

Uncomfortable Science and Enemies of the People

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Abstract

I had wanted for some time to write an account of Henrik Ibsen's play 'An Enemy of the People'; the narrative of the play uncannily replicates the situation, feelings and social consequences of the case of Dr. Andrew Wakefield. My analysis of the play is hopefully not an academic exercise but an account that provides an insight into the way in which those with vested interests behave and how we might combat them. One of the most important aspects of any comparison between the play and the case of Dr. Wakefield touches on the fact that despite its age and its national circumstances, the message of this play is still clearly germane to contemporary situations. One reason for this is that Ibsen chose not only an environmental toxin as his dramatic spark but also in the play's central character, a medical doctor who moved from clinical observation to a rough form of epidemiology.

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Scientists cannot rely on authority, they cannot rely on panels, they cannot rely on big-time certifications such as those coming from Nobel Prizes or the National Academy of sciences. They must rely on individual responsibility, and they must create an atmosphere and conditions under which scientists, both young and established, can exercise this responsibility without fear—fear of retaliation, fear for their careers, fear for their funding, whatever.
Serge Lang, Challenges, Springer 1996.

I have wanted for some time to write an account of Henrik Ibsen's play 'An Enemy of the People'; the narrative of the play uncannily replicates the situation, feelings and social consequences of the case of Dr. Andrew Wakefield. I first used quotes from the play in 2003 when writing about Sir Richard Doll,¹ but a more complete analysis of the play eluded me until I prepared a paper for the third Science and Democracy conference held in Naples in May 2008.

My analysis of the play is hopefully not an academic exercise but an account that provides an insight into the way in which those with vested interests behave and how we might combat them. One of the most important aspects of any comparison between the play and the case of Dr. Wakefield touches on the fact that despite its age and its national circumstances, the message of this play is still clearly germane to contemporary situations. One reason for this is that Ibsen chose not only an environmental toxin as his dramatic spark but also in the play's central character, a medical doctor who moved from clinical observation to a rough form of epidemiology which provided proof of the toxicity.

Both the play and the contemporary situation of Dr. Wakefield, pose similar questions:

First, are there times when scientists should not publish or make public the results

of their work, if such results do not appear to be in the public interest?

Second, should the scientist be continually on the lookout for the vested interests that are at the heart of his detractors' rebuttal of environmental research?

Finally, how should this trial of strength between the honest scientist and commercial vested interests be resolved?

At the end of this essay, after a description of the play, I will conclude with some observations about the play's historical value and try to place its message in a contemporary environmental context.

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Although I knew that I would have to describe the narrative of the play for those who have not seen or read it, I did not set out with any intention of giving a post modern textural analysis of the play. This was principally because I have little knowledge of this kind of literary analysis but also because the most important ideas in the play, I would see as radicalising or consciousness-raising and my reason for discussing them is to communicate these ideas to the reader. I do not want to suggest how one might read this text but, instead, how one might use it to analyse contemporary situations and to act.

Ibsen finished 'An Enemy of the People' in 1882. Throughout its writing, he had considered it to be a comedy, although, by its completion, he understood it to be a straight drama. In the

¹ Martin J. Walker. 'Company Men and the Public Health, Part I: The unbearable lightness of bias', 2003. Available as an e-essay from www.slingshotpublications.com. Martin J. Walker. 'Company Men and the Public Health, Part II: Death, Dioxin and PVC', 2003, also available at: www.dipmat.unipg.it/~mamone/sci-dem/contri/walker.pdf.

copy that I have, Martin Esslin² wrote in his introduction that the play is Ibsen's most political work. He also suggests that, because of this, it is one of his simplest works. By this, I think that Esslin meant that the play was not clouded by psychological undertones like much of Ibsen's other work. However, I would argue against any analysis that makes the play simple or 'economistic'. The central character, Dr. Stockmann, learns, throughout the course of the play, some very difficult lessons. These develop him from his early clown-like cartoon figure to a rounded character who does not just arrive at simple conclusions but also resolves questions of consciousness, truth and political conflict.

The Story

Dr. Thomas Stockmann is the Medical Officer of Health in a small coastal town in Southern Norway. His brother, Peter Stockmann, is the town's Mayor, Chief Constable and Chairman of the Municipal Baths' Committee.

Within the first few minutes of the play, a number of things become obvious. First that Dr. Stockmann, who sometimes writes articles for the local paper, takes an exuberant interest in the rude health of the population—believing in good food, clean water and having a robust attitude to alcohol.

His elder brother Peter, on the other hand, is formal, slightly prudish and very conservative. He is classically a liberal. And the reality of his views as a capitalist lies mainly hidden beneath an extensive 'democratic manner'. He is vain and quite concerned that, of the two, the doctor might take credit for having the greater intelligence.

When Dr. Stockmann hints that there might be something wrong with the water at the Baths, one of the first moral statements of Peter is: 'You've heard me say this before: it's the duty of the individual to subordinate himself to society, or to be more precise, to the municipal authority in charge of our civic welfare!' Throughout the play, Ibsen makes much of the fact that all party political systems expect individuals to subsume their own interests to those of the 'majority'.³

The new health giving spa baths⁴ were the idea of the good doctor, but it was Peter who sought the support of the business community in order to set them up. Peter's hope is that the Baths will raise the standing of the small community, attract tourists, and make good profits for those in the business community who have supported the project.

It is clear from the beginning of the play that Dr. Stockmann has found out something about the Baths, which, because he is at first unsure about his finding, he does not yet wish to share it with his brother.

The play opens with the doctor and his brother in the doctor's house. After Peter leaves the house and while Dr. Stockmann is in the dining room with a group of local friends, a

letter arrives. The letter turns out to be a laboratory analysis of the water in the Baths and the drinking water in the town. Later, we learn that Dr. Stockmann has studied the state of this water and its effect on health for some six months. His clinical-epidemiological-type study began after he had seen a number of patients suffering from stomach complaints during the last summer.⁵ However, Stockmann does not have the sophisticated equipment to analyse the water and has sent samples to a lab. The analysis proves what Dr. Stockmann had suspected, that effluence from a tannery, one of the town's major commercial interests, had leached into the town's water supply making it a danger to drink or bath in.⁶

In the first flush of reading the analysis, both Dr. Stockmann and his friends feel very pleased that in compiling a report of the public health crisis he has struck a blow for public health. Completely unaware of the possible political reaction from vested interests, both Stockmann and his friends make a series of naive statements describing how others might perceive his public-spirited discovery.

Peter can only be grateful to me for discovering the facts.

Y'know it's wonderful to feel that you've managed to be of service to your native town and your fellow citizens!

Y'know doctor this discovery of yours is enough to make you the most important man in town.

I've only done my duty.

Don't you think the town ought to honour Dr. Stockmann in some way?

Ibsen lays on the naive irony with a trowel. These idealistic friends imagine that the discovery of a public health crisis will bring greatness rather than odium to its discoverer. Elements of Ibsen's original comedy are here still in the play, and this celebratory mood in the First Act is principally there so that Ibsen is able to show in the penultimate and last Act just how far the wheel can turn away from those who might reasonably expect to reap the rewards of public service and instead become the butt of society's loathing.

As Act Two begins the next morning, the news of Dr. Stockmann's discovery has leaked out over town and he is inundated with offers of political support as he gets ready to deal with the public health crisis.⁷ All the progressive forces appear to support him. In fact, none of the people making flattering noises have the same simply scientific understanding of the case as Dr. Stockmann—rather, they each want to use the disclosure of the environmental hazard for the furtherance of their own personal political or party political careers.

⁵ Coincidentally again, the first symptoms are gastrointestinal and they are observed in a clinical setting.

⁶ The choice of a tannery as the toxic industry responsible for the public health crisis shows how on the environmental ball Ibsen was. Those who have read the brilliant work *A Civil Action* by Jonathan Harr or seen the film made from it starring John Travolta, will know that tanneries are still today accused of producing both toxic waste, cancer in employees and leukemia in children.

⁷ Here are shades of Professor Zuckermann and other prosecution witnesses who in the beginning, despite denials later in their evidence to the GMC fitness to practice hearing, supported Dr. Wakefield's research conclusions.

² Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*. English adaptation by Max Faber with an Introduction by Martin Esslin (1918 - 2002). Heinemann educational books, London 1967.

³ There is here, even at the beginning of the play, a direct parallel with the politics of vaccination.

⁴ The 'health-giving' aspect of the spa baths, that are to turn out to be the source of toxins, also parallels the 'health and immunity' bestowing aspects of vaccination.

There are two seminal speeches in the first part of the Second Act, one from the town's newspaper editor who says to Dr. Stockmann:

As a doctor and a man of science, naturally, you see this affair of the water supply as a perfectly clear-cut isolated issue. I don't suppose it's occurred to you that a great many other things are involved?

Here is the first hint that Dr. Stockmann's idealism might easily be turned against him, that as an honest scientist, it is easy to accuse him of being both naive and lacking an understanding of 'the whole'.

And Mr Aslaksen, a craftsman-printer, offers the support of the 'solid majority', the silent middle class:

And you could do a lot worse, let me tell you, than to have us small middle-class men behind you. You see, we form what you might call a 'solid majority' in the town—when it suits us. And it's always an advantage to have the majority with you Doctor ...

The audience can't hope to understand at this point in the play that Ibsen is in full cry against the 'solid majority' or any other kind of majority. By the end of the play he admits to only one truth and that is that majority are inevitably always in the wrong. This sentiment echoes that of Soren Kierkegaard who thirty years before Ibsen wrote 'An Enemy of the People' suggested that: 'Truth always rests with the minority, and the minority is always stronger than the majority, because the minority is generally formed by those who really have an opinion, while the strength of the majority is illusory, *formed by gangs who have no opinion*'.⁸

Despite Ibsen's higher philosophical arguments, Dr. Stockmann is bemused by all of the politicking that has suddenly come to his door, seeing the issue as simply one of science:

... to be quite candid, I don't see why anything like that should be necessary in this case. After all, the things so clear and straightforward ...

* * *

The following morning Dr. Stockmann receives a visit from his brother and in the scene that follows, Peter Stockmann uses all the wiles of ardent capitalists, with which we are so familiar in the 21st century, in an attempt to suppress the Doctors report.

First he accuses his brother of using intemperate language in the report. He then expresses amazement at Stockmann's suggested solution—the building of a sewer in the toxic area followed by the replacement of all the water pipes. Peter Stockmann tells his brother that not only will the work cost between forty and fifty thousand pounds but it will also take at least two

⁸ There could not be a more exact analysis of contemporary views on MMR and the sub-set of children who have suffered serious adverse reactions. While the 'majority' is made up of those who simply receive their opinions from the media, together with those in positions of authority who simply make up ideological opinions, the parents and a handful of concerned professionals know their case from personal experience and a rigorous reading of the science.

years. He makes clear to the doctor how the Baths will have to shut while this work goes on and how consequently the town will inevitably lose money. He expresses the opinion that closing the Baths for this period would be a public relations disaster: No one he maintains, will ever want to come near the town again.⁹

Within a very short time, Peter Stockmann is accusing his doctor brother of wanting to ruin the town. He forcefully pursues the argument that the Baths' committee should wait for a period until they have the money to make some modifications to the water supply. Dr. Stockmann responds angrily to this self-seeking and dilatory strategy. He accuses his brother and the committee of perpetrating 'a fraud, a trick, a lie! An absolute crime! Not only against the public but against the whole notion of a civilised society'. It becomes apparent later that Dr. Stockmann is convinced that a civilised society can only be based upon truth and openness and that those who conceal evidence of a danger to public health are simply criminals.¹⁰

After the two brothers have almost come to blows over the matter, Peter Stockmann, the 'responsible civic authority', makes his position clear.

It's absolutely vital to me that your report shouldn't go before the committee. *In the public interest*, it's simply got to be withheld! Then, later on, I shall tactfully bring the matter up for discussion, and we'll do the best we can - quietly. But not a whisper not a hint of this unfortunate business must leak out to the public!¹¹

Dr. Stockmann, however, has already given his report to the town newspaper with instructions that they are to publish it in the event of pressure being brought on him to renege on his research.¹² Peter Stockmann suggests a simple way out for Dr. Stockmann, 'Oh, it's quite simple', he says, 'We shall expect you to state that, after further investigations, you've come to the conclusion that the matter is after all by no means as serious or as urgent as you had at first thought.'¹³

Towards the end of Act Two the position between the two men, the capitalist with vested interests on the one hand and the curiosity-driven medical scientist on the other, is polarised. Peter Stockmann accuses his brother of damaging the town and tells him that if he persists the Baths' Committee of which he is chair will have no option but to sack him.

⁹ Peter Stockmann is expressing the views of the medically and commercial interested parties who are happy, as they are with vaccination, to tolerate a few casualties in pursuit of profit and the 'public good'.

¹⁰ This principle should apply to all those who claim that MMR is perfectly safe and those who have persecuted Dr. Wakefield. How would the crime read? Perhaps 'negligent of public welfare', or something stronger, such as 'causing illness by denial of science'.

¹¹ This politically intelligent but personally damaging strategy unfortunately gives us no clues at all as to how New Labour can crawl out of their abysmal hole, dug by the politics of denial. The fact is, so vehemently have New Labour denied any vaccine damage, that they could not now accept any new scientific evidence or put a brake on their position of ignorance.

¹² Echoes here of the press briefing just after the publication of *the Lancet* paper.

¹³ And here a direct reference to Horton's suggestion that all the authors should sign a 'forced' retraction, saying that there wasn't really a possibility that MMR might have been the initial trigger for Inflammatory Bowel Disease or autism.

Peter: ... That's why you're trying so hard to cut off the town's main source of revenue I suppose.

Dr. Stockmann: But don't you understand? - the source is poisoned man! Are you mad? We're a health-resort and we're selling dirt and disease! Why, the whole of our flourishing social life's founded on a lie!¹⁴

Peter: Sheer imagination, or even worse! The man who can make such vile suggestions about his own town is nothing but *an enemy of the people!*¹⁵

Act Three begins on a truly humorous note, – with the idealistic Dr. Stockmann being pledged complete support by the town newspaper which is to run his report in full. But while Stockmann revels in this support it is apparent that the newspaper owner and its main journalist as well as the printer are all just toying with the idea of a revolt in the town for their own party or class reasons.¹⁶

The first half of Act Three is given over entirely to a discussion of the economics of newspapers. The newspaper owner and the journalist and the lower-middle-class master printer agree entirely to publish Dr. Stockmann's report, but the discussion that follows after Stockmann has left the office leaves you with the clear impression that the newspaper is in a shaky financial situation.

Peter Stockmann, the Mayor, visits the paper shortly after Dr. Stockmann's visit with the intention of pressing the proprietor into *not* running the story or printing Dr. Stockmann's scientific report.¹⁷ In order to rectify the problem with the Baths, Peter Stockmann tells the printers that the committee will have to levy a council tax. When the newspapermen say that the Baths' owners should pay for the renovation, Stockmann insists that the people will have to bail them out.

Peter Stockmann has arrived at the newspaper office with a clearly written statement of damage limitation which, he says, if it is printed in the paper will clear up the whole matter and put the renovation of the water supply within the boundaries of money available to the Baths' committee.

¹⁴ Here again another allusion that could just as well apply to vaccination 'Are you mad, we are supposed to be preventing disease and we're injecting toxins into people'.

¹⁵ This argument echoes that of Salisbury and others, as well as the chemical companies in the case of Rachel Carson, for instance. In order to destroy the messenger, those in power accuse them of damaging their host society and endangering the health of the public rather than trying to protect them. US chemical interests accused Carson of being a communist, only a communist they argued could side with the soviet bloc in trying to damage the US economy. More recently, in the case of HIV and AIDS-related illnesses, the medical establishment accused Peter Duesberg, one of the most prominent retrovirologists of his generation, of being a murderer after his science led him to conclude that AIDS-related illnesses were not the product of infectious disease spread by a retro-virus.

¹⁶ I've lost track of the number of times I have had exhilarating conversations with journalists and newspaper editors, only to wake up the next morning to read an email, a letter, or get a phone call that informs me that after consideration (i.e., after power has passed on a message) my idea was not such a good one after all.

¹⁷ Could this be a far-sighted reference to the visit from Science Media Centre apparatchiks to the *Observer* newspaper, after the paper had printed a few words in defence of Dr. Wakefield at the start of the GMC fiasco.

When Dr. Stockmann also arrives back at the newspaper to see if his proofs are ready, he is faced with his brother and the newspaper owner and staff who tell him that they have decided not to print his report, rather they are going to run the 'official' statement from the Mayor and the Baths' committee; in their opinion it carries more authority, as well as patronage.

We have reached the stage in the play where Dr. Stockmann has become an alienated dissident¹⁸ and the official rebuttal of his science is about to be seeded and made public. Feeling angry and rejected, Dr. Stockmann goes through a series of options now available to him; if the paper refuses to print his report.

He will, he says, get the printer to publish his science as a pamphlet; the printer refuses. He tells them he will hire a hall and call a public meeting; he is told that no one will rent him a hall, and even if he did find one, no one would turn up. Finally, he says he will march through the town and read his report out loud on every street corner; he is told that no one will march with him. His wife initially puts pressure on him to think of his family rather than 'the truth', but later when she sees how he has become isolated she vows to support him.¹⁹

By the end of Act Three Dr. Stockmann's identity as a scientific dissident is clear and his access to the public forum has been censured and denied him.

As Dr. Stockmann leaves the newspaper offices he says: 'We shall see who wins – you with 'an official statement', or me with the truth!

At this point, had I been producing or directing the play, I might have issued a note in the programme warning the audience against holding their breath. In fact, before the end of the play, Ibsen has suggested that it will on average take fifty years for the majority to believe in and agree on any real truth - to be right.

* * *

The Fourth Act is staged entirely in a meeting in a large room at a private house, the only place that Dr. Stockmann has been able to secure for a meeting. However, from the beginning, the meeting is taken over by his brother and others who by now completely disagree with his scientific work, despite the fact that they have not assessed it scientifically.²⁰

They manage to censor Dr. Stockmann almost completely and turn the meeting into a vote of no confidence in him rather than their mismanagement of the Baths or the environment. During the meeting Dr. Stockmann makes clear his newly found political views. It is these views that lead to him being

¹⁸ I have long thought that this process should have a descriptive word and I have decided on 'disidentiation' or 'disidentification'.

¹⁹ Although Ibsen saves Mrs Stockmann's soul, his initial suggestion that woman—although he wants them to be financially and emotionally independent—cannot carry the burden of serious principles, is inflammatory. However, it is always difficult with dramatists to tell whether they are introducing a situation for the effect of the drama or to report truthfully what they believe to be the case. Here I suspect that Ibsen just wanted a character who would start out sceptical but finally lend support to Stockmann's science.

²⁰ This is clearly a reference to the MRC evaluation meeting organised after the publication of *the Lancet* paper. Salisbury and others claimed that Dr. Wakefield could choose those who attended and set the agenda, presenting his work, but when it came to it, the DoH packed the meeting and excluded sympathetic voices.

branded by the collective as ‘an enemy of the people’, and it is these views, expressed through Dr. Stockmann that drew considerable criticism of Ibsen himself from his contemporary socialist friends, colleagues and comrades.

Dr. Stockman now asserts that the ‘solid majority’ hampers the freedom of truthful and imaginative individuals – that, in the main, their lives are based on stale moral codes that are conservative in the extreme. He insists that the mess made of the Baths and the irresponsibility of the tannery owner are both clearly a sign that those with vested interests are incapable of being truthful.

He shows himself to be radically against the idea of the political collective, or the ‘working class’, and expounds the view that an intellectual elite of individuals would better govern society. Dr. Stockmann’s key assertions in this Act are that the ‘solid majority’, what we now call the ‘silent majority’, are always wrong, that they are incapable of individual thinking and are receivers only of the pre-formed views of others.

For scientists, this is probably the most uninteresting act in the play. Had Ibsen had science at heart, he might have tried to link Dr. Stockmann up to a wider scientific community who appear upon the scene to replicate his research results on the environmental toxicity coming from the tannery.

* * *

That night, following the meeting, Dr. Stockmann’s house is assaulted by the mob and his surgery stoned. In the morning, as the Stockmann family is discussing the idea of leaving the country, a letter arrives from their landlord evicting them from the house.

Later in the morning Dr. Stockmann’s daughter returns home early having been dismissed from her job as a teacher.

The local ship’s captain who helped them make a safe exit from the meeting the night before turns up and he too has been dismissed.

Dr. Stockmann’s two sons return from school having been attacked by other boys in the playground. Dr. Stockmann makes the radical decision not to send them back to school but to home educate them.

Dr. Stockmann’s brother Peter arrives to hand him his dismissal from the Baths’ committee. He explains to the doctor how the Chair of the Householders Association is presently organising a petition to stop people consulting the doctor as patients.

After a visit from the newspaper owner and journalist, astounded by their corruption and desire to make money out of his predicament, Dr. Stockmann changes his mind about leaving the country and instead decides to stay and fight.

* * *

At the end of the play, Ibsen continues his tirade against organised ideological parties that practice stale and liberal views and whose leaders do not have the courage of their convictions. He ends with Stockmann stating the focused anarchist view that ‘The strongest man in the world is he who stands alone’.

There has been much discussion about this statement because it can clearly be read in a number of ways. Many socialists would immediately disagree with it on the grounds that individuals cannot effectively challenge power and that for this the energy of the collective is needed. However, Ibsen was clearly not thinking of the collective views of the masses, but stating a simply principle: Only those who think for themselves have views to which they can stay committed. He was stating the anarchist view that, in science and in politics, it was important to be autonomous and hold views that you know you could be committed to and not simply parrot the views of others over which you had no real control. Ibsen is putting down a marker, against leaders and followers and in favour of individual autonomy.

Watching Dr. Wakefield give his evidence and be cross-examined for two weeks by Miss Smith, I was constantly reminded of this idea that the individual who remains clearly in touch with their own views, in this case proven scientific findings, is indeed one of the strongest people. Miss Smith, with all her received and creative collective truths of the vaccine establishment and the DoH, was completely unable to move him. Much of the time, it was like watching a baby try to push a sumo wrestler off his mark.

Ibsen was a wholehearted believer in scientific socialism, a Marxist. He was also, at least at the time he wrote ‘An Enemy of the People’, a believer in eugenics.²¹ While many of Ibsen’s critics point to eugenics as a major influence in the play, I’m not so sure. Ibsen does describe a reactionary mob, driven on without thought, their actions initiated by the propaganda of those in power. Critics raise their heads at this point and say with evident delight, ‘See, here are the lower orders, unfeeling brutes, evidently described through Ibsen’s belief in eugenics’.

However, ‘the rabble’ exists in all societies, shaped not by some mishap of genetics but by environmental factors and led by the ruling elites for their own purposes. Certainly ‘the rabble’ exists by necessity in this drama because Ibsen wouldn’t have had a play without them. Whether or not they are a social group that socialists would want to ‘cull’ is a quite different matter. Even in contemporary society where people are more able to make their own decisions about social matters, this lumpen received/opinionated mass exists but not necessarily as part of the poor or the ‘working class’. Sometimes the rabble is recognisable in great swathes of the middle class who are led to assume their opinions by the media, which uses them to court the ideas of the powerful.

²¹ Although the ideas of eugenics might seem at odds with the ideas of Marxism or socialism, a misreading of Marx might lead you to understand that science would provide the next revolutionary advance in the means of production and that this would involve changing animal, plant and human form, for example into controlled or robotic individuals. This is undoubtedly a very complex area of philosophical investigation. Ibsen’s views in the nineteenth century were very close to those articulated by today’s science lobby groups and the self-destructing Revolutionary Communist Party. Other Marxists would argue, however, that while science might well power a new revolution in production, there is nothing in Marx’s writing which suggest that he would have wanted science to change the principles of the human form or human reproduction. The drive to do these things, most political philosophers would argue, comes in the present day from the means of production, in whatever regimes, in societies that are highly technologically advanced, and need a pliable and submissive labour force in which workers act like machines.

Ibsen was suffering at the time he wrote the play from his own public and social rejection on account of his play 'Ghosts', for which he suffered terrible condemnation. In Esslin's words, Ibsen was being portrayed at that time as a 'fanatic who threatened the peace of society by exposing its hidden shames and sources of infection'.²²

This combination of the personal assault upon Ibsen, his socialism and his then current interest in eugenics, lends a complexity to 'An Enemy of the People', the theme of which has stood the test of time. One of the principal reasons for this is that a number of social issues, such as the economic independence of women, dealt with in other of Ibsen's plays, have proved transitory in the face of the needs of advancing capitalism. While the question of toxic industries and their cost to the community, together with the attempts to cover up this cost by vested interests, has continued to be an irresolvable issue at the heart of capitalist production.

When I first went back to 'An Enemy of the People', I was staggered by its contemporary reality and meaning, but then when I thought about it and I thought about the work done by the American 'muckrakers' at the turn of the 19th century, I realised that it was written close on the most energetic period of writing about vested interests and corporate denial of the toxic effects of industry in the history of the industrial revolution. It was written just over 20 years before Upton Sinclair's great work about the meatpacking industry in Chicago and even closer to Ida Tarbell's reporting on the cavalier ways of the Rockefeller oil industry.

But, if anything, Ibsen's play tells us not that Ibsen and the US 'Muckrakers' were before their time, but that in contemporary society we have all slipped behind our times. While Martin Esslin insists that the play is a simple one, almost—he infers—propagandist, I would say that the fact that it reproduces a narrative that socialists and progressives have not yet won makes it more complex than Ibsen's work about such subjects as the economic independence of women.

Despite its age and its seemingly specific cultural heritage, 'An Enemy of the People' is a piece of pedagogic theatre for our time. Moreover, it offers good political lessons. The echoes of the case of Dr. Wakefield in the play demonstrate quite forcibly that what are frequently dismissed as 'conspiracy theories' in contemporary developed society have been recognised for well over a century as set-piece strategies by industrialists and established powers. We should no longer be confused by constant reiteration of the collective view, which, while being believed unthinkingly by the mass of the people, does not stand up to independent rational or public examination. Those of us who stand for truth have to retain an independence of mind which makes us strong as individuals and stronger as a group with a common purpose, while we battle politically on behalf of uncomfortable science and its often unhappy advocates.

²² Such a similar description could fit Dr. Wakefield's present position and his characterisation by the medical establishment.