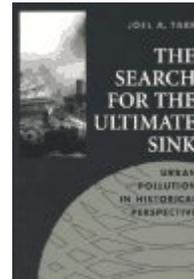


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Joel A. Tarr.** *The Search for the Ultimate Sink: Urban Pollution in Historical Perspective.* Akron: University of Akron Press, 1996. xlvii + 419 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-884836-06-0; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-884836-05-3.



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This volume brings together fifteen essays that historian Joel Tarr has written over the last twenty-five years. These essays originally appeared in journals and periodicals from many different disciplines and sub-specialties, and their amalgamation here serves as testimony to Tarr's long-standing efforts to cross disciplinary boundaries to shed light on the historical growth and development of American cities. Taken as a whole, the volume combines the perspectives of urban history and environmental history into a new, more integrated "urban environmental history" that examines the complex relationships between cities and the environment.

Tarr has divided the book into five sections, each consisting of a brief introduction, two to four articles, and a collection of relevant photographs. The sections are organized around common themes found in the essays: water pollution, smoke pollution, industrial waste, and the connections between transportation technology and environmental change. A fifth section examines the interrelationships between these sub-segments of environmental history. This organizational setup imposes a sense of unity on a collection of papers that were originally crafted to stand alone. Furthermore, Tarr has provided brief, cogent introductions and conclusions to almost every chapter, which adds to a cohesiveness that is rare amongst this type of collection. Of course, despite these efforts, there are times when the separate origins of the

chapters is manifest. The overlapping subject matter produces some unavoidable redundancy, and also there are a couple of articles that show signs of age, in some cases having been published over two decades ago. Nevertheless, these are only minor flaws in a volume that otherwise is a readable and well-organized collection of informative and interesting essays.

One of the most pervasive and dramatic environmental consequences of urbanization was devastating water pollution. It is not surprising therefore, that this was one of the first instances of environmental regulation and management by American governments, and it is entirely appropriate that this topic is touched on in many of Tarr's essays. The largest section of the book, entitled "Water Pollution", contains four such tracts, ranging from a general overview of the history of wastewater treatment technologies to in-depth examinations of individual policy decisions. The section focuses on the interconnections between changes in methods for disposing of *human* wastes and the closely related changes in municipal water systems. In addition, another part of the book addresses *industrial* waste and its impact on water quality. Tarr is at his best in these two sections, using his sophisticated understanding of disparate aspects of urban development and technological advances to guide the reader through skillfully condensed histories. Technical aspects of coke manufacturing, water treatment methods, and

sewage disposal systems are presented with clarity, allowing the focus to rest on broader issues.

There are three overarching conclusions that emerge from Tarr's presentation of urban environmental history, each of which seem obvious once stated, but nonetheless are noteworthy. First, technological advances have historically produced unanticipated consequences, often creating new problems while solving old ones. For example, the innovative new water systems of the mid-nineteenth century reduced disease and improved the quality of urban life dramatically, but at the same time overwhelmed back-yard cesspools and privy vaults, creating new health hazards and new refuse problems. In turn, the sewer systems developed to solve these problems ended up polluting nearby bodies of water, killing wildlife and tainting water supplies.

Tarr's second main theme is that environmental controls were only implemented when the *perceived* costs of pollution were higher than the *perceived* costs of mitigation. Of course, as Tarr points out, these perceptions were rooted in contemporary cultural values, and were limited by the extent to which pollutants could be measured and firmly identified by the public as a problem. He uses the examples of smoke control and water quality improvement initiatives to illustrate this dynamic.

The third major thrust of this collection is that the regulatory and scholarly division of the environment into separate categories (e.g. water, air, land) often obscures the connections between these arbitrarily separated areas. The lead essay, from which the book's title is drawn, convincingly makes the case for considering the environmental externalities of urbanization from a cross-disciplinary perspective. (In so doing, Tarr also presents a wonderfully useful summary of many of the issues discussed elsewhere in the book). Tarr reiterates this call for interdisciplinary scholarship in the book's final sentence: "History beckons us, therefore, to sharpen our sensitivity to the interconnected nature of the environment and the implications of these connections for environmental policy" (p. 406).

As with many anthologies, this collection is an encouraging sample of the fine work that has been done by a pioneer in a relatively new academic area of inquiry. However, it also serves as a reminder that environmental urban history is still uneven, with a number of substantial gaps that are still awaiting scholarly attention. Essential components of the relationship between cities and the environment haven't yet been explored (or hadn't when these essays were written), and therefore get no more than passing mention in this collection, if any. Examples that come immediately to mind are flood control, reservoir construction, and automobile exhaust. Of course, it would be unreasonable to expect one scholar to have published treatises covering every aspect of this complex field. On the contrary, the fact that all the work contained in this book was done by a single scholar is particularly impressive. Tarr is clearly well on his way to constructing a new synthesis and this volume presents a tantalizing taste of what such a book could be. The field has gained momentum, and as Tarr himself points out, "each year, greater numbers of young scholars focus their research on environmental issues" (pp. 336-37).

In summary, this impressive collection can serve as a general introduction to this emerging area of scholarly inquiry, and also contains individual essays that will be helpful to many different academic audiences. The individual chapters range from broad, well-constructed overviews to more technical and tightly focused case studies. All are well-written and easy to read. Since some of the articles were written many years ago, this volume also serves as a vehicle for the re-publication of scholarly gems that may otherwise have faded (the wonderful article on "The Horse- Polluter of the City" certainly falls into this category). Urban scholars will find a great deal of value in this collection, as will students of environmental history and the history of technology.

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