

Florida State University Journal of Land Use and Environmental Law

Volume 2
Number 1 *Spring 1986*

Article 7

April 2018

Book Review: Poisoning for Profit, the Mafia and Toxic Waste in America

Dan Brown

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.law.fsu.edu/jluel>



Part of the [Environmental Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brown, Dan (2018) "Book Review: Poisoning for Profit, the Mafia and Toxic Waste in America," *Florida State University Journal of Land Use and Environmental Law*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://ir.law.fsu.edu/jluel/vol2/iss1/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida State University Journal of Land Use and Environmental Law by an authorized editor of Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact efarrell@law.fsu.edu.

BOOK REVIEW

POISONING FOR PROFIT, THE MAFIA AND TOXIC WASTE IN AMERICA. By Alan A. Block and Frank R. Scarpitti. William Morrow and Co., Inc., New York: 1985, Pp. 340. \$17.95.

Poisoning for Profit, The Mafia and Toxic Waste in America, is preparing us for a potential threat to civilization—most likely an earth incapable of supporting human life due to the accumulation of toxic wastes. The authors, Alan A. Block and Frank R. Scarpitti, begin their account of the Mafia's infiltration and control of toxic waste management with the chapter "Fear Death by Water" (p. 13), borrowed from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.¹ The authors depict society as an involuntary victim of organized crime, subject to the horrors of improper disposal of toxic waste. This "environmental time bomb" is a problem of vast proportion that may be beyond the scope of correction.

Alan A. Block and Frank R. Scarpitti are both professors at the University of Delaware. Block is an associate professor of criminal justice, specializing in the area of organized crime, and Scarpitti is a professor of sociology, specializing in the effects of crime on society. The book reflects the hallmarks of academia as the authors present research, supported by congressional committee reports and personal investigation. This hampers the transitional flow of the book, but does not detract from its intent: to awaken us to an imminent peril from improper toxic waste disposal by Mafia controlled companies.

Block and Scarpitti approach their exposé with great courage. Itemizing and dating incidents, meetings, agreements and, most heroically, naming those responsible for our problem of toxic waste disposal, establish a credibility base for the text's conclusions. Names such as Vincent J. "Jimmie" Squillante, a hoodlum boss of the greater New York Cartmen's Association, who strongarmed a monopolization of New York City garbage collection in the 1950's (p. 68), and Santo Trafficante, Jr., who is presently trying to muscle his way into westcoast Florida garbage disposal are expressly enumerated. The authors' research is presented in three phases: (1) a description of the real presence and effects of illegal/improper toxic waste disposal in America; (2) the identification of the Mafia members, members of Congress, and government administrators

1. T.S. ELIOT, COLLECTED POEMS, 1909-1935 at 59 (1958).

responsible for these offenses; and (3) the explanation of why the Mafia continues to maintain control of toxic waste disposal in this country.

PHASE ONE: TOXIC WASTE

Toxic wastes are generically described as "the dangerous effects of industrial byproducts" (p. 35). Federal legislation defines hazardous waste as "one that may cause or significantly contribute to serious illness or death, or that poses a substantial threat to human health or the environment when improperly managed" (p. 44). As society has grown, so has its demands for products such as polyester, plastics, and paints which generate toxic waste by-products. For some, hazardous waste disposal and the health and environmental damage which it causes represents the price our society has to pay for achieving the world's highest standard of living. The authors imply that the price we pay is unconscionable for the standard of living we enjoy.

The book is not a chemical dissertation on toxic waste. Since the authors' backgrounds are not concentrated in environmental studies, the focus of the book is not surprising. Where some authors of environmental studies make radical projections of future harm, deflating their work's credibility, these authors substantiate the immediacy of their study with hard evidence of documented environmental abuse and damage.

The story of the "Love Canal" scenario (pp. 39-43) gives the reader a historical account of potential dangers attributable to the improper dumping of toxic chemicals. In 1942, the aborted canal, intended "to connect two branches of the Niagara River" (p. 39), became a dumping ground of industrial by-products. The most significant "dumper" was Hooker Chemical and Plastics Corporation who disposed of the "chemical wastes resulting from the production of various industrial chemicals, especially chlorine, plastics, and fertilizers" (p. 39). In a five year span, deposits totalled "over 43 million pounds of chemical waste" (p. 40). Among the dangerous deposits were trichlorophenol (TCP) used in the production of herbicides and caustics, and the deadly by-product of overheating TCP during the manufacturing process (TCDD). Three ounces of TCDD potentially could kill the entire population of New York City (p. 40), thereby demonstrating the toxicity of the industrial by-product deposits.

In 1953, the industrial dumping ceased because the property was to be a site for an elementary school and residential community. In

the ensuing years, neighborhood children used the site as a playground. All seemed quite normal and natural on the surface. However, as the years passed the subterranean toxic wastes from corroding drums would seep into the neighborhood basements. An environmental time bomb had begun ticking. Twenty-five years later it would explode.

Studies in the 1970's of the Love Canal area indicated that "women between the ages of thirty and thirty-four in the surveyed area were found to experience miscarriages four times more often than would normally be expected" (p. 41). "In May, 1980, the EPA released a study which indicated that nearly one-third of a sample of canal residents had suffered chromosome damages" (p. 43). After political infighting in the EPA subsided, the federal government purchased over five hundred homes within a thirty-square block area around the dump, offering local residents an opportunity to flee the horrors they had been suffering (p. 43).

The book's account of "Love Canal" traced the planting of toxic waste, its fermentation, and its fruition over a forty-year period. The seed which was planted grew to 43 million pounds of material disposed over a five-year period. In comparison, "several EPA officials [speaking] privately [have stated] . . . the United States was probably [generating yearly] far in excess of 150 million metric tons" (p. 47). This is enough toxic waste to "fill New Orleans' mammoth Superdome from floor to ceiling nearly three times every day of the year" (p. 47). Documented toxic waste disasters raise two crucial questions: who will dispose of the toxic materials, and where will the materials be deposited?

PHASE TWO: MAFIA CONTROL OF TOXIC WASTE DISPOSAL

Historically, the disposal of garbage in the Northeast has been under the control of the Mafia (p. 66). "From the mid-1950's to the present, evidence detailing the role of organized crime in the solid waste disposal business has come to light periodically" (p. 67). In New York, organized crime figures such as Vincent J. "Jimmie" Squillante "invoked monopoly and restraint of trade arrangements with a system of punishments for nonconforming members" (p. 69). The Mafia eventually gained control of both the carters (garbage collectors) and the dump sites. With this control, bidding for government contracts was manipulated so that local governments became inevitably dependent on the Mafia.

At the beginning of the relationship, the attractiveness of Mafia contracts for garbage disposal was the cost. However, after the Ma-

fia monopoly had driven most competitors out of the market, prices escalated. These expenses were passed on to taxpayers who absorbed the cost for disposal of this common garbage. During that same time that Mafia control was solidifying on the common garbage market, another cost began to surface—the cost of disposing of toxic wastes.

The cost of properly disposing toxic waste is substantial. “A tank truck of common solvents and degreasers could run as much as \$10,000.00 to dispose of in a safe manner” (p. 61). However, disposing toxic waste in an illegal manner may be quite inexpensive, at least initially. For example:

At the Valley of the Drums in Kentucky, barrels of caustic chemicals were dumped at a cost of 75 cents each. Although this was an extreme case, illegal haulers were often able to outbid competitors because of their relatively low overhead, which did not include costly processing or licensed storage facilities (p. 61).

The Mafia once again came to the toxic waste disposal rescue of municipalities with initial low bids. However, the price which these cities and most of America will pay for their presently inexpensive dumping will not only be the higher price the Mafia will charge after the monopoly is in force, but also the immeasurable price which society will pay in the form of deleterious effects. The northeastern cities and the Mafia have entered into an internecine dance.

PHASE THREE: THE MAFIA'S CONTINUED CONTROL

In city after city, New York, Yonkers, Newark, Elizabeth, Philadelphia, Houston, Chicago, and Miami, the names of the three biggest companies involved in waste disposal surface again and again. Waste Management, Inc., Browning-Ferris Industries, and SCA Services, Inc., all reported to have “links to organized crime” (p. 289), have been given millions of dollars for disposing toxic wastes. Political strain felt by local government officials unable or unwilling to confront their constituents with the complexity and cost of toxic waste have caused these officials to choose short-sighted resolutions. Most of the book deals with the rationale behind local decisions which directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, exacerbate the problem of Mafia control of toxic waste disposal. The decisions were often directed by political contributions, payments to local politicians, bribes in obtaining contracts,

payments for using private dump sites, and kickbacks for receiving lower dumping fees (p. 294).

At first, the relationship between the Mafia and politicians was apparently viewed as inherent in the trade. However, after "greed, crime, and corruption" (p. 245) caused a chemical storage explosion, nearly destroying Elizabeth, New Jersey, local governments were forced to recognize the character of the disposal problem. Numerous congressional and state committee reports and EPA reports document the illegal activities of disposal. However, "[i]t may well be that the purpose of information controlled by the government is to satisfy bureaucratic needs, and the most important need is to prolong that period until an accounting is finally necessary" (p. 203). What frustrates the hope that an informed government will resolve the disposal problem is that "[m]any governmental agencies are withholding vital information about toxic wastes from the public because they march to the tune of various private interests" (p. 193).

The authors allege that whether government agencies, and local and national politicians realize it or not, the "private interests" served are those of the Mafia. The declaration of "fact" by Block and Scarpitti to administrators and politicians that their naive or informed actions are *all* furthering the Mafia's control of toxic waste disposal, is the cornerstone of the book.

PHASE FOUR:

The book calls out for a "Phase Four" to include suggestions to correct the problems of improper toxic waste disposal. The authors offer no real direction on how modern society is to free itself of the Mafia's ingrained system of control and influence. Manifest systems which trace toxic wastes from "cradle to grave" (p. 313), from the generation of toxic waste to its disposal, are shown to be easily manipulated and subverted. EPA directors are shown to be ineffective administrators (p. 324), and, in the face of the growing toxic waste disposal problem, President Reagan's administration moves backward (p. 319).

The authors imply a need for better regulation, stricter penalties, and more honest politicians. Failure to recognize and change current trends, the authors assert, threaten the United States to create its own "Valley of Death" (p. 338) similar to Cubato (Brazil) where:

[R]esidents . . . have had a lethal red rain fall upon them for the

past twenty-five years, killing all vegetation in the area and spreading numerous ailments among them. . . . The city [Cubato] also holds what must be the world record for number of children born with total or partial absence of a brain (p. 338).

The stark reality of Cubato is unlikely in America. However, in the future America undoubtedly will realize serious toxic waste problems.

Poisoning for Profit was not written by categorical environmentalists. Block and Scarpitti approach this problem from their unique criminal justice perspective. The authors documented criminal investigations also document the societal effects. The book is almost cold in this regard; however, this adds to the credibility of presentation. The book impresses the reader with no real solution, but rather presents the general public with the issues hoping that the public will force the hand of governmental powers. The authors have shifted the responsibility for toxic waste disposal to society; a society which caused the toxic waste dilemma by its demanding lifestyle.

Authors of similar books too often depict a calamitous situation and then elevate themselves to messianic leadership, willing to correct all the wrongs they have perceived. Block and Scarpitti have performed a workmanlike, detailed investigation, and they have laid their objective findings before the reader. They have carried their labor to its logical end and appropriately leave the solution of the problem to the society that bred the problem.

Toxic waste is the leavings of a science which has borne our mechanized civilization. Our society has bedded a demanding mistress in its commitment to science and progress. One would hope that American author Robert Frost was wrong when he wrote in 1947:

Sarcastic Science, she would like to know,
In her complacent ministry of fear,
How we propose to get away from here
When she has made things so we have to go
Or be wiped out²

If the book is to be faulted, it is for burdening the reader with too much reality and too many facts. There is a bleakness in the

2. R. FROST, *Why Wait for Science*, in *THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST* 395 (E. Lathews ed. 1969).

general tone which calls for some stroke of hope in the landscape. One can only hope that Block and Scarpitti are wrong in their evaluation of the dangers presented by the Mafia's control of toxic waste disposal. Those same burdening facts state otherwise, and if those facts are correct, the authors have done the reader a great service by reporting to society the tragic situation faced by governments in the regulation and disposal of toxic wastes.

Just as T.S. Eliot described modern man's world as a "Wasteland" without any self-professed method of rejuvenation, so do these authors offer little promise of recovery from the modern environmental dilemma. Rejuvenation from Eliot's "Wasteland" required the will of individuals. Block and Scarpitti imply that society's recovery from the toxic waste disposal dilemma will require something just as elemental. With that as an implied solution, the book remains bleak with regard to advising society of solutions to toxic waste disposal problems. The book's value is in the declaration of the magnitude of danger, and not in the methodology of defusing "the ticking time bomb."

Dan Brown

