

Lead, Politics, and Community: Notes from La Oroya, Peru

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Lead is a controversial subject in the Peruvian town of La Oroya (population 30,000), which has the dubious distinction of being ranked one of the top ten most contaminated places in the world. Looking out at its scarred white hills today, it's hard to imagine that a century ago, La Oroya was home to just a handful of subsistence farmers. Everything changed, however, when the U.S.-owned Cerro de Pasco Copper Corporation began processing metal concentrates (lead, copper, and zinc) in 1922. People migrated to La Oroya in droves, and by the end of World War II, Cerro de Pasco had become the second largest employer in the country.

In 1979, the metallurgical complex was nationalized and renamed Centromín. However, Centromín began to lose money and was eventually privatized by then-President Alberto Fujimori in 1997, at which point it was acquired by Doe Run Peru (DRP), a subsidiary of the U.S.-based Renco Group. It wasn't long after this transition that the first official studies of lead exposure were conducted in La Oroya—first by the government's Director General of Environmental Health (1999) and then by DRP (2001). Both studies confirmed dangerously high levels of lead and sulfur dioxide exposure among La Oroya inhabitants, particularly children. Yet DRP repeatedly denied that the environmental contamination had any effect on children's intellectual development.

In 2002 a small group of local residents known as MOSAO (Movement for the Health of La Oroya) organized to demand state action against DRP. One of their main concerns was that DRP had failed to build a new plant to reduce sulfuric dioxide emissions. Members of MOSAO experienced firsthand the fierce and sometimes violent opposition from the company workers' union.

Tensions escalated in 2003 when Peru's Ministry of Energy and Mines (MINEM) ordered an audit of DRP's operations. In response, DRP requested an extension for the completion of the required sulfuric acid plant, and threatened to suspend operations if their request was not granted. This news sparked a series of protests and blockades organized by the workers' union until MINEM officially approved DRP's request in May 2006.

Undaunted by this setback, MOSAO took their case to the Peruvian Supreme Court, which ultimately ruled in MOSAO's favor and declared a state of emergency in La Oroya in 2006. That same year, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ordered the government to provide treatment for residents with lead-related illnesses. Subsequently, Doe Run and the Peruvian Health Department established an agreement under which the company would fund treatment for the most severely affected children in the community. Then, in 2009, the company suddenly announced that it would be temporarily ceasing operations due to severe financial difficulties. The government offered DRP a one-year extension but when the deadline passed without resolution, DRP declared bankruptcy and officially suspended operations in 2010.

DRP's decision was devastating for La Oroya. Small businesses were forced to close, and families were geographically divided, as many women and children moved away to live with relatives or friends. When I visited in 2011, educators I spoke with described how maintaining their schools' infrastructure and services to students (e.g. showers, breakfast and/or lunch) had become increasingly difficult without DRP's support. One 10th grade girl told me, "All of La Oroya's problems would be solved if the company reopened."

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The social and economic crisis in La Oroya drew extensive attention from the media—but not the kind that some residents appreciated. Tania, a local schoolteacher told me, "In the media there are these ideas that we are nothing but a bunch of slow, sick, contaminated people, but they don't pay any attention to how some students are very

high performing.” Elena, a 45-year old shop owner, agreed, saying: “Of course there are sick children everywhere, slow children, just like in your country [referring to the United States]. But we have children who are doing well, we have professionals, professors.”

School teachers and principals took pride in the achievements of their students, which they felt were ignored in the rush to paint La Oroya as nothing more than a town full of “mongolicos” (a local term for people with Down’s syndrome/disabled). In seeking to defend their town’s identity against a barrage of negative media coverage, some residents denied the contamination was a problem at all. “Look at all the awards we’ve won,” one principal told me, pointing to a row of trophies on the wall. “We couldn’t have done this if the contamination was really a problem.”

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Scholarship on community responses to environmental contamination often explains residents’ lack of mobilization against pollution in terms of a “jobs vs health” tradeoff. However, months of living in La Oroya convinced me that some residents’ apparent denial of the effects of contamination was not only about fear or loyalty to the company, however. It was also about the identity and continued existence of their embattled but proud community (see Neumann, forthcoming).

In late 2012, DRP partially re-initiated its operations in La Oroya under new management, with a significantly reduced workforce. Since then, the town has undergone something of an economic rebirth, thanks to an explosion of new mining activity in the surrounding area. Having survived the crisis, La Oroya sought to remake its image. For example, a local NGO launched a new campaign marketing the town as an eco-tourism destination: “Rediscover La Oroya” proclaimed several posters around town, featuring attractive photos of local landscapes and ancient ruins.

In December 2015, the management of the smelter in La Oroya changed hands yet again. A severe drop in the world price of heavy metals led the new owners to suspend copper production and announced plans to liquidate the company entirely—and an August 27th deadline to do so is now imminent. Peru’s incoming President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski has promised to try to extend this deadline, but the outcome remains uncertain. The future of this gritty mining community once again hangs in the balance.

Featured image: credit Pamela Neumann

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Neumann, Pamela. 2016. "Toxic Talk and Collective (In)action in a Company Town: The Case of La Oroya, Peru." *Social Problems* 63(3):431-446.

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