

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Benjamin J. Pauli, *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2019)

Sean Antaya

Volume 86, Fall 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074490ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2020.0054>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Antaya, S. (2020). Review of [Benjamin J. Pauli, *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 86, 208–210.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2020.0054>

and lesbians resisted their oppression, predating New York's more famous Stonewall riot; how women campaigned for peace, opposed the war in Vietnam, and charted new paths of liberation; and how a fearless nun, Sister Corita, bucked the hierarchy of the Catholic Church to champion protest. Free health clinics, an alternative press, and Asian American radicalism are all discussed, as is the struggle to turn back the tide of gentrification in Venice Beach. This book is a kaleidoscope of movements, whose many moving parts and colours are orchestrated by Davis and Weiner in ways that reveal connections across a diverse human landscape. The particularities of 1960s Los Angeles are evident, as is the city's connectedness to wider struggles, national and international. Few books on the Sixties are as multi-dimensional, as riveting in their originality, or as insightful in their reconsiderations.

Davis and Weiner buck the academic trend, insisting that, while some of their story begins in earlier times and continues into the 1970s, as is of course entirely predictable, the 1960s were nonetheless unique years. New communist movements spawned by developments of the later years of the decade are not addressed, more properly situated in another era. Taking their title from The Doors "Light My Fire"—"The time to hesitate is through/No time to wallow in the mire/... Try to set the night on fire"—the authors, like the band's drummer, John Densmore, want no part of either commodifying the decade or selling it short. Interviewed for the book, Densmore provided a strong statement on the meaning of an influential moment, one that lit flames of resistance refusing to be extinguished: "The seeds of civil rights and the peace movement and feminism were planted in the sixties. And they are big seeds. Maybe they take fifty or a hundred

years to reach fruition. So stop complaining, and get out your watering cans." (vi)

BRYAN D. PALMER
Trent University

Benjamin J. Pauli, *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2019)

DEPICTED IN FILMS such as *Roger and Me* (1989), Flint, Michigan has long been associated with the decline of American manufacturing. Yet, as Benjamin J. Pauli notes, the city has also been an inspiring site of social struggle for American workers dating back to the Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1937. Cognizant of this legacy, Pauli's book explores the more recent struggles in Flint over the contamination of the city's water supply. Starting as early as 2014 when Flint's unelected Emergency Managers (EMs)—appointed by the state of Michigan to deal with Flint's budget deficit in wake of the 2011 Financial Crisis—switched from water provided by the city of Detroit to Flint river water processed locally as part of austerity measures, Flint residents began to experience an array of water quality issues. Water in many parts of the city smelled of foul odours and ran brown or murky out of the tap. Residents began to experience mysterious health problems including hair loss, rashes, and undiagnosable illnesses—all of which residents eventually linked to the contaminated water supply. While often framed in the media as a crisis stemming only from lead poisoning, Flint's water was also plagued by other contaminants including trihalomethanes (THMs) and harmful bacteria which likely contributed to outbreaks of Legionnaires' disease. Flint residents responded to being "poisoned by policy" (77) through collective

action – forming water justice organizations, coordinating protest actions, engaging in local electoral campaigns, and even conducting their own citizen-led scientific studies to gather evidence of the poisoned water to counter the city's experts who attempted to downplay their concerns about water safety. Though their struggles are ongoing, these organizing efforts successfully led to further studies which confirmed widespread lead contamination, the initial state of emergency declarations, international media coverage of Flint's tribulations, intervention from the State of Michigan and the Federal Government, and eventually the end of the EM trusteeship.

Pauli's key argument is that these struggles were not simply fights for clean water but that they soon transformed into a broader struggle against the unelected EMS in favour of a more substantive democracy. As a university professor at Kettering University in Flint who was involved in Flint's water activism though this period, Pauli offers a unique perspective into Flint's water struggles, relying on innumerable interviews, news articles, internal documents circulated by activists, and his own reminiscences. Though Pauli attempts to tell the story from the perspective of the activists themselves and is of course sympathetic to their cause, he is not uncritical and attempts to identify the inadequacies and contradictions within the movement and its strategies.

Unfortunately, though he does of course refer to the processes of deindustrialization, urban decline, and austerity in the historical and political "narratives" of the crisis in chapters 2 and 3, Pauli does not sufficiently contextualize Flint's struggles in the broader political and economic transformations of the past 40 years, focusing only on Flint's own specific history. Indeed, Pauli does not

situate the struggles for democracy in Flint within the wider literature on the inherent contradictions of liberal capitalist democracy or the withering of democratic governance under neoliberalism (neoliberalism is not a term that he uses). A reference to Peter Mair's *Ruling the Void*, for example, on the "hollowing out" of democracy represented by the decline of even limited forms of popular sovereignty and the increasing dominance of the 'post-political' technocrats tasked with administering the neoliberal consensus would help to strengthen Pauli's arguments about the undemocratic state-appointed EMS, perhaps framing the State of Michigan's austerity authoritarianism as part of a much broader trend affecting all of the so-called democratic advanced capitalist states to varying degrees – from similar water struggles in Ireland to the European Union's strong-arming of Greece. What could be more emblematic of Mair's depoliticized and technocratic-authoritarian "void" than Flint's EMS appointed to cut budgets no matter the human cost and without any consent from the people of Flint themselves?

Nevertheless, there is much that is of value in Pauli's account of the Flint water struggles. Chapter 5 stands out in particular. The chapter documents in detail how Flint residents gradually transformed their personal-individual problems with the water into collective political action and social struggle. Most remarkably, the chapter reveals the development of class consciousness amongst Flint's residents who began to identify with one another based on their shared experiences and explicitly articulate their demands through the lens of class struggle. Pauli observes that the class-based understanding of the crisis was favoured by both white and black activists. Indeed, residents were so insistent that Flint's water struggle was primarily a class issue

that the activists saw any attempts to frame the problem through other lenses—especially racial lenses—as bids by outside actors to break the movement and sow divisiveness. Activists pushed back against a racial framing of the crisis even when it emanated from sympathetic observers such as the Michigan Civil Rights Commission or the famous Michigan documentarian Michael Moore. Pauli unfortunately does not expand much on these particular insights from the Flint activists and the broader implications for left-wing strategy which might follow from them, despite the fact that these observations run directly counter to the dominant thinking amongst many left academics and NGO-based activists who seem increasingly focused on identity-based *difference* and contingent “allyship” rather than processes of class consciousness and the deeper forms of solidarity which can eventually *transcend* difference through common struggle as has played out in Flint.

In later chapters, Pauli also examines the contradictions that followed from activists’ attempts to recruit scientists like Marc Edwards and Scott Smith to their cause. Though such experts were helpful in building credibility for the water movement and helping the activists conduct studies refuting the shoddy and misleading evidence put forward by the City of Flint initially claiming the city’s water was safe, activists found that they had no way to hold the scientists accountable to the movement. As a result, the experts often engaged in opportunist behaviour by using the movement to bolster their own careers and political ambitions – sometimes becoming outright turncoats. Edwards, in particular, was blatantly co-opted by the State of Michigan, with Republican Governor Rick Snyder appointing Edwards to lead the state committee for Flint’s crisis recovery. Because of this, Pauli notes, “[r]ight around the

time when activists started calling for Snyder’s arrest, Edwards began singing his praises” (191). Pauli suggests that these experiences ought to serve as a warning for future environmental justice movements, which should exercise extreme caution when recruiting experts. Pauli reminds us that scientific evidence is a crucial tool for advocates of environmental justice, but science alone cannot replace social and political struggle. Similarly, individual experts are not impartial observers but can in fact function as influential political actors in their own right.

Though I find *Flint Fights Back* to be flawed in some ways, it is certainly worthwhile reading for anyone concerned with contemporary struggles for environmental justice and community-driven resistance to austerity. Water struggles like those in Flint will continue to be key sites of class conflict as climate change intensifies alongside economic inequality and as fresh water subsequently becomes an increasingly scarce resource.

SEAN ANTAYA
York University

Jenny Brown, *Birth Strike: The Hidden Fight Over Women’s Work* (Oakland, CA: PM Press 2019)

IN *BIRTH STRIKE*, Jenny Brown provides an analysis of the declining birth rate in the United States, an area that has not received much attention from feminist scholars in their discussions of the struggle over reproductive rights. Brown argues that the conflict over birth control and abortion has less to do with culture or religion and more to do with economics, that is, corporate and establishment interests in “an ever-expanding workforce raised with a minimum of public spending.” (11) Brown argues that the “ruling group” is interested in women