



Hidden Arguments: Political Ideology and Disease Prevention Policy

By Professor Sylvia Noble Tesh

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In this provocative book, Sylvia Tesh shows how "politics masquerades as science" in the debates over the causes and prevention of disease. Tesh argues that ideas about the causes of disease which dominate policy at any given time or place are rarely determined by scientific criteria alone. The more critical factors are beliefs about how much government can control industry, who should take risks when scientists are uncertain, and whether the individual or society has the ultimate responsibility for health. Tesh argues that instead of lamenting the presence of this extra-scientific reasoning, it should be brought out of hiding and welcomed. She illustrates her position by analyzing five different theories of disease causality that have vied for dominance during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and discusses in detail the political implications of each theory. Tesh also devotes specific chapters to the multicausal theory of disease, to health education policy in Cuba, to the 1981 air traffic controller's strike, to the debate over Agent Orange, and to an analysis of science as a belief system. Along the way she makes these principal points: She criticizes as politically conservative the idea that diseases result from a multifactorial web of causes. Placing responsibility for disease prevention on "society" is ideological, she argues. In connection with the air traffic controllers she questions whether it is in a union's best interests to claim that workers' jobs are stressful. She shows why there are no entirely neutral answers to questions about the toxicity of environmental pollutants. In a final chapter, Tesh urges scientists to incorporate egalitarian values into their search for the truth, rather than pretending science can be divorced from that political ideology. Sylvia Noble Tesh, a political scientist, is on the faculty of the University of Michigan School of Public Health.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Ranging widely in public health theories of the last 200 years, present-day Cuban public health policies, the Agent Orange tragedy, and the air controllers' strike of the early 1980s, Tesh (Yale) spells out the unstated political assumptions of U.S. public health policy. She believes federal policy focuses on change in individual behavior and lifestyle rather than change in the social structure and national economy. She is critical of this country's reliance on individualistic values, which makes government regulation suspect in fighting disease and poor health and makes the individual the "center of moral authority." An important, clearly argued analysis with national implications for medical issues such as AIDS and for sociopolitical problems such as handgun control. For informed readers and specialists. Jack Forman, Mesa Coll. Lib., San Diego

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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