

**Review: Reclaiming the Environmental Debate: The Politics of Health
in a Toxic Culture**

By Richard Hofrichter, ed.

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Richard Hofrichter (Ed.). *Reclaiming the Environmental Debate: The Politics of Health in a Toxic Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. 356 pp. ISBN 0-262-58182-5 (paper). US\$25.00

In the introduction to this collection of seventeen essays, Hofrichter claims that our toxic culture goes beyond the traditional understanding that toxic relates to materials and processes to encompass virtually all aspects of our daily lives. That includes physical environments; ecosystems; and economic, social and spiritual community health. Moreover, he argues that a toxic culture exists because of "social arrangements that encourage and excuse the deterioration of the environment and human health" (p. 1). The themes that echo most loudly in this volume are that corporate America is responsible for creating a toxic culture, that toxicology is suspect at best, and that risk assessment, despite being science-based, is biased, perverted by corporate influence, and not considerate of risk views in non-mainstream America.

Aside from the introductory chapter by the editor, the book is organized into three parts. Part One, "Challenging Current Perspectives," consists of seven essays that cover diverse ground such as cancer, worker health, brownfields, community as place, Native American experience, risk assessment, and economic reductionism. In "The Social Production of Cancer: A Walk Upstream" Sandra Steingraber writes of her own experience with bladder cancer and the lack of attention paid by researchers to potential environmental causes of a variety of cancers. She concludes with some "guiding principles for reducing toxics." One of the principles she espouses is that of principle of least toxic alternative. It's not a bad idea. However, in order to determine the least toxic version of any chemical, some sort of risk assessment process is required. Other essays in the same volume argue that risk assessment is a science to be dismissed. Corporate America is on the hook in Charles Levenstein and John Wooding's essay "Deconstructing Standards, Reconstructing Worker Health." They astutely assert, "occupational disease and injury are 'unintended consequences' of technological choices driven by financial imperative." (p. 39). They examine the history of worker protection standards and the clout of corporate America. They also provide some ideas on how to ameliorate corporate influence. These include the building of organizations that represent worker interests, changing attitudes and values of professionals in occupational safety fields who, the authors

claim, are "largely dominated by corporate interests" (p. 53), and allowing communities to set their own standards for controlling polluting industries.

Community involvement is central to the essay by William Shutkin and Rafael Mares' "Brownfields and the Redevelopment of Communities: Linking Health, Economy and Justice." They examine the principles of brownfields, including its regulatory history and intent and provide suggestions for an improved brownfields process that not only considers economics but social capital as well. They use two neighborhoods of Boston as examples of brownfields that work. Mindy and Robert Fullilove's essay "Place Matters" is perhaps the most abstract of all essays appearing in the book. They talk about place as a concept to which all should aspire. This *place* would ideally be the result of changing individual's precepts about where they live. And the way that is achieved, they claim, would be to "think globally, act locally." How one Indian community responded to a hazardous waste site and their sense of place is the subject of Alice Tarbell and Mary Arquette's essay "Akwesane: A Native American Community's Resistance to Cultural and Environmental Damage." The authors argue that well-meaning regulatory agencies try to resolve environmental issues with mandates and directives when they should amend problems by considering social and cultural values and experience. Once again, as others do in this volume, the authors take risk assessment to task. In this case, they say it is not responsive to Native American views of risk, which are not based on a modern industrial economy.

Risk assessment is treated harshly in Mary O'Brien's essay "When Harm Is Not Necessary: Risk Assessment as Diversion." She dismisses it as "the current process by which we claim that exposure to toxic chemicals is safe" (p. 132). She also claims that simple morality will save the earth. Simplistic at worst and misleading as best, she ignores that fact that risk assessment is also the current process by which we claim that exposure to toxic chemicals is *unsafe*. Because morality is not science, but a human emotion, we will need both risk assessment and a sense of morality to sustain ourselves for a greener and cleaner future. The last essay in Part One, John Foster's "The Ecological Tyranny of the Bottom Line: The Environmental and Social Consequences of Economic Reductionism" is heady stuff, delving into environmental economics and theories thereof. Ultimately, Foster argues that our defense of our environment should be based upon diverse values not connected to the "bottom line."

Part Two, "Shaping Consciousness," consists of five essays. Immediately, the ghost of Rachel Carson is evoked in Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber's essay "Silencing Spring: Corporate Propaganda and the Takeover of the Environmental Movement." The focus of their essay is on how corporations have co-opted environmentalism to their benefit. Corporations and the

environment are also the topic of Joshua Karliner's essay on "The Globalization of Corporate Culture and its Role in the Environmental Crisis." Both essays decry the corporate interest in environmentalism and claim that true environmental change will only be the result of both idealistic and radical grass roots alliances and action. Corporate marketing of products with an environmental bent is the focus of Robin Anderson's essay "Selling 'Mother Earth': Advertising and the Myth of the Natural." The author uses several telling examples of how corporate America uses environmental images in advertising that have no relation whatsoever to the product in order to appear "environmentally friendly." These include T.V. advertisements for Kitchen Aid and Whirlpool appliances. Another example is the selling of bottled water products and cosmetics. In these cases images are often keyed to natural landscapes that are far removed from the actual development, bottling, distribution, use and disposal of the products.

In "Green Living in a Toxic World: The Pitfalls and Promises of Everyday Environmentalism" author Marcy Darnovsk starts off with the statement "More Americans now recycle than vote for president" (p. 219), which is an interesting but un-sourced statistic. Green consumerism was a prominent trend in the 1990s and seems unabated in the new millennium. Therefore a focus of her essay is on the environmentalism practiced by many Americans. She doesn't seem to hold much hope for our environmental future if placed in the hands of everyday citizens. However, she claims that sustainability is the key to an environmental future.

The last essay in Part Two of this book, "Rethinking Technoscience in Risk Society: Toxicity as Textuality" by Timothy Luke is similar in scope to an earlier essay on risk assessment by Mary O'Brien. Unfortunately, as with O'Brien's treatment of risk assessment, Luke is inaccurate at times about the purpose of risk assessment. For instance, he makes the statement that "not all chemicals are, in and of themselves, intrinsically contaminants or toxic as such" (p. 241). The science of toxicology is traced back to the Greek Paracelsus who said "all substances are poisons; there is none which is not a poison. The right dose differentiates a poison and a remedy." Luke also misses the historical context of the toxicological and allied professions. He comments about the "development of new technoscience disciplines, such as environmental toxicology, risk assessment, or public health..." (p. 245). Environmental toxicology is a relatively new discipline but is based on historical concepts of poisons. Risk assessment too, is a relatively new science, but is reliant in part on historically significant disciplines such as toxicology, epidemiology, and pharmacology. Finally, the discipline of public health is more than a century old—for instance, Public Health Reports has been published since 1885. In addition many state and local public health agencies

were created between the 1830s and 1870s.

Part Three, "Notes from the Field: Community Struggles," consists of four essays that focus less on theory and more on real life examples of environmental confrontation. In Al Gedicks' "Silencing the Voice of the People: How Mining Companies Subvert Local Opposition," he uses the Flambeau copper-gold sulfide deposit in northern Wisconsin as a prime example of the continuing battle between those who seek to acquire a natural resource and those who would stand in the way of corporate progress and profits. He makes the interesting note that the anti-mining movement is quite different from the hazardous waste movement in that the anti-mining movement is rurally based, multiracial, and grassroots in its approach.

The concept of environmental justice is the focus of Giovanna DiChiro's "Bearing Witness or Taking Action?: Toxic Tourism and Environmental Justice," and John O'Neal's "For Generations Yet to Come: Junebug Productions' Environmental Justice Project." DiChiro defines three types of tours that focus on issues of environmental justice. The first is the toxic tour as political action, the second is the toxic tour as reality based, and the third is the toxic tour as community activism. Frankly, there is relatively little difference between these tours; however, they appear to be useful in alerting "tourists" to the very real problem of contaminated lands located in minority and low-income neighborhoods. O'Neal, who is artistic director of Junebug Productions, a company that develops, produces and presents artistic works that support African-American interests in New Orleans for the black belt south. In his chapter, he describes a project of the company that over a period of seven years resulted in the production of a major festival in New Orleans that focused on environmental racism. Branda Miller's "Media Art and Activism: A Model for Collective Action" has a tone similar to the two previous environmental justice essays. Miller describes a *Witness to the Future* comprising a 50-minute video and a CD-ROM that relates to three sites where people have been exposed to environmental toxins (Hanford Nuclear reservation, San Joaquin Valley, and Cancer alley in Louisiana).

This reviewer has never been convinced that anthologies reach the right audiences. Largely published by university presses, they seem to promote the tenureship of professors rather than being distributed or made readily available to individuals and interest groups who can actually institute any of the recommended ideas or changes. This is not to say that Richard Hofrichter hasn't done an admirable job of putting together varied and interesting viewpoints. However with a limited press run, this anthology might collect more dust than readers. One point of contention-it would be refreshing if essayists ceased invoking Rachel Carson's ghost and words-invoking her name is too easy.

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