

BOOK REVIEW

Democratizing technology: risk, responsibility & the regulation of chemicals

By Anne Chapman

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“Our Stolen Future convinced me that we should be much more worried about synthetic chemicals than we generally are”. With these words from the preface to her first book, *Democratizing Technology*, environmental campaigner and now author, Anne Chapman, inadvertently reveals that one of the main, supposed conclusions of her work pre-dates her actual research. Chapman was driven by the ideas of the controversial 1996 book by Theo Colborn and her collaborators Dianne Dumanoski and John Peterson Myers – which suggested that artificial hormones were having dramatic effects on wildlife, the environment and humanity itself. When she came to doing a PhD years later, she “felt” that the way in which “synthetic chemicals” were treated “was part of the problem” and that too little had been done to regulate them (p.vii). This book is the result.

A serious reader, pushed for time, could stop reading at this point, as indeed I almost did at the end of that preface. Not because her work bears the usual hallmarks of a book based on a PhD – a number of ponderous, pedantic and overly-abstract chapters on themes tangential to the main subject – but because, like many other purportedly disinterested activists working in this field, Chapman reveals from the outset how she started with a conclusion and then went in search of the data to confirm it. In fact, judging by her description of the “weight of evidence” as being “the evidence from different, independent sources, which, though none individually is necessarily conclusive, may together form a convincing case” (p.74/5), data may be too generous a term here. Clearly, from her perspective, evidence is the plural of anecdote.

Never mind that humans ingest doses of hormones

millions of times greater in their food than through exposure to, what Chapman tactically and pejoratively labels as, “synthetic” chemicals, nor indeed, that by choosing to use oral contraceptives or hormone replacement therapies, many expose themselves even more. Chapman’s mission, judging by the limited variety of works she references, has no room for contrary evidence or research.

She is, in this regards, in what she might consider to be excellent company. It was precisely such a cavalier and pseudo-scientific approach to evidence by Colborn and her collaborators that led Professor Michael Kamrin of Michigan State University in his review of *Our Stolen Future* for the journal *Scientific American* to note that the book was “not scientific in the most fundamental sense”, arguing that “the authors present a very selective segment of the data that has been gathered about chemicals that might affect hormonal functions”, and further that “it obscures the line between science and policy to the detriment of both”.

Despite these criticisms, Chapman hits an easy target by identifying UK policy on science and technology as being too instrumental and narrowly focused on economic outcomes. But, far from celebrating the human spirit to innovate, her real concern is that technology might change social relations, leaving people with little choice as to whether to adopt it or not. In this regards, much like the editors of the *Science in Society* Series within which her publication appears, she seems to assume that technical aspects dominate human ones. But, there is plenty of evidence that it is social change that enables technological development, as much as the other way round. Hence too, in our pessimistic age, society

may be having more of a negative impact on science than vice-versa.

Technology should “produce and consist of durable things” (p.29) she incants. But not too durable maybe, lest these be considered “persistent”, that bogeyman of chemical substance types she rails against later on in the book. In fact, both of these outlooks are wrong. One of the great benefits of technology being invented and re-invented anew on a regular basis is that it becomes better and more efficient. Even a hardened eco-worrier must recognise, for instance, that today’s mobile phones use less material and less energy than the more “durable” early prototypes. At the same time “persistent” chemicals are often safer and more stable than more active and volatile alternatives.

In relation to chemicals regulation, the key concept Chapman introduces, upon which her book rests is that of “riskiness”. This, she advises, is not the same as hazard – the potential for something to cause harm – but rather includes “the possibility of harm even when we cannot specify the nature of that harm” (p.104). For years, Green activists have tried to get governments to legislate on the basis of possibilities rather than probabilities. Now, by introducing unknown possibilities into the equation, Chapman is effectively trying to move the goal-posts even further. Pigs might truly fly, and by doing so she tramples over the one element she seems to uphold elsewhere in her book – that of human agency.

By focusing on what actually happens rather than what might happen, real exposure rather than potential effect, the concept of risk, to a limited extent at least, takes account of human knowledge, expertise and even choice. The demand that regulation be based on inherent properties, rather than human action and experience, removes us entirely from the equation. A fitting tribute to a profoundly anti-social age.

Chapman should have understood this as she draws on the work of the German political theorist Hannah Arendt in her analysis, counterposing Arendt’s notion of a public realm to the relatively ahistorical and ahuman outlook of liberalism and utilitarianism. What Chapman misses though is that today, such a social outlook is largely absent. It will have to be reforged from the roots up. Hence, like many others who have little real faith in the people’s ability to do so, she is left with little choice but to offer a form of patrician governance as her solution, stating that “it is the duty of a government to use its powers to ensure that the public world is a good for its citizens” (p.134).

In one fell swoop all her good intentions are undone as politicians are exhorted to be “spectators of, rather than actors in, government” (p.160). She concludes by advocating that most backward and anti-social of frameworks – the planning system – as her model for future decision-making about technology in general and chemicals in particular. Yet it is precisely through this that those toffs from the Campaign to Protect Rural England have managed to maintain vast swathes of this country – some 92% – devoted to grass, keeping the great unwashed masses, who they fear and loathe intently, at bay for so long.

Sensing her solution might not suffice to crush the aspirations of the public realm she claims to crave, Chapman concludes with a demand for “public interest advertising” so that “just as much money can be spent on criticizing as is spent on promoting products” (p.168). Like those tired political leaders and commentators now considering the imposition of a party-funding levy on people, in recognition of their inability to inspire and generate active support, so Chapman, fearing that the “right to know” which she promotes might not suffice, now insists on a “right to tell” to continue exhorting the evils of chemicals. No doubt, in a few years, this will elide into a “right to decide”.

How very New Labour! Or should I say Cameronite? Either way, Green politics and its anti-social outlook is now at home right across the political spectrum. There remain serious issues to address in the production, introduction and regulation of technologies, but those looking for answers will only find disguised calls for restraint and disingenuous demands for dialogue here.

References

Colborn, T., Dumanoski, D. and Myers, J.P. 1996 *Our Stolen Future*. London: Abacus.