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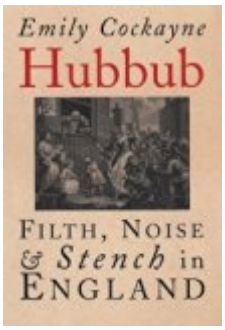
Emily Cockayne. *Hubbub: Filth, Noise and Stench in England, 1600-1770.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. xiv + 335 pp. Â£25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-11214-6.



Reviewed by Patrick Wallis

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This is an unusual and unusually enjoyable book. It takes an unremittingly negative subject--disgusting things--and yet manages to shape an interesting, amusing, and thought-provoking read from it. It will not satisfy everyone, but a chapter or two should soon feature in most courses discussing urban life in early modern Europe.

Emily Cockayne's self-proclaimed ambition is to highlight the "worst parts" of urban life in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, to draw out those things that inspired disgust or repulsion, that discomforted or discombobulated the urban population (p. 1). To achieve this she has trawled through a good range of diaries and a slightly narrower cross-section of urban records (London, Oxford, Bath, and Manchester are the main locations discussed) and other materials to fish out views and experiences of what repelled and irritated contemporaries. Given that nuisances are defined by context and perception, her qualitative approach largely works. She then fashions a great variety of material into broad thematic chapters whose titles--"Ugly," "Itchy," "Mouldy," "Noisy," "Grotty," "Busy," "Dirty," "Gloomy"--leave no illusions about their contents. Having read it straight through, I would recommend dipping in. There is only so much discomfort one can take in one sitting.

In truth, the book covers much more than nuisance and unpleasantness. To give a few examples, the chapter on ugliness takes in views on beauty and ugliness--interestingly emphasizing the strength of moral norms underpinning contemporary attitudes to appropriate dress--campaigns against drunkenness, and attitudes toward and punishments of scolding women. This intermingling of the moral and the physical is one of the central themes of the work, as is the great variation of experience between rich and poor, men and women, and young and old. The chapter on noise neatly emphasizes the differences between legally objectionable disturbances and unpleasant--largely because it was unexpected or abnormal--sounds. The chapter on grottiness gives a tour of bad building and dangerous, damp, and draughty housing.

This is, then, a trove of rich and well-presented material. The litany of misfortunes it offers

leaves little doubt about some of the potential downsides to premodern urban living. It is well written, if you don't mind folksy ("face-fur"?), and, overall, the book is a substantial achievement in the reconstitution of the social and physical environment.

Inevitably though, there are some problems and holes here. Most obviously, relying on qualitative sources makes it impossible to get a sense of the scale of many of the problems discussed. How frequently did houses actually collapse? London's roads may have been busy, but is an average of less than one manslaughter case from road accidents a year really a heavy toll? Similarly, the city was surely smoky, but was it really oppressed by a choking fog that made twilight of the daytime? Some of these are issues where we could get a sense of scale to balance the perceptions--something that is particularly important if we want to compare the costs of urbanization over time and space.

There is a further tension in the book: for the most part the sources drive Cockayne to categorize an experience as unpleasant, but there are moments where hindsight and modern gut-instincts begin to play a part. Was second-hand clothing really as badly made and uncomfortable as Cockayne indicates? How great a problem was contaminated and rotten food? How troubling was seeing and smelling human and animal waste to pedestrians? Economies of makeshifts incorporate adaptation and remaking. Knowing how to spot bad fish or meat does not necessarily imply that many people ended up eating it and, while unrefrigerated and dirty meat markets may not be ideal, most people consumed their produce without much of a problem.

Finally, much of the book ducks the question of change over time. There is some suggestions of change--the chapter on noise, one of the best here, suggests a greater sensitivity to unwelcome noises on the part of the urban elite at least in the eighteenth century, and the conclusion appeals to the campaigns of urban improvement rooted in middling politeness that Paul Langford and Peter Borsay have made familiar.[1] However, in general the reader is left more with a picture of urban existence--a beautifully colored and cleverly composed one--than an analysis of its transformations. To that extent, one wonders what a more neutral set of categories--light not gloom--might have suggested. Nonetheless, this is a book to relish and enjoy. At least you are not there.

Note

[1]. Paul Langford, ***A Polite and Commercial People : England, 1727-1783*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Peter Borsay, ***The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660-1770*** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

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