
Book Review

Reviewed by Dirk Van Melkebeke

Email: vanmelkebeke.dirk@gmail.com

Taming Manhattan

by: Catherine McNeuer

Published 2014

by Harvard University Press

79 Garden Street, Cambridge, MA02138, USA, 312pp

ISBN: 978-0-674-72509-6

The subtitle of the book reads ‘environmental battles in the antebellum city’: the city is New York (NY) and the antebellum spans the period from around 1800 until the beginning of the American Civil War (1861). During this period, the population of NY exploded from 96,000 inhabitants in 1810 to 813,000 people in 1860. However, the main transformation concerned the transition from a rural area to an industrialised society characterised by massive immigration from Europe.

The book describes how NY struggled with spatial, environmental and public health problems caused by this development, the policy replies, the failures, and often the incapability and unwillingness to deal with the problems. The publication illustrates this using a series of cases, of which the most striking ones are summarised in this review.

The first one describes the ‘war about rambling dogs and hogs’. The animals were considered as a public health threat in spreading rabies. By 1820, NY had an estimated 20,000 dogs, mainly kept by poor Irish and Afro-American immigrants, who survived at least in part on the income the dogs raised. The animals foraged in the street litter and caused nuisance, especially to the wealthier New Yorker, walking along the dirty streets. The city authorities undertook several attempts chasing the dogs out of the streets. This policy caused significant resistance among the poor. By 1859, the situation became critical. The metropolitan police felt strong enough to enforce the 1811 law and established a ‘Piggerie War’: it took weeks of riots and hilarious scenes (dogs were even hidden in beds). The ‘war’ ended by capturing 9,000 dogs and demolishing 3,000 illegal piggeries. Whether NY was cleaner and healthier after this is still unclear. It is, however, noticeable that the discussion about the events was most emotional: people considered the dogs as domesticated, and a friend of man. This mirrors contemporary situations where dogs are considered the best friends of lonely people and are sometimes even humanised in ridiculous ways.

The demographic explosion also resulted in a most significant speculative pressure on every square metre, in particular on the surface of green spaces. Parks hardly existed in NY. An 1811 plan for a park in Manhattan was immediately reduced to 40% and disappeared completely from the urban planning in 1829. Minds changed, however gradually, and green areas were progressively established. Also, this evolution was related to public health and social aspects. The wealthier NY citizens walking through

NY's streets avoided poor immigrants and blacks. In this context, a yearly 10 dollar fee was installed for entering green areas such as St. John's Square. This should be compared with the one dollar daily wage of a black worker. Evidently, this part of the population could not afford to pay the park entrance fee. Gradually, two types of tax became the drivers forcing a change in policy on access to green areas: the value of the houses near the parks doubled in a few years, and so did the income of the city. Moreover, NY recovered the construction and maintenance costs of the parks with a cover tax, which was only affordable by the wealthier neighbourhoods.

Investments in urban sanitation were triggered by two outbreaks of cholera (1832 and 1849). They were associated with the substandard quality of drinking water and refuse household waste. The extension of the drinking water network was equally accelerated by the 'great city fire' in 1834, which destroyed 700 buildings.

Some called the 19th century NY 'the dung heap of the universe' as a result of its omnipresent waste. By 1835, the city hosted 10,000 horses producing 150–200 tons of manure a day. The manure, together with other agricultural and household litter, was used as fertiliser, which was processed out of town.

A related problem was offal resulting from slaughtering animals. By 1850, NY consumed an estimated 2,500 cows, 5,000 sheep, 1,200 calves and 1,200 pigs a week. The offal was boiled (bones for glue), and dumped into the river. As a result of the tidal action, the offal was deposited along the river banks. The problem was addressed by opening an offal processing facility out of town. Of interest: the inspector closing down the boiler houses in town started a profitable offal business near the city.

A chapter with a real dark side concerns the 'swill milk' produced by cows fed on the draft originating from the hundreds of breweries and distilleries in the city. The hygienic conditions of the cow stables were dramatic, while the animals had no prairies. The quality of their milk (and meat) was also substandard and fraud was everywhere (e.g., chalk was added as a whitener to the milk). These practices increased the mortality of an estimated 8,000 to 9,000 babies, in particular in poor families. Following a press crusade on these malpractices, and a court case, the situation improved but did not disappear.

These socio-environmental situations are not limited to NY. Most 19th century cities in industrialised countries faced similar challenges. In NY, however, the situation was most pronounced as a result of the fast increasing population and immigration. As in other parts of the world, NY had its social reformers advocating better conditions for the working class and alleviating the tension between races and (non-)immigrants. Their proposal was to improve the cultural standards of the working class, embracing the bourgeois values, and acting on their quality of life. They considered well planned, clean cities with sufficient green spaces, clean water, and decent housing conditions as imperative in addressing the social reform. This was at the origin of Central Park, until today the main green area in downtown NY.

The fear for a bloody revolt almost materialised in 1863, when during the civil war compulsory military service was declared for men between 20 and 40 years of age. Exemption was however granted after paying a 300 dollar fee. Riots started, Afro-Americans were attacked (this was also related to the abolition of slavery, one of the causes of the civil war), and several richer neighbourhoods were burnt down to cries of 'kill the rich'. This commotion speeded up the unavoidable social reforms.

The book provides a most interesting historical analysis while pointing to lessons for the future. Situations comparable with those in 19th century NY exist today in a range of

developing countries with exploding cities and expanding numbers of inhabitants. They are characterised by:

- Poverty and environmental deterioration causing migration towards major cities.
- Tensions among the most vulnerable people.
- A weak state insufficiently dealing with the problems - an unwilling government driven by short term interests, a lack of vision, and corruption.
- Socially vulnerable populations, who are the first victims of spatial, environmental and hygienic public malfunctioning. These groups are equally the first victims when the government installs socially uncorrected policies.
- The necessity for a systematic approach based on a long term view.

The book is very well-documented (footnotes and references fill nearly 20% of the pages) and is based on an in-depth review of the contemporary literature, media and city council reports. The story is fascinating and the reading is easy, also for the non-professional historian. This is partially related to the wealth of described anecdotes. Many 19th century illustrations are included, although unfortunately they are often too small to illustrate the essence of the message.

This is an interesting book, certainly for the inhabitants of NY, but also for many other readers worldwide.