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Review: Resisting Global Toxics. Transnational Movements for Environmental Justice

By David Naguib Pellow

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David Naguib Pellow, *Resisting Global Toxics. Transnational Movements for Environmental Justice*, MIT Press 2007, IX+346 pp., £33.95, ISBN-13: 978-0-262-16244-9 (Hardcover), alkaline paper

In 1937, while Nazi harassment was declining towards the “final solution”, Edmund Husserl, founder of phenomenology, argued that modern genocides, like social crimes and inequalities involving mass participation, share a disengagement between ethics and *sight* as an essential trait. To gain the complicity of entire societies in immoral actions, he explained in “The Crisis of European Sciences”, it is necessary to conceal or make ambiguous the relationships between collective actions and their consequences. The only antidote is the pedagogy of *sight* applied as a capillary practice: opportunities for attentive ethical choices can arise, but the obstacles to a comprehensive perspective have to be eliminated. In this arena, the efforts of David Naguib Pellow, director of Cultures in Comparative Perspective at the University of California, are remarkable. In the award-winning “Garbage Wars” (2002) and in “Power, Justice, and the Environment” (2005), he has already exposed to the Western *sight* the unequally distributed costs of its toxic development. Now, in “Resisting Global Toxics”, Pellow examines the export towards the poor communities of the planet of millions of tons of toxic waste produced in the global North, and charts the rise of transnational movements struggling to challenge and reverse it.

From his current book’s first pages the practice of waste trading clearly emerges along with the indefensible ideology that accompanies it. To stress that environmental inequality ought to be theorized in the context of race, class and nation, Pellow quotes a 1991 internal memo from Lawrence Summers, vice president of the World Bank: “A *given amount of health impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost...under-populated countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted (...). The concern over a pollutant that causes a one in a million change in the odds of prostate cancer is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostate cancer than in a country with higher mortality rates*” (p. 9).

The literature on the ill effects of globalization rarely characterizes environmental injustices as racialized, so the relationships between modernity, race, class and nation must be brought forward as well as the nature and efficacy of movements combating inequalities in the global economy. More refined transnational networks now use a rights-based discourse to mobilize across national borders and along racial and class lines, while responsive environmental studies directly challenge the toxic nature of late modernity itself. Entire chapters of the book deal with “Electronic wastes” (Ch. VI), the fastest growing stream of pollutants in industrialized nations, and pesticides (Ch. V, “Ghosts of the green revolution”). The first are externalities, the unwanted byproduct of industrial manufacture, but the latter were explicitly valued for their killing power in the belief that their heavy use would lead to larger crop yields. Unfortunately, scientific advances cannot put remedy to collective misbehaviors. Rather, they

amplify the consequences: e-waste and pesticides pose a threat of toxic substances that affects some people disproportionately because of inequalities still observable across nation, race, class, and gender. *Resisting Global Toxics* provides a survey of the impacts of global industrialization on health, environmental, and democratic issues. Transnational environmental justice offenses require transnational responses, and the full life-cycle impacts of globalization must be brought to light: waste dumping from rich to poor nations reflects North-South divisions in the global world. Anyone questioning cultural awareness and pragmatic paths towards environmental justice and sustainability can turn to this book.

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