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BOOK REVIEWS

Cherni, Judith A., editor, Economic Growth Versus the Environment: The politics of wealth, health and air pollution, 2002, Palgrave, pp.xxi+235, n/p.

This book deals with the most destructive contradictions of our times, that is between nature and society. The author has expressed dismay at the impacts of development and modernization where modernization manifests itself in large commercial cities with massive concrete infrastructure, huge multi story buildings, affluent homes, gardens and superstore malls.

The pollution in air engulfing these modern cities in the developed world is the cocomitant of enormous expansion. Dusty environment, unpleasant pungent smell in the air and chocking sensation is experienced daily by the inhabitants of any thriving large city in the developed world.

The author states that from the onset Industrial Revolution exposed the growing cities to all sorts of toxic and hazardous pollutants in the air. Although the air pollution and air quality is an issue which has been thoroughly debated and subjected to close scrutiny, it still remains an issue which needs to be resolved.

In the decades of 1940 and 1950, air quality improved in big cities of the developed world, but the negative externalities of air pollution still remains to be checked and tackled.

The unabated industrial activities in large cities in the US and in Europe with expanding urban growth dissipated the belief of 1960s that air pollution had become very low and it was not a threat and a factor in influencing mortality or morbidity in the population. During 1980s air pollution became a major problem again causing health damages in large urban areas. The author has argued that, "the 1990s marked the re-emergence of acute air pollution in large and economically developed cities, generated by the continuous growth of industry, commercial and financial activity, urbanization and spiraling levels of energy consumption". But this elevated level of air pollution became almost acceptable and often ignored in order to achieve the objectives of high material standards of consumption and in an effort to build mega cities to compete at the international level.

The book points towards the lack of accountability at the institutional level. In the author's point of view, politicians, entrepreneurs industrialists and public at large

are not being accountable for growth related air pollution but the reasons of unconcerned attitude of individuals towards air pollution are different from institutional ones.

The author has asserted that the simultaneous creation of wealth and ill health in a society is quite a difficult path to tread on. To deal with these paradoxical issues, the author has referred to theoretical debates on economic growth and environmental degradation and on co-evolution of technology, science and environment. It draws on historical information, monitored data, other empirical information and significantly on the perceptions of city inhabitants. The importance of economic development is unquestionable for any society and acknowledging this fact, the argument in this book is about some of the political and economic parameters under which degradation occurs.

The principal focus of this book is the concrete biophysical consequences of the way the environment is socially affected. Both global and local effects are considered.

The author states that local contamination of air has never been analyzed from the perspective of global activities. In large cities, the social, political and economic uniquencess of local places becomes as important as the powerful globalization and growth trends that dominate them.

In the preface; the author has very lucidly explained the issues in this book. First three chapters provide theoretical conceptions of the main topic of the book. While rest of the five chapters bring together descriptions, analyses and discussions of growth and pollution with theoretical ideas formulated in a city in the first part.

Chapter one is an introduction to the magnitude of the problem of air pollution and ill health in world cities, discusses the nature of the contradictions raised and explains the significance of the notion of a second contradiction between society and nature.

It introduces sociological and philosophical writing about the role of positivist and realist methods of research and the problems encountered by reductionist thinking. It also outlines the evidence for globalization and the presence of constant air contamination found in world cities, stressing the reality of the problem in spite of a measurable reduction in the levels of contamination in comparison with those that hit cities in the 1950s.

Chapter two undertakes a systematic review of the literature on the subject. It emphasizes the fact that disciplinary fragmentation has dominated explanations. The chapter examines studies in the natural sciences, the sociology of health, and social and medical geography, garnering useful concepts and crucial information from them. It concludes that an interdisciplinary approach is imperative and that a separation of fields interest can be crucial, but only for initiating analysis. It argues against mostly unhelpful dualist and reductionist assumptions while stressing the fact that physical and social realities are continually amenable to mutual influence.

A number of basic misconceptions are highlighted which reveal the inherent weakness of mainstream thought. It is concluded that a necessary explanation must also consider the structures of society.

Chapter three outlines the main politics of environmentalist theories that have criticized economic growth for its resultant ecological degradation. It suggests a classification of these theories according to factors that have caused sustained environmental degradation. To develop an appropriate explanation of air pollution and ill health in large 'world/globe cities', it draws on ecological economies and materialist ecological thought, and on a critical interpretation of globalization. The chapter presents a fresh political and economic approach to contemporary physical environmental conditions and develops an interdisciplinary methodological strategy to address the issue of air pollution in cities.

The theoretical problem of persistent urban pollution and economic growth in the real geographical and historical contexts of a case study is set out in Chapter four. It discusses changes associated with economic development in the Houston region; the globalization of the oil industry, the making of world city, and its transformation into the world energy capital. These components have brought considerable wealth to the area but have also led to environmental degradation. The author raises the subject of the contradictions between economic and urban affluence and the deterioration of nature, and between global competitiveness and local poverty. This chapter compares existing urban landscape of progress, abundance and glamour with the look and smells of current pollution and urban dereliction. Houston is shown as an epitome of contrasts where wealth and misery stand side by side. Finally, it describes how present local environmental problems, historical developments and the current impact of world economic forces interact with regional growth.

In the next chapter the author turns to the issue of air pollution in recent times, examining in greater detail how a place like Houston ranks today among the most polluted cities in the US. It focuses on pollutants, measures of monitored contaminants and the failure to attain the national health safely limits. It also assesses the reports of local contamination by residents in two geographical areas of the city. This chapter indicates the severity of the problem of air pollution in a world city from the two complementary perspectives of lay opinion and scientific expertise. Together with patterns of spatialized risk, it uncovers notably high levels of reported ill health among children and reveals that the extent and type of ill-health symptoms follow a geographical pattern. Further analysis of the book's original database complements the arguments of the next chapters.

Chapter six looks into whether the remarkable clusters of ill health found in Houston were in any way affected by US health provision. It presents a brief introduction to the US medical care delivery system and the social exclusion that it implies. The author has exposed the relatively poor achievement level of public health and the causes of mortality in one of the wealthiest US cities, presenting a

detailed socioeconomic analysis of residents' reports of ill health among children. It concludes with a discussion of the importance of conditions of poverty as a trigger for ill health and stresses this well-known aspect of the unequal system of social organization. This factor alone, however, cannot explain the high incidence of ill health found in high-income homes. This issue is further analysed through spatial indicators of environmental pollution.

In chapter seven the analysis is taken further into the regulatory fields of industrial emissions. It highlights a number of important flaws in a set of regulations that have promoted a partial betrayal of the declared aims to protect the environment and health. It presents solid evidence for the argument of a persistent trend of pollution due to institutional weakness which, importantly, is rooted in both the economic structure and our configuration of knowledge. Local interests and international producers have forcefully defended restricted government control. The modifying role of household spatial location in relation to sources of industrial air pollution is assessed throughout the chapter while the risk of industrial accidents and severe environmental, and hence health, consequences is higblighted. It underscores the social character of a geographical association between exposure to pollutants and increased risks and stresses the importance of more appropriate regulation to control industrial emissions.

Chapter eight brings together the themes and issues developed in the book. It discusses several of the lessons that can be learnt from the process of analyzing the topic from a political-economy perspective, using an interdisciplinary approach and also a participatory strategy. It identifies the responsibility of social institutions against that of individuals alone to protect the environment and public health. Local and global risk phenomena, and the need to over willful neglect of the previous US governments and powerful oil multinational to reduce emissions will be a start towards benefiting the local residents and eventually the global environment.

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