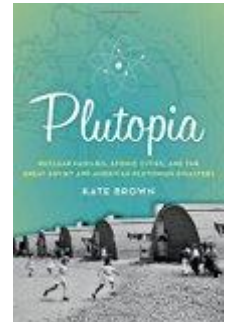


Kate Brown. *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. X, 373 S. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-985576-6.



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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

Kate Brown's impressive book, *Plutopia*, accomplishes the central goal of comparative history—deepening our understanding of its two subjects, in this case the plutonium-producing complexes in the United States (the city of Richland and the Hanford Nuclear Reservation) and Russia (the city of Ozersk and the Maiak Plutonium Plant). But Brown aims for something deeper and more complicated: not just comparative history, but paired history. The stories of these two places, Brown argues, must be told together to capture the ways that they reflect and reinforce each other, “to show how plutonium bound lives together across the Cold War divide.... [The] world’s first plutonium cities shared common features, which transcended political ideology and national culture” (p. 8). Brown is not so much comparing two separate stories as telling two parts of one intertwined narrative. In both places, powerful centralized state authority dictated responses to concerns about national security, radioactive discharge, and the control of the labor supply by strictly controlling the flow of nuclear information, by rigidly

organizing space, and by promising material compensation to the residents of these “plutopias.” In both places, as well, residents accepted—welcomed—the promises of consumer affluence in trade for their loyalty, discipline, silence, and health.

Brown builds this case over forty-two short chapters divided into four sections. Parts 1 and 2 examine the construction of the two plutonium-producing plants, and the social and economic impacts of the plants on the surrounding communities as they developed and grew. Part 3 examines the years of peak production, when both plants churned out the plutonium that fueled the growth of Soviet and American nuclear stockpiles but also—often in the name of national security—covered up accidents, budget overruns, and patterns of exposure to workers and residents. Part 4 explores the social and environmental legacies of plutonium production, as some residents of plutopia came to question the trade of consumer affluence for health while others clung to narratives of loyalty and national sacrifice. Brown repeatedly

demonstrates how Richland and Ozersk confound the simple categories of capitalist, communist, democratic, and totalitarian. There was no private property or civic authority in Richland, where the plant workers leased their homes from the government and the companies that ran the plant paid the salaries of the workers, but also the police force and the mayor. In Ozersk, meanwhile, Russian leaders realized that Western-style consumer goods served as the best way to keep skilled workers stable and happy. The organization of the book is at times hard to follow, as Brown bounces back and forth between the two locations and includes a dizzying array of details. But this complicated history demands a complicated narrative.

In *Plutopia*, Brown relies on research from more than a dozen archives, interviews in both the United States and Russia, and a firm grounding in the secondary literature of both places. Many of these stories have been told before—it is telling them together that allows Brown to draw such insightful conclusions. She effectively weaves her own experiences and first-person observations into the narrative as well, providing readers an important access point to a narrative whose social justice implications require this personal touch.

Several themes emerge that link Richland and Ozersk, Hanford and Maiak. In both places, plutonium production depended on the division of space, divisions that followed preexisting lines of race and class. The engineers, scientists, and military officials whose expertise proved critical to production lived and worked in environments structured to minimize their exposure to radiation. Relying on a transitory labor force for the most dangerous work helped preserve the fiction of safety that brought compliance and loyalty. The creation of buffer zones cleared of (most) residents—Brown calls these “zones of immunity”—enabled the discharge of radioactive waste in ways that could be hidden, at least for a time. In both places, too, residents willingly embraced affluence

and consumerism, viewing these attributes as markers of personal and national success. The costs of this tradeoff looked much the same on both sides of the Cold War. “As plutopia matured,” Brown explains, “residents gave up their civil and biological rights for consumer rights” (p. 5).

Brown uses the term “biological rights” casually, and it appears in the text only four times. But the concept lies at the heart of her argument and could have been developed more fully. What, exactly, are biological rights? Are they constructed differently across time and place? In this story and in many others, individuals have had their biological rights prescribed by their race, class, and location. Do biological rights change with our understanding of human and environmental health? How are they related to civil rights and responsibilities? Brown has introduced a powerful concept, one that I suspect other scholars will deepen and refine.

Rarely does a book’s one-word primary title so perfectly capture its content. Brown defines plutopias as “unique, limited-access, aspirational communities [that] satisfied most desires of American and Soviet postwar society. The orderly prosperity ... led most eyewitnesses to overlook the radioactive waste mounting around them” (p. 4). The stories that Brown pulls out of plutopia are not necessarily new, but they are still shocking. Convicts in a Hanford-area prison voluntarily had their testes X-rayed to determine the impact of radioactivity on male sterility in the 1960s. When a 1951 accident at Maiak flooded the downstream village of Muslumovo with radioactive waste, officials deemed the population too large to resettle and instead used the area to study the long-term, multi-generational impact of radiation exposure; as recently as 2001, the Russian government promoted the area as a “data set” for further study. At the same time, those shielded from risk by their class or race practiced a brand of willful ignorance and almost universally remember Richland and

Ozersk as wonderful, even ideal, places to live, work, and raise families.

Telling these paired stories highlights the compromises made in the name of national security on both sides of the Cold War, as well as those made to secure historically unprecedented levels of affluence and consumer comfort. Neither the compromises nor the consequences have been confined to Richland and Ozersk. We have all paid for these choices, Brown suggests, with militarized landscapes, Superfund sites within four miles of 25 percent of American communities, and spiking rates of childhood cancer, obesity, and asthma that cut across the population. Brown concludes: “we are all citizens of plutopia” (p. 338).

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