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Book Review

Urban Pollution: Cultural Meanings, Social Practices

Edited by Eveline Dürr and Rivke Jaffe. 2010. Studies in Environmental Anthropology and Ethnobiology, Vol. 15. Berghahn Books, New York. 216 pp. $27.95 (paperback), $120.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-84545-692-4 (paperback), 978-1-78238-508-0 (hardcover).

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Social science research on environmental pollution tends to focus on impacts from natural resource extraction in rural and remote areas, while studies on the urban environment often concentrate on technology, economics, and innovation. Environmental anthropologists write about green spaces and gardens in cities, but have generally neglected the brown spaces. The 15th volume of the Studies in Environmental Anthropology and Ethnobiology series, entitled *Urban Pollution: Cultural Meanings, Social Practices*, presents an innovative collection of ethnographic case studies on perceptions of pollution in urban centers. The authors use Mary Douglas' seminal work *Risk and Blame* (1966) as an entry point for examining pollution as a disruption of social order. To correct for what they see as Douglas' "unmitigated dualism" and "constructivist inclinations," the editors set the intention in the introductory chapter to give equal weight to symbolic and physical pollution (Dürr and Jaffe 2010:5). They argue:

> [A] symbolic-material dualism only holds true up to a point, as these categories are, of course, overlapping and interrelated. The materiality and sociality of urban pollution are relational entities that produce each other—this relational materiality itself, as well as the hybridity of pollution, can be the focus of study (Dürr and Jaffe 2010:3).

In the second chapter, Eveline Dürr examines how concepts of cultural pollution are revealed through discourse about environmental pollution in New Zealand. Settler "Kiwis" place value on environmental and indigenous flora and fauna preservation, while describing Asian immigrants as environmentally irresponsible, 'polluting others'. Meanwhile young Asian immigrants counteract this stereotype with volunteer litter removal initiatives. In the next chapter, Damaris Lüthi argues that concepts of im/purity in Kottar correlate with the physical world and are therefore more similar to scientific understandings rather than symbolic ones. Inside homes and spiritual spaces, lower caste impurities are more dangerous than those from upper castes, which reinforces class and caste segregation. In the fourth chapter, Susanna Trnka describes the legacy of Indo-Fijian Hindus, the second largest cultural group in Fiji, who were brought there by the British as indentured servants. Indo-Fijians provided the physical labor for the "development" of the Nation, while the British colonizers forced indigenous Fijians to remain rural. Through this separation, the "jungle" is seen as wild, encroaching, and indigenous; in contrast the city of Suva is perceived as an advanced, modern, and clean place, in spite of actual physical pollution. In Chapter 5, Anouk de Koning argues that in Cairo, tropes of pollution and defilement are used to elaborate and contest new class configurations from Egypt's liberal era through the bodies of young upper-middle class women. The women's experiences and contestations are linked to space and place as they negotiate their current positions shaped by gender and class. Next, Magnus Treiber provides an ethnographic account of two different social establishments in Asmara, Eritrea. Asmara is shaped by post-independence youth, students and young professionals, who draw on symbolic conceptions of pollution through a differentiation between "hangouts" and "bars". In the seventh chapter, Szabina Kerényi looks at post-Communist social movement mobilization and collective action in Budapest. She argues that mem-

bers of urban social movements define pollution on overlapping material and abstract levels, as it is considered both ritually unclean and resulting from harmful practices in the urban environment. In Chapter 8, Johanna Rolshoven employs a historical perspective of European discourse of the city to look at characterizations of cleanliness, sanitation, health, and morals that determine urban management. She finds that concepts of health and the city are fundamentally linked, reflecting society and space. Next, in Chapter 9, Kathryn Scott and her co-authors apply political ecology to the discourses and material conditions that shape the urban environment and reinforce existing power relations in Glen Innes, New Zealand. The authors show that low-density housing is a symbol for the middle class, while high-density housing is equated with slums, even though more compact forms of housing have the potential to improve the lives of marginalized people living in Glen Innes.

As Aidan Davison points out in the afterword, research on pollution is not cleanly separated into the various academic disciplines: "As the illegitimate offspring of technological systems, pollution appears to be the antithesis of ecological order and social order. The category of pollution threatens to pollute modern disciplines of knowledge by seeming to originate from neither the realm of nature nor the realm of culture" (Davison 2010:198). In this context ethnobiologists are well-equipped to study pollution, as they are skilled in the interdisciplinary negotiations of researching human interactions with nature, in which measurable science and traditional knowledge need not be framed as opposing forces. However, if you are looking for a book on ethnobiology and pollution, *Urban Pollution* might not suit your needs. It leans heavily towards urban anthropology and away from presenting folk taxonomy, scientific results, or ecological or environmental data. In fact, the chapters fall short of the editors' aforementioned intention to give equal weight to measurable conditions and cultural perceptions of pollution by focusing on symbolic pollution. Nonetheless, academic inquiry often favors ecological systems outside of cities, in spite of the fact that now the majority of the global population lives in urban centers. A diversity of perspectives on environmental pollution in cities is a welcomed contribution and this volume presents a scholarly and rich selection that is worth consideration.

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