

## *Book Review*

**Auyero, Javier and Swinstun, Debora Alejandra (2009) *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-537294-6**

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One of the most hopeful developments in the midst of increasing toxic pollution on a global scale is the emergence of alliances between labour and environmental activists in many countries to mobilise against polluting corporations. The need for such co-operation is demonstrated by *Flammable. Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown* (2009), an account of how the inhabitants of a particular community make sense of toxic danger.

In Burawoy's analysis, what is unique about the contemporary period 'is the way the expansion of capitalism has given rise to environmental degradation, moving toward ecological catastrophe.' (Burawoy, 2013: 39). Much of this degradation takes the form of a toxic pollution which takes place gradually and invisibly. Nixon captures this in his concept of 'slow violence': 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space' (Nixon, 2011: 2). In *Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Nixon, 2012) Nixon shows that much environmental damage takes the form of this slow violence that extends over time, is insidious, undramatic, accretive and relatively invisible.

This process is powerfully illustrated in *Flammable* (2009). The sociologist Javier Auyero and Debora Swinstun provide a moving account of how the inhabitants of a particular community cope with this process of slow, invisible environmental contamination. The community of *Flammable* is an Argentinean shantytown located adjacent to a compound that houses Shell and other petrochemical companies and storage facilities. This is a poor community of some 700 families 'in many ways similar to other territories of urban relegation in Argentina; it was deeply affected by the explosion of unemployment and the ensuing misery of the 1990s. Residents mostly subsist on part-time manual jobs in one of the companies of the compound, retirement pensions, scavenging and state welfare programmes' (p. 45). But *Flammable* is different from other destitute neighbourhoods throughout Buenos Aires in the extent of its air, water and soil pollution. The effects are known to local government experts and the area is acknowledged to be unsuitable for human residence. But there is a marked lack of government action and a widespread confusion and uncertainty about the causes and effects of the contamination among residents.

The authors' main concern is with how the contamination is socially constructed and perceived. This counters what sociologist Ulrich Beck called a 'social invisibility', an absence of 'social thinking' about environmental issues (Beck, 1992: 25). Correcting the tendency to ignore different social meanings, the main purpose of the author's 'collaborative ethnography' is 'to examine what living in the midst of garbage and poison does to people and how they make sense of it...' (p. 18). The authors are profoundly sensitive to the multiple and contradictory meanings people give to their experiences of contamination '... the culture of toxic uncertainty is a complex web of meanings and shared understandings' (p. 108). They acknowledge that 'Flammable residents are alternately

angry, and confused or mystified about the source, extent and potential effects of contamination' (p. 5); residents 'do not think about toxicity in a single, monolithic way' (p. 6). 'Flammable is a story of people's confusion, mistakes and/or blindness regarding the toxicity that surrounds them. Flammable is also a story of silent habituation to contamination and of almost complete absence of mass protest against toxic onslaught' (p. 4).

This 'silent habituation' and absence of mass protests suggests a strong contrast with a different poisoned community – that of Love Canal in the USA - where the toxic contamination was similarly invisible, slow and insidious. As Levine writes, 'there were no walls of water, no bolts of lightning, no reports of multiple deaths and brave rescues. In short, the Love Canal situation was neither cataclysmic nor dramatic' (Levine, 1982: 179). But there was a slow process of community members moving from a condition of ignorance about the chemicals which had been dumped in their neighbourhood, to appreciating the dangers involved and organising themselves to challenge the power of a multi-billion dollar corporation and an unresponsive government. This mobilisation depended on unmasking the power relations at work which involved the externalisation of environmental costs by the Hooker Chemical Corporation.

Auyero and Swistun explain the lack of mass protest in Flammable in terms of Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic violence', how domination involves the misrecognition of power structures on the part of the dominated. Their sense of responsibility as scholars ends with the task of explaining 'the reproduction of uncertainty, misunderstanding, division and ultimately, inaction in the midst of sustained toxic assault' (p. 8). Their focus is on the subjective perception of contamination, not its material base.

In this sense the book illustrates the limitations of a discourse analysis which fails to address material factors. The authors pay scant attention to the fundamental material causes of the environmental suffering they describe: the externalisation of costs by the oil companies operating in the area which involved petrochemical waste and emissions. While pointing to Shell's concern to present itself as safe and responsible they back off any explicit criticism, 'We are ill-prepared to confirm or dispute Shell's assertions' (p. 73).

The denial of responsibility for pollution is characteristic of corporate practices in many different societies. Corporate 'deceit and denial' has been documented in the USA for instance (Markowitz and Rosen, 2004). One of the most powerful exposes of this pattern is Devra Davis's *When Smoke Ran like Water: Tales of Environmental Deception and the Battle Against Pollution* (2002). As in the case of Debora Swistun, a resident of Flammable, for Davis pollution became a personal issue when toxic pollution from a steel factory killed several family members and damaged half the population of her hometown of Donora in Pennsylvania. At the time pollution was marked by a social invisibility. 'Nobody knew about pollution. That was just the way it was'; '... today they call it pollution. Back then, it was just a living'; 'People had to eat' (Cited by Davis, 2002: 9). The inhabitants lacked crucial information about how the steel mill was externalising environmental costs. 'For Donora... the important questions never got asked.' (Davis, 2002: 21). This experience spurred Davis to go on to research and expose many other instances of corporate 'deceit and denial' as in how the oil companies and car manufacturers in the USA fought for decades to keep lead in petrol while knowing that it caused brain damage.

Auyero and Swistun do not interview any of the workers employed full time in the petrochemical compound, or explore the experiences of those community members employed on a casual basis. While they provide a deeply moving account of different experiences and understandings of environmental suffering, the 'silence' and 'absence' in Flammable raises challenging questions for

scholars. Is it sufficient to uncover and analyse the social construction of toxic pollution? Is there a responsibility to expose the ways in which the ‘deceit and denial’ of powerful corporations blocks the understandings of the inhabitants of pollution affected communities? Such blockages obviously constrain social action. Should research also investigate and expose the causes of the toxic pollution, in this case the externalisation of costs by petro-chemical companies? Does the book demonstrate the need for a scholarship that is committed to empowering people for transformative change? This could take the form of direct interventions such as popular education or attempts to provoke government action. How far should interventions go, such as contributing to the building of local and global alliances between labour and environmental activists which is happening in many countries to challenge polluting corporations?

There are many communities in contemporary South Africa who are suffering from toxic pollution caused by powerful corporations concerned to externalise production costs. The community of South Durban is struggling to survive the highest rate of asthma in the world from exposure to toxic chemicals from the Shell refinery. In Steel Valley, the area near Vanderbijlpark, the penetration of the toxic pollution was extensive, permeating the landscape, moving slowly through the air, the soil and the underground water and – in many cases- was driven inwards and somatized in the form of illness, genetic defects, cancers and kidney failures among animals and humans. In Steel Valley, as at Flammable and at Love Canal, ‘there was no moment of impact when physical surroundings changed suddenly’ (Levine, 1982: 193). But over a long period the area of Steel Valley has been reduced to a wasteland. The cause is extensive toxic pollution from a steel mill – operated first by the parastatal Iscor, and now by the largest steel producer in the world, ArcelorMittal.

What is the responsibility of progressive scholars to these communities? Simply to investigate and describe suffering, ignorance and confusion? In this highly individualised neoliberal moment, research on the toxic contamination of poor communities which connects labour and environmental issues could illuminate and mobilise the collective action necessary to challenge corporate abuse.

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