

FLINT FIGHTS BACK,

Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis

Benjamin J. Pauli
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Flint Fights Back, Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis examines the political origins of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, which has received international attention. The author Benjamin J. Pauli, who completed his PhD in political science and is currently assistant professor of social science at Kettering University, moved to Flint in 2015 and began engaging in local water activism in 2016. His book presents an exhaustive review of the water crisis from the perspective of a self-described “activist-scholar”. The format—methods, concepts, references—is suggestive of an academic work, and it rigorously describes the discursive and organizational roots, and ongoing evolution, of pro-democracy and water activist movements in Michigan in the 2010s.

Specifically, Pauli provides a singular account of the water crisis from the perspective of a heterogeneous local political activism. In the context of the state-imposed emergency managers (EM) in the post-2008 era, concerns related to the usurpation of representative democracy merged with water contamination issues in Flint when non-elected public administrators decided to change the city’s water source from Lake Huron to the Flint River. The decision resulted in unprecedented water contamination among the city’s homes and caused devastating damage to the residents’ well-being. The author invites readers to dive into the experience of residents becoming political agents as individuals and as a group in their struggle for justice and democracy. Pauli practises an ethnographic immersion consisting of what he identifies as “militant ethnography”, a politically engaged participant observation with water activists, combined with around 70 semi-structured interviews with activists from different backgrounds, their allies (journalists, public health experts and public interest figures), elected representatives and scientific knowledge producers.

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Pauli explores how Flint residents came to see that, in the words of Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, they have been “poisoned by policy” (32), which serves more to describe than to explain. He refuses to rely on any theoretical framework to avoid counterproductive generalizations. The author’s engagement with the main concepts of the book and the structure of its argument are meant to be closer to the activists’ engagement with the water crisis. Accordingly, Pauli describes in the introduction and chapter 1 different meanings and frameworks to the themes of justice and democracy. For instance, he compares different definitions of the environmental justice framework and its critiques in a well-documented way. However, this work is not meant for the author to place his own understanding of the framework to analyze the case study. Instead, he states how local activists and external actors used the themes in different ways throughout the crisis and describes their political engagement over the next chapters. The structure of the book follows this same approach. The first three chapters offer different analytical approaches to the water crisis in which water activists synthesize their own narrative. The remaining chapters explore different chain of events that led to the constitution and evolution of the pro-democracy and water activist community in Flint. The author’s consistency on this position throughout the book may be one of its major weaknesses. Without an attempt to take a step back from the crisis and propose a thesis, the readers are left with multiple narratives and chains of events to sort out.

The core of the book begins with a reconstruction of different narratives mobilized by actors of the crisis. Pauli focuses on what he names the “technical” (incompetence and problematic infrastructure caused the faulty water treatment) and the “historical” (deep structural factors such as racial, economic and political dynamics are to blame) narratives. He explains how both narratives were partly used as arguments by the activists, but also by opponents to depoliticize and simplify the crisis. The political narrative constructed by the activists is presented as the one that really allowed them to put forward the sustainable and global solutions beyond the search for culprits or causes. From a geographer’s point of view, to present those narratives simply as conflicting political positions seemed incomplete. It would have added some perspective if the political narrative was discussed as rooted in a politically motivated assemblage of different timelines and scales.

The second part of the book emphasizes on the evolution of the pro-democracy and water activism in Flint and how it merged during the crisis. Pauli contextualizes local activism to repeal EM laws in Michigan along with larger movements for democracy of the early 2010s, such as the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement. He highlights how the residents’ experience lead them to strategically mobilize as both “victims” and “warriors” and how this move seemed to transcend race and class-based divisions in their discourse. The elements of discussion throughout the book about how Flint residents are especially vulnerable to the crisis depending on class, gender and race are eminently interesting. The author discusses how evidence of environmental racism and classism has been brought by external commentators, but that residents felt that Flint as a *whole* was exposed to the threat. He addresses how residents have organized themselves to unite Flint’s political actors despite the fact that the crisis affects them differently. To resolve the common threat beyond their particularities, they mobilized around their place of residence with slogans like “Flint Lives Matter”. Pauli also describes the evolution

of the Flint water movement over time as it came to meet the limits of representative and deliberative democracy offered by the state, along with the limits of institutionally controlled citizen science and the help of so-called “experts”. He describes the rise of participatory initiatives among the community to organize resistance, produce social movement-controlled knowledge and enlarge popular empowerment. Pauli concludes by illustrating how, once state officials declared the crisis over, some activists tried to keep the community organized to maintain the spaces of deliberation and radical democracy opened by the rise of local political consciousness.

Throughout the reading, it is not clear what the targeted audience of the book is. The detailed overview of the different organizations active in resolving the crisis and their methods of actions could be useful for community organizers. However, the language used might be hermetic and the singular structure, from conflicting narratives to multiple experiences of activism, could be hard to follow for environmental and social justice activists with no academic background. On the other hand, although some conversations are initiated when the themes of this book are explored and documented, it can hardly be considered an academic piece since it lacks comparisons against arguments made in other scientific works. As this book stands out as a unique account of a political crisis, other activists-scholars involved in environmental justice and pro-democracy movements have worked around issues like participatory democracy, class, gender and race-based environmental justice, and place-based solidarity.

In Flint Fights Back, Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis, Benjamin J. Pauli provides a comprehensive summary of the events surrounding the water crisis in Flint from an activist-scholar perspective. This book highlights the narratives built by a community that wanted both to stop being poisoned and to decide its own future so that such a crisis would not happen again. Their inspiring struggle highlighted how the lack of democracy and citizen control over health decisions and vital infrastructure can degenerate and cause irreversible harm.