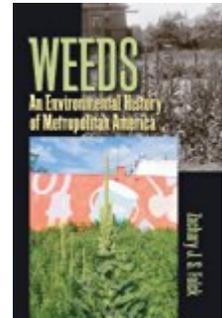




Zachary J. S. Falck. *Weeds: An Environmental History of Metropolitan America.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010. Illustrations. 280 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8229-4405-8.



Reviewed by Sean Kheraj

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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

There is a history to the anonymous plants that grow between the cracks in the sidewalk. Cities are biological habitats profoundly shaped by the energy and effort of human beings, but simultaneously influenced by even the smallest and innocuous of their inhabitants. Zachary J. S. Falck's historical survey of weeds in metropolitan America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries takes readers through this often overlooked part of the urban past, examining the many ways in which city dwellers defined, despoiled, and destroyed what he refers to as happenstance plants or fortuitous flora.

Weeds, in Falck's narrative, are as much metaphors as they are biological entities. The changing meanings and ideas of what plants constitute weeds in urban America played a central role in shaping municipal regulations and state law throughout this history. What is a weed? Falck tracks this evasive question throughout his book never quite pinning down a precise definition, because, as he aptly shows, "by the end of the twentieth century, several courts had protected the

prerogative of municipalities to define weeds with extreme, if not infinite, vagueness" (p. 170). Perhaps more insidious was the way in which the weed metaphor casually passed from plant to people. Urban reformers, eugenics advocates, sociologists, and law enforcement representatives variously tossed around the term "human weed" to describe criminals, the poor, and other city dwellers deemed undesirable. Weeds, as it turned out, "when they were not irritating people working or managing land, helped some Americans grasp and express the problems of modern life, including its environmental and social challenges" (p. 13). The use of the term "human weed" was as resilient as its floral namesake, persisting into the late twentieth-century U.S. Department of Justice's Operation Weed and Seed (OWS), a federal urban crime initiative. Falck adeptly untangles the interconnections between the biology of fortuitous flora and the use of the human weed metaphor over time through numerous well-documented examples from across the country.

Perhaps the most interesting case study of the interplay between plant biology and human imagination in *Weeds* involves the fate of cannabis in metropolitan America in the early twentieth century. In the 1920s and 1930s, urban reformers transformed the ubiquitous and naturalized cannabis plant into a “criminal weed,” as Falck puts it, along with its human users (p. 76). Municipal authorities blamed immigrants, African American jazz musicians and enthusiasts, and the urban poor (often subject to the human weed moniker) for the spread of wild cannabis on vacant city lots across the country. The zeal with which American city dwellers took to eradicating cannabis willfully ignored, or carelessly neglected, the long history of the place of cannabis within urban environments. Cannabis bloomed in patches throughout Brooklyn, Chicago, Boston, and elsewhere because city dwellers had once seeded these lands, and cultivated and processed these plants in the past.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the constant presence of well-adapted plant species, including cannabis, often at the margins of expanding metropolitan centers, underlines a central irony in this history: happenstance plants persisted in urban America because they *belonged* in cities. While Falck’s research does not examine the evolutionary biology of aggressive wild plants in urban environments, behind this human history is an evolutionary history of plant species coevolving with humans and adapting to human-made habitats. A closer examination of literature in botanical sciences on urban plants may have uncovered more of this history, but this is not the focus of Falck’s work. Instead, *Weeds* devotes much of its attention to a national survey of municipal weed control measures, legal case law, popular representations of weeds in print media, and public debates over the suitability of certain plants within urban environments. The addition of some maps to illustrate the changing geographic distribution of happenstance plants within major U.S. cities over time would

have better demonstrated some of Falck’s arguments regarding the ebb and flow of the ecological relationship between city building and vegetative cover. I suspect, however, that this is absent due to a lack of sources. Weeds, of course, are not well-documented historical actors, yet Falck’s primary source research on the subject is impressive in both its depth and national range. The book also includes some excellent historical photographs of happenstance plants in past urban landscapes, not often the subject of photography. From New York City to Tucson, this book convincingly makes the case that urban weeds were a national cultural and environmental concern.

Falck’s analysis of happenstance plants intersects well with current frameworks and debates in urban environmental history, offering some novel contributions, especially his arguments regarding urbanization and ecological time. Cities, under this framework, “mingled with ecological processes,” but the efforts to designate and eradicate weeds placed city dwellers out of synch with such processes or, as Falck suggests, ecological time (p. 20). Falck argues that “people’s ‘distance from nature’ in cities was not just spatial, then, but temporal, and this temporal distance intensified and increased as city dwellers interfered with and tried to undo the flow of ecological time” (pp. 6-7). This framework stands in contrast to Martin V. Melosi’s recent article in *Journal of Urban History* (2010) in which he contends that historians should “think about the broader role of humans as living beings operating within the material world, including cities.”[1] To a certain extent then, Falck’s arguments situate metropolitan America within what Melosi refers to as a nature/built environment nexus, in which cities are artificial creations concurrent with, but outside of, nature. While Falck’s book clearly acknowledges cities as ecological spaces, his analysis does situate human modifications of built environments in contradistinction to nature or ecological time. Rather than creating new ecologies, city building under this framework produces dissonance or

disconnection between human-made environments and the rest of nature. Given contemporary ecological challenges related to climate change and the health of the earth’s biosphere, readers may be sympathetic to this outlook. These different understandings of urban environments also speak to core concerns of environmentalists and nature advocates struggling with difficult concepts of environmental sustainability and ecological health, making *Weeds* a book suited to not only scholars of urban history, but also environmental studies broadly.

Notes

[1]. Martin V. Melosi, “Humans, Cities, and Nature: How Do Cities Fit in the Material World?” *Journal of Urban History* 36, no. 1 (2010): 7.

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