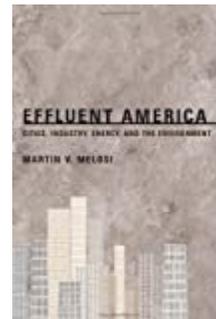




Martin V. Melosi. *Effluent America: Cities, Industry, Energy, and the Environment.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001. xi + 325 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-5766-9.



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The Urban Environment and Urban Environmental History

Martin Melosi's *Effluent America: Cities, Industry, Energy, and the Environment* is a collection of his essays on urban environmental history written over the span of twenty years. This collection is a concise distillation of the work of a respected environmental historian who has played a key role in expanding the boundaries of the discipline to include a deeper consideration of, among other things, the materiality of urban societies. As Melosi has demonstrated across his career, environmental history has as much to do with the history of city sewers, sanitation departments, electric grids, anti-noise campaigns, and solid waste management as it does the drowning of Hetch Hetchy or Henry David Thoreau's meditations on Walden Pond.

The eleven essays in *Effluent America* are divided into three topics: "Pollution in Industrial America," "Urban Growth and Community Services," and "Urban Environmental Reform." Readers new to Melosi's work will find the essays, and the updated literature reviews that divide the three sections, helpful for framing a range of issues in urban environmental history.

The first section concerns the relationship between

pollution and industrialization. Two of the essays in this section are overly repetitive but they offer a concise survey of the range of issues that civic reformers and municipal engineers faced in the wake of rapid urbanization and industrialization. Most notable in this first section is Melosi's essay on the evolution of the concept of environmental liability. In it, Melosi explains that the concept of environmental liability emerged out of traditional nuisance law in the nineteenth century as well as industrial age statutes such as the 1899 Refuse Act and the 1924 Oil Pollution Control Act. Melosi tells us that the regulation of hazardous waste in particular, which we typically understand to be a post-WWII concern, had important antecedents in the industrial age when private citizens, cities, states, and the federal government sought common law and statutory redress for some of the most glaring environmental nuisances that attended industrial development.

The second section of *Effluent America* turns to the city as a subject of environmental history. Melosi argues in this section that the city remains an under-theorized and under-studied subject in the field. Melosi's claim

was probably truer in 1993 when he first made it than it is today, but his work has been instrumental in helping to see the profession through that shift. Historians will find the final two essays in this section to be the most helpful. Both focus on Houston as a case study for addressing issues in urban environmental history. The first is a carefully developed history of municipal decision-making regarding sanitary services such as solid waste management, water supply, and sewage. Melosi illustrates the consequences of certain path dependencies that developed in Houston as the city committed early in its history to particular technical service options such as ground water pumping and solid waste incineration. In the final essay of this section, Melosi turns to Houston to examine the pattern of the modern American community as it is exemplified in this de-centralized sun-belt metropolis. Melosi challenges urban environmental historians to transcend the facile assumption that the modern metropolis like Houston represents the antithesis of community.

The final section of *Effluent America* proposes that the urban reform movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries needs to be written into the history of the American environmental movement. Melosi tells us that civic reformers and sanitary engineers from this period, while not typically viewed by environmental historians as in the same camp with John Muir or Gifford Pinchot, developed a complementary set of environmental concerns centered on such issues as pollution and sanitation in the urban environment. Concerned that the city environment affected the character of citizens and the quality of life, such reformers and civic officials spoke of the city as an organism that might be ailing or healthy. The concern of such urban environmentalists originated with their belief in the miasmatic theory that sewer gases created unhealthy living conditions

and shifted in the late nineteenth century to a bacteriological theory that focused on the need to regulate potential pathogen vectors before it ultimately eventuated in the “age of ecology,” the paradigm which shapes our current understanding of urban and non-urban environments. The final essay in this section, and in the book, is the most contemporary of the essays in the collection. Focused on today’s environmental justice movement, it is a thought-provoking and informative essay on the ways in which that movement has created a mythic history for itself by ignoring its commonalities with the earlier urban environmental movement in America that can be traced back more than a century to the birth of industrialization and the city. Melosi concludes this collection by wondering what the long-term political efficacy will be in drawing such a sharp rhetoric line between the supposedly dominant white, elitist environmental movement, with its emphasis on the preservation of nature, and the new environmental justice movement focused on the more humanitarian issues of class, race, and gender. Melosi’s work suggests that the American environmental movement has always been considerably more diverse than such a mythic history proposes.

Environmental and urban historians alike will find *Effluent America* a useful book to have on the shelf. While some of the earlier essays in this collection have become textbook material, and thus will be more useful for their reference value than their arguments, readers will find the examples Melosi provides in each essay helpful. Moreover, the literature reviews for each section are excellent, and the collection as a whole will challenge environmental historians in particular to think creatively about how to incorporate urban material culture, technical and administrative systems, and the progressive reform movement more effectively into their research and curriculum.

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