



# Shopping Our Way to Safety: How We Changed from Protecting the Environment to Protecting Ourselves

*Andrew Szasz*

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“Not long ago, people did not worry about the food they ate. They did not worry about the water they drank or the air they breathed. It never occurred to them that eating, drinking water, satisfying basic, mundane bodily needs might be a dangerous thing to do. Parents thought it was good for their kids to go outside, get some sun.

“That’s all changed now.” —from the Introduction

Many Americans today rightly fear that they are constantly exposed to dangerous toxins in their immediate environment: tap water is contaminated with chemicals; foods contain pesticide residues, hormones, and antibiotics; even the air we breathe, outside and indoors, carries invisible poisons. Yet we have responded not by pushing for governmental regulation, but instead by shopping. What accounts for this swift and dramatic response? And what are its unintended consequences?

Andrew Szasz examines this phenomenon in *Shopping Our Way to Safety*. Within a couple of decades, he reveals, bottled water and water filters, organic food, “green” household cleaners and personal hygiene products, and “natural” bedding and clothing have gone from being marginal, niche commodities to becoming mass consumer items. Szasz sees these fatalistic, individual responses to collective environmental threats as an inverted form of quarantine, aiming to shut the healthy individual in and the threatening world out.

Sharply critiquing these products’ effectiveness as well as the unforeseen political consequences of relying on them to keep us safe from harm, Szasz argues that when consumers believe that they are indeed buying a defense from environmental hazards, they feel less urgency to actually do something to fix them. To achieve real protection, real security, he concludes, we must give up the illusion of individual solutions and together seek substantive reform.

Andrew Szasz is professor and chair of the department of sociology at the University of California at Santa Cruz and author of the award-winning *EcoPopulism* (Minnesota, 1994).

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