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## Book review

Nygren, Anja

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Auyero, Javier and Swistun, Débora, Alejandra. *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Despite considerable research on inequality and poverty in Latin America, environmental suffering and the unequal distribution of environmental vulnerabilities have remained relatively marginal research topics in anthropological research on Latin America. The ethnographic analysis by Javier Auyero and Débora Alejandra Swistun on environmental suffering in an Argentine shantytown, called Flammable, is a very welcome contribution to the theory and practice of people's experience of daily environmental suffering and its links to social domination. Surrounded by one of the largest petrochemical compounds in Argentina, a contaminated river that brings the toxic waste of different industries, a hazardous waste incinerator, and an unmonitored landfill, the soil, air, and water in Flammable are contaminated with benzene, chromium, lead, and other chemicals. The book offers a sophisticated analysis of the devastating effects wrought by industrial contamination on local shantytown dwellers. It provides a meaningful discussion of the political ethnography of environmental suffering and social injustice in territories of urban marginality.

The empirical material of the book is based on a long-term fieldwork carried out by Javier Auyero, a professor of Latin American sociology at the University of Texas at Austin and Débora Swistun, an anthropologist who has lived most of her life in Flammable and thus has personal experience of the environmental sufferings endured by the inhabitants. The study is based on a careful combination of different kinds of data, including life-stories, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations with local residents, interviews with governmental officials, industrial representatives, physicians, and lawyers, as well as an analysis of the archival documents and media discourses concerning the issue. Using life-

stories of Flammable's residents, the authors have succeeded in producing a rich ethnography of the local inhabitants' subjective, albeit socially constructed, evaluations of the effects of industrial contamination in their living place.

Rather than being cohesive defenders protesting against the toxic assault on Flammable, Auyero and Swistun demonstrate how the residents' experiences of soil and air contamination are characterized by confusion, suspicion, and disagreements. To analyze such experiences, the authors draw on the theoretical framework of "schemata of perception", as conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu (1998, 2000) and Diane Vaughan (1998, 2004). Since these cognitive schemes that frame the ways in which people perceive their surroundings are socially constructed, Auyero and Swistun analyze the local experiences of contamination as an outcome of the power relationships among multiple actors, who have differentiated access to knowledge and power. The discursive and practical interventions by governmental officials, industrial personnel, lawyers, and other influential actors strongly mould the cognitive schemes through which the residents of Flammable perceive and act in their contaminated environment. These interventions also shape the kinds of issues that local residents recognize, misidentify, or ignore in their living space.

By paying careful attention to the local residents' lived experiences of toxicity, Auyero and Swistun succeed in painting a touching ethnographic portrait of what living in a contaminated environment is like and how social domination works with the subaltern complicity. Inspired by Bourdieu's ideas of social domination, the authors unravel how symbolic violence operates via the dominated people's unconscious sharing of the categories of perception with the dominant. The book shows in a convincing way how effectively governmental officials, oil industry personnel, physicians, and lawyers, propose their own definitions of the problems and attendant solutions in Flammable, (mis)diagnose the local residents' ailments, and offer palliatives for the afflictions or promote dreamlike expectations

about compensations for damage. Far from being a consequence of imperfect knowledge, the widespread confusion among the residents of Flammable about the contamination of their living space is partly a result of political manipulation between conflicting interests and asymmetrical power relations.

This profound ethnographic study of environmental suffering would have been improved had the authors endeavoured to find out more about the “objective side” of the environmental contamination. I do not completely agree with the authors when they claim that “in the analysis of the experience of pollution, it is not a matter of what this or that company or this or that government official really are or do but how they are perceived to be and to behave” (p. 15). This claim does not make complete sense if we consider that the subjective experiences of pollution are formulated through close interaction with the contaminated bio-physical space and the wider socio-political setting. Through a more careful combination of the bio-physical aspects of contamination and the subjective experiences of it, the authors could have offered a more thoughtful analysis of the manifold material and symbolic consequences of living in a contaminated place.

It would also have been interesting to know more about the confused misunderstandings of the environmental risks, not only among the local residents, but also among governmental officials, industrial representatives, and other interested parties involved with Flammable, especially because in the Introduction, Auyero and Swistun point out that “the actions of government authorities toward pollution in the neighbourhood were less consistent and more contradictory than either the denial or underestimation” (p. 10). For a better understanding of how people cope with toxic danger, I would also have highly appreciated if the authors had given more examples of how local residents may sometimes act as skilful players in political games with authorities and how they may strategically reinterpret the dominant discourses of expert knowledge. Even if they are relatively

powerless, local inhabitants can hardly be passive playthings, condemned to live in a “reality” totally dictated by other, more powerful actors.

With their analysis of the social construction of environmental uncertainty, Auyero and Swistun challenge many of the conventional arguments characteristic of the contemporary literature on environmental movements. Much of the conventional scholarship on environmental movements emphasizes how subaltern people develop a shared oppositional consciousness about the sources of environmental injustice and transform themselves from a hopelessly subordinate position to a protracted collective resistance. Such scholarship is, however, of little analytical help when there is no consensus on the sources and the effects of contamination. To comprehend the social domination of environmental risks, Auyero and Swistun call for a revised theoretical framework in which doubt and disagreement among the dominated population are at the centre of the analysis. To explain why residents of Flammable did not act collectively on their shared grievances, Auyero and Swistun demonstrate several factors – including a lack of networks that would link these shantytown dwellers with influential actors in a more equal way, the scarce resources for mobilization at their disposal, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities to engage in joint action – that help to explain why the residents of Flammable experience contamination as something which turns them into onlookers on the decisions taken by powerful outside actors over their lives. The same situation holds true with many populations living at risk in environmentally vulnerable and socially marginal territories.

As a critical reflection on the social construction of environmental vulnerabilities, *Flammable* deals with issues highly relevant to several disciplines, including anthropology, geography, development studies, psychology, political sciences, and environmental sciences. It offers a series of theoretical and methodological challenges to the conventional literature on people’s adaptation to environmental vulnerabilities by urging us

to pay closer attention to the complex relationships between the subjective experiences of environmental suffering and the social domination of the cognitive frames that mediate those experiences. This book will serve as reading material for theoretical and methodological courses dealing with political ethnography, environmental vulnerability, and social justice. It is highly recommended for academics, policymakers, environmental activists, and development practitioners, as well as for anyone interested in careful analyses of the links among environmental suffering, social domination, and the political construction of environmental uncertainties.

Anja Nygren

The University of Helsinki, Finland