

Environmental Suffering, Here and There

by JAVIER AUYERO

I “I RAISED THREE KIDS HERE. I myself have been inside many of the chemical plants, and I don’t have any health problems,” a 70-year-old resident of Flammable—a highly contaminated shantytown on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Argentina—told me. The shantytown sits adjacent to one of the largest petrochemical compounds in the country (the site of the only oil refinery Shell has in the Southern Cone), and it is surrounded by a hazardous waste incinerator and by an unmonitored landfill. Other residents expressed their doubts about pollution in the following ways: “I don’t really know if I am contaminated or not. . . . I don’t even know what the symptoms are” or “We don’t really know if we have something.” Flammable residents are routinely exposed to chromium and benzene (both known carcinogens) and to toluene. But lead, “the mother of all industrial poisons . . . the paradigmatic toxin [linking] industrial and environmental disease” (Markowitz and Rosner 2002:137), is the main toxin affecting primarily shantytown children. Despite ample evidence of pollution, residents, both young and old, express serious doubts about its sources, extent, and effects. Indeed, in a detailed analysis of the ways in which shantytown residents think and feel about widespread air, water, and ground contamination (Auyero and Swistun 2009), I found dramatic patterns of pervasive *toxic uncertainty* and paradoxical *absence of community protest*. Together with a group of graduate students (Lindsey Engelman, Emily Spangenberg, and Pamela Neumann) and with funding provided by LLILAS, we have begun a new research project that seeks to extend that analysis to other places across Latin America (Esmeraldas, in Ecuador; Abra Pampa, in Argentina; and La Oroya, in Peru), and to delve more deeply into (a) the sociopolitical production of uncertainty regarding origins, degree, and impacts of contamination, and (b) the intricate relationship between toxic uncertainty and presence or absence of environmental protest.

The project, tentatively entitled “Environmental Suffering in the Americas,” will use ethnography, archival research, oral history, and photography to describe the life-threatening effects of environmental

contamination in three highly polluted marginalized communities in the Americas and to explain the (sometimes puzzling and contradictory) meanings their poor residents ascribe to it. The main questions our project will address are the following: How do poor people make sense of (and cope with) toxic danger? When and why do they fail to understand (and to act on) what is objectively a clear and present danger? How and why are (mis)perceptions shared within a community? In answering these questions, we will contribute to the resolution of the two-decades-long effort among scholars to understand the intermingling between *risk frames* and *collective (in)action*.

The miserable physical environment in which the urban poor live, “the real grounds of [their] history” to use Karl Marx’s expression, remains a marginal preoccupation among students of poverty in Latin America, despite having been raised on some of the existing literature on urban environmental problems (Lemos 1998; Pezzoli 2000; Evans 2002; Hochstetler and Keck 2007). Both a recent comprehensive review of studies of poverty and inequality in Latin America (Hoffman and Centeno 2003) and a symposium on the history and state of the studies of marginality and exclusion in Latin America published in the most prominent journal of Latin American Studies (González de la Rocha et al. 2004) make no mention of environmental factors as key determinants in the reproduction of destitution and inequity. With few notable exceptions (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Paley 2001; Farmer 2004), ethnographies of urban poverty and marginality in Latin America have also failed to take into account the simple fact that the poor do not breathe the same air, drink the same water, or play on the same playgrounds as others.

Poor people’s lives do not unfold on the head of a pin. There is an often-polluted environment that seriously affects their present health and future capabilities, and about which scholars, myself included, have long remained silent. This silence (another incarnation of what Sherry Ortner [1995] famously called “ethnographic refusal”) is shocking given the prominent place of the material context of poor people’s lives both in a founding text in the study of poverty and

inequality, Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, and also in one of the seminal texts on the lives of urban pariahs in Latin American cities. In *Child of the Dark, The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus*, Carolina, a longtime resident of a favela during the 1950s, provides a firsthand account of everyday life in a shantytown in São Paulo, Brazil. She refers to her favela with words that will sound painfully familiar to the inhabitants of poor neighborhoods throughout Latin America and much of the Third World: "It is a garbage dump," she writes. "Only pigs could live in a place like this. This is the pigsty of São Paulo" (27). Throughout the book, she points to polluted waters and what she calls the "perfume" of "rotting mud (and) excrement" (40), as defining features of the lives of the poverty enclaves. Half a century later, the shantytown poor are still surrounded by filth, disgusting smells, and contaminated grounds and water.

Any social-scientific sketch of urban marginality and its effects on socially organized suffering should pay sustained and systematic empirical attention to the highly polluted and risky surroundings where the urban poor dwell. Together with income, employment, education, and other conventional variables, social scientific analyses of the causes and manifestations of urban deprivation should take account of poor people's relentless exposure to environmental hazards. In other words, if we want a better, more comprehensive understanding of "the texture of hardship" (Newman and Massengill 2006), and a more adequate grasp on the possibilities of a full-fledged social inclusion, the garbage-filled sidewalks the poor traverse daily, the polluted grounds and streams where they live and play, the open air sewers and the muddy streets they are forced to deal with, and the toxic air they breathe are inescapable objects of analysis.

Our project thus heeds the call of a new generation of geographers and urban sociologists (e.g., McFarlane and Rutherford 2008; Murray 2009) who are beginning to focus on social inclusion and exclusion (and on citizenship more broadly) as dynamic processes inextricably linked to the biophysical fabric of urban spaces. ☀

Javier Auyero is Lozano Long Professor in Latin American Sociology at the University of Texas.

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Ingeniero Budge, Buenos Aires. Photo taken by a local fourth grader.