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SMEARING COSMETICS

BY MICHAEL FUMENTO

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[Cosmetics](#) and fragrances have long been mixed with politics. Because most users are women, Marxists and some extreme feminists have declared them [tools of female oppression](#). Conversely, dictatorships like [Nazi Germany](#) and [the Taliban](#) have banned cosmetics out of sheer [misogyny](#). (Never mind the redundancy of forbidding mascara behind a [burqa](#).)

Unsurprisingly, then, it's activism and not science that's behind the latest push to restrict access to cosmetics, with the activists targeting something called [phthalates](#). (Pronounced "thal-lates.") Many of these ingredients are used in cosmetics. They can make perfume scents last longer, make nail polish more flexible, and [keep hairspray from stiffening](#).

Activist groups seem to have joined the anti-phthalate campaign just to have something to agitate against. An umbrella group seeking to ban the chemicals, the [Campaign for Safe Cosmetics](#), includes extremist environmentalist outfits like [Friends of the Earth](#), the [Environmental Working Group](#), and the [Breast Cancer Fund](#). The last argues that as many as half of all breast cancers are chemically-induced.

The current anti-cosmetics crusade is trying to force U.S. companies to comply with a [European Union \(EU\) ban](#) on some cosmetic phthalates. The activists say they will publish a "report card" this month to show which companies appeared to yield the most.

Supposedly the EU knows something we don't. Yet a [2003 EU scientific report](#) on one of the banned chemicals concluded that for consumers, "There is at present no need for further information or testing or risk reduction beyond those which are applied already." Why was such a clear finding utterly ignored?

In part, it's because the EU [recently adopted](#) something called "[the precautionary principle](#)," whereby synthetic chemicals are presumed harmful until "proven" safe. Since it's impossible to prove anything safe, merely that there's no evidence of harm, this allows EU regulators to willy-nilly ban any man-made chemical they wish.

Moreover, whether government bans something is often merely a reflection of the power and geographic location of activist groups. That's why the agricultural chemical [Alar](#) was [banned](#) over a decade ago in the U.S. but not in the EU. In Europe, the anti-cosmetic activists are much more powerful.

Yet the research stubbornly refuses to support them or their campaign. Every few years a group called the [Cosmetic Ingredient Review \(CIR\) Expert Panel](#) evaluates new data on cosmetic ingredients and issues updated reports. It's a massive undertaking precisely because cosmetic ingredients are so heavily researched.

The conclusion of their [latest re-evaluation](#), from 2003, is unequivocal. All three of the EU-banned chemicals are "safe for use in cosmetic products in the present practices of use and concentrations, and therefore, the safety assessment of these compounds was not reopened."

While harmful phthalate effects have been found in massive doses in animal studies, CIR Director F. Alan Anderson told me, "Actual exposures are so low there could be no adverse effects from cosmetics." More specifically, "The exposure you get from cosmetics is 5,000 times lower than that shown to produce any kind of observable effect" in test animals and an "observable effect" may not even be harmful.

Warning: Do not apply perfume more than 5,000 times in one evening.

The U.S. government has also [weighed in](#). The "FDA believes that at the present time there is no reason for consumers to be alarmed at the use of cosmetics containing phthalates."

With no science to fall back on, the activists instead employ circular reasoning. Because [some major cosmetics companies](#) have voluntarily pledged to adhere to the EU standards, they insist all should be forced to. Yet a major factor in that decision was bad publicity from the activists. ("[L'Oreal, Revlon Bow to Bay Area Pressure](#)," as a [San Francisco Chronicle](#) headline put it.)



"Für deutsche Frauen sind Kosmetik verboten!"




There's no birthright to superior cosmetics or fragrances, of course. But that women under totalitarian regimes have been brutally punished for defiantly wearing them should give us pause before caving in to activist groups that also insist upon inflicting their own extreme beliefs on others.

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