

When Too Much Precaution Kills Humans and Wildlife, Part II

By Hiroko Shimizu and Pierre Desrochers (The Drill, September 24, 2014)

As the English writer Douglas Adams (of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* fame) once quipped, technology that existed when humans are born seem normal, anything developed before people turn thirty-five is exciting, and whatever is developed after that age is treated with suspicion.

Although there is certainly some truth to Adams' saying, fear of hydraulic fracturing among otherwise highly educated young North Americans and Europeans is now widespread. Much of this sentiment is fueled by out of context images and factually inaccurate claims made by the likes of activist Josh Fox in his muckumentaries *GasLand* and *GasLand 2*. Urban hipsters sheltered all their lives from infectious diseases, hunger, cold and extreme weather events by abundant and affordable energy, it turns out, prove especially receptive to a worldview according to which nature is inherently benign and harmonious...

Missing from current debates, however, is the notion that anti-fracking activists are but the latest in a long line of doomsday prophets who made a good living denouncing recent technological advances as harbingers of environmental Armageddon. Many evolutionary psychologists explain their success by the fact that humans are programmed to respond to fear rather than good news. After all, our ancestors who paid more attention to a tip that there was a lion hiding behind a bush were more likely to survive and pass on this trait than those who didn't...

We already mentioned in our previous column how European peasants were for a long time reluctant to add the (South American) potato to their diet for fear it would give them everything from leprosy to cholera. Largely forgotten today is that fears of pesticides did not begin with Rachel Carson's 1962 best-seller *Silent Spring*, but rather with the large-scale introduction of arsenic-based substances in the second half of the nineteenth century. A contributor to an agricultural publication thus asserted in 1891 that "hundreds of tons of a most virulent mineral poison in the hands of hundreds of thousands of people, to be freely used in fields, orchards and gardens all over [North America]" presented a "danger worthy of serious thought." Other critics claimed that "potatoes would absorb the poison to such an extent that the tubers would carry poisonous doses, so that after each meal it would be necessary to take an antidote." Reports of dead livestock blamed on arsenic poisoning soon followed.

Popular fears stemming from the use of toxic substances in food and other products were then periodically revived. The biggest best-seller in that genre before *Silent Spring* was Arthur Kallet and Frederick J. Schlink's *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs: Dangers in Everyday Foods, Drugs, and Cosmetics* first published in 1933 (the number referred to the size of the US population that year). It remained at the top of the best-sellers' lists for a couple of years and went through thirty-two printings before the end of 1937.

Kallet and Schlink claimed that the "food and drug industries have been systematically bombarding us with falsehoods about the purity, healthfulness, and safety of their products, while they have been making profits by experimenting on us with poisons, irritants, harmful

chemical preservatives, and dangerous drugs.” Because of the large amount of lead arsenate then being sprayed on fruits and some vegetables, American consumers were “eating arsenic, and there [was] good reason to believe that it may be doing [them] serious, perhaps irreparable injury.” Even worse, government officials had “suppressed important information on the arsenic hazard, and have resisted in every way the opening up of the question to discussion in the interest of public safety.”

Building on Kallet and Schlink’s work, in 1962 the social ecologist Murray Bookchin published *Our Synthetic Environment* in which he stated that the use of chemicals in food had “become so extensive and reckless that mass poisoning is now a real danger to the American population. Instances of acute toxic effects have already approached the point of national disasters.” By far the most important problem was “chemicals without an immediate toxic effect” that were slowly accumulating in the food supply and might, “in the long run, produce incalculable damage to public health.”

A decade later, John Grant Fuller, a writer who specialized in the study of extra-terrestrial life and the supernatural, published *200,000,000 Guinea Pigs: New Dangers in Everyday Foods, Drugs and Cosmetics* in which he asserted that the situation was now logarithmically worse than in the 1930s and that “time bombs” were “ticking away in several dark corners.”

Despite these dire warnings, throughout these years Americans became more numerous, healthier, taller and lived much longer than their ancestors. True, more people now die of cancers in their old age than before, but this is because they no longer die of malnutrition and infectious diseases at a much younger age. Or else, consider that approximately 700,000 people die every year from food- and water-borne diseases in Africa where, in the policy analyst Robert Paarlberg’s words, “many foods are still purchased in open-air markets (often uninspected, unpackaged, unlabeled, unrefrigerated, unpasteurized, and unwashed).” By contrast, the death toll from such causes in the United States is only a few thousand people.

Unfortunately, as the economist Thomas DeGregori puts it, too many people now equate “preservatives with contamination and microbes with health” and are obsessed with the pesticide-residue molehill while ignoring the germ mountain. Most puzzling to us is the popularity of raw milk, a great carrier of important disease vectors such as listeriosis, diphtheria, polio, tuberculosis, salmonellosis, scarlet fever, strep throat and typhoid fever. But we are told it tastes better, a claim we are not willing to challenge...

In a world where no good deed goes unpunished, the pioneers of hydraulic fracturing who have improved human life by making energy more abundant, reliable and affordable than before are now vilified in the court of public opinion while opponents of vaccination and pasteurization are often heralded as champions of nature and mankind. Yet, the world would be a much poorer and more miserable place if past generations had heeded the warnings of the anti-progress activists of their days.

As we will discuss in our next column, this will be the unavoidable outcome of adopting the “precautionary principle” that now underlies much of the opposition to technological advances in general and hydraulic fracturing in particular.