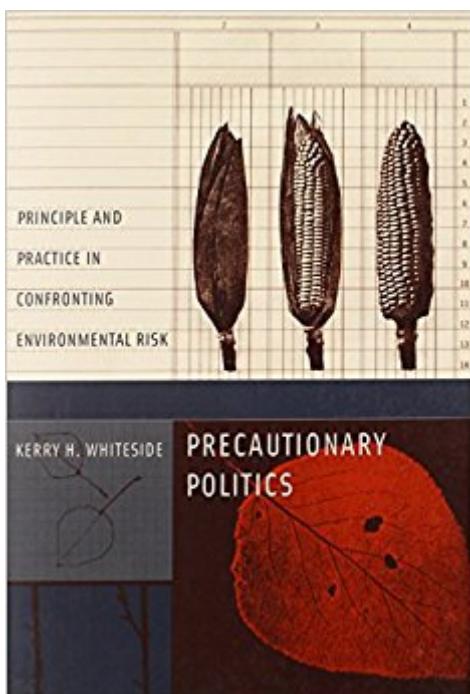


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# Precautionary Politics: Principle And Practice In Confronting Environmental Risk (Urban And Industrial Environments)



## Synopsis

The precautionary principle--which holds that action to address threats of serious or irreversible environmental harm should be taken even in the absence of scientific certainty--has been accepted as a key feature of environmental law throughout the European Union. In the United States, however, it is still widely unknown, and much of what has been written on the topic takes a negative view. *Precautionary Politics* provides a comprehensive analysis of the precautionary principle--its origins and development, its meaning and rationale, its theoretical context, and its policy implications. Kerry Whiteside looks at the application of the principle (and the controversies it has stirred) and compares European and American attitudes toward it and toward environmental regulation in general. Too often, Whiteside argues, American critics of the precautionary principle pay insufficient attention to how the principle has been debated, refined, and elaborated elsewhere. *Precautionary Politics* fills this gap. Whiteside demonstrates the different responses of Europe and the United States, first by describing the controversy over genetically modified crops, and then by using this example throughout the book to illustrate application of the precautionary principle in different contexts. He contrasts the European view that new types of risk require specially adapted modes of regulation with the American method of science-based risk assessment, and argues that despite Bush administration opposition, U.S.-European convergence on precaution is possible. Finally, he looks at the ways in which participatory innovation can help produce environmentally positive results. Whiteside's systematic defense of the precautionary principle will be an important resource for students, scholars, activists, and policymakers and is particularly suitable for classroom use.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book clearly, cogently, and in meticulous fashion demonstrates how to build a common vernacular between the U.S. and the E.U. around the precautionary principle. In so doing, it provides a forceful indictment of those authors who have largely dismissed the concept in favor of risk-benefit analysis. This makes it an original and welcome addition to the literature. (Jan Mazurek, Director, Energy & Environment Project, Progressive Policy Institute)What a concept -- a book on environmental ethics that is actually useful for policymakers and activists. This nourishing book satisfies a hunger for big ideas, fuel for the essential environmental work that we must do for the sake of future generations. Precautionary Politics reaches deep, but its readership should stretch far and wide. (Carolyn Raffensperger, Executive Director, Science and Environmental Health Network)

Kerry H. Whiteside is Clair R. McCollough Professor of Government at Franklin & Marshall College. He is the author of *Divided Natures: French Contributions to Political Ecology* (MIT Press, 2002).

First, Kudos to . I ordered this book yesterday at around 4pm, and it was on my front porch this morning. I read it whilst drinking my coffee, and I am reviewing it around 24 hours after ordering. rocks!Okay, now for the book review: I ordered this book because I was interested in understanding the interplay between scientific risk, uncertainty, and policymaking in the United States. I was not disappointed. The author, Kerry Whiteside, is a professor of Government, so I was not sure if he would be able to write cogently on issues of "environmental risk," but he was able to seamlessly combine the science with the political philosophy. Granted, he did not delve deeply into the science, but I had the impression that his grasp of the issue was firm. The book is very readable, mostly because the author uses his organizational skills to present his arguments with clarity. If you have ever read any books dealing with political philosophy, you might find that he is unusual in that regard.I think I can sum up the thesis of this book with an analogy used by the author--Pascal's wager. As you recall, Pascal's belief was that there was a small likelihood of the existence of God. If a person chooses to believe in God, and God turns out NOT to exist, nothing much has been lost except perhaps a few hours on a Sunday. However, if God DOES exist and a person chooses NOT to believe, then...well, it is all downhill from there, if you know what I mean. The idea is, there is a

small risk with huge consequences, so it is best to prepare for the huge consequences. Similarly, certain technological advancements have small risks of unknown but potentially devastating consequences, such as global extinction. Therefore, it is "prudent" to be somewhat circumspect. Whiteside develops his argument through several sections: 1-The case of agricultural biotech, 2-debating precaution, 3-comparing precaution in the US and Europe, 4-precautionary theory, and 5-precaution and democratic deliberation. The strongest of these sections were #2 and #3, so I will discuss those briefly. Section 2 starts out like a classic debate, with a resolution. "Be it resolved that the international community should adopt the precautionary principle as a guiding norm for global environmental protection." The author develops the debate by explaining that there are new risks today, with potential damages of unprecedented magnitude. These risks may take many years to become evident, and are fraught with scientific uncertainty. Damage may be irreversible by the time it is detected. Opponents of the precautionary principle believe that it will lead to unfounded fearmongering, unscientific mob rule, and unnecessary regulation. The author follows up the opposing case with some rebuttals, the most effective being that "scientific" risk assessment cannot be accurate when we cannot calculate risks with any degree of certainty. (which is why actuarial analysis leads insurance companies to refuse liability coverage for GMOs. They KNOW they cannot do the numbers!) Okay, you can probably tell by now that I agree with the thesis of this book... Section 3 is very interesting as it compares the European political philosophy with the American political philosophy. I was particularly taken by the following comparison: "German guidelines speak of an "imperative to minimize risks." Minimizing contrasts to optimizing. Optimizing would suggest quantifying as much as possible the costs and benefits of alternative environmental protection measures, then choosing the one that brought the greatest NET benefit (money). Minimizing, on the other hand, forgoes balancing in favor of reducing potentially damaging practices as much as possible." The Europeans seek to minimize damage from the unknown (duty to minimize risk), while the Americans seek to quantify a dollar amount to how much money would be lost if we regulated biotech instead of rushing it to market. (optimize risk). The different political philosophies of dealing with risk were nicely fleshed out. Finally, the author cautions against a utopian sort of environmental totalitarianism, and points to the Dutch model of engaging citizen stakeholders in the deliberative process. All in all, this is a very useful and informative look at how different policymakers think and how it affects all of us on the planet. I hope someone is reading this book, maybe the author is assigning it to his students or something. But it is worth a read, it was published in 2006, how can this be the first review???

Whiteside presents the subject from all angles. He applies precaution to the precautionary principle in general. By the end of the book one has a comprehensive understanding of the issue. He highlights the nuances of different interpretations of the precautionary principle and discusses the consequences. The book is a much more a critical work than other books on the topic and importantly, it underlines not only practical, but also philosophical problems.

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