

STS.462 Social and Political Implications of Technology

Reflection Paper: William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis* (1991)

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Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* tells the fascinating story not only of metropolis and hinterland, but of human sensory interaction with each. Manure, blood, dust, offal, muck, rotting meat, sprouted wet grain, sewage: Chicago's economic development was a fundamentally smelly process. I lived for a year by the Tower of London, where Beefeater tour guides describe the stench that kept royalty away at their country homes despite the grandeur of this capital residence. I lived, too, by a paper mill in Russia, and its run-off caused pungent, warm waves in an otherwise frozen Siberian lake, in the dead of January. My sanitized suburban nose – with its roots, as Cronon points out, in those wealthy Chicagoans seeking respite from the stench and noise – was shocked at the thought of placidly living by such obvious pollution. Throw Chicago's (or 1700s London's, or modern Russia's, or worldwide slums'...) sanitation problems into today's suburban US and general support for “development” and growth, I predict, would face heavy green opposition. Indeed, urban stench, pollution, and disease – whether in Lake Erie or London's Thames – have lead to public outcry and (eventual) pollution abatement efforts.

The real puzzle of Chicago seems to me, then, why stand the smells? The patriotic Chicago boosters were somehow so enthralled with being the Gateway, the White City, the metropolis of the Great West that they were willing to go through horrific amounts of stink to earn that title. Neither the boosters nor the workers living in Chicago's muck stopped, fundamentally questioned, changed, or slowed down development – even when the process was painful and their businesses bankrupt, even when the opportunity presented itself after 1871's

Great Fire.¹ Whether or not everyone agreed that wealth accumulation was the best way, those who did agree created an environment where wealth accumulation was the only way to avoid (real or keep-up-with-the-Jones'-type) poverty.

Cronon's history reminds me, strangely, of Stalinist modernization in the 1950s USSR. Yes, Chicago's futures markets represent the height of abstract, individualistic capitalism. But mixing in grain elevators, the origins of today's ultra-complex financial instruments, is a powerful representation of equality, not of individual rights, but of product. Economies of scale, whether in meatpacking or lumber, were touted not because they were best for the individual but because of their contributions to the City's aggregate growth. And growing pains, endured through inequality, exploitation, crime, and the associated vices of the city and market, were all for *future* reward. Fairs like the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition were a constant form of propaganda in the modernizing USSR, both celebrating progress and dissuading detractors by promising improvements just over the horizon. Communism was to be *achieved* not to be *enjoyed*. It seems to me that 1900s muckrakers exposed not only the crimes of capitalism, but the quality of life that "economic development" stole away from the people of Chicago. Chicago, too, was to be *achieved* and not *enjoyed* (that's what rural Wisconsin was for).

What caused this myopia and anosmia² to persist? Cronon explains how farmers' and ranchers' understanding of the urban system was limited at best. Indeed, the rise of transport technologies could only ever allow the *crossing* of goods between metropolis and hinterland. Communications technologies had revolutions too, *transmitting* information via the telegraph or the *Chicago Tribune*. But Cronon's stories (both personal and historical) show us that

¹ The Great Fire, and the ensuing mania for more rather than less "development" and reconstruction, has of course important parallels to Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans.

² Inability to smell.

meaningful large-scale *connection* between the hinterland and Chicago required, in the end, the historian's perspective to tease out.

“Second nature” – meaning both Cronon's human overlay on the land and that which is mundane – forms the heart of *Nature's Metropolis*. Commodification, whether through the price of wheat, coffee, oil, gold, or derivatives, is enabled by human technology. Yet necessary innovations like the grain elevator become over time mundane and “natural” in the human world. The technologies which enabled liberal economic development in Chicago had social, political, and environmental effects well beyond the needs they were designed to fill. But I haven't smelled them. It therefore (sadly) takes an enlightening history like Cronon's to remind me that wheat and pork futures come from very real wheat, pork, and livelihoods. Cronon's work is excellent because he emphasizes that sensory connection. At the same time, however, he establishes that Chicago was a very special place. What kind of boosterism, what kind of person, what kind of self-sacrifice does it take to see “a man standing to his waist in blood sticking pigs” as the grandest of sights? (208)