

Book Reviews

Masco, Joseph. 2020. *The Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive World-Making*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 440 pp. Pb.: US\$29.95. ISBN: 9781478011149.

In the epilogue to *The Future of Fallout*, readers learn that the book's author, anthropologist Joseph Masco, had initially travelled to New Mexico in the 1990s with the anticipation of writing a book about the end to a multigenerational conflict and the reorientation of scientific expertise towards peaceful ends. Instead, what he encountered was an 'expert community readying both politically and conceptually for a future of unknown but still proliferating existential dangers' (p. 366). This open-ended notion of the future organised around the perception of imminent threat is one that the book grounds as historically emergent within the post-Second World War moment following 1945. Examining the institutions, infrastructures and investments (both libidinal and financial) through which American nuclear nationalism became a socio-historical force, Masco uses the notion of fallout to foreground the unintended side effects and legacies of the atomic bomb, both materially and conceptually. In doing so, he highlights how disparate temporalities and conceptualisations of danger, operating at a planetary scale while also being differentially distributed, emerge in the wake of America's nuclear testing regime and continued investment into the production of nuclear weapon defences (pp. 357–358).

Mid-twentieth-century aboveground nuclear detonations in the name of national defence inaugurated, as Masco argues in Chapter 1, an 'age of fallout'. The figure of fallout, which only acquired a nominative form after the Second World War (p. 20), invites attention to the unintended, often negative, outcomes of an event that is 'understood retrospectively but lived in the future anterior' (p. 19). Within this chapter, such outcomes include (1) shifts in responsibility to individuals, rather than security infrastructures, who must be alert for these dangers, (2) scientific studies conducted in the 1950s, in which radioactive signatures enabled scientists to track ecological flows, helping to foment 'a new kind of planetary vision' (p. 28) and (3) new modalities of industrial toxicity whose danger is cumulative but often unseen, registered only after a temporal lag (p. 22). Thus, the problem Masco identifies lies more in the perception of these effects, rather than in their documentation: 'This lag between the environmental event and the recognition of its long-lasting effects is a major psychosocial achievement of the industrial age where, in the name of commerce or security, consequences are loaded into an uncertain future and thus expelled from the realm of political discourse' (p. 33).



This critical aim of the book targets precisely this expulsion, excavating and analysing documentary and popular film (section III), ex-Soviet spy narratives (Ch. 25) and declassified photographic archives (Ch. 9), to probe how the threat of imminent danger through nuclear attack has become so normalised within American culture that historical incidents and facts contradicting this social imaginary no longer appear to have any impact. What does it take, Masco asks rhetorically, to begin to conceptualise an end to the projections of catastrophic war, which have become so sedimented within the logics of US national security that the prospect of peace no longer seems possible (p. 195)?

One potential avenue of alternative thinking he identifies lies in the proliferation of multiple, partial and possibly frictional ‘planetary optics’ in the twenty-first century. If, however, the critical theory of fallout enables the (visual) contemplation of ‘industrial effects as a cumulative form of planetary engineering’ (p. 18), one question I had was how such ‘slow violence’ might be recognised while also challenging ‘the privileging of the visible’ (Nixon 2013: 15). In Chapter 14, for instance, Masco examines the vibrational force of the bomb, as that which has transformed matter into energy, yet has also energised social movements that have amplified into potent political forces, such as in the ‘Give Peace a Dance’ project. As such, his analysis gestures to how modes of collective action and social protest oriented against destructive planetary engineering also emerge through multimodal relationalities, ones that move beyond the realm of the merely visual.

A far-reaching work of an astute and meticulous scholar, the book demonstrates how acts, logics and perceptions supporting ‘security’ – also forms of fallout – have achieved the opposite, eroding democratic processes and producing states of insecurity for differently situated communities (Ch. 3); they also enact an inversion in the relationship between security and the health of populations (Ch. 8). Yet just as nuclear fallout extends beyond the nation-state, this important contribution to the anthropology of (in)security and nuclear politics also goes beyond strictly disciplinary concerns with its call for post-national forms of governance. As such, its critical import extends to all those interested in interrogating how warlike commitments have become infrastructurally embedded in the USA and have inaugurated planetary-scale dangers, opening up the possibility to think and act otherwise.

Reference

Nixon, R. 2013. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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