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Review: Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago

By David Naguib Pellow

Reviewed by [Alan L. Chan](#)

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David Naguib Pellow. *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002. 234 pp. ISBN 0-262-16212-1 (cloth). US\$24.95

The question that motivated Pellow to write this book was: what are the origins of environmental inequality and environmental racism with regard to policies on the management of solid waste in urban areas? (p. 5) The author is an Associate Professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, San Diego.

As the title suggests, *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago* is an analysis of the politics of garbage in Chicago, in particular, and the United States, in general. There are altogether seven chapters plus an extensive 21-page reference section in this book. The topics of the seven chapters are: 1. Waste, Politics, and Environmental Injustice; 2. A Social History of Waste, Race, and Labor, Part I: Movements, Technology, and Politics, 1880s-1930s; 3. A Social History of Waste, Race, and Labor, Part II: Waste Management and Waste Conflicts, 1940s-2000; 4. The Movement for Environmental Justice in Chicago and the United States; 5. Working for the Movement: Recycling Labor at the Resource Center; 6. The Next Evolutionary Stage: Recycling Waste or Recycling History?; and 7. Toward Environmental Justice.

As an activist-scholar, Pellow frames the "garbage wars" as a struggle against environmental racism, rather than simply battles over natural resource management and community resources (p. vii). Realizing the complexity and disturbing reality of environmental racism, he argues that not only are local and/or state governments and industry often guilty of perpetrating acts of injustice, but often environmentalists and certain people of color are also implicated in creating these problems.

Pellow did historical studies of waste management, from horse and cart to compactor trucks and dumpsters; and from city dumps, incinerators, reduction plants, and sanitary landfills to materials recovery facilities and the recycling industry. Using case studies and the anthropological method of participant-observation, he supports his findings with facts as well as firsthand experience. Pellow investigates the most vilified waste hauler in

history, Waste Management, Inc. (WMX). His case studies show that people of color and people in poverty suffer a disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards. The book concludes with a discussion of different areas that communities can work in for effective environmental justice and safe and sustainable waste management.

This is a timely study of the struggle of environmental justice in terms of waste management. Pellow uncovers the root causes of a notorious social problem and suggests ways to cope with it. This book is recommended to all who are interested in learning more about urban waste management and its related issues.

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