

Lead white: just another licence to kill

In antiquity it was used to manufacture cosmetics for women and make-up for the actors in Greek and Roman tragedies, and for centuries it led the field as the go-to pigment for the making of white paint. With the rise of industry in the 19th century, ceruse – or white lead, the ordinary name for lead carbonate – was manufactured on a grand scale and went into all the paint used to cover buildings, stations, bridges, ships and, later on, cars. There was white lead all over people's houses too, where it was used to whiten the walls, and to make such things as wallpaper, oilcloth, fabrics, glazed cardboard and visiting cards.

However, this lead pigment is a poison. From 1820 onwards, it caused countless deaths among the white-lead workers who manufactured it and the house-painters who handled it. It wasn't finally banned in Europe until 1992, more than a century and a half later.

In her book *Blanc de plomb: Histoire d'un poison légal* [*White Lead: The History of a Legal Poison*], historian Judith Rainhorn analyses why this toxic pigment was allowed to be used on such a huge scale and for such a long time, with the endorsement of public authorities.

The harmful effects of white lead were actually being described and condemned as early as the beginning of the 19th century. Inhaling the compound or allowing it to come into contact with the skin causes lead poisoning, an illness whose symptoms include dizziness, trembling, paralysis of the limbs, impaired eyesight and coma. Long-term usage (particularly occupational) can result in death.

This extremely well-researched book chronicles the journey of this industrial poison: the risks that were denied by parts of the scientific community, the concerted attempts made to hide the truth, the short-lived public outcries, the prevention campaigns, and the regulations that were promoted but never implemented.

It is a tale which has clear parallels with the much better-known story of asbestos. Just as with asbestos, public authorities were faced with a difficult choice between economic prosperity for the chemical industry and safeguarding the health of workers and the public. Many aspects of the white lead story call to mind that of the "wonder fibre": the claim that nothing could possibly replace a product whose performance was unmatched, the promotion of controlled use to stave off prohibition and, most of all, the fact that occupational hazards turned into environmental hazards. Like the asbestos so abundantly used in housing for its fireproofing and insulating properties, paints based on white lead degraded over time.

From the mid-1880s onwards, there was a renewed wave of lead poisoning cases. The victims were disadvantaged children living in slums who inhaled or ingested the dust from old layers of paint containing lead carbonate. The consequences of this second wave of exposure to white lead were outbreaks of acute encephalopathy (brain damage), psychomotor retardation and irreversible impairment of cognitive performance. The toxicology of lead and its derivatives was now well-known: they were neurotoxic substances with no threshold level, and were also toxic to reproduction.

Although the use of white lead is now banned, as is using lead to improve the octane rating of petrol, we should not forget that the use of other lead compounds in industry is still widespread. This applies, in particular, to the manufacture of motor vehicle batteries. To reduce the health hazards to the workers exposed, compulsory limit values on occupational exposure have been laid down in EU law. These limit values, defined more than 30 years ago, are patently obsolete. However, rather than banning the substances, which are seen as "vital" to the competitiveness of Europe's automotive industry, there is talk now of scaling those values downwards.

This book is also essential reading for anyone who wants a better grasp of what is at stake in the current debate about the carcinogenicity of glyphosate, the active ingredient in the most widely used herbicide in the world, or of titanium dioxide, the pigment which has replaced white lead in all paints for industrial or home use. Reading it may help to stop history repeating itself.

— Tony Musu

Blanc de plomb: Histoire d'un poison légal

by Judith Rainhorn, Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, 2019, 370 pages

Lesbos: outpost of Fortress Europe

A concise, impactful and essential book. In May 2019, Swiss sociologist Jean Ziegler took a trip to Lesbos in Greece. There he met refugees, political leaders and humanitarian aid operators, as well as Greek and European officials who, on a daily basis, implement what is known in administrative terms as "migratory flow management" and "external border control" but which we know better to be an all-out war on migrants.

Lesbos is an island of captivating beauty. Close to the Turkish coastline, it has become a "hotspot" location, a reception point for migrants. The camps there are supposed to "assist" with the efforts made by the migration authorities and, in particular, to facilitate examination of asylum applications. However, this description is a far cry from the reality of the situation.

"When I worked as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, I witnessed first-hand life in Rocinha, the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro, and in the slums at Smokey Mountain in Manila, and experienced the stench of the shanty towns of Dhaka, Bangladesh," the author comments. "But never in my life had I ever encountered any dwellings quite so squalid or families quite so desperate as in Moria's olive groves."

The true function of the hotspots is to create conditions that are so inhumane and degrading as to serve as a deterrent to those people fleeing wars and violence from seeking refuge in the European Union (EU). A dual reality exists on Lesbos and the four other "hotspot" Aegean islands. There are the 40 000 people crammed into the poverty and filthy living conditions of the camps, with no access to the most basic care; and then there are the multiple perpetrators of state violence, from Turkey and Greece's military and police forces to their EU sidekicks, predominantly Frontex. And this violence is certainly not

without effect: while 172 000 refugees made it onto the shores of the Aegean islands in 2016, the number dropped below 30 000 in 2017 and declined yet further in the following year.

Refugees, 35% of whom are children, can spend years waiting among the rats and refuse. Suicide is commonplace. Food rations are inadequate, and the lack of shower and toilet facilities creates appalling hygiene conditions.

One important feature of the book is the spotlight it shines on the "security economy", which is financed for the most part by the European budget. While much spending in other areas is stagnant or curtailed, the budget projections for this "war" on migrants are still excellent. According to the EU's budget forecasts, allocations for "border security" and "migration" will be tripled between 2019 and 2027, reaching a total of 34.9 billion euros. The Frontex budget will be allocated an additional 12 billion euros over the next seven years.

The security and defence sectors benefit from this financial boost. They have an important lobbying contingent in Brussels, including the European Organisation for Security (EOS). Among the lobbyists, the author points to the role played by Dirk Niebel, former General Secretary of the FDP (Germany's Free Democratic Party) and former Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development in Angela Merkel's coalition government between 2009 and 2013. He subsequently moved into the private sector, working for defence contractor Rheinmetall.

To Jean Ziegler's mind, the war on migrants is more lucrative than any of the wars currently raging in Syria or Yemen. Highly sophisticated equipment has been designed to monitor, terrorise and kill unarmed individuals. Scanners used by Frontex to check whether people are hidden in lorries each

cost in the region of 1.5 million euros. Bankrolled by the EU, the Turkish government has installed devices along the border with Syria which automatically activate machine-gun fire if they detect the presence of refugees. Anyone entering the controlled zone first hears warnings in three languages with an instruction to turn back. After that comes the automatic gunfire. One particular example of the inventiveness of companies in the non-lethal weapons business is presented in the form of the Spanish undertaking ESF: "The principal manufacturer of NATO barbed wire. Its engineers have racked their warped brains to come up with an unbreakable iron wire with metal, razor-sharp barbs. Refugees attempting to lift up this barbed wire in order to slide beneath it will have their hands lacerated, and occasionally even have their tendons severed."

There are hundreds of books which examine the relationship between political systems and the human body. The merit of this book lies in its direct language, stripped entirely of its theoretical casing. It pursues a single objective: to convert outrage into a collective force. Ziegler concludes with an appeal to his readers: "We have to get every single hotspot shut down immediately and definitively, wherever they are. They are the shame of Europe."

— Laurent Vogel

Lesbos, la honte de l'Europe [Lesbos, Europe's Shame]

by Jean Ziegler, Éditions du Seuil, 2020, 144 pages