

Book review

**Review of  
“Participatory Technology Assessment –  
European Perspectives”**

**edited by Simon Joss and Sergio Bellucci, Athenaeum Press, 2002**

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# **Review of ‘Participatory Technology Assessment – European Perspectives’**

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‘Participatory Technology Assessment’, edited by Simon Joss and Sergio Bellucci, presents a timely stock-take of a field of research and practice that has experienced extensive growth over the last decade or so. The collection of case studies from the 1990s is based on the EC funded ‘EUROPTA’ project (1998–2000), which brought together research capacity from six countries, namely Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

The book spans a wide range of environmental and health issues, including traffic planning, low-level ozone, biotechnology and novel foods. These were handled with a diverse set of methods. Diversity, in this case, relates to scale, scope, and format of different exercises as well as purpose and (political) effect. Already at this superficial level, the volume offers a wealth of detailed information that will be particularly useful to practitioners and newcomers to the complex field.

Yet the authors produce more than a mere collection of empirical data. Apart from a brief theoretical introduction and a detailed description of the analytical framework, nearly half the book deals with a comparative analysis that offers important insights not only into the pros, cons and pitfalls of planning, conducting and evaluating participatory Technology Assessments (pTAs), but also the diverse thinking that exists within the field focusing on implementation and project management, methodological issues as well as pTAs’ impacts on policy and civil society at large.

The 11 authors that have contributed to the final six chapters draw on a wide variety of academic disciplines, personal experiences and national, socio-cultural contexts. Maybe surprisingly for such a broad and complex research task, the analysis remains coherent and contains many little gems that are certain to find their way into forthcoming pTAs and related exercises.

Though internally coherent, the latter chapters appear somewhat disconnected from the case study work at least as reported in the central section. One cannot help feeling that the authors are trying to deliver a message that they feel is important without being

able to derive it convincingly from the empirical data. The casual reader will wonder, perhaps, where the conclusions emerge from. The experienced and involved will no doubt recognize and sympathize with the difficulties of evaluating as complex an exercise as a pTA and delivering a convincing cross-cultural comparative analysis. This lack of strict coherence is excusable and offset by the value the collection delivers elsewhere.

Less excusable is the lack of in-depth critical analysis. Though at times hinted at, the important ideas that theorists such as Foucault (1980), Lukes (1986), Luhmann (1997) and others have contributed to discursive decision-making and the concept of consensus remain vague. One might argue that pTAs are commonly conducted in the spirit of Habermasian ideals (e.g. 1984), hence the analysis may be built legitimately around the concept of non-strategic communication and the power of the most convincing (rational) argument. Further, the lack of systematic evaluation of the case study assessments, bemoaned by the authors themselves, contributes to the difficulty of linking critique to empirical data and of exploring crucial details.

Nevertheless, it may be precisely these details about the different dimensions of power in discourse, the political nature of institutionally arranged stakeholder meetings and the socio-culturally determined strategic interests of participants and organizers alike, as well as the major issues surrounding trust and credibility, against which pTA, *in reality*, has to struggle. As a concept somewhat, *a priori*, pTA as conceived in this volume leaves itself open to strong constructivist critique developed around the inherent politicization of knowledge (e.g. Wynne, 1999). At least implicitly, the authors rest the traditional dichotomy of lay and expert knowledge at the heart of the analytical framework instead of reflecting its questionable position and validity. Uncertainty and inequality are raised as key parameters at the outset, yet central issues such as cultural diversity and incertitude (Stirling, 1998) remain under- or unexplored. For many though, these form the essence of the 'Collingridge-Dilemma' (Collingridge, 1980) in late modernity – the complex and paradoxical relationship between technological evolution and its societal control.

In conclusion, the book presents a thoughtful collection and analysis of important empirical data. It will and should no doubt find its way onto many practitioners' book shelves as a useful checklist and tool box. Whether pTAs designed accordingly will be perceived by those concerned as more appropriate, valid and successful, particularly under the strains of ever-increasing polarity in highly charged debates about innovative technology, remains to be seen.

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