

Neil Smith and Don Mitchell (eds), *Revolting New York: How 400 Years of Riot, Rebellion, Uprising, and Revolution Shaped a City*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-0-8203-5281-7 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8203-5282-4 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-8203-5280-0 (ebook)¹

New York is one of the most famous cities in the world, and there are hundreds, if not thousands, of books about its history. However, before now there has not been a book that attempts to tell the story of New York's history of dissent. *Revolting New York: How 400 Years of Riot, Rebellion, Uprising, and Revolution Shaped a City* rises to the challenge admirably. It is an engaging and well-written book that details episodes of dissent in New York over almost four centuries in order to argue, quite convincingly, that such episodes have shaped the city's physical, social, and economic development.

The book argues that episodes of dissent are "lightning flashes", briefly illuminating the geographies of the city at the same time as they change it. Over time, the small changes caused by each riot or revolt, such as the movement of black New Yorkers from the Tenderloin district to Harlem after the 1900 Tenderloin race riots, build up to make a significant difference to the physical and social form of the city.

Revolting New York developed out of one of the late Neil Smith's graduate seminar groups at the City University of New York. Don Mitchell took on the task of editing the book after Smith passed away in 2012. It has taken a decade to produce, and can truly be described as a collective labour of love. Whilst its chronological structure gives it more coherence than a lot of edited collections, the book does feel like a group project, with the authors of each chapter choosing the events and themes that they felt are most important. Occasionally, this results in quite significant lengths of time between the events featured in contiguous chapters. This issue is resolved through "vignettes", short descriptions of significant protests and riots that do not have a dedicated chapter.

¹ The book's "general editors" are Neil Smith and Don Mitchell; its other editors are Erin Siodmak, JenJoy Royball, Marnie Brady and Brendan O'Malley: http://www.ugapress.org/index.php/books/revolting_new_york/ (last accessed 26 July 2018).

The book is structured chronologically, although the editors invite you to read it thematically too, tracing particular themes, such as policing or race, or specific locations. The Introduction and Afterword, both written by Don Mitchell, contextualise the book well; the Introduction presents a broad-brush history of dissent in the city, and the Afterword brings the narrative right up to 2017, exploring the influence of past rebellion on protests against the actions of the Trump administration. The individual chapters are capable of standing alone as detailed narratives of moments of dissent; *Revolting New York* is intended as a reference book as well as a coherent history. However, the book will also satisfy those looking for a general overview of the history of dissent in the city. The book works well whether it is read chronologically or thematically, and I am sure I shall be using it in both ways in the future.

The use of images and other visual aids can significantly impact the quality of a book such as this. Unfortunately, the photographs and engravings in *Revolting New York* are in black and white, but there are lots of them and they are spread throughout the book, complementing the text rather than sitting apart from it. There are also several wonderful maps, some of which are double-spread. Some make it much easier to understand how the locations of different protests and riots relate to each other, whilst others focus on events that took place over a large area, such as the 1863 Draft Riots, and Occupy Wall Street in 2011. Both of these events involved incidents in different parts of the city, and the maps give a clear picture of which areas were affected.

Revolting New York is limited in its analysis and interpretation of the events it describes. I will not call this a weakness, as the authors did not set out to create an analytical text. The book was designed as a narrative overview, not an in-depth analysis. Occasionally, however, the authors do engage in analytical discussion, and some interesting issues are raised. For example, in her chapter on the riots during the 1977 blackouts, Miguelina Rodriguez debates whether the riots can be classed as a revolt, or whether they were an apolitical explosion of rage and frustration. This brief, but thoughtful, discussion raises the question of how *Revolting New York* as a whole uses terminology. In my own work on the historical geographies of protest in London, I avoid using the term “riot” when I can,

preferring to use terms such as “protest” and “dissent”. The word “riot” conjures up images of violent and mindless destruction. Gustave Le Bon’s work in the late 19th century on riotous crowds casts a long shadow, and the image of protesters as irrational, volatile, and easily manipulated remains influential to this day, particularly amongst the media and general public (see Le Bon 2002). Whilst violence is a tool utilised by protesters, it is rarely mindless, far from it. As the examples in *Revolting New York* show, violent acts committed by demonstrators are overwhelmingly against property, not people—the authorities kill and injure far more people during times of unrest than protesters do. Admittedly, the lynchings carried out during New York’s various race riots are an awful exception to this rule. However, even when bodies are targeted as well as objects, they are targeted selectively, based on their membership of certain groups. Participants in riots are not mindless and irrational, temporarily rendered unable to think and reason for themselves.

The second issue that I have with the term “riot” is the way that it is frequently employed to describe any protest that results in violence, no matter how it starts out. The riots featured in *Revolting New York* grew out of a variety of events, including marches, demonstrations, accidental killings, violent altercations, and even the performance of an unpopular actor. Describing all of them as riots can hide that variety. The authors of *Revolting New York* have no such qualms about using the term. This is not to say I think that the terminology the book employs is necessarily wrong; words and their meanings are notoriously difficult to pin down, and there are multiple arguments for and against the use of different terms. I do, however, think it is worth discussing the implications of the decisions that we as academics make when analysing, and publishing about, such topics.

Another decision made by the authors of *Revolting New York* that can affect perceptions of protest is associated with the books’ structure. Many history books that focus on significant lengths of time are structured according to shorter periods of time that have been grouped together according to key themes or trends (see, for example, German and Rees 2012; Porter 1996). In *Revolting New York*, each chapter and vignette is focused either on a specific event—such as the 1765 Stamp Act Riots, or the 1965 CUNY Open Admissions

Strike—or on a movement or series of events, including the city during the American War of Independence, transit strikes between 1886 and 1895, and the Global Justice Movement between 1999 and 2004. Many of the events that have been grouped together could be looked at in isolation, and many of the standalone events could be placed in the context of broader movements. This will undoubtedly have an effect on the way that readers perceive New York’s history of dissent. In general, I think grouping protest events together gives a sense of progression. It conveys the idea that they are building up to, or moving towards, something decisive, generally either a victory or defeat. Studying an event in isolation might avoid that sense of inevitability, but it can also strip that event of its social and temporal context. Again, this point is not a criticism of book, but a call to ensure we consider the implications of such decisions, particularly when our writing might reach a popular audience, as is the case with *Revolting New York*.

The editors and authors of *Revolting New York* set themselves a mammoth task. They should be proud of what they have achieved—the book is accessible, well-written, and engaging. It will appeal to anyone with an interest in urban history or dissent, and I’m sure I will be re-reading it, in whole and in part, many times in the future.

References

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