

*Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago.* By David Naguib Pellow. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002. ix + 234 pp. Bibliography, index, photographs. Cloth, \$24.95. ISBN 0-262-16212-1.

Reviewed by Louis P. Cain

Business historians will find *Garbage Wars* an irritating book, which was in part the author's intent. However, his one-sided approach to the topic adds another level of irritation that he mostly likely did not intend.

As defined by environmental activist David Naguib Pellow, in this expansion of the Ph.D. dissertation he wrote in 1998 while studying sociology at Northwestern, "garbage wars" are "the conflicts over solid wastes and pollution in urban areas, particularly in communities of color and in neighborhoods and workplaces where immigrants and low-income populations live and labor" (p. vii). Pellow documents how, over time, the majority of landfills, incinerators, and recycling centers have been located in such communities, largely employing local, unskilled labor, with the result that many residents are exposed to toxic chemicals both in their homes and their places of work. He develops his theme of community exploitation through a series of Chicago-based case studies arranged chronologically, most notably the Silver Shovel illegal-dumping-for-bribes case, the construction of the Northwest and Robbins incinerators, the Resource Center, and the Blue Bag recycling program. He argues that political favoritism resulted in the recycling program's being assigned to Waste Management (WMX), a company that Pellow describes as "an environmental terrorist" (p. 142). The pictures he paints belie the "clean and safe" images invoked by supporters of recycling. Pellow wants his readers to be irritated by his examples, as well they should be. They are portraits of injustice.

The book's subtitle suggests that his discussion takes place against a wider context of environmental racism and environmental justice. He identifies the former, described as "unequal protection against toxic and hazardous waste exposure and the systematic exclusion of people of color from decisions affecting their communities" (p. 8), with problem identification; the latter, summarized as "cultural norms and values, rules, regulations, behaviors, policies, and decisions to support sustainable communities" (p. 8), is equated with problem solving. Unfortunately, Pellow's exposition is skewed toward one tray of Justice's scale; he is a war correspondent reporting his side of the conflict.

Business historians will be irritated with the paucity of investigation carried out "behind enemy lines." Pellow has framed his narrative to emphasize history, the role of multiple

stakeholders, the effects of social stratification, and “the ability of the least powerful segments of society to *shape the struggle for environmental justice*” (italics in original, p. 7). Yet he employs a caricature of the business sector: “As corporations and individuals invest and reinvest capital in markets to seek maximum profits and economic growth, there are strains on the ecosystem and the social system” (p. 61). Pellow alleges that WMX is racist and that it “cut a deal” with Chicago, allowing it to hire nonunion day laborers to do dangerous work with no employee benefits. Is WMX a representative solid-waste-disposal firm? A typical capitalistic firm? These questions are not addressed.

One consequence of Pellow’s one-sided view is that he does not take his story much beyond the limits of his case studies. The correlation between lower-income neighborhoods and the siting of solid-waste facilities is clear; the causation is not. Both groups have always sought out the lowest-priced land. In the 1850s, Chicago forced stockyards to move out of town because they were environmental nuisances. The Chicago Union Stock Yards were built on vacant land beyond the city’s boundaries, but the city eventually grew to absorb that land during a time when people still largely walked to work. The land upwind of the yards commanded a higher price. As Pellow notes, the taxpayers’ interest is to locate a city dump on inexpensive land, whether or not people are there. Which came first is a moot point by now. As time passed, as technology changed, as landfills gave way to incinerators and incinerators to recycling centers, the same land was used, a factor that has its pluses and its minuses.

Pellow does note the pluses, but too often only in passing. At the beginning of his two chapters on recycling, he writes: “In many cases, recycling has led to job creation, the reduction of property tax increases, and the removal of solid waste from community streets and landfills. However, the data I have marshaled . . . will assess those benefits against the social outcomes” (p. 102). Instead of providing a rigorous assessment of benefits (or costs), however, Pellow concentrates on depicting the (usually adverse) social outcomes through interviews and observation.

It is duly noted that social movements are usually much clearer about what they are fighting against than what they are fighting for. Pellow makes clear what he is fighting against: “Environmental justice in Chicago, the United States, and on Mother Earth will never be achieved without resisting corporate power and the ideology of profit before people and the environment that supports it” (p. 169). He also elucidates what he is fighting for: to provide communities with a safe environment and with “decent paying safe jobs; quality schools and recreation; decent housing and adequate health care; democratic decision-making and personal empowerment; and

communities free of violence, drugs, and poverty” (p. 8). Pellow does not offer a road map for arriving at solutions, nor does he engage in problem-solving.

The book opens with this quote from a company representative: “the garbage has to go somewhere” (p. 1). However, Pellow does not consider the tradeoffs involved in selecting alternate locations. How much more would people be willing to pay, in either user fees or property taxes, to move waste facilities onto more expensive land? If higher-priced land were used, net wages for many of those currently employed would fall as their commuting costs increased. How willing would they be to incur this extra expense? Clearly, Pellow believes that the recyclables-only approach of the nonprofit, labor-intensive, neighborhood-based Resource Center was superior to the Blue Bag program, which combines recyclables with municipal waste, and most likely he is right, despite the former program’s potentially higher costs. Pellow has produced no clear solutions for dealing with the garbage, which is likely to remain a *causus belli* wherever it goes.

*Louis P. Cain is professor of economics at Loyola University Chicago and adjunct professor of economics at Northwestern University. With the late Jonathan Hughes, he is author of American Economic History (2003). His current research is on the early development of Chicago, with an emphasis on the role of William B. Ogden.*