

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dorceta E. Taylor. *The Environment and the People in American Cities, 1600s—1900s: Disorder, Inequality, and Social Change*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. xii + 626 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4436-0; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4451-3.

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## An Interdisciplinary Odyssey

In 1995, Martin Melosi credited the environmental justice movement with inspiring fresh avenues of inquiry for historians, including issues of environmental equity, race, gender, and class.[1] With her wide-ranging, complex book, Dorceta E. Taylor has ventured into this territory and gone a step further—into America’s cities over a span of four centuries. Taylor focuses on cities because, she argues, *they* were the original sites of environmental activism—not the wilderness. While environmental histories of cities are not new, Taylor’s work stands out for its breadth: its five hundred-plus pages traverse urban ground from New York City to Honolulu, from New Orleans to Chicago. And, though urban environmental history is necessarily interdisciplinary, this book adds a fair amount of labor history and discussions of contemporary issues to the mix, making for a work of distinctive hybridity. Taylor relies on a variety of sources, synthesizing them into a narrative that is groundbreaking for its sheer scope. Because of its size, however (the notes number nearly one hundred pages), serious readers will wish this book had a bibliography.

Taylor is an environmental sociologist. As a result, the book’s theoretical discussions consider labor market dynamics, social networks, resource mobilization, and interlocking directorates. These factors and others drive change over time, according to Taylor. This analysis can be challenging to readers who are not conversant with the terminology; however, the majority of the book’s contents are highly accessible and incorporate more fa-

miliar discussions of social control, race, gender, and class.

Taylor organizes the book into five main sections. The book’s first section covers topics from fire prevention to race relations and riots before moving on to consider how three diseases (yellow fever, cholera, and bubonic plague) forced urban policy makers to enact environmental reforms and adopt sanitary measures. Taylor focuses on an outbreak of the plague in Honolulu in 1899-1900, an episode where race, class, and disease intersected to literally combust the city. The second section takes on urban reform and includes not only the elite’s efforts to establish residential enclaves, but also labor unrest in company towns, data gathering and “cultural cartography” (a term referring to reformers’ practices of mapping the incidence of social problems), the Chicago Fire of 1871, sanitation, and housing reform. The third section deals with parks, recreation, and social control, using Central Park as the primary case study and introducing the notion of pastoral transcendentalism. Taylor shows us that in cities, leisure space has long been contested space. Comprehensive zoning as a means of eliminating undesirable businesses and people from urban spaces is discussed in the fourth section. The book’s last section concentrates on efforts to reform working conditions and includes a lengthy exploration of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. While this book covers a lot of material both chronologically and topically, Taylor assembles a narrative that contributes a new perspective to urban environ-

mental history.

Note

[1]. Martin V. Melosi, "Equity, Eco-racism and Environmental History," *Environmental History Review* 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 11.

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