



# Anthropology Book Forum

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From Lead through activism to activism through lead

Reviewer: Dr. Juan M del Nido

Life Without Lead: Contamination, Crisis and Hope in Uruguay, by Daniel Renfrew, Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2018, 296 pp., \$85.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0520295469, \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0520295476

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*Life Without Lead* examines how lead poisoning became the first environmental problem to reach mass awareness in Uruguay, a self-styled continental haven of stable, middle class, “it can’t happen here” industriousness. Factories in Montevideo began smelting lead during Uruguay’s 1950s import substitution industrialisation efforts. Emboldened by tacit or explicit support from democratic and dictatorial governments alike, lack of protocols and/or controls concerning refuse disposal, and little public awareness, these factories, smaller businesses and microentrepreneurs smelting in backyards discarded lead and lead-laced contaminants in rivers and unclaimed land in La Teja, the historical and cultural heart of Montevideo’s working class. Residents used these waters and newcomers settled precariously on this land; by the turn of the millennium the first clinically-confirmed cases of long-suspected lead poisoning began making headlines.

Neighbourhood activists, sympathetic politicians and militant paediatricians fought to visibilize lead contamination as a pervasive, silent threat to all Uruguayan people, and to relocate families living, literally, on lead-laced dirt floors. Much of this work, Daniel Renfrew shows, involved challenging the terms of contention of Uruguayan medico-bureaucratic discourse. When health protocols were finally set up, contamination tolerance thresholds were exceptionally lenient in international terms, downplaying the seriousness of lead poisoning as an epidemic and reducing the number of cases in need of an assistance already insufficient. These activists secured relocation for many families, the redefinition of medical intervention protocols and the phasing out of tetraethyl leaded gasoline, but they never managed to frame lead contamination as a *Uruguayan* epidemic. Medical discourse, national statistics and popular common sense still account for lead poisoning through a culturalist take of the uneducated poor.

The author positions this work as a study of the various dimensions of a lead-poisoning epidemic through an ethnography of grassroots social movements (9) and at the theoretical intersection between environmental justice, knowledge and power, and government and resistance (11-15). Lead poisoning and activists do indeed come into being jointly, for example in Renfrew’s excellent analysis of the medical, legal and economic arguments involving activists, business representatives and government officials concerning who is to blame for what kind of contamination, why, and how that blame and that contamination are to be historicised and circumscribed (127-143). Particularly original is the author’s attention to the knowledge battles his informants had to wage to unsettle settled science in Chapter six, *We Are All Contaminated*. State doctors wrote off exceptionally high concentrations of lead as circumstantial outliers; aggregated and disaggregated soil samples such that averages were constantly “normalized”; and explained the case for this selective pragmatism through the logics of a realpolitik clinical approach to the Uruguayan biopolitical, since otherwise the entire country would be off the charts (189-198). Renfrew makes a very nuanced case against explaining these encounters through corruption, ignorance or indolence, focusing instead on how the contaminated bodies of the poor became the site of environmental and clinical knowledges in dispute.

Aside from that chapter, *Life Without Lead* seems to work the other way around: it reads more as an in-depth study of a grassroots social movement *through* an ethnography of various dimensions of a lead-poisoning epidemic. At times this difference is irrelevant: Renfrew’s very point is that were it not for these activists’ efforts, lead poisoning would have never been problematized in the first place. Yet in several instances lead is a wholly adverbial presence, a means towards a main narrative spearheaded throughout the book by the grassroots movement. For instance, the third chapter, *La Teja Shall Sing*, minutely details the experience

of a *murga*, a musical festivity-cum-parade proper to the River Plate basin, and the history of an activist publication, as sites of ritualized, idealized resistance and authenticity (83-114). Lead is there, but by the time it enters the narrative as a concern of the publication, in *murga* lyrics and in schoolchildren's homework (104-108), it can only do so as the (fascinating!) modifier of a subplot that has *already* become about the semiotics of a somewhat heroic associative life. Often, the interesting technical, STS-y arguments the book makes are crowded out by the very richly detailed context, history, affects, semiotics, performativity and poetics of activism. Contributions like "counterexpertise," defined as alternative scientific discourses within western medical epistemology deployed for strategic reasons (33-34), and spectral science, "science that has become unmoored (...) and translated selectively to fit locally disputed contexts" (189), crucial to problematising lead by the author's own account, go unmentioned for the 150 pages separating these quotations. When they reappear to explain the grassroots fight to redefine both lead poisoning and its appropriate care, their exact meanings are hard to tell apart, and both fuse with what the author calls "graphic evidence" (202): the deployment of grotesque, dramatic imagery, clinical and cultural, to visibilize lead as a medical problem.

As an ethnography of activism, *Life Without Lead* joins the work of ethnographers, also often activists themselves, studying economic-environmental grassroots movements and political ecology of Latin America through the continent's alleged, or attempted, turn away from neoliberalism. To an anthropology increasingly seeing its duty in ethico-narrative terms, and finding those terms in a certain kind and intensity of portraiture, these works add the task of examining "popular" struggles. In this convergence romanticization is near inescapable. Renfrew knows this; his excellent analysis of Uruguay's recent political and economic history (57-71) and a nuanced take on simplistic discourses blaming "neoliberalism" for lead poisoning (25-34) convincingly embed this activism in industrial and employment conditions, Montevideo's geography and complex political networks – activism as a *social* condition. Still, a general conflation between "being from La Teja" and "resistance," an insistence on "traditions of solidarity and collectivity" (68, also 70, 72, 74) and passages as "La Teja (...) would prove through its collective response (...) that there was still fight resonating deep from within the spirit of its proud residents" (74) confirm a tone of working class *culture* panegyric that a passing declaration of fissures within this collective (71) does not dispel. Part of the difficulty of shedding this romanticization is of course that through it this ethico-narrative duty produces the conditions where it itself finds, produces and signals its legitimacy. Following several pages of quite impressionistic accounts of the destitution and contamination of the poor where he "looked into the eyes of a baby girl (...) and (he) felt complicit with her poisoning" (147-166, quote in 166), Renfrew asks "how do we render the *look* and *feel* of 'shattered people' living in polluted and 'ruptured places'?", and "how do we avoid the *voyeuristic* 'dismay of images' in a media-saturated world that often (...) aestheticize(s) or pathologize(s) suffering?" (ibid, my emphasis). Readers unconcerned with *this* particular ethico-narrative duty might find the book flirts with a somewhat baroque, and ultimately barren, solipsism. Certainly, the latter neither defines nor challenges its contributions in terms of rigour, nuance and originality, but does confirm in tone and positionality *Life Without Lead's* concern with activism and its struggles rather than with lead.

Although some sections are heavy on theoretical reviews and references, this book remains an engaging, accessible and interesting read and one of the very few book-length studies of Uruguay. Beyond anthropology it will be well suited for regional studies, environmental,

human, cultural and economic geography, and of course, popular politics and activism reading lists.

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