Although Commoner’s career ranged from bench plant physiology at Washington University to social and environmental activism to 1980 presidential candidate, he may be best known for his “Four Laws of Ecology”, “everything is connected to everything else”; “everything must go somewhere”; “nature knows best”; and “there is no such thing as a free lunch.” These “laws” in their straightforward simplicity are brilliantly accurate, descriptive, and evocative. Coupled, however, with Commoner’s advocacy of the precautionary principle—a moral and political concept that evolved from the German democratic-socialist legal tradition of the 1930s—they can be seen as forcing stalemates, his laws warning society to proceed with care, but the precautionary principle virtually eliminating any possible path along which to proceed.

Where Commoner visualized risk assessment as an essential analytical and informational tool for implementing the precautionary principle, over time the two have evolved into competing, politically driven approaches. This competition can be of considerable economic consequence, perhaps best seen in recent disputes between the United States and the European Union over the regulation of genetically modified organisms.

Although perhaps not Egan’s intent, the book also uses Commoner’s career to help the reader gain insight into fascinating elements of the evolution of the involvement of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in the social politics of environmental science, and to illuminate key portions of the early radiation-based history of environmental risk assessment.

Commoner emerged as a public figure with the nuclear fallout issue of the 1950s and 1960s. What this portion of the narrative suggested to me was that Commoner’s view of the conflict between national security and public health should be reformulated. Maintenance of an environmentally sound, healthy population and environment must be thought of as key elements of national security, rather than as its competitors.

In the end, we get from Egan an analytical, reasoned picture of Commoner—clearly a seminal figure in the history of American environmentalism—and of his role in that environmentalism. Commoner’s background, biases, aspirations, and intentions are well described and intriguingly tied to analyses of his activities. In the process, we also learn about many intertwined political movements of the last half-century, and from this we get a clearer picture of the evolution of American and international environmental politics.

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