David Wacker

DHC 180

Professor Hickey

3/6/2022

*Pesticide Drift: and the Pursuit of Environmental Justice* Book Review

The use of pesticides is an agricultural topic that has had its fair share of time in the spotlight, a main point in the ever-famous *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. Evidence shows that these poisons are not only harmful to its usual targets of insects, but to the human population as well. In *Pesticide Drift: and the Pursuit of Environmental Justice,* Jill Harrison explores how these chemicals get to spots where they shouldn’t be, which is the idea of “pesticide drift.” Jill Harrison is currently and Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She has had many pieces of work published and is also a member of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Also in her book, she details the effects on humans who are unfortunately in the area that the pesticides drift to. In 2010 and 2011, Harrison explores the Central Valley of California as a case study for the use of the pesticides and how they have hurt the residents of the region in the past. Difficulties with reporting pesticide exposure and the poor regulations are also explored under the lens of unequal treatment of people who are less financially fortunate and who are people of color. She also goes into detail on the idea of Environmental Justice and how it is different than some of the common definitions of justice in politics.

I chose this book because we were currently in the process of talking about DDT and its harmful effects on the human population when we needed to get our choices in. After some looking, I found this book that was easily available and free to read from our library. It had an intriguing title with the inclusion of Environmental Justice as a nice bonus. After reading it I would have to describe its genre as a political and science review. From the list provided it was hard to find a perfect descriptor of what it is. From its title I assumed that it would be an alright choice in terms of my ability to understand what is being discussed, this was not a fully correct assumption. This will be particularly shown when I explain the different types of justice that were brought up. Jill Harrison is an academic and wrote like one, I did my best to follow along through this well-organized book.

Pesticide exposure is a global phenomenon wherever large amounts of agriculture is found. The use of the chemicals in the industry has reached the point where most major farms won’t ever go without them. Harrison speaks about how the application of the chemicals almost always comes with “drift.” She does a good job giving a brief overview how it happens, including when it is applied by airplane and just other sprayers in general. Once it is in the air it can easily be blown away towards neighboring homes and their residents. On page 31 she provides a statistic that “90 percent of all pesticides used in California are prone to drift.” Seeing as though that “25 percent of the nation’s agricultural pesticides,” (pg. 26) are used in California, this is a frightening statistic. This was a very surprising fact to learn, I of course knew that drift occurred, but I would not have guessed that it is that common in our application methods. One of the reviews I found by Graham Matthews talks about how the drift only affects people that live right next to agricultural areas. Which seems to be true, based on the author’s description of who is exposed the most (I’ll touch on that in a little bit). This makes it hard for me personally to be concerned, but that doesn’t mean that actions should be taken to support those that are directly exposed to the chemicals. I liked how Harrison structured this part of the book. In the first two chapters she gives a base line on what pesticide drift is as well as how it is affecting certain areas differently, while referencing the future sections of the book. She also gave a nice description of the book’s structure. Describing each of its six long chapters and what to expect later. The second chapter was for advocating for change in the pesticide industry. The third, fourth, and fifth chapters explained the views of different parties involved; the third chapter was for the agriculture industry, the fourth was about the regulatory agencies, and the fifth was about environmental activists. Finally, the sixth chapter was a good conclusion of what had been said previously, as well as providing possible solutions to pesticide drift.

In the Central Valley of California, which is sometimes described as the “dumping ground” of California there are many miles of agriculture that employ many people of Latino/a origin. 90 percent of which are from Mexico, some of whom are there illegally. Regardless of whether they should be working there or not, these are the ones that are exposed to pesticides the most. Harrison speaks on how regulations are not made for the people that work on the agricultural fields. I really liked how she gave representation for people who have been exposed to the chemicals. Throughout the whole book she provides answers she acquired from interviews during her case study. Her explanation of how the regulations affected them differently was kind of saddening for me to read. The regulations also happen to be voluntary in most cases, which makes it even harder to fix the situation through reporting from the workers and nearby residents. Those interviewed spoke on how that they won’t report their exposure due to fear of the consequences for them. If they report the exposure, there is a good chance they could lose their job and then be placed on the “blacklist,” meaning no other farmers in the area will hire them back. Which would be horrible knowing that a lot of the workers rely on the jobs to provide for their families. Or worse, there will be legal repercussions and they could end up being deported (if they are there illegally), as well as the possibility of their family members being deported. Along with all these possible consequences, she reminded the reader that these families also tend to live right nearby. She gave an overview how not only do they get exposed while working, but the drift makes it so they get exposed at their homes as well. It was saddening to hear about everyone getting rashes and their eyes burning, not to mention how the kids were vomiting. These families tend to start fighting for Environmental Justice and become pesticide activists as well. I really wish Harrison talked about her case study more than she did. I found it fun to hear all the different perspectives from actors in the field from her interviews. She uses them a lot, but I think they could have been utilized as a base to her writing instead of a supplement to it.

Throughout the book Harrison touches on how Environmental Justice is compared to different definitions of “justice.” She brought up what she considered to be the two main types of justice that exist in the United States, libertarian, and communitarian. This is where she started to lose me. As someone who isn’t the most knowledgeable when it comes to politics and different viewpoints, this is a topic where the type of book is shown. It is hard to say that this book is for the layperson, even though it is her intended audience. I say that because this is a very “call to action” type of book. Jamie Conklin references the author’s use of justice definitions as such, “She does this by pointing out how libertarian and communitarian ideas of justice used by the crop protection industry, the environmental regulatory state, and the alternative agrifood movement fail to provide solutions to pesticide drift.” This is the only time that Conklin references this part of the book in their review. Which is about the same amount as what I can say. Matthews doesn’t touch on this part of the book at all in his review, which is another showing for it needing to be improved. When “Environmental Justice” is in your title, one must do a good job at explaining it for their reader. She spent 4 whole pages on what justice was to different political groups, that is too long for a general reader. I wish I had more to say on the topic, but she lost me. In the last chapter of the book, she explains how the libertarian and communitarian views of justice can creates “paths of least resistance” for the furthering of environmental justice. Then right after says that they won’t work in the long run for pesticide drift and that government legislation is the only real way to get the desired result. I’m not from the field so I’m not going to understand how these different definitions of justice work, if you wish to get me on your side, don’t explain it with examples that only a small percentage of your audience are going to know.

This book was a very tough read, at only 204 pages I had assumed that I would have an alright time getting through it, I was wrong. The pages are larger than lots of standard books and the font is smaller. Not to mention the doctorate level of writing Harrison uses. If she had focused more on her case study, I think this book would have been better. She uses a lot of quotes from her interviews, but they’re only used as evidence and not the backbone of her argument. Because of these reasons I think I would have to give this book a 5/10. If I were someone who was more active in the pesticide industry, I probably would have really liked this book. I would recommend it to people who are more interested in the area and have a higher level of education. Another group that might like this are people who are interested in political science. I believe this because they are the ones who will be able to grasp the whole justice portion of the book better. This book tried its hardest to be for the layperson, but I think it fell short. Unless you have lots of time to look up different types of pesticides and different types of political views, this book isn’t for you.

References

Conklin, J. (2013). Review: pesticide drift and the pursuit of environmental justice. *Electronic Green Journal*, *1*(34). <https://doi.org/10.5070/g313413993>

Harrison. (2011). Pesticide drift and the pursuit of environmental justice. MIT Press.

<https://searchlib.cwu.edu/permalink/f/15utse1/CP71102489080001451>

*Jill Lindsey Harrison*. Sociology | University of Colorado Boulder. (n.d.). Retrieved March 6, 2022, from <https://www.colorado.edu/sociology/our-people/jill-lindsey-harrison>

Matthews, G. (2014). Pesticide drift and the pursuit of environmental justice. *International Pest Control; Burnham*, *56*(1). Retrieved March 6, 2022, from <https://www.proquest.com/openview/504b86f612f820e6c8acfa81a9a78329/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=2029999>.