PP. Whichever side one choses, within the scientific discourse one has to deal with scientific criticism from both sides. My conclusion therefore must be that the EEA did not so much present a scientific piece of work on this issue but made a political statement on how to deal with risk. It is part of the 'ecological critique' of the Western World which Anna Bramwell described so well in her 'Ecology in the twentieth century'. The PP fits well with a misanthropic view of progress combined with a relativistic perspective on science. Therefore the PP empowers bureaucracy as the scientific check and balances are side-tracked in its implementation. Indeed a recipe for increasing social and political struggles and stagnating economies.

The precautionary principle is widely seen as fundamental to successful policies for sustainability. It has been cited in international courts and trade disputes between the USA and the EU, and invoked in a growing range of political debates. Understanding what it can and cannot achieve is therefore crucial. This volume looks back over the last century to examine the role the principle played or could have played, in a range of major and avoidable public disasters. From detailed investigation of how each disaster unfolded, what the impacts were and what measures were adopted, the authors draw lessons and establish criteria that could help to minimise the health and environmental risks of future technological, economic and policy innovations. This is an informative resource for all those from lawyers and policy-makers, to researchers and students needing to understand or apply the principle.

"...Explains how to avoid major health and environmental disasters." -- Publisher's Weekly
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