

Benjamin J. Pauli, *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis*

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019. For order info, click [here](#).

Overall

This book provides a rich and compelling account of how ordinary citizens of Flint, Michigan, a predominantly African American city with a storied labor history facing decades of deindustrialization and disinvestment, fought to expand local democracy to respond to the water crisis that left families and especially children vulnerable to massive lead contamination and other pollution. In the context of state laws authorizing emergency manager takeovers of city governments, especially after 2011, they developed the organizational and narrative basis, as well as the alternative deliberative forums and citizen science, to challenge emergency powers and to mobilize “water warriors” into a “water movement” seeking “water democracy,” with a profound sense of environmental justice.

Local democracy enriched options but was not without its own conundrums, including movement ambitions and radical forms that often outran realistic political opportunities and made it difficult to organize residents in effective and sustainable ways or to stabilize broader partnerships. The author offers a complex analysis that resists, as he puts it, a storybook account.

Author

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Research methods

Pauli uses an ethnographic approach to study the response to the Flint water crisis. He officially entered the field in January of 2016. At the outset, he details his complicated position as a white man, who was a new resident to Flint and faculty member at the local university. He began to attend community meetings, rallies, protests, and marches organized by Flint Democracy Defense League, Flint Rising, and the Two Years Too Long Coalition. He also attended town halls, panels, hearings, and community partner meetings about the water crisis. Additionally, he was given access to closed-door meetings and behind the scenes interactions between top officials. He conducted seventy interviews, thirty-five of whom were activists. The rest of the interviews were comprised of elected representatives from city and state governments, employees of the EPA, scientists, journalists, lawyers, and public health advocates. The author’s position as a committed yet critical activist within all these settings yields an especially rich sense of dynamics on the ground.

Context

While coverage of the Flint water crisis took the mainstream media by storm between 2015 and 2016, Pauli explores the ways in which this crisis unfolded within a specific historical context. The city suffered from decades of deindustrialization, segregation, and white flight, as well as a shrinking tax base and declining government services before the details of the Flint water crisis came to light. An important component of the crisis was the distinctiveness of the political context in which it unfolded. Pauli emphasizes that in order to understand what the activists were up against and why they were so distrustful of the state, one must understand Michigan's Public Act 4 and the role of the emergency managers at the local level.

Michigan's Public Act 4

In March of 2011, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder signed Michigan's Public Act (PA) 4 into law with the intention of installing emergency managers (EMs) in certain municipalities that were struggling financially. From the perspective of PA 4 advocates, emergency managers were expected to salvage basic services that were no longer sustainable due to inept local leaders. One advocate attempted to positively frame the statute as "financial marshal law." People who opposed PA 4 described it as "vulture capitalism" that turned democracy into "a rigged lucrative game for oligarchs."

In November 2011, a state review panel had decided that Flint was in the midst of a financial emergency. Under the provisions of PA 4, Flint would receive a state appointed EM who would assume both executive and legislative functions of city government. PA 4 allowed EMs to strip locally elected officials of their powers, alter or abolish union contracts, and disincorporate units of local government altogether.

Between 2011 and 2016, activists across Michigan pushed back against PA 4. They held large scale protests at the entrance of Governor Snyder's gated community, tried to repeal PA 4 through a referendum, launched legal challenges to the constitutionality of the law, and organized diverse forms of local resistance to particular EMs.

Activists won the referendum in 2012, but Governor Snyder signed PA 436 into law in late December. PA 436 allows local officials the choice of four options: a consent agreement, mediation, an emergency manager, or Chapter 9 bankruptcy. However, the state retained veto power over the choice and Republican legislators attached an appropriation to it that made PA 436 immune to repeal. Additionally, the new law did not apply to communities that already had an EM in place, which included the city of Flint.

Pro-democracy activism helped make Flint one of the hot spots for anti-EM resistance. Of particular importance was the founding of the Flint Democracy Defense League in 2013. Water was the issue that rose to the top of the group's priorities during mid-2013. As efforts to contest EM laws directly ran into obstacles, the water contamination issues that began to disrupt everyday life became the basis for broad-based organizing around the connection between

democracy, privatization, and the water crisis, and elicited broader discussions about human rights and self-determination.

The Water Movement and the Flint Water Warriors

Pauli describes the Flint water movement as “the loose collection of people and groups that vocally protested the condition of the water, demanded that the city cease using the river, helped reveal the existence of systematic contamination, and fought to ensure that residents got what they were owed after the crisis was officially recognized.”

The water movement in Flint came from a fusion of activists who “came to water through democracy” and residents turned activist who “came to democracy through water.” The disruption of everyday life operated as a springboard to activism for residents – especially mothers – who came into the water crisis without any prior political commitments. They came together as a community “under attack” by the state and the EMs who would not listen or validate their commonsense concerns about the water’s smell, color, and effects on their health and those of their children.

“We have to help us. We have to do this”

Because the EMs limited the ability of the city council or any other public official to help mitigate the water crisis, activists understood that working with local government directly would not be an option. They would have to engage in sustained, direct action and they would have to rely on each other to create change. Activists felt that the water crisis was an imminent threat and that the traditional channels of representative democracy were useless as long as the city was under state control through the EMs.

Even after the end of emergency management in April 2015, residents still felt like they were under the thumb of a repressive, uncaring, and unaccountable state.

While officials hosted town hall meetings and deliberative forums and created citizen advisory committees, the roll out of these efforts experienced a host of missteps. In many of these spaces, activists felt like they were being spoken to rather than spoken with. These missteps fueled activist’s distrust and disdain for people in power and were exacerbated by the political context in which the EMs held an enormous amount of power.

Activists created their own spaces of deliberation where nontraditional ways of knowing were valued and used certain tactics designed to pressure politicians to act, rather than persuade them to do the right thing. Among these were:

- *state of emergency meetings*: the Flint Democracy Defense League (FDDL) held a series of four community meetings on water. These “Flint Water State of Emergency” meetings were intended to create a nonhierarchical space for residents to share their experiences and develop strategies for collective action.

- *Coalition for Clean Water*: this was created in early 2015 and was made up of groups like FDDL, an activist group called Water You Fighting For? and the Concerned Pastors for Social Action. Their goal was a legal injunction that would force the city back onto Detroit water.

Rather than work the “inside game,” activists approached the water crisis as an “us versus them” situation where they claimed to hold the moral high ground. In practice, these lines were not always so clearly drawn, but they were part of how the water movement understood its role.

Lead in the Water

After failing to make any headway with officials on the dangers of TTHMs (total trihalomethanes) in the water, activists worked with Marc Edwards from Virginia Tech to conduct large scale testing of the lead content in the water. This was the breakthrough moment where activists began to gain traction that they had not previously had with their personal stories of stinky and cloudy water or unexplained rashes and hair loss.

In September 2015, over the course of a month, activists collected 269 usable water samples that were well distributed over a geographic area. This study was much more comprehensive than previous lead sampling efforts put on by the city. Finally, state officials and emergency managers were confronted by something they couldn’t brush off as anecdotal: an academic study conducted by a professor at a well-respected research institute that claimed that Flint’s water had a significant lead problem.

This research, conducted in collaboration with Flint water warriors, turned the tide. Within six months after the findings were released, Flint was back on Detroit water – something officials said would never happen because “money doesn’t grow on trees.” In addition, the incumbent mayor had been unseated by a political newcomer backed by the water movement, and Governor Snyder declared a state of emergency, which triggered President Obama to declare a federal state of emergency.

Technical, Historical, and Political Narratives

As it became clear to local activists, state officials, and the broader public that there was indeed a water crisis in Flint Michigan, a resounding question emerged: How did this happen? While this question had been percolating in the local community for years, it was thrust under the spotlight of the mainstream national media in 2015-2016. Pauli argues that there were three main narratives put forward to answer that question: the technical narrative, the historical narrative, and the political narrative. These had distinct emphases, though they were not logically incompatible.

Technical Narrative

The technical narrative framed the crisis narrowly by claiming that it was caused by faulty water treatment and technical incompetence. Advocates of the technical narrative argued that

in addition to faulty water treatment, chronic underinvestment in infrastructure was also a contributing factor to the crisis.

This narrative drew on the images of crumbling infrastructure and defective federal regulation. Those who employed this narrative claimed the Flint water crisis was a water treatment problem, not a water source problem. The technical narrative decried the decision not to use optimized corrosion control during the water treatment process as the core reason the crisis occurred.

The technical narrative was adopted by the Snyder administration and scientists like Marc Edwards, who headed the Virginia Tech team that worked with community activists but was later criticized by them. The idea that the crisis would never have happened if a few people in charge had done their jobs allowed the Snyder administration to keep a narrow focus on the problem and blame the a few career bureaucrats. This frustrated activists, as it allowed for short term solutions and was often used to depoliticize the crisis.

Historical Narrative

The historical narrative connects the origins of the crisis to Flint's early days and emphasizes the role that historical racial, economic, and political dynamics had on the contemporary vulnerability of the city. Scholars like Andrew Highsmith highlight decades of industrialization, and then deindustrialization, suburbanization, segregation, declining government services, and urban renewal to provide a schematic pre-history of the Flint water crisis that dates all the way back to the early 20th century and implicates a wide range of actors.

While the political narrative championed by many activists built upon this structural critique, there were some limitations in the eyes of the water movement. Activists wanted to be able to pinpoint actors, actions, and policies as direct causes of the crisis. The birds eye view of the historical narrative diffused responsibility and often took on a regional emphasis rather than focusing solely on Flint.

Political Narrative

The claim that emergency management eliminated democracy and encouraged decision makers to act abusively and recklessly was central to the political narrative of the crisis. The moral of the political narrative was not only the intrinsic injustice of the denial of democracy, but also the ways in which that denial spawned the injustice of the water crisis. According to activists, disregard for democracy in Flint led to disregard for public health and as a result, residents of Flint were poisoned by policy.

Poisoned by Policy

According to activists, what made Flint so unique was not just that it had been poisoned, but that it had been poisoned by policy. What made the crisis distinctive was not just how badly residents were harmed, but how they were harmed.

This narrative allowed activists to maneuver through some challenges to their claims during the crisis. They could avoid the problem of demonstrating the causal links of contamination and instead focus attention on the context in which critical decisions about Flint's water supply, water treatment, and water infrastructure were made.

Pauli notes the challenge of the quantification of harm as a core limitation of a distributive justice framework. In the case of Flint and water contamination, Flint was not necessarily unique in terms of quantifiable harms. As a result, activists had to think of other ways to frame what they saw as a distinct set of challenges faced by Flint. Activists wanted to make it clear that while the effects of lead poisoning should not be minimized, there was much more to be worried about in Flint than lead alone.

Tenuous Alliances

While the partnership created between activists and scientists served as a catalyst for change in the Flint Water Crisis, it was not without its complications. The relationships between some experts and activists deteriorated over the years, and Pauli uses the example of Marc Edwards as an example of the falling out.

From Edwards' perspective, activists were willing to part ways with the truth when it didn't suit them. He felt that when the science didn't fit their narrative, they turned on him. From the activist's point of view, Edward's became too caught up in the allure of power, fame, and the hero status he was granted by the media. They felt that he was more concerned with fitting the activists into *his* narrative focused on the heroism of science than on working *with* them.

The starkest contrast between the activist's and Edwards' perspective was about the status of the Flint water crisis. While Edwards wanted to wrap up his story and claim victory and defeat of the problem, activists felt very strongly that the crisis was nowhere near over.

From Poisoned People to People Power

After the water used by the city was switched back to Detroit water, the activists entered the second phase of their fight. They wanted to ensure residents got the justice they deserved. To them, justice meant accountability and reparations. Activists wanted to ensure that those who were responsible for the crisis were punished and that those who were impacted by the crisis were taken care of.

The Flint Rising coalition was created to build community capacity, which was relatively limited at the time, by channeling residents' and activists' excitement around the switch back from Flint river water to Detroit water. The work of the coalition aimed to "expand" democracy rather than simply "defend" it. It sought to build people power by establishing relationships between community members that could be parlayed into collective action. This kind of organizing was different than other activism in Flint during the crisis in that its goal was to help people change the situation rather than cope with it.

This coalition was primarily sponsored by a network of progressive political, community organizing, and labor groups outside of Flint, which provided the coalition with important connections and political power. But this became a source of tension for some local activists, who drew parallels between the outside influence of Flint Rising and the emergency managers who made most decisions without consulting residents or local officials.

However, when Flint Rising reinvented itself as a group rather than a coalition, it opted for radical and prefigurative forms of participatory democracy and “beloved community,” which further disabled its strategic capacity in a context defined by complex political opportunities and governance challenges. While Pauli does not draw upon the extensive literature on the deficits of radically democratic forms of organization – what feminist activist and political scientist Jo Freeman famously called the “tyranny of structurelessness” – his own astute, close-up observation and engagement led him to similar conclusions.

Pauli wraps up his book claiming that while there was no “storybook ending” for the Flint water crisis, there is much to be learned for this unique case.

In conclusion

This book presents a complex and rich tale of environmental justice activism that converged on the relationship between poisoned water and poisoned democracy, with competing types of narratives and multiple tensions among democratic forms of organizing and representation.

Reviewed by Ann Ward, managing editor of [CivicGreen](#)

Last revised: 12/20/20