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*The Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive
World-Making* by Joseph Masco (review)

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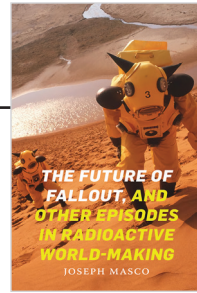


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BOOK REVIEW

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Joseph Masco. *The Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive World-Making*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. 440 pp.

The *Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive World-Making* builds on Joseph Masco's previous scholarship to further stress the links between the nuclear security state, national security affects, climate change, and the war on terror. The book examines how the United States continues to produce invisible violence, injustices, ecological collapses, and a limited public understanding of security, resulting in the loss of alternative, more sustainable futures. Masco explores a wide range of normalized violence operating at different scales and temporalities. He also highlights how such violence is in constant need of affective and militarized support in order to revamp itself throughout history.

The book gives special attention to how specific citizen-state relationships and modes of life are structured around the imaginaries of permanent warfare and mass death engrained in a "petroleum-based capitalist-militarist-industrial system" (263). The work aims to escape this system by attempting to re-conceptualize our understanding of security, so as to imagine different forms of collective goods and planetary well-being.

To do so, the author utilizes a range of methods, from ethnographic snippets to archival research to film analysis. The book focuses predominantly on the US and provides numerous examples drawn from nuclear-related museums, guided tours, advertising billboards, documentaries, and characters' biographies. The first part of the book, entitled "Dreaming Deserts and Death Machines," examines how the US military complex creates domestic spaces of insecurity, resulting in harmful contamination and collective endangerment. Through an exploration of the US desert as a supposedly empty space that absorbs violence, Masco traces the

practices of erasure that surround indigenous resistance and underscores how a politics of invisibility around specific harms is continually reinvented by nuclear nationalism. The second part, “Bunkers and Psyches,” is a study of the contradictions that surround the imaginary space of the bunker as a “site of power, pleasure, desire, and escape” (12). This section explores the nuclear fantasies that Americans tell themselves by focusing on the links between infrastructure and affects. In this regard, Masco asks how nuclear fear was structured and engineered to serve nation-state building. The third part, “Celluloid Nightmares,” meanwhile, uses government test films, promotional movies aimed at congressional funders, and Hollywood blockbusters to explore the “role of film in both constituting and psychosocially managing existential dangers” (198). The book’s final section, “After Counterrevolution,” examines how the US counterterror state is inseparable from nuclear nationalism and petrochemical capitalism, creating a vicious circle that constantly pulls tropes from past historical memory—notably the Cold War—into the 21st century. Masco concludes with a critical take on the crisis discourses and practices that stabilize the status quo of security studies rather than serving as genuine shocks that might provide the impetus for radically rethinking modern society.

Like any work, the book has both strong and weak points. In terms of shortcomings, I would have liked to see a less US-centric approach, especially since the monograph’s subtitle is “and Other Episodes in Radioactive *World-Making*.” For instance, as a scholar working on the Fukushima nuclear disaster (Polleri 2019), I had expected at least some engagement with the vast anthropological literature that has traced the aftermath of radioactive fallout rather than a short stint with the musings of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. The now popular terms “colonialism” and “settler colonialism” are also peppered through the book but not explained in particular detail. While the author refers to the work of experts on these topics, I would have liked to see Masco’s own theorization of this subject. The book’s selection of examples is breathtaking, and readers are sure to find preferred pieces of empirical data. At the same time, much of the material in the book has already been published elsewhere. For instance, numerous chapters previously appeared in different edited collections or as standalone articles. Consequently, for those that are very familiar with Masco’s scholarship, the book does not feel as new as previous works, even considering the revisions made for this volume.

Aside from these minor shortcomings, the book does accomplish Masco's goal of making the reader think otherwise about issues of security. The sheer strength of the book is its rich examination of the foundational contradictions of major security projects that create aberrant, unsustainable, and toxic paradoxes. As a scholar, Masco has always excelled in explaining how discourses and practices done in the name of security, democracy, and global security ironically reinforce everyday as well as multigenerational violence, ecological endangerment, antidemocratic praxis, and inhumane policies. *The Future of Fallout* pushes this paradox even further by examining how US internal well-being, the domestic cost of nuclear projects, or sustained social security policies are sacrificed at the expense of an external security that is supposed to protect America. The other strength of the book lies in the connections it traces between seemingly unrelated subjects in order to make us completely rethink security and toxic affect. For instance, Masco uses snippets from the life of American pianist Liberace to prompt the reader to think about the culture of excess and performance that surrounds the nuclear security complex. For me, this is where Masco as an anthropologist really shines: writing on the apparent "strangeness" of mundane things (and vice versa). Using Liberace to rethink nuclear security is a tour de force. Furthermore, the book stands out for its attention to broader historical knowledge—something that is often lacking in anthropological ethnographies. For example, Masco shows how the legacy of the Cold War is constantly mutating to inform specific understandings of the war on terror and global warming in the 21st century. Such examinations offer a much-needed view of how past historical elements remain in dialogue with current events, often creating long-lasting influences on the governance of nuclear power (see Polleri 2020).

In terms of readership, the book is perhaps too complex for undergraduate students. Nonetheless, it will surely interest anthropologists, historians, and STS scholars working on a range of different themes—namely nuclear-related issues, global warming, the nation-state, governance, affect, and militarization. As an anthropologist who has read much of the author's previous work, I did not face much difficulty engaging with the book. Yet, since this work attempts to decenter security studies, I wonder if the anthropological jargon is accessible enough to be digested by non-specialists. Indeed, scholars working in nuclear security, political science, and global studies would benefit tremendously from reading this

text, since it precisely critiques the limited notions of security associated with different threats.

As a concluding thought, *The Future of Fallout* is a fitting conclusion to Masco's nuclear trilogy, which has tried to topple the enduring tropes that continue to dominate issues of social, political, and environmental security. Throughout the book, Masco wonders what would constitute a strong enough shock to rethink the terms of everyday life in a post-nuclear world. The author provides several theoretical reflections to help us think about a different kind of governance that might deal with planetary harm otherwise. A great complement to this question can be found in Vincent Ialenti's (2020) recent study of Finnish nuclear waste security, which provides the sort of proactive templates and long-term solutions advocated by Masco. Echoing Gore Vidal's criticism of American empire, *The Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive World-Making* is a trenchant and much-needed critique of typical security studies and normative forms of security culture in the US, which have for far too long set research agendas and determined funding of scholarship. Considering the current narratives of a new Cold War between the US and China, one can expect the book to become even more relevant in the decades to come. ■

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