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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4tz996b5>

Journal

Electronic Green Journal, 1(26)

Author

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Publication Date

2008

DOI

10.5070/G312610753

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Review: Challenging the Chip: Labor Rights and Environmental Justice in the Global Electronics Industry

Ted Smith, David A. Sonnenfeld, and David Naguib Pellow (Eds.)

Reviewed by Peter Little

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Smith, Ted, David A. Sonnenfeld, and David Naguib Pellow, (Eds.) *Challenging the Chip: Labor Rights and Environmental Justice in the Global Electronics Industry*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006. 357 pp. ISBN: 1-59213-330-4 (paperback).

The influence of electronic technology on the lives of humans today is profound and the economic successes of the global electronics industry are no doubt impressive. The global capitalist system has for the last century become almost entirely dependent on information and data processing technologies, adding to the powerful position this industry has in the broader global economy. But, despite the industry's economic prowess, high-tech comes at a high-cost. This book sets in relief the "industry's overall footprint," showing how personal computers, cell phones, iPods, and calculators are gadgets of high-tech modernity with social and environmental consequences. The high-tech industry is in fact polluting the environment, it is guilty of numerous environmental injustices, and workers in the industry are speaking out about labor rights and health concerns.

Challenging the Chip explores not only "the globalization of the electronics supply chain (from components to subassembly, to final assembly and testing, etc.) and product life cycle (from manufacturing, to sales and marketing, to consumption, to obsolescence and waste recycling/disposal/processing)" (p.9), but also the globalization of advocacy networks and the broader contentious politics emerging as a result of electronics. Moreover, the book brings political debate to the chip industry. As contentious politics multiply over the environmental and health consequences of electronics, there is an increasing need to understand the relationship between high-tech and environmental and labor politics. In this timely and wide-ranging volume, the contributing authors—33 in total—provide insightful case studies showing how the politics of the risk society, corporate power, social movements, labor rights, health, and environmental justice are topics to engage in order to make electronics an industry built on commitments to sustainability and justice.

Challenging the Chip discusses a variety of issues at local and global scales, including, but not limited to, occupational and public health, gender and migration, corporate responsibility, grassroots politics and mobilization tactics, immigrant worker politics, unionization, electronic waste management and ethics, global environmental policy and regulation, and producer responsibility and electronics recycling. Most impressively, the book probes the activities of community and worker advocacy groups and transnational advocacy networks, with several of the members of these groups acting as contributing authors. Several of the advocacy groups and campaigns discussed include the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health, the Campaign for Responsible Technology, and the International Campaign for Responsible Technology. As participating members of these advocacy groups and campaigns, the editors contend that “the future of sustainability, environmental justice, and labor rights cannot lie solely in the hands of either the social movements or the captains of industry and representatives of the state. All citizens and stakeholders must help determine the future of this industry, its employees, and the environment of impacted communities around the world” (p.11).

Challenging the Chip is certainly the most comprehensive review of the social, health and environmental consequences of the electronics industry to date and provides a critical platform for developing new theoretical and empirical research on the political economy and ecology of the industry. The plethora of topics explored also highlights the multiplicity of disciplines that can contribute to debates about the chip industry, including the social sciences, public health, and environmental sciences. A most impressive feature of the book is the way in which it developed out of a collaborative partnership of intellectuals and activists with a shared vision of sustainability and justice. Overall, the book will be of interest to students of social science, environmental science, science and technology studies, political ecology, and anybody using a computer to read this book review.

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