

Review: Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States

By Steve Lerner

Reviewed by Peter C. Little
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NOTE: This review is for the hardback edition (2010) which is no longer available. The citation information with this review reflects the currently-available paperback edition, available September 2012.

Lerner, Steve. *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2012. 368pp. ISBN 9780262518178. US \$19.95, trade paperback.

Sacrifice Zones chronicles the plethora of U.S. towns struggling with industrial pollution, corporate negligence, environmental injustice, and public health challenges. The employment of the term “sacrifice zones,” which Lerner admits is a spin on the government term “National Sacrifice Zones,” is based on “the fact that low-income and minority populations, living adjacent to heavy industry and military bases, are required to make disproportionate health and economic sacrifices that more affluent people can avoid” (p.3). In his exploration of twelve sacrifice zones, Lerner finds that the goals and intentions of grassroots leaders in these communities are “rarely to shutter the industry causing the pollution. Instead, they work to improve enforcement of existing regulations, reduce emissions, and convince company owners to install state-of-the-art pollution control technologies” (p.13).

Lerner begins the book with a look at communities of “partial victory,” where despite continuing pollution struggles, community-based political organizing and progressive compensation, remediation, and relocation action has taken place. He organizes the book into three sections based on the nature of the contamination problem (e.g., contaminated air, water, and soil), showcasing how various communities grapple with toxic onslaught in both different and similar ways. Lerner’s grassroots approach to learning about fence-line community struggles reveals the powerful role of collecting personal testimonies to better understand the human experience of environmental injustices.

As Lerner points out, “To learn about what life is like in these fence-line communities requires traveling off the beaten track and venturing beyond the centers of affluence and power. Sacrifice zones are not garden spots and few people travel to them as destinations of choice. As a result, many of them remain essentially hidden from the

view of most Americans” (p.15). It is, as Lerner would argue, necessary to engage such “uncomfortable facts” (p.314) if we truly wish to address problems of environmental injustice.

Sacrifice Zones is an excellent book for environmental justice activists and academics alike, and will be of interest to students and scholars of environmental studies, environmental anthropology and sociology, social movements, and public health.

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