

'The new relationships with the natural world ushered in by the development of the American city in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveal the tensions between the rich and the poor, and between public and private interests.' Discuss.

In the era of industrialization, American cities irrefutably developed new (bilateral) relationships with the natural world in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries – from natural resources such as water as an input into the growth of cities, to air and noise pollution as some forms of output from urban life.¹ However, I will argue that these processes were not confined to the urban-natural dialectic (which is in itself not as clear as it may appear), but were more “socioecological” (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2004) in the sense that they also revealed tensions within society: between the rich and the poor, between public and private interests, as well as within and across the various socioeconomic groups.² Also, the relationships between the city and the natural world were dynamic and highly interrelated, and hence it is useful to examine the changing relationships and tensions at different spatial and temporal scales.³ Furthermore, these new relationships did not only manifest in the physical or infrastructural world, but also in changing discourse and “urban consciousness” (Gandy, 2002) of urbanites.⁴

Through examining the case studies of New York City, Boston and Seattle, this essay will push forth the argument that while the new relationships with the natural environment in these American cities provoked and highlighted tensions between various societal groups, these tensions were not always between cleanly-divided parties because of the multiple interests of individuals and their changing positions in relation to relationships with the environment.⁵

At a more theoretical level, I will first examine the possible outcomes of socioecological relationships on tensions between the rich and poor, and between public and private interests.⁶ With rapid population growth in urban areas, the increased pressure on limited resources construct⁷ the city as “the centre of a society-environment dialectic” (Benton-Short & Short, 2008), and the distribution of these resources depends heavily on power geometries and political decisions within society. Often, what is beneficial to ‘private’ interests is also more beneficial to the rich, since those with the greatest bargaining power to exert their private interests are those with the most economic backing; conversely, what is beneficial to ‘public’ interests tends to be more equitable since the government is accountable for the provision of services to citizens regardless of socioeconomic status.

Also, due to⁸ distance decay theory, the quality of environment, as well as their corresponding costs of residence, fall with increasing distance from the city centre, making it very difficult for ‘public’ initiatives to benefit those living at the margins as much as those living in the centre. However, this is not always true, as sometimes, private interests may masquerade as ‘public’ ones, or private companies or individuals may usurp what was initially constructed for public good, so in fact, “most urban design resulted from the desires and decisions of a few powerful individuals” (Benton-Short & Short, 2008) as the later examples in this essay will show.⁹

Nineteenth-century New York City and Boston, in their construction of modern municipal water supply systems, provide clear examples of how attempts to harness a natural

Comment: This is a strong statement – the word ‘irrefutably’ summarises, with conviction, the era covered by the question, and eliminates the need for the essay to ‘prove’ this point, when it is plainly not necessary.

Comment: This is the more interesting argument: that the ‘dialectical’ relationship between cities and nature is at the same time a relationship between different social groups. The author here agrees with the title question, but sets this up as a more positive statement.

Comment: Some qualification – rightly accepting that these relationships varied across this period, and dependent on where they were developed.

Comment: Another qualification, but adding in another level of complexity, concerning how urbanites conceived, or were encouraged to conceive, of the relationship with ‘nature’.

Comment: A reasonable prospectus, telling us which cities the author is concentrating on, and again adding some complexity and critical awareness. Some less appropriate expression: e.g. ‘push forth the argument that’ instead of a simple ‘argue that’; ‘in relation to relationships’ is an example of redundancy (why not simply ‘changing position in relation to the environment?’) This is a minor example of over-sophistication.

Comment: This paragraph rightly attempts to set out in theoretical or abstract terms what the question is getting at in relation to ‘private’ and ‘public’ – how this might be related to rich and poor. This is very helpful in relation to the specific, empirical discussions which follow.

Comment: This should read ‘constructs’.

Comment: ‘Furthermore’, or a phrase like ‘In addition’ is preferable here to ‘also’, which sounds weak, no more than an afterthought. ‘Due to’ is also a bit clumsy; here, ‘following the conclusions of distance decay theory’ would be better.

Comment: This paragraph adds valuable insight into the fact that ‘public works’ may advance ‘private’ interests, developing the points made in the preceding paragraph.

resource (water) and make it more accessible to the public drove a divide between the rich and the poor, because of the way water turned into a commodity.¹⁰ In early nineteenth-century NYC,¹¹ even though there were vast improvements in urban infrastructure such as transportation networks, “squalid and insanitary conditions for the city’s poor persisted” (Gandy, 2002). This lack of access to sanitary water in an increasingly overcrowded city (mainly in the poorer areas, where wells became heavily polluted) became the background against which various epidemic outbreaks occurred, especially yellow fever and cholera. Thus, right from the beginning, the pressures of overpopulation on limited resources within an urban area created a social gap between those who could afford clean water and those who could not.¹²

A 1798 proposal for the construction of a public waterworks was rejected due to authorities’ fears that financing public works programmes would significantly increase taxes, losing them popularity among the elite and richer residents. However, 36 years later, in 1834, when a law to give NYC its right to create its own municipally owned waterworks, uptown residents and those who still had clean water in their wells opposed the law, citing increased public expenditure and aesthetic destruction (due to the aqueducts) as reasons for doing so (ibid.).¹³ The power of these upper-class groups meant that construction of the waterworks was successfully delayed for two more years, although they were still eventually built, and the Croton Aqueduct opened in 1842. Thus, despite the power of the rich over the poor in urban planning, government intervention to reinstate public interest over private interest in a city guided by democratic principles may overrule opposition by a few elite individuals in order to improve living conditions for the working class and poor.¹⁴

The new infrastructure then established a new set of relationships between NYC and nature – with nature entering into contemporary organic metaphors such as the “circulatory health” of rapidly expanding cities, and with water as components of NYC as a “space of flows” (ibid.).¹⁵ Water “gradually entered urban consciousness in a variety of ways, some public and some private” (ibid.), and in a sense actually united citizens through building up a common public imagination, thereby in some ways could have reduced tensions between socioeconomic groups within the city. In line with this argument, Gandy (2002) also posited that the water system “consolidated the emergence of a more sophisticated kind of urban society within which fragmentary and parochial perspectives were superseded by a more strategic urban vision”.¹⁶ The relationships between city and nature were dynamic and constantly changing, sometimes revealing the tensions between the rich and the poor but sometimes in fact covering it up.

On the other hand¹⁷, some argue that this phase of a more united urban consciousness was a mere by-product of capitalist forces based on private interest, and was all but temporary. Modernisation of the municipal waterworks was not to “improve the conditions of the poor but to enhance the economic efficiency of urban space for capital investment” (ibid.), and furthermore the “water revolution” (ibid.) of advanced plumbing and bathing facilities was largely confined to the middle classes. Those with higher incomes were also able to import spring water and buy clean water through other means when pollution and sewage drainage issues in the Croton aqueduct arose. However, again, municipal authorities stepped in and put laws in place to ensure a basic standard of water hygiene and facilities in all new housing including tenement housing for the poor.

Comment: Introduces us to the empirical examples, but reminds us that what the author says about water stands in for environmental resources in general; there is a good sense here of relating back to the wider themes of the question, even when being specific.

Comment: In general it is best to avoid abbreviations. Here, it would be better to write ‘New York’, having established (by ‘New York City’) that this refers to the city rather than to the state of New York.

Comment: Again, the author is decisive (‘right from the beginning ... pressures of overpopulation ... created a social gap’), gaining the confidence of the reader.

Comment: This ‘(ibid.)’ [short for *ibidem*, Latin for ‘in the same place’, and used where a reference is the same as the one just cited] is too far away from the reference it connects to; it might be better to repeat ‘(Gandy, 2002)’ here.

Comment: The use of ‘may’ in the last sentence of this paragraph again widens out the specific example, suggesting that this situation may be found in other places, and the conclusion about the overriding of elite interests is something akin to a principle. Confident writing.

Comment: This paragraph says something in summary about the new relationships with nature, but also builds on the promise, in the introduction, to talk about new forms of consciousness of that relationship with nature. All of this *develops* the argument of the essay, and adds momentum as well as complexity.

Comment: Excellent examples of quotations from the source material, picking up on what Gandy (2002) has to say about ‘public and private’ – a central theme of the question and the essay – and also about ‘vision’, or consciousness – the central point of this paragraph.

Comment: Good example of a student accepting contradictory views, reporting them fairly and offering detail, but then countering with a clear statement about why we should accept that the poor did benefit from the water revolution, whatever the differential benefits. Irrespective of the specifics, this is good practice – don’t just *note* the different views, argue *which* perspective is more relevant or convincing in the context of the essay.

In a similar situation was Boston with the completion of its first municipal water system in 1848. Like NYC, it was urban reformers and working class¹⁸ supporters who wanted a public system while the wealthy and tax-averse Bostonians opposed it, as illustrated by the four petitions for public water and four remonstrances against it in 1838. The average real estate tax contributed by petitioners was approximately 25% that paid by remonstrants (A Selfish Taxpayer, 1844, cited in Rawson, 2010), clearly showing how it was the less well-off who were in support of a public system whereby water could be delivered more equitably among citizens, versus a private system whereby water was a commodity and only sold to those who could afford it (Rawson, 2010).¹⁹ Even though the public system was eventually executed, the poor still had little access to running water in their apartments due to the unwillingness of landlords to install such facilities in tenement housing, and they were restricted to using new public hydrants installed throughout the city instead. Besides the tangible divide between rich and poor Bostonians in their ease of access to clean water, in terms of discourse and representation, the “image used to represent waterworks also reflected concerns of the rich” (ibid.), and government reports on the new system ignored those who continued to be denied access to running water, but focused on those who could afford up-to-date plumbing facilities.

Comment: If we are being picky, as an adjective, describing particular ‘supporters’ of public water, this should have a hyphen: ‘working-class supporters’.

Comment: This paragraph proposes Boston as a readily comparable city, adding substance to the New York example, and making it clear that New York was not an isolated case. The author argues that the poor did benefit from the public works, even if they were not put on an equal footing as the rich in terms of access to water resources.

Thus, the case studies of NYC and Boston and their public water systems highlight the changing physical and representational relationships between the city and the natural world in the nineteenth to early twentieth century, and their resultant effects on the dynamics between societal groups. While the rich were always advantaged vis-à-vis the poor, in NYC municipal authorities managed to implement laws to ensure a more equitable distribution of water-related resources, whereas in Boston the rich continued to dominate the public water system. There is also some irony in the fact that the motivations behind constructing a municipal water system in NYC were more private-oriented, whereas those in Boston were more public-oriented, with the city authorities offering to connect private buildings to water mains at public expense (ibid.), yet resulted in rather opposite outcomes.²⁰

Comment: This paragraph is a good summary of what the comparison of and contrast between Boston and New York tells us. It is helpful to the reader to have these clear statements of what the author thinks we should think. ‘Rather opposite outcomes’ is both weak and oxymoronic (something is either opposite or it is not...), however, and could easily be rewritten as, say, ‘resulted in nearly diametrically opposed outcomes’, or ‘broadly contrasting outcomes’, or some such.

Rapidly growing cities such as Boston and Seattle needed to maximize their land in order to accommodate population growth and new needs.²¹ In Seattle, this meant the construction of new transport network and investment in the waterfront commons; in Boston, this meant the literal growth of Boston through annexation and making land by building on tidal flats. Both these urban strategies required a careful assessment of public and private interests, as well as the effects of new relationships with the natural environment on the rich and the poor.

Comment: This paragraph’s concerns (and those of the next two) might have been introduced more deftly. This does add another aspect to the argument – not merely the provision of clear water but also the amenity value (for the general public, and for private investors) of waterfront land – and here the author decides to contrast Boston and Seattle. But the development of the argument is a bit abrupt as it stands.

At its initial stages of growth, Seattle lacked a transport system that connected efficiently to the other parts of West America, and it also lacked investment because of the unclear boundary between water and land along the waterfront (Kingle, 2007). First, it undertook a renovation of the watershed to create a more distinct boundary so as to sell land off to investors, as “by changing geography, they believed they would conjure up real estate” (ibid.).²² The private investors, who wanted to develop this land as well as improve transportation infrastructure so that land value would appreciate, marketed such developments as for the sake of public interest, although opponents voiced their worries

Comment: Another good example of how an excellent quotation can work – this quotation sums up an argument very quickly, and of course it marshals support for the author’s argument.

that private development of land would deprive citizens of once public space. However, due to capitalistic tendencies that guided the growth of American cities, the commodification of land was merely another step towards establishing new relationships with the natural world, and between groups within society.²³

To improve transportation links, the city used public funds to build railroads and a canal to link the tidelands to the central areas and surrounding cities. The first tideland grant was issued to build the Walla Walla Railroad, which gave investors the “choice point of entry into the city” (ibid.) in order to control the Seattle Waterfront. Companies and individuals then made use of the process of “adverse possession” (ibid.) i.e.²⁴ gradually adding rocks and sediments to expand private property in order to create real estate that could be sold off for extra profits. This was done with the help of mostly lowly paid Chinese labourers, and this brought out a tension within the low-income group, as white labourers felt that such foreign labour was unfair competition and they were crowding out jobs. Yet, market forces compelled investors to continue using the cheapest forms of labour possible, so as to maximise private gain. The South Canal was built in order to increase accessibility of the waterfront and address flooding problems faced by the city (public interest), however, like the railroads, it was marketed as a system of public transportation yet “both were ultimately used to acquire and sell off real estate for private gain” (ibid.).

Similarly, Boston also had a harbour that was initially used by individual landowners to expand their land through pushing the boundary between land and water (Rawson, 2010). In this case, though, the tensions were not clearly between private and public interests, nor between the rich and the poor. Both harbour protection as well as continued land-making and resource extraction could be seen as beneficial to public interest; private interests were divided between the protection of the harbour (which could accommodate Boston’s increasing prominence as a commercial port), and the development of land which would benefit railroad and real estate investors. Instead of a private-public battle of interests, it was a changed paradigm towards the relationship between city and nature that determined the outcome of this dilemma. Newer ideas of nature as a resource requiring careful management had replaced ideas of nature as a set of resilient resources, and the theory of tidal scour that emerged from this debate was then used to protect the harbour.²⁵

“Across America, the building of cities promoted a complete restructuring of the natural world to accommodate larger populations and to fulfil new social and economic goals” (Rawson, 2010). In American cities such as Boston, Seattle and NYC in the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, the new relationships between the city and nature brought about by rapid development, and that between these relationships and societal tensions, were far from being unilateral. Changing relationships between city and the natural environment did reveal certain tensions between groups within society (with divides drawn along class, private-public, and other lines, but more importantly one should note that the urban process itself “fundamentally constitutes a political-ecological process, one that shapes the process of production of urban natures” (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2004). The tensions within urban society were themselves fundamental in constructing new relationships between cities and the natural world, as the different outcomes in each city despite similar circumstances clearly reveal.²⁶

Comment: This last sentence of this paragraph is tendentious (not wholly convincing), but in its generalizing force, and its reference to the themes of the question, its advantages (as a strong, generalizing statement) outweigh the disadvantages.

Comment: Again, avoid using contractions such as ‘i.e.’ or ‘e.g.’; these look lazy and half-hearted in an essay format.

Comment: Some of this paragraph is a bit clumsy, and the tidal scour argument needs more detail and introduction, but the essence of the contrast with Seattle is reasonably well explained.

Comment: This conclusion proceeds by way of a quotation asserting the significance of American society’s restructured relationship with nature, and notes the complexity of the social tensions with which this reworked urban nature was enmeshed; this argument is enlarged to take in all cities at all times (‘the urban process’). This conclusion is reasonable rather than spectacular, but it serves its purpose in more or less adequately summarising the argument of the preceding paragraphs, and its basis on a comparison of the three American urban examples, whilst also widening things out usefully in its general assertions.

Bibliography²⁷

Comment: This bibliography is exemplary: well laid out, properly alphabetised and accurate.

Benton-Short, L. and Short, J. R. (2007) *Cities and Nature*. London: Routledge.

Gandy, M. (2002) *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*. London: MIT Press.

Klingle, M. (2007) *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle*. London: Yale University Press.

Lemon, J. T. (1996) *Liberal Dreams and Nature's Limits: Great Cities of North America Since 1600*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rawson, M. (2010) *Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston*. London: Harvard University Press.

Rosen, C. M. and Tarr, J. A. (1994) 'The importance of an urban perspective in environment history', *Journal of Urban History*, 20(3): 299-310.

Swyngedouw, E. and Heynen, N. C. (2004) 'Urban political ecology, justice, and the politics of scale', *Antipode*, 35(5): 898-91

Finally, if we were to break down this essay into its component parts, we might find a straightforward structure, something like this:

1. Introduction (paragraphs 1 and 2)
2. Remarks on the complexity of private and public interests (paragraphs 3 and 4)
3. On the provision of municipal water (paragraph 5)
 - a. New York City (paragraphs 6-8)
 - b. Boston (paragraph 9)
 - c. Intermediate conclusions of the comparison between New York and Boston (paragraph 10)
4. On the production and alienation of waterfront land (paragraph 11)
 - a. Seattle (paragraphs 12 and 13)
 - b. Boston (paragraph 14)
5. Conclusions (paragraph 15)

Clearly this is only one interpretation, and it lacks the detail of the particular argument, which, if summed up, would be something like the following: that the new relationships between society and the natural world that developed in the United States were inseparable from the inevitable tensions within urban society between different groups; these tensions revealed themselves in the competition between 'public' and 'private' interests, but we should be careful to note that these categories do not map neatly on to the interests of the poor and the rich respectively. Instead, these interests were complex and dynamic, taking different forms in different cities, particularly insofar as these interests took form in urban consciousness and were represented in urban politics. For all these complexities and specifics, we can learn from the American historical experience valuable lessons about the urban process and the political ecology of all cities.