

Anthropology Book Forum

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AGATA MAZZEO, 2020, *Dust Inside: Fighting and Living with Asbestos-Related Disasters in Brazil*, New York: Berghahn Books. 202 pp., ISBN 978-1-78920-931-0

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Agata Mazzeo opens the book with the shared feeling of disappointment and indignation among activists over the Eternit trial, the first trial of an AC corporation accused of environmental disaster manslaughter. On these feelings of disappointment and indignation hinges a story of activism around the anti-asbestos movement. A poignant and layered ethnographic work shows how the anti- asbestos movement based in Brazil which is formed in relation with local, national, and international activism. Tracing the connections between Italy's anti-asbestos movement to Brazil, the author explores the history of migration, material and knowledge transfer between Italy and Brazil. They settle on Osasco, where Eternit built its first asbestos cement plant in Brazil, as a place to explore the lives and relations formed in the production and activism against asbestos.

Asbestos tells the story of bodily debilitation over time. Asbestos is the generic term that indicates a group of fibrous silicate minerals including amphibole, chrysotile, amosite, and crocidolite. It lingers on clothes and laces lungs. It causes a condition of incessant painful suffering caused by asbestos related diseases (ARD), exacerbated by the company's concealment of their rights. The knowledge created from this embodied experience and the activism stemming from that connects the Brazilian activist movement with a struggle for global health. Through this, the book explores

a case of health-based activism from an anthropological perspective centered on the bodily experience of disasters and activism.

The author conducted interviews with professionals in the field of public health (biomedical doctors, epidemiologists, and lung specialists), lawyers, trade unionists and members of NGOs and associations of workers who had been exposed to other toxic substances. Most importantly, they remained an active part of ABREA (Brazilian Association of Exposed to Asbestos) where they met anti-asbestos activists for discussions, reflections and proposals for action that might be feasible in the local context, but with connections to national and international organizations. The author's focus on memory as a method leads them to reconstruct the worlds of their interlocutors' youth and work at the plant through narratives and bibliographic research, reading the traces and the resonances left by that past in the present. The author described their role as rooted in research, where they let themselves be "affected by the events' (Foucault 1997) but does not claim to equate the public and social contribution that might derive from [the] study to the actions resulting from the daily commitment of anti-asbestos activists" (149).

In chapter 1, *The Toxic Market of Asbestos and Global Health Disasters*, the author presents their interlocutors' narratives, showing how the disaster processes occur and which practices have exacerbated the impact of asbestos exposure on their lives. Global market of asbestos promoted the possibility of establishing a safe threshold of asbestos exposure and focused on promoting the use of masks, moistening asbestos material before proceeding with disposal, and washing work clothes inside the factories. The way risk from asbestos was understood and managed globally in reports, rulings and research created the knowledge for its invisibility. By managing what counts and is diagnosed as asbestos related disease (ARD), the veil of invisibility of risk was made more

impenetrable and asbestos market was managed to prevent exposed workers and citizens from framing their own experiences of danger into risk categories. Linking the local struggles of workers to global discourses around asbestos sets the stage for the interconnections regarding the flourishing of the anti-asbestos movement that the author brings to light later on in the book.

The author provides the historical and socio-cultural context for the anti-asbestos activism in chapter 2, *Osasco: City, Work and Struggles* through a description of the process of industrialization, exchange, migration, and urbanization in the city of Osasco in Brazil. Between the late 19th and early 20th century, when Italians were migrating to Brazil for factory work, the former São Paulo County of Osasco was a labor-class suburb. Osasco was born and developed with a unionist past and the anti-asbestos activism stems from it. The author shows how the practices of activism develop from the “involvement of the sufferers, who develop knowledge and therefore acquire the power to act” (65). Anti-asbestos activism has provided ARD sufferers with language, including political, judicial, and biomedical words, to think about and name their private experiences of exposure, illness, and grief in terms of injustice.

This anti-asbestos activism is based on the knowledge of workers own bodies made into socially relevant knowledge often in the battle for their recognition as ARD victims. Chapter 3, *Suffering and Embodied Disasters, Engagement*, is a look into anti-asbestos activism which gives workers the space to perform their victimhood as agents by developing a theoretical knowledge through their experiential knowledge of asbestos dangers. The book provides a deep understanding of affective worlds formed in and through the realization of disease, the work done for the acknowledgement of disease, and the activism for the anti-asbestos movement. The sensorial

recollections of working at the plant are used to make claims on the local, national, and international judicial system and activist networks.

Chapter 4, *The Politics of Anti-asbestos Activism*, the author shows how anti- asbestos activists use the memory of their loved ones as a tool to legitimize their campaigns affectively. Secondly, they use biomedical documentation proving contamination to take action and claim their rights for compensation, access to health care and relief while facing basic needs and everyday difficulties. The chapter also reflects on the role of ABREA in negotiating rights and elaborating knowledge through continuous dialogue since the 1990s with political and local administrative settings, public health centers, judicial arenas, and the transnational movement for the global prohibition of asbestos.

Chapter 5, *Engaging Global Health, Anti-asbestos Activism and Ethnography*, shows how anti-asbestos activism can be situated within global health by focusing on the actions of anti- asbestos activists, health professionals and researchers who conceive of their engagement in activism and research as a moral commitment. The chapter shows how the work of biomedical doctors who, by engaging in interdisciplinary collaborations and exchange of knowledge with the exposed communities, made diseases like pleural plaques considered a disabling disease. These examples are illustrative of how the anti-asbestos movement takes part in the ‘quest for equity’ in a global arena by contributing to and making use of global knowledge about asbestos.

The moral commitment of activism that Chapter 5 explores is also linked to the author’s own moral commitment. The book ends with exploring their place in the research where they engaged with their interlocutors as well as the process of activism but did not assume full participation. They also developed their own relationality of exposure through this research. Further, they situate the

research in the political landscape of violence and poverty in Brazil while embedding the narratives of interlocutors in transnational frameworks of global health. It is the well-nested argument from everyday narratives of people to activism including the work of organizations and judicial systems in understanding the impacts of asbestos. This is a must-read book that adds to the field of the study of bodies, memory, activism, and care.

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