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**Review: Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint
Water Crisis**

By Benjamin J. Pauli

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Pauli, Benjamin J. *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2019. 396 pp. ISBN: 978-0-262-53686-8, paperback, US\$35.00.

Combining rigorous participant observation with analysis of media reporting, *Flint Fights Back* by Benjamin J. Pauli is a story of environmental justice and participatory politics that offers an empowering look at one of the United States' most shameful and persisting social and health crises in the 21st century. Using a focus on the political activism inspired by the water crisis, Pauli's main thesis is that the political mobilization in response to Flint's crisis is part of broader contemporary pro-democracy movements, demonstrative of not only democratic practices encoded in law, but in practice.

In addition to giving thanks to the many people who shaped the book, Pauli uses the preface and acknowledgements to sharply contrast the Flint of General Motors and the first mover in racial parity to the Flint of residence vacancies and financial crisis. He also brings to attention to the people who move to Flint by choice, the arts, the receipt of philanthropy, and the community's rising hope for Flint's future. Pauli frequently refers to Flint as "progressive, pugnacious, and resilient", a description which drives the narrative of the city, its people, and concerned activists throughout (xi). He initially moved to Flint for work with no idea that the water was a safety hazard. In the thick of the move, he became witness to local and government voices giving contrasting accounts of the water quality, leading to a unique, if highly unanticipated or premeditated, participant observation.

Pauli's methodological choices center on a triangulating qualitative strategy, consisting of semi-structured interviews, drawing from the interviews of other individuals and organizations, and examining narratives in media coverage of the Flint water crisis. As he took on a qualitative and discursive examination of Flint's crisis, he discusses his

work to “shrink” himself, limiting his perceived authority on the issue or in activism and dismantling potential hierarchies between him and affected community members (p. 9). The result was a sharp, impactful awareness of the degree to which local knowledge informs the situation.

The layout of *Flint Fights Back* is clearly shaped by the extent of framing research conducted by the author. Before the text is a timeline showing the relation between “water” and “democracy” that provides a brief overview of the escalation of the city’s water problems and social mobilization (xxi-xxxi). The book also contains an extensive bibliography; pages 1 through 257 are the monograph, while pages 258 through 377 are notes and bibliography. Initially, there are reasons to be wary about the generalizability of the lessons learned from the book. While a significant event in contemporary American politics and a richly descriptive case study, Flint’s water crisis is not generally considered to be a case to which political theoretical frameworks lend themselves easily. Rather than be disheartened by Flint’s challenging fit, Pauli argues that a shift in focus towards what it says about democracy mobilization not only fills gaps in the scholarship on intra-United States mobilization cases, but also has non-academic implications for empowering activists who experience challenges in overcoming the opposition discourse that Flint is too ‘singular’ to inform Pan-American activism. Pauli considers the beneficial nature of such “pebble in the shoe” case studies, reminding academics of the incompleteness of even robust theories (p. 17).

One takeaway Pauli seems particularly concerned with imparting unto readers is narrative construction. *Flint Fights Back* is both a story of the construction of legitimacy and victimhood and a critical challenge to scholarship that proposes that meaningful democratic processes may only happen in city halls rather than in the streets and in living rooms. Though the racial element of the water crisis is undeniable, the book comes across as less for critical race and ethnic studies than for broader social movements. The book is a recommended read for environmental movement and policy scholars, comparative politics scholars looking for North American case studies, as well as Americanists looking for an accessible connection to environmental justice scholarship.

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