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David S. Barnes, *The Great Stink of Paris and the Nineteenth-Century Struggle against Filth and Germs*. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. 314 pp. Notes, index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 0-8018-8349-0.

Review by Colin Jones, Queen Mary University of London.

In this book, David Barnes tells an interweaving story of public health, social hygiene and bacteriological breakthrough across the nineteenth century, and particularly in its last quarter. Some of the ground he covers is not new: the early hygienists have been well treated by Anne La Berge and others, the Pasteurian revolution can boast whole dedicated libraries.^[1] But no other work focuses so closely and illuminatingly on the social and cultural context of public health reform during the crucial last quarter of the nineteenth century. The book is also distinctive in dealing less with major diseases such as cholera and tuberculosis which have attracted much attention than on the unpleasant background noise of sanitary concern—diseases such as typhoid fever and diphtheria.

Barnes structures his narrative around two moments, set apart by fifteen years. The first and most significant of these was during the dog-day summer months of 1880, when a massive and indeterminate stench hovered over the city of Paris, stimulating wild imaginings of a horrible epidemic in gestation. The range of contradictory and often strident opinions which the “Great Stink of Paris” (which appears to be Barnes’s term) aroused within the capital introduces the central plank of the book’s argument. The Pasteurian Revolution taking place at this time should have ensured that stench was not viewed as a factor of morbidity and mortality. This was a correlation fundamental to pre-existing miasmatic theory, which germ theory had allegedly consigned to the dustbin of public health history. The Pasteurian mantra—and it is a phrase which Barnes recycles constantly throughout the book—was that “not everything that stinks kills and not everything that kills stinks.” No matter: the Pasteurians cheerfully abandoned a parsimonious reading of their own logic in order to foreground the importance of their own scientific contributions towards ending this and other stenches. Fifteen years later, in 1895, a similarly pervasive and nauseous smell hovered over the city—but roused none of the debates and anxieties of 1880, and even stimulated light amusement. By then, Barnes suggests a satisfactory compromise had been produced between germ theory and preexisting attitudes towards hygiene.

David Barnes wallows in filth to very good purpose. His way of complicating simplistic versions of the “Pasteurian Revolution” is to train his spotlight mercilessly and consistently on unadulterated filth and excrement. His spasmodically stomach-turning treatment is followed through analyses of public discourse and medical argumentation around the “stinks” of 1880 and 1895, polemics surrounding the *tout-à-l’égout* debates over sewage disposal, local efforts to implement policies of isolation and disinfection, and growing state involvement with sanitary measures. The latter chapters orient the argument around a wider history of disgust—by which some readers may be feeling somewhat queasy. Yet Barnes’s tone throughout his account of such unpromising matter—scholarly, yet also light, engaged and breezy—is (appropriately?) contagious.

Barnes calls the compromise between germ theory and pre-existing hygienic attitudes “the sanitary bacteriological synthesis” (shortened to ‘SBS’). This was, he suggests, less a medical doctrine than an

ideological and pragmatic framework which “brought the commonsense cultural appeal and broad applicability of the old knowledge (for example, that foul-smelling substances were bad for one’s health) into harmony with the specific mastery inherent in the new knowledge of microbes” (p. 3). His suggestion is that SBS lastingly structured attitudes towards public health not only in France but also throughout the West. Yet its ontological status—at times a kind of *über-mentalité*, at times a historical end-point, at times an agent of change—is shifting and indeterminate throughout the work. It may be more prudent to view changed attitudes between 1880 and 1895 less as a trans-historic watershed than as a provisional cease-fire in a continuing struggle of interest groups and competing theories. In fact, this fits better with the thrust of Barnes’s argument, for, as he is at pains to show, there is no satisfactory proof that isolation, disinfection and other features of the SBS transformed mortality patterns. Nor did SBS in France alter France’s laggardly position in public health compared with its industrial competitors. The SBS had not yet, it would appear, begun to deliver in epidemiological terms, and was more a provisional, if significant triumph for a certain kinds of arguments and policies.

The Great Stink of Paris demonstrates in exemplary fashion the value of complicating medical-historical issues by lifting our vision above ideological and narrowly social concerns so as to explore the broader cultural context of medical ideas and practices. Albeit lighter on actual morbidity and mortality than on medical attitudes and policies, it is fundamentally a work of medical history. Cultural historians will regret the fact that Barnes chooses not to orient his work more in the direction of Alain Corbin, whose influential *The Foul and the Fragrant* situated the history of bad smells in the history of good, ranged widely in terms of sources and mingled desire and attraction with disgust and repulsion.^[2] Barnes’s analysis is drawn largely from public health sources, and although he is both wise and witty when he does nod towards Corbinian perspectives—as in the case of the respectable public figures who thrilled to the challenge of pleasurable olfactory analysis of stench as if they were wine connoisseurs sampling the finest *crus*—such touches are few. Yet they remind us of how filth could be positively valorised in this *fin de siècle* in which—as Oscar Wilde had it—the best way of seeing the stars was to lie in the gutter. It may seem strange to put it in quite this way, but Barnes’s chronicle of filth and disgust leaves us wanting more.

NOTES

[1] Ann F. La Berge, *Mission and Method. The Early Nineteenth-Century French Public Health Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Ann F. La Berge and M. Feingold, eds., *French Medical Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986); Ann F. La Berge and Caroline Hannaway, eds., *Constructing Paris Medicine*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994); S. M. Quinlan, *The Great Nation in Decline: Sex, Modernity and Health in Revolutionary France*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); and the still eminently useful W. Coleman, *Death is a Social Disease: Public Health and Political Economy in Early Nineteenth-Century France*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

[2] A. Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odour and the French Social Imagination*, (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1986).

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