Alexa S. Dietrich

The Drug Company Next Door: Pollution, Jobs, and Community Health in Puerto Rico.
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This is an important study on a timely topic in a revealing location. Alexa Dietrich conducted sixteen months of fieldwork between 2004 and 2011 in an area of Puerto Rico with the highest concentration of pharmaceutical factories in the world at the time. She investigated the environmental and sociological impact of a dozen U.S.-owned pharmaceutical factories on a northern seaside community in the context of an analysis of the political economy of Puerto Rico and its history as a neocolonial territory of the United States. She thoughtfully employs survey materials as a quantitative supplement to her ethnographic perspective. The community under investigation is fortuitously sited in that it has been the focus of several previous studies, which affords Dietrich historical depth and analytical nuance that strengthen the discussion. Her substantive chapters are interspersed with ethnographic vignettes offering glimpses into the texture of everyday relations and the revealing experiences that punctuated her fieldwork. The analysis operates at a lively juncture between political ecology and medical anthropology, with important implications for public health and human geography.

Chapter 1 examines development of the pharmaceutical manufacturing complex from the early 1970s, which created water treatment and other pollution problems with serious cumulative effects on the health and well-being of the community. A grassroots activist group emerged in response, pushing back against the unholy state-corporation alliance modeled on traditional patron-client hierarchical relations and legitimated by technocratic “compliance” mechanisms. Yet questions of environmental and infrastructural responsibility proved blurry and complex, making it difficult to hold anyone accountable as well as easy to pass the buck and rationalize “accidents.” Activists were depicted as leftist radicals or dismissed as avaricious attempts for compensation monies. Many in the community suffered and most were sympathetic to the cause—which never included shutting down factories, just compelling them to operate responsibly—but found themselves ambivalently caught between the conflicting demands of economic and health priorities.

Chapter 2 charts the rise of Big Pharma in the context of post-World War II industrialization schemes that had run their course by the 1970s. New corporations were lured to the island with various tax benefits, though Pharma had in fact already begun taking root due to its exploitation of the island’s abundant aquifers of high-quality water. Chapter 3 surveys the local political

landscape and complex sociopolitical dynamics, from the role of the *alcalde* (mayor) and the influence of party politics to conflicted relations of *confianza* and ideological rhetorics of “progress.” Dietrich revealingly explores the interrelationship of political and corporate ritualization in the production of public opinion and reproduction of power relations. Chapter 4 examines the multifarious technocratic machinations of the corporate-state nexus in getting what it wants while defusing forms of opposition by fostering a widespread politics of resignation accompanied by ideological tendencies for everyone to “see like a corporation.” Using empirical examples, Dietrich explicates the notion of “deep capture” as a way of conceptualizing the cumulative panoply of strategies and tactics through which corporate hegemony is produced and reproduced.

Chapter 5 deconstructs the “Corporate Social Responsibility” (CSR) movement in Puerto Rico as a ruse for exculpating Pharma’s misdeeds by greenwashing its toxic effects on health and society. And it critically examines the strategically ambiguous concept of “stakeholder” so ubiquitous in today’s corporate and policy discourses. Emphasizing the intertwining of environmental and sociocultural degradation, Chapter 6 proposes moves that corporations should consider if they really want to be good neighbors. Dietrich argues for reconceptualization of knowledge as a public good, calling for radical epistemological transformation in order to destabilize the hegemony of the status-quo, in which too much is invested in disconnecting the corporate-state nexus and the well-being of local communities.

A brief epilogue notes that the activists’ class-action suit was settled for several million dollars in 2008, some progress was made in terms of pollution monitoring, and the long-time mayor was arrested in a corruption scandal and ejected from power. Meanwhile, the discourse of CSR had subsided after the 2008 global economic meltdown, and the community’s unemployment rate was on the rise as Big Pharma began pulling out of Puerto Rico with the phasing out of tax incentives that had lured the companies to the island in the first place.

Dietrich’s study fruitfully combines the old and the new as a traditional anthropological community study on a cutting-edge topic of profound global significance. She documents and analyzes the situation in layered terms encompassing corporations, federal, island and municipal state action, NGOs, community institutions, activist organizations, and everyday citizens. She powerfully shows that corporations are neither good “neighbors,” nor responsible “citizens”—much less “persons.” Indeed, it is poignant to be reviewing this book when a gargantuan debt crisis has now materialized in Puerto Rico, with Big

Finance circling over the island as debt vultures and not even pretending any sort of good neighborliness or corporate citizenship.

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