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Dust Inside – fighting and living with asbestos-related disasters in Brazil: a book review

Pó dentro – lutando e vivendo com desastres relacionados ao amianto no Brasil: uma resenha do livro

Mazzeo A. Dust inside – fighting and living with asbestos-related disasters in Brazil. 1st ed. New York: Berghahn; 2020. ISBN 978-1-78920-931-0; eISBN 978-1-78920-932-7

Dust Inside is a work about health disasters caused by the risk-denying worldwide asbestos industry and the anti-asbestos health-based activism that opposes it. By promoting awareness in occupational and environmental health, such activism intends to build a kind of counter-hegemonic globalization path in the current world.

Professor Mazzeo draws our attention to the invisible and silent disasters caused by the transnational asbestos market. As she pursues “the dust trail” (i.e., the asbestos powder track), Mazzeo raises several current issues that stimulate critical reasoning and interdisciplinary dialogue in relevant and urgent matters. In the best tradition of Anthropology of Health, the author reveals how a major health tragedy was purposefully hidden for a considerable amount of time simply for convenient economic interests. The book brings in details on how corporate risk-denying practices prevent or hinder disseminating proper awareness of asbestos-based risks among communities of asbestos goods factories’ workers and their neighborhoods. In doing so, it clearly shows how people were put at risk and thus became ill – especially the blue-collar workers ever exposed to it. For Mazzeo, asbestos-related health disasters are paradigmatic of the political-economic dynamics in a world interconnected by the global market and characterized by increasing inequality and environmental injustice. Injustice such as that denoted in the double standard of hazards and risk management, abundantly reported in the specialized literature – particularly within North-South relations. The University of Bologna researcher unveils the “fabrication of silence” of asbestos-related diseases (ARD) and its camouflage within the cloister of that fallacious acquiescence called “controlled use of asbestos.”

Mazzeo reports that it was only by becoming part of the anthropological research on asbestos-related disasters that she realized her own previous exposure to the fibers of this mineral dust, as she had lived nearby *Cementifera Fibronit*, an asbestos-cement manufacturing company in Bari (Puglia, Italy), a neighborhood adjacent to the high-risk area. Multicenter ethnographic research in Brazil resumes and, in a way, strengthens her previous academic trajectory and professional experience with Italian activism pro-claims concerning asbestos exposure. Altogether, the book covers ten years of research with multiple health-based activism actors, both in Brazil and Italy. Parallels and intersections between the judgment of the *Casale Monferrato* (Italy), comprising its social actors and dynamics, and the Brazilian asbestos victims’ rights movement are targets of her scrutiny.

Mazzeo conducted her ethnographic fieldwork in several Brazilian States, but it was in São Paulo – more precisely Osasco (municipality located within the Greater São Paulo conurbation) – where the research

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assumed its most dense and fruitful strand. Thence, where Eternit built its first asbestos cement plant in Brazil – and also its hugest industrial plant in Latin America –, she interviewed victims of the “time bomb” that turned their lives into a condition of incessant painful suffering caused by asbestos-related diseases (ARD), exacerbated by the anguish upon the company’s concealment of their rights.

In this breathtaking work, the author masterfully collects and analyzes vivid narratives of those who submitted their bodies to the experience of unfair confrontation with the indestructible mineral. To our knowledge, such narratives had never been reported before in Brazil – at least in such a degree of completeness. Curiously – or even emblematically – this report was achieved by the listening and hands of Mazzeo, as if this western “*paulistano*” district founded by Mr. Antonio Agù^b had waited until a compatriot could give proper attention to the vicissitudes and health struggles inside its boundaries – which neither emerged from the void, nor overnight. In Chapter 2, Mazzeo recalls part of the city’s history, of its people and union’s struggles, where even an anarchist streak gained space with the Italian immigrants established there by a strong migratory flow in the early 20th century. Between the late 19th and early 20th century, the former São Paulo County of Osasco was a labor-class suburb populated by families of various origins, most of which worked in the city of São Paulo – a then nascent industrial hub. Thus, Osasco was born and developed with a unionist “accent.” In the 1960s, it was emancipated from São Paulo by the autonomist movement, and raised to the category of “municipality.” The context examined by the author matters: industrial jobs in asbestos-cement factories have always been at the center of these actors’ narratives.

Given the above, the researcher gained a valuable description of how workers were exposed to extremely high levels of asbestos in workplaces and, furthermore, how they used their own bodies to build and share socially relevant knowledge. A knowledge embodied and ingrained in vital organs was then gradually being shared with other subjects, in the battle for their recognition as ARD victims. The book details the intense work of collecting ethnographic material during a 10-month work on Brazilian soil with the suffering-activists, to use the author’s own words, and family members – their wives, widows and children.

The text also shows how the workers’ spouses and family members were exposed to asbestos

indirectly, through dust accumulated in the workplace on their clothing and their own bodies. Along with the industrial dust, then naively “domesticated” within their homes, these spouses experienced disaster in brutal paroxysm. An invisible disaster at first, it then evolves to a tenuous but growing illness disaster, and finally coalesces into a “visible” community of subjects that share a common experience of exposure and ARD and articulates a collective resistance to company disputes and social erasure before legitimate demands. If, at times, the ethnographic report converges with an epidemiological narrative, typical of the “Natural History of the Disease”; in others, it breaks through the epidemiological silence that a sanitary “aphasia” produced in the territory, given the lack of preventive measures. The presence-absence of the deceased is brought to light in life stories as authentic frames where personal dignity struggling for recognition of the disaster and the solidarity of activism clashes against embodied suffering and mourning for irrecoverable losses.

Abrea’s (Brazilian Association of Exposed to Asbestos) role deserves prominence as a collective actor who reveals, during her fieldwork, the socio-political actions promoted by the community of exposed subjects to the disasters. Through Abrea, Mazzeo analyzes how singular corporeal experiences of suffering shaped and gave substance to a new knowledge that, in turn, gains a dimension of a social movement for health and against the social invisibility of ARD. The author also discusses how this new knowledge may support Public Health Policies and Public Policies for Safe and Decent Work.

The book provides interesting inputs for researchers in the health sciences and reaffirms the heuristic value of Social Sciences in health. With her anthropological “magni-lens”, Mazzeo expands the view of the work-related health-disease process and forces us to clearly see the “mongrel dog syndrome” cultivated by the ethnocentrism of the Brazilian elites. A work destined to become an academic reference in the two hemispheres. Its message, however, is wider than that: the saga of the exposed sick individuals takes on an air of manifesto. The air missing in their lungs in the throes of ARD, now comes inspired to fight the disease of silence. *Dust Inside* is, in fact, an unmissable reading.

^b Piedmont’s pioneer Antonio Agù, born in 1845 in the homonymous Osasco (an Italian village in the Province of Turin), was a businessmen from the former Italian community in the State of São Paulo.

Note*: During the preparation of this review, a cargo of more than 300 tons of chrysotile asbestos “*in natura*” was embargoed at the port of Santos by the São Paulo Health Surveillance, with destination abroad, in flagrant legal violation of Brazilian legislation. (The exact amount remains uncertain: would it be 340 ton¹, 459 ton² or closer to 400 ton³?). This news updates the relevance that socio-sanitary and environmental justice issues, concerning the ban on asbestos, have taken worldwide over the past few decades. If it is true that thinking globally (the disastrous risk chain) imposes an ethics of acting locally (to prevent or undo its links), any permissiveness in the opposite direction will certainly become an affront to humanity.

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