



Uneasy Alchemy: Citizens and Experts in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor Disputes (Urban and Industrial Environments)

Barbara L. Allen

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Louisiana annually reports over eight tons of toxic waste for each citizen. Uneasy Alchemy examines the role of experts -- lawyers, economists, health professionals, and scientists -- in the struggles for environmental justice in the state's infamous Chemical Corridor or "Cancer Alley." This legendary toxic zone between New Orleans and Baton Rouge is home to about 125 oil and chemical plants; cancer and respiratory illness rates there are among the highest in the nation. The efforts of residents to ensure a healthy environment is one of the most important social justice movements of the post-civil rights era. Louisiana is an especially appropriate venue for the examination of race, class, and politics within an environmental justice framework because of the critical role the chemical industry has played in the economic development of the state, and the weak record of state agencies in controlling toxic chemicals and enforcing environmental regulations. But while Louisiana suffers from some of the worst chemical pollution in the nation, it has also been the site of important environmental victories. Using ethnographic analysis of interviews with citizens, activists, and experts, media accounts, policy reports, government documents, minutes of hearings, and company statements, Barbara Allen identifies the factors that contribute to successful environmental justice efforts. She finds that the most successful strategies involved temporary alliances between local citizens and expert-activists, across lines of race and class, and between local and national organizations. These alliances were not easy to achieve -- local citizens tend to mistrust outside experts and want fast action in response to health threats -- but once formed, these powerful combinations of local and expert knowledge were an important force for action and change.

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