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Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago

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Review: Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago
By David Naguib Pellow

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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 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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