

american sociological association

the contexts reader

second edition

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W. W. NORTON & COMPANY • NEW YORK LONDON



amidst garbage and poison: an essay on polluted peoples and places

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spring 2007

the world's poor often live with terrible pollution—but that doesn't mean they like it.



"This is my backyard" (Maria). (Courtesy of Javier Ayero and Debora Swistun)

Kids are sometimes more perceptive than anthropologists and sociologists. That's what we thought as we left the local school in Flammable shantytown (Dock Sud, Buenos Aires). We had just spent three hours talking with a group of middle school students (ranging from 13 to 17 years old) about the photographs they had taken of their barrio with the portable cameras we gave them. They see things about themselves and about their place that we keep ignoring, we realized. With a few exceptions, ethnographies of poverty and marginality in Latin America ignore something that school kids in Flammable shantytown know full well: the poor do not breathe the same air, drink the same water, or play on the same ground as others. There is a

poisoned environment with dire consequences for their present health and future capabilities.

This essay is part of a collaborative ethnography that examines the diverse ways in which shanty dwellers understand and explain (to outsiders and to themselves) the surrounding contamination. Flammable shantytown (its actual name!) is a poverty enclave adjacent to one of the largest petrochemical compounds in Argentina, the site of Shell's only oil refinery in South America.

We asked the 13 students in the ninth grade to work in teams, and we gave them disposable, 27-exposure cameras. We told them to take half the pictures of things they liked about the neighborhood and half of things they did not like. We gave them no further instructions. They all returned the cameras, providing a total of 134 pictures. For this essay, we selected the pictures that best show the group's recurrent themes. As we will see, they agreed on the things they like and the things they do not.

After a brief description of the community, its history (profoundly entangled with the growth of the adjacent petrochemical compound), and its present predicament, we turn to the images and voices of the students. The message conveyed in these voices and images is simple: where poisonous fumes, polluted waters and contaminated ground are concerned, habitat does not necessarily generate habitation.

Exposure to (or socialization in) a dirty and polluted environment does not accustom these youngsters to dirt and pollution. Even after years of living in it, they profoundly dislike what they are forced to see, touch, and smell.

an organic relationship

Flammable shantytown is located in the district of Avellaneda, on the southeastern border of Buenos Aires. The name "Flammable" is quite recent. On June 28, 1984, there was a fire in the *Perito Moreno*, an oil ship harbored in the nearby canal. The ship exploded and produced, in the words of an old resident, the "highest flames I've ever seen." After the accident, remembered by everyone as a traumatic experience, companies in the compound built a new (and according to experts, safer) dock exclusively for flammable products, which gave a new name to the adjacent community—formerly known simply as "the coast."

According to the latest available figures, in 2000 there were 679 households in Flammable. It is a fairly new population: 75 percent of the residents have lived in the area for less than 15 years. Although there is no exact count, municipal authorities, community leaders, and people



"This is the street where Yesica lives." (Courtesy of Javier Auyero and Debora Swistun)

who live or work in the area (in the petrochemical compound, the school, and health center) told us that in the past decade the population had increased at least fourfold—fed by shantytown removal in the city of Buenos Aires and by immigration from other provinces and nearby countries (Peru, Bolivia, and Paraguay). Internal differences separate a small sector composed of old-time, lower-middle-class residents from the majority of newer, low-income dwellers. Scavenging, state welfare programs, and part-time manual jobs in one of the companies in the compound are the main sources of subsistence.

Flammable shantytown is, in many ways, similar to other poverty enclaves in urban Argentina, deeply affected by the explosion of unemployment and the ensuing misery of the 1990s. What distinguishes this poor neighborhood from others, however, is its relationship with the compound's main company, Shell-Capsa, and the extent of the contamination that affects the area and its residents.

The brick walls and guarded gates that separate the compound (the site of six major petrochemical companies and numerous small ones) betray the organic connection that, for more than 70 years, Shell-Capsa has had with the community. The first Shell Oil refinery opened in 1931. Since then, together with the other chemical, oil, and electrical companies in the compound (notably YPF, Meranol, Central Dock Sud, and now Petrobras), it has attracted eager workers who came from the provinces to look for work in Buenos Aires. In the life stories we collected, older residents remember an abundance of work in the area. They also recall the lack of housing close to the compound and their efforts to build what initially were shacks in the middle of swamps (still, today, there are lowlands in the center of the neighborhood—many of the pictures taken by the students portray small lagoons in their backyards). Filling in the surroundings appears in old-timers' narra-

tives as an important joint activity of those early days—and it still is, according to our interviews with middle-aged residents. Health practitioners in the area claim that one source of local contamination might be the materials, often loaded with toxic waste, that people in the neighborhood use to level their plots. There are several main elements of the material and symbolic entanglement between the neighborhood and Shell, or *la empresa*, as residents call it. Historically, Shell provided formal and informal jobs for

men (who worked in the refinery) and women (who did domestic work such as cleaning and baby-sitting for the professional workforce within the compound). Old-timers remember not only working for Shell, but also going to the health center located on the company's premises, obtaining drinkable water from the company, and receiving pipes and other building material from the company. Less than a decade ago, Shell funded the construction of the health center in the neighborhood (a center that employs seven doctors and two nurses and has a 24-hour guard and an ambulance, something quite uncommon in poor neighborhoods throughout the country). Having automated many of its operations, Shell is no longer the main employer in the community, but it still provides jobs to residents, young and old.

Furthermore, Shell routinely grants funds to the local school in what a company engineer we interviewed defined as a "social performance plan." Among the services the company funds are a nutritional program for poor mothers that includes the distribution of food; computing classes for school students (held inside Shell's compound); windows, paint, and heaters for the school building; the end-of-the-year trip for graduating classes; T-shirts with the Shell logo

It is still used as an open-air waste disposal site by subcontractors who illegally dump garbage in the area (we witnessed several instances of this during our fieldwork).

Flammable is also different from other destitute neighborhoods throughout Buenos Aires in the extent (and known effects) of its air, water, and soil pollution. Experts (from both the local government and Shell) agree that the air quality associated with the compound's industrial activities makes the area unsuitable for human residence. The place has also been used as a dumping ground by many nearby companies. It is still used as an open-air waste disposal site by subcontractors who illegally dump garbage in the area (we witnessed several instances of this during our fieldwork). Many of the pipes that connect homes to the city water supply are plastic; breaks and defects in the joints allow the toxins in the soil to enter the stream of the officially defined "potable water." A nauseating stench often comes from these garbage disposal sites, from putrid waters filled with this same garbage, and from the chemicals stored and processed in the compound.

One epidemiological study compared a sample of children between seven and eleven years old living in Flammable with a control population living in another shantytown with similar socioeconomic characteristics but lower levels of exposure to industrial activities. In both neighborhoods, the study found, children are exposed to chromium and benzene (known carcinogens) and to toluene. But lead distinguishes the children of Flammable from the rest. Fifty percent of the children tested in this neighbor-

hood had higher-than-normal blood levels of lead (against 17 percent in the control population). Not surprisingly, given what we know about the effects of lead in children, the study found lower-than-average IQs among Flammable children and a higher percentage of neurobehavioral problems. The study also found strong statistical associations between frequent headaches and neurological symptoms, learning problems, and hyperactivity in school. Flammable children also reported more dermatological problems (eye irritation, skin infections, eruptions, and allergies), respiratory problems (coughs and bronco-spasms), neurological problems (hyperactivity), and sore throats and headaches.

Where does the lead come from? The study is inconclusive. Lead in the air of Flammable is two and a half times higher than the state threshold. The small river that borders the shantytown is also contaminated with lead (and chromium). Experts point to the material buried in the ground on which the children play as another possible source of lead poisoning. They also told us that, long before laws regulating toxic waste disposal existed, the companies within the compound used Flammable as a free dumping zone. Lead, in other words, might be coming from everywhere.

the "good" pictures

To see how the young think and feel about this poisoned place, we consider the pictures they took and what they told us about the images. We did not provide any training in the art of photography, and the cameras we supplied were basic.

Although a few stated that it was difficult to take pictures of the things they liked ("because there's nothing nice here"; "How can we take photos of the things we like if there's nothing pretty here?"), the concurrence among the teams

was striking: among the things they liked were people (most of the pictures classified as "good" portrayed friends and family—not included here) and traditionally beneficial institutions (the church, the school, the health center). Yet, even when they placed the school among the "good" pictures, they did not fail to notice the terrible condition of the school building. Many took pictures of the health center and included them among the "good" pictures for unfortunate reasons: they routinely use the center when they get



(Courtesy of Javier Auyero and Debora Swistun)



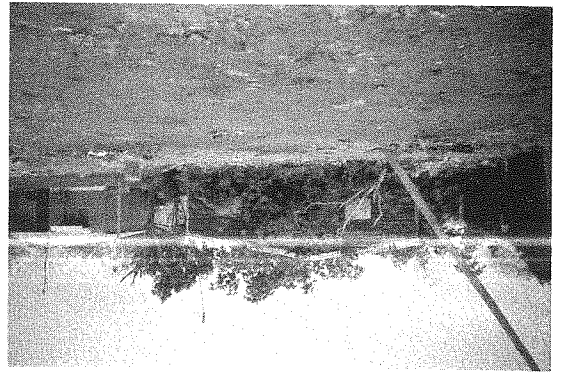
The Health Center. "There's an ambulance there, and they take good care of you." "If something happens, you can go there, and they treat you very well."
(Courtesy of Javier Auyero and Debora Swistun)

sick or when there is an emergency. Those who photographed the center stressed how well they are treated.

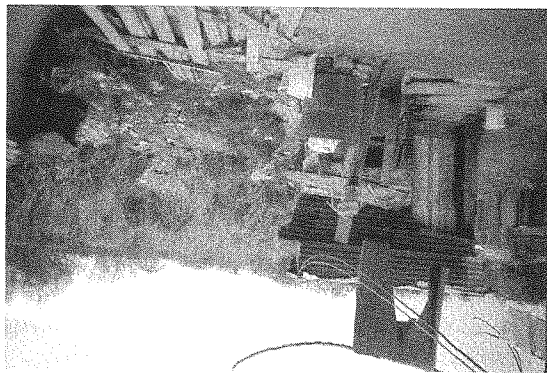
the "bad" pictures

Among the things they dislike: the ubiquitous garbage and debris, the stagnant and filthy waters, the smokestacks, and the Shell-Capsa building. When speaking about the pictures, their agreement was overwhelming: there is a single viewpoint about their surroundings. The kids all abhor the contamination of the water, the soil, and the air, and they emphasize that pollution is the only reason they consider leaving the neighborhood. "The school building is falling apart. It's damned cold in the winter, we can't attend classes because of the cold. If you turn the [electric] heating on, the lights go off. And in our classroom there's a broken window, and it's very cold (*nos recagamos del frio*)."

Overall, students stressed that they did not like the "bad" pictures because they show how dirty and contaminated their barrio is: "We don't like any of these pictures because there's a lot of pollution, a lot of garbage"; "I like the

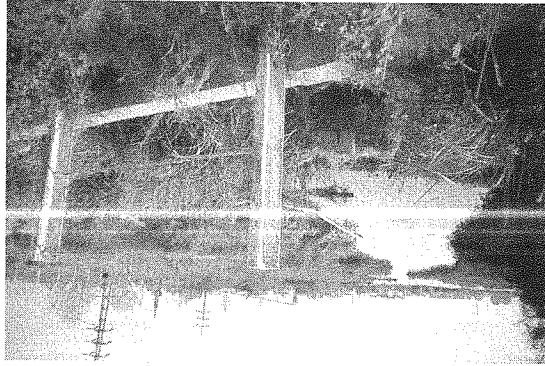


"This is right in front of our house. There's a man living there, poor guy. . . . You feel sorry for him. The rats are all around." (Courtesy of Javier Anyero and Debora Swistun)



"This is my aunt's backyard." (Courtesy of Javier Anyero and Debora Swistun)

neighborhood, all my friends are here. But I don't like pollution." In their minds pollution is associated with smoke (represented in the pictures of smokestacks, most of them taken at night when the smoke could be better seen—not included here because they are difficult to reproduce), garbage, mud, and debris (shown in the photos of the fronts of their houses, their backyards, and the streets they travel daily). Pollution is also associated with Shell-Capsa



"When you walk by, the stench kills you. . . . You can see the rats there, they are huge, like monsters." "Look at the river. . . . It is all contaminated. . . . I wish the neighborhood were cleaner." (Courtesy of Javier Anyero and Debora Swistun)

and particularly with the coke-processing plant that was installed a decade ago (environmental organizations and some community activists tried unsuccessfully to stop this, arguing that the plant was potentially carcinogenic).

All of them see themselves living in the midst of waste and debris, *en el medio de la basura*, surrounded by stagnant, stinking water and by refuse that feeds huge and menacing rats. In several conversations during our fieldwork, mothers of small babies told us that they feared their babies would be eaten by rats “which are this big!”

One of the most revealing dialogues was with Manuela (now 16). One of her photos shows the site where trucks illegally dump garbage (not included here because of poor quality). Many neighbors scavenge in the garbage and, according to Manuela, “They make a lot of money.” In another picture, probably the one that best realizes students’ concerns about their dirty surroundings, Manuela caught a cat eating from the garbage. She used the same word for the cat that she had used to refer to her neighbors (*ciruja*, scavenger): “Check out this cat

Manuela caught a cat eating from the garbage. She used the same word for the cat that she had used to refer to her neighbors (*ciruja*, scavenger).

looking over the garbage. He is looking for something to eat. He is a scavenger cat (*un gato ciruja*.)” In their survival strategies in the surrounding dirt, neighbors and animals are, in Manuela’s eyes, clearly similar.

Pollution is not only “out there”—in dirty streets, backyards, and playgrounds; it is also inside their own bodies where “contamination” has, in their view, a very precise name: lead. The epidemiological study received a lot of media attention—in the press (which they do not read)

and on TV (which they do watch). Teachers also informed their students about lead, and some of them or their relatives were actually tested for the study. When speak-

ing about pollution in the neighborhood, the kids used the interviews and the pictures to talk about their loved ones and themselves as poisoned persons: “I would like to leave because everything is contaminated here. I don’t know



(Courtesy of Javier Auyero and Debora Swistun)



“We don’t like the factories because of all the smoke.”

“This is all polluted. It’s all coming from Shell.”

“I don’t like Shell because it brings pollution. . . . I don’t know how much lead we have in our blood.”
(Courtesy of Javier Auyero and Debora Swistun)

this situation? In an effort to answer this question, we gave cameras to school students, interviewed them, and found they were highly critical of their surroundings. Despite being regularly exposed to (and endangered by) contamination, they are not "used" to what they routinely see and smell. They cannot stop thinking about their environment, and they were eager to talk about it in the interviews. Why? Why can't they simply "forget about" contamination? First, their aching, itching (and, in many cases, lead-poisoned) bodies and their nervous minds constantly remind them that something is not right with themselves and their setting. Their suffering prevents forgetfulness. Second, the words and actions of teachers, lawyers, activists, and journalists thwart habituation. Youngsters' critical views are shaped by teachers who educate them on a daily basis, lawyers who frequently come to the neighborhood in search of (sick or potentially sick) clients on whose behalf they might sue one or more companies in the compound, activists (like those of Greenpeace) who occasionally organize protests against some of the adjoining companies, and journalists who report the (mostly bad) news about the neighborhood. All these influence how youngsters think and



(Courtesy of Javier Anyero and Debora Swistun)

how much lead my cousin has in his blood . . . all of my cousins have lead inside," (Laura) "I have lead inside . . . I had my blood tested because some lawyers said they were going to eradicate us." (Manuela).

Many of the students have visited the plant. Miguel liked it, as he puts it, "It's really cool . . . full of trucks." Carolina, who took a two-week-long computing course inside the company's premises, says, "It is ugly inside, machines, smoke, lots of smoke." Romina tells us that "We don't like it (Shell-Capsa) because at night there's a lot of smoke coming out. We once went to visit. They treated us really well, but they contaminate everything . . . (pointing to the coke plant). In front of my place there's a woman who came to live in the neighborhood with her daughter. After a couple of years, they were all contaminated because of the coke . . . most people are contaminated by that." And Samantha adds, "There's a lot of disease here (*aca hay mucha enfermedad*). The pictures they took and their comments make it clear that, for these youngsters, Shell (and the petrochemical compound by extension) is associated with the smoke and the lead that affect their health. Shell is, for them, the source of their (and their neighbors') sickness.

lives exposed, minds unused

Where does this visual journey leave us? In speaking so adamantly about their surroundings, these youngsters remind us of a simple truth: poor people's lives do not unfold neatly but rather messily in polluted waters, poisoned soils, and contaminated air, surrounded by garbage where the rats, as one of the students put it, invoking his worst nightmares, "look like monsters."

Poor people's lives unfold badly in polluted environments. How do the poor experience

feel about their lives in the midst of garbage and poison.

shaky grounds

Many students took pictures of Dock Oil, an abandoned factory that was the site of the most recent community tragedy. On May 16, 2005, three youngsters, one of them a classmate of the students we interviewed, broke into the premises of the abandoned building to scavenge for iron bars. Apparently, a wall fell down after one of the teenagers pulled the wrong beam. Two were injured, and the third died. When we asked the students why they included so many pictures of Dock Oil among the “disliked” aspects of their neighborhood, they all said, “Because that’s where one of our classmates died.” As we looked at the pictures and transcribed these youngsters’ voices, we felt that the reason they included so many pictures of that ugly building was related to the shaky ground on which they live—both literally and figuratively. No image, and certainly no words, can better convey the sense of existential insecurity among these youngsters. In this dangerous context where their bodies and minds are under constant (visible and invisible) attack, giving them cameras so that they could photograph their space and themselves was our way to better grasp their lived experiences of space and place. It was also our way of telling them that we were concerned about them, we were listening to their stories, and we would testify to what they were living through.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Pierre Bourdieu and Marie-Claire Bourdieu. “The Peasant and Photography.” *Ethnography* 5 (2004): 601–16.

An insightful analysis of the meanings and social uses of photography in the peasant society of Bearn in the early 1960s.

Wendy Ewald. *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969–1999* (Scalo, 2000).

Children from around the globe, trained by an award-winning photographer, portray their social worlds.

Jim Hubbard. *Shooting Back from the Reservation* (New Press, 1994).

A moving reconstruction of Native American life as seen through the cameras of Native American children and teenagers.

Steve Kroll-Smith, Phil Brown, and Valerie J. Gunter, eds. *Illness and the Environment: A Reader in Contested Medicine* (New York University Press, 2000).

A comprehensive and informative collection of articles on the (contested) relationships between health, illness, and the environment.

Jon Wagner. “Constructing Credible Images: Documentary Studies, Social Research, and Visual Studies.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 47 (2004): 1477–1506.

An illustrative piece on the challenges faced by documentary photographers and visual social researchers with useful lessons for empirical investigators.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was your reaction to learning about how the people in Flammable live? What do you think could be done to improve their situation?
2. Describe how capitalism in the United States affects people in Flammable. Do

you think that Shell-Capsa has a responsibility to the people of Flammable? Why or why not?

3. Research and define the terms *environmental justice* and *environmental racism*. How do they relate to the case of Flammable?

4. Activity: Take three photographs of sites in your neighborhood or city that you think exemplify environmental inequality and share them with the class. Why did you choose these sites? What do you think they say about your city?