Central Washington University

A Review of the Book *Pollution is Colonialism* by Max Liboiron

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DHC 180

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# Introduction:

*Pollution Is Colonialism* is an eye opening experience about a new way to see how pollution can effect the world we live in and not only that but it brings about a unique perspective on dominant science in general. Taking place in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada at the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR), Max Liboiron, Ph.D. in Media, Culture, and Communication, New York University, 2012,Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Memorial University, and founder of CLEAR (Liboiron, CV) sets out to bring an indigenous perspective to the science of pollution and refocuses it on Land (Liboiron, Pollution Is Colonialism) relations. At CLEAR one of their fundamental goals is to look at the plastic in fish that the province consumes, specifically cod caught by the local fishers, and use anticolonial science that does not assume access to L/land. This book carefully crafts a story of the rise of *assimilative capacity* in the world of pollution science, explains how pollution is perpetuating colonialism in the world, and how CLEAR is pushing forward on the continuing quest to change dominate science to be more ethical for the entire world. I chose this book purely for the title itself as I grew up in a world where there are no major old colonial systems in place, but I recognized a new system called neo-colonialism. My thoughts were that this system affected the continents of Asia and Africa and left the Americas alone. How wrong I was, as after reading this book my knowledge of the original people of the Americas culture is still being infringed upon by colonialism.

# L/land and Colonialism and Land Relations:

The most interesting part of *Pollution Is Colonialism* is the focus of relations. According to Liboiron relations are the guiding way to live as such I will follow their methodology given by Styres and Zinga with Land being capitalized with as “the unique entity that is combined living spirt of plants, animals, air, water, humans, histories, and events recognized by many Indigenous communities” (Liboiron, 7) while land being lowercased signifies the specific landscapes people on vacation would see. This might seem insignificant, but this book is told from the perspective of Red River Métis/Michif (Liboiron, about page) where these differences are front and center to their ideas of knowledge. Max starts the timeline of how pollution is colonialism by stating that under a colonial system the government assumes access to Land for anything they perceive as beneficial. One example of this is landfills where “plastic disposables go “away”” (Liboiron, 8) are perpetuating the colonial system that removes the spirituality of Land as it is seen as land and a resource to be exploited. Instead of trying to stop the production of pollution in the environment we allow companies to pollute to just below the point at which the environment becomes unable to correct itself. I liked the idea of Land relations as it brings to light other ways of cultures view of the world. I do not necessarily agree with everything stated about Universal Theory, but more on this in the next section.

# *Assimilative Capacity*:

I felt that this was something so important to Max’s book that it required a separate section then the previous one it is based on. According to *Pollution Is Colonialism* the modern view of assimilative capacitycome from Streeter and Phelps study at the Ohio River “looking at organic wastes and coal-tar waste” (Liboiron, 46). The study found that there are sigmoid curves at which the river could not introduce more oxygen then was needed to get rid of the waste. This was the threshold the river could handle before being unable to naturally correct itself allowing companies to continue to pollute if they did not go over the limit. By observing the pollution in the Ohio River Streeter and Phelps “needed particular Land relations for their universal theory to work” (Liboiron, 46). The problem here is that Streeter and Phelps did not ask the people who these lands are sacred to and just treated land as a resource for their study, but did you catch the end of the quote? Universal theory.

From my upbringing this sounds reasonable to me, of course I want science to hold true everywhere, yet it is a hallmark of dominate science (as an aside Liboiron uses dominate science to keep “power relations front and center” and “[s]econd not all Western science is dominant” (Liboiron, 20-21)) which keeps other ways of knowledge repressed. The discussion on assimilative capacity reminds me of DHC 180 with the “dose creates poison” (Hickey, Toxicity Lecture), under Liboiron we should not find a universal curve for which to model all toxicants. For example, the study of BPA on rats by the National Toxicology Program found “no convincing bisphenol A was carcinogenic for F344 rats or B6C3FI mice of either sex” (Liboiron, 89) and so the EPA set the maximum dose to 50 micrograms (Liboiron, 90) believing in the universality of the curve. Yet Liboiron challenges this by bringing up a study done by Patricia Hunt, where the control rats become the focus of the study after it was discovered trace amounts of BPA cause problems in their eggs (Liboiron 91-92). This blows the age-old theory of assimilative capacity out of the water as BPA is harmful at lower doses than the EPA set. When reading the part on BPA my first thought was everything I learned in DHC 180 had an immediate counter point and brought into question all the good that was being done at using this world view and how we can stop the effects of pollution on the environment. I do however see the point in having somethings be not universalizable as with the case in toxicants which was a shock to the mathematician I am.

# Plastics as Land:

I am copying the title of this section directly from the book as this was my favorite part of the entire book. Starting out by explaining why people continue to eat food despite the government posting otherwise as to them “it makes sense spiritually and mental [you should eat the food you catch]” and repercussions are equated to “cultural genocide” (Liboiron, 108-109). I like the differentiation of different people’s obligations as for me I have an obligation to try and stay as healthy as possible, yet to others keeping their culture going is another obligation just as strong. This is extrapolated to the Land relations as plastics are part of the system of relationships and should be treated with ceremony as such. To not appropriate that culture I will refrain from using this in my daily life as obligations for me are different yet seeing how something (plastics) generally seen as a major problem can be helpful to different cultures showed me how little I know about the world.

My one major problem with *Pollution Is Colonialism* is how little this text can be applied to the European Countries. I know that this was intentionally vague as Land requires specificity and Liboiron wanted to avoid any assumptions of how Europeans view their own land, but I don’t know if there are any Land relations between Europe and her people. The last section of the book was about how “anticolonial sciences eschew universalism in favour of place-based methods” (Liboiron,152) and should thus be generalized instead.

# Conclusion:

Reading this book was a rollercoaster of emotions. It stared out very slow and I hated every sentence I disagreed with. Science is science specifically because it can be universal was my thought. However, as I continued, I made the realization that this was told from a perspective that I was unfamiliar with and that not every word need to connect with me. Once this dawned on me I began to enjoy the book much more and by opening my mind I learned something I never thought of before that the dominate science lens I view things in is just one lens of many like the different mathematical systems proposed by formalists. I think this book make plenty of great arguments for pollution being colonialism instead of coming from the factories instead. Overall, I rate this book a 9.5/10, a must read for anyone who wants to see how to practice social justice in an unjust science system or anyone who is curious about different perspectives of the world.

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