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**Norah MacKendrick, 2018, Better safe than sorry.
How consumers navigate exposure to everyday toxics
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The topic dealt within the book is timely and of great concern to post-modern consumers: how do we make our decisions when buying something that can affect our health? It is about what the author calls ‘precautionary consumption’, something that is correctly differentiated from precautionary principle. To clarify, discuss, articulate, explore and investigate this difference is the great value of this book. It shows how the failure to apply the precautionary principle in the USA leads inexorably individual consumers alone to navigate complicate decisions about which products to buy, whilst widespread consumers’ concern and uncertainty open spaces to be capitalised by the market actors on the promise of health and safety.

In the failure of an effective public regulation, collective risks need to be addressed at the individual level. Decisions about buying food and consumers’ products, which seem small and simple, become very complex. It is a matter of deciphering infinite warnings and cryptic information on product packages, whilst trying to balance the household budget and buy the right food or product for the all family. It is here that the topic of precautionary consumption intersects gender and class issues. As mothers are the primary shoppers in most families, the burden of precautionary consumption decisions falls mostly on them. Since income, rather than a national regulation based on a precautionary principle, affects what products mothers can buy, reliance on precautionary consumption discriminates among social classes. Responsibility is then gendered, whilst social classes affect exposure to chemicals.

This book shows how consumption sociology can contribute to understand the effects of policy decisions and biosafety regulation in risk society. The issue is of particular relevance in the USA, because there the federal government adopts an ex-post approach to safety regulation. The majority of synthetic chemicals used in processed food and cleaning or personal care products enter the market without any

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rigorous testing or federal government review. On the contrary, since 2007, the European Union has adopted a precautionary approach to chemical regulation. The result is that in the case of cosmetics, the European Union has banned or restricted the use of over 1300 chemicals, whilst the FDA in the same period has banned or restricted only 11 chemicals (p. 6).

According to the author, concern for health of humans and environment is not a consumers' paranoia, but it is rather supported by scientific knowledge. When navigation into the uncertainties of market in risk society is left to individuals, exposure and responsibility are culturally, economically and socially determined. This is the strong message of this book.

Precautionary principle urges the universal protection of living beings and environment by the State. It arose in the 1970s, at a time of growing public concerns for environmental degradation and it is the guiding logic behind several international conventions, like the 1992 Rio Declaration or the Cartagena Protocol of the Convention on Biodiversity entered into force in 2003. In 2001, the European Union adopted the precautionary principle as basis of its biosafety Directive on the release into the environment and the market of Genetically Modified Organisms. About this same matter, the US federal government has opted for the 'substantial equivalence' concept, which declared GMO substantially equivalent to conventional product, and then not in need of any specific testing.

As the author states, "Whereas the global diffusion of the precautionary principle represented a major turn in environmental politics that focused on improving worldwide environmental quality, precautionary consumption presents the individualization of a universal risk" (p. 12). Individualization of risks calls for green companies and eco-brands that promise to empower individuals by giving them an escape from chemical risk. In this way, a two-tiered marketplace is created: conventional products vs. organic or green products. In this approach, the problem of undesirable chemicals is not understood as a collective problem (requiring state intervention), but as an individual consumer and market problem.

From a sociological and a political perspective, the question may arise whether these individualised behaviours express the political apathy prevailing in the neo-liberal society or are the expression of a defensive environmentalism that, in given situations, may become more political and collective. According to neoliberal ideology the state cannot take a leading role in health and environmental protection. Rather the 'educated' consumer should be free to choose among different products, whilst industry should inform consumers and make eco- and green-labelled products available. It is then the ecologically minded consumers/citizens who, with their market choices, may put pressure on highly polluting industries to go green. But what about people who cannot vote with their pockets? What about people with low income, or people who are dependent on other people choices, like children? The neoliberal approach to health requires parents and, especially, women and mothers, to invest time and money into personalising the care for their children. Precautionary consumption is then the product of neoliberal shift in economic, political and social structure, but also a reflection of post-structural changes in discourses about risk, gender and reproduction and biopolitics.

In four different chapters, the Author examines four interrelated contexts that explain how precautionary consumption has emerged: (1) The regulatory system for chemical substances in the USA based on proof of harm for a product to be prohibited (a system

called in the book ‘safe-until-sorry’), rather than proof to be safe before approved. (2) The campaigns of major environmental health and social movements groups—especially Environmental Working Group (EWG)—in establishing precautionary consumption as a form of consumer citizenship. (3) The analysis of the marketplace of green and non-toxic products with Whole Food Market as case study. (4) Mothers’ lived experience of precautionary consumption, through interviews to 30 mothers in New York City between May 2014 and May 2016.

Of great interest is chapter 3 on the environmental health movement. Considering the US context, MacKendrick shows how, given that the government rejected the precautionary principle, the environmental health movement acts as an alternative to the government regulation agencies, testing cosmetic products, children toys, jeweleries, or measuring pesticides residues in food in order, at first, to accumulate evidence for regulatory reform. So doing, though, the movement shifted away from demanding the institutionalisation of precautionary principle and embraced ‘advocacy bio-monitoring’, leading to individualization of precautionary principle and its enacting into the shopping habits of consumers, especially women. Progressively, the focus of advocacy bio-monitoring shifts from environmental and structural problems to the contamination on women’s bodies and threats to children’s health, posing the issue of the ‘body-burden’: contamination is personalised and mother’s body, not the polluted environment, is considered the centre of toxic accumulation and becomes the centre of the environmental health movement’s campaigns.

In the analysis of Whole Food Market (WFM) as a case study, visits to WFM in New York in addition to news releases, press materials, online annual reports and newspaper articles were considered. What emerges in this account is how even in a shop that is branded as environmental and health friendly, consumer must be a ‘super-shopper’ in order to interpret and understand a constellation of signs and symbols, quality standards, labels and claims in a climate of fear and anxiety.

Finally, in the interviews of 30 mothers in New York City between May 2014 and May 2016, mothers’ lived experience of precautionary consumption is represented as interplay of gender, embodiment and consumption. Mothers see themselves as gatekeepers of their children’s exposures to toxic chemicals. Three types of precautionary routines emerge, from basic to moderate, to comprehensive, influenced of course, among other things, by social class, i.e. income and flexible time they have to spend on shopping, but also on literacy and capacity to decipher the array of information on products labels. Whilst motherhood responsibility for children’s health protection is taken by women in the sample as just another part of motherhood, men are mostly absent from the account of precautionary consumption; at best, they are supporters, surely secondary actors.

Precautionary consumption is clearly affected by class position. Working class and low-income women face much more limited and stressful choices. Precautionary consumption is based on upper-middle and middle-class assumptions of flexible choice, time and creative budgeting. Women on low income are required to work harder to actualize it.

MacKendrick’s conclusions are quite strict: precautionary consumption may result in an overall increase in market choice, but exacerbates inequalities related to gender, race, class, occupation and geography. Furthermore, precautionary consumption is not motivated by the political will to change the world, nor it is a form of consumers’

citizenship. It is rather a form of self-protection. Precautionary consumption is also ineffective and does not necessarily lead to a reduction of the 'body burden' of toxic substance. MacKendrick cites one study of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nation Environment Programme (UNEP), according to which the only evidence of population-level decrease in human body burdens is in case where a substance was banned by government (p. 154). So, to make a difference, precautionary consumption should be transformed into precaution principle and precautionary logics should be incorporated across political institutions at all levels of governments, as well as in science and corporate research and development.

I find the book very informative and compelling in its logic. As I wrote above, I find the difference between state action and regulation and individualised precautionary behaviour illuminating, but from a European perspective, I would observe that the adoption of the precautionary approach in the European legislation on regulation of release of toxic substances or novel foods into the environment has not prevented the diffusion of 'precautionary consumption' and many differentiated forms of consumers' and ecological citizenships. In the case of food, that I most studied and researched, forms of consumers' or ecological citizenships manifest themselves, for example, in community supported agriculture, solidarity purchasing groups, promotion of cities' food councils and other forms of civic food networks, all of them aiming to change practices of food consumption and production in direction of environmental and social justice.

Whilst I agree that precautionary consumption is not enough to protect consumers and environment's health and that certainly the involvement of the state is a necessary step, I do not agree with the dismissing of any form of consumers' citizenship as a form of self-protection. There is a polarised vision in the way MacKendrick presents her thesis that impedes to see the variegated manifestations of precautionary consumption as new forms of food politics. Theoretical results may be determined by the research design, the choice to study Whole Food Market as a case study and the way mothers were recruited. No participants to the various forms of Community Supported Agriculture or shoppers at the Farmers' Markets are present in the sample of interviewed mothers. In such a way, the most visible and politicised forms of ecological citizenship are ignored, with the result that a complex post-modern reality is simplified in a dualistic vision, in which there is no place for a struggle aiming to build environmental and social awareness and justice from below.

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