

## **Review: The Culture of Flushing: A Social and Legal History of Sewage**

By Jamie Benidickson

Reviewed by Peter C. Little  
Oregon State University, USA

Benidickson, Jamie. *The Culture of Flushing: A Social and Legal History of Sewage*. Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2007. 404pp. ISBN: 978-0-7748-1292-4. US\$29.95, paper.

Reminiscent of “risk society” scholarship, as pointed out in the foreword by Graeme Wynn, *The Culture of Flushing* offers another study of the dark side (or the sludge) of modernity that explores murky dimensions of risk society that have seen little attention from social and legal historical scholars: municipal water management, waste water treatment, and the formation and transformation of a legal system designed to manage sewage.

Most impressive is Benidickson’s comparative approach which offers a rich historical analysis of the legal politics of flushing in Britain, the United States, and Canada. The book highlights not only national differences in legal culture, and thus national differences in the management of aquatic pollution, but also the multiple ways in which “professionals whose trans-Atlantic careers and exchanges encouraged the continuing diffusion of learning the public health and sanitary engineering communities” (p. 9). The international and exchange of engineering expertise and management practices “nurtured flushing on a grand scale” (p. 4) and had critical impact on the culture of flushing. In this way, *The Culture of Flushing* attends to legal systems for managing sewage in urban environmental by comparing and contrasting the practices and consequences of flushing in core global cities, including Toronto, Chicago, New York, and London.

*The Culture of Flushing* is grounded by a detailed history of flushing. Beginning with the development of water laws in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the formation of a coalition of Surfers against Sewage or Surfriders who are fighting to safeguard coastal waters, Benidickson shows how the connections between industrial development, urbanization, and water quality are critical issues of both the present and the past. Benidickson tells the story of flushing in an attempt to bring attention to a history that has been flushed down the drain, a history of water and society that has escaped historical and legal critique.

The concluding chapter argues that understanding the legal history of such water politics has implications for how flushing will be understood and debated in the future. Efforts to make the future of natural resource management in general and sewage treatment and management in particular more sustainable may require a deeper knowledge of industrial activities, the contentious relationship between industry, natural resources, and municipal water management and policy. Moreover, “[t]he legacy of flushing, a foundation of the civilization we have inherited, is psychological and cultural as well as physical” (p. 323). Since *The Culture of Flushing* provides a limited focus on the cultural history of flushing for Britain, the United States, and Canada, readers might be left asking to what extent a comparative analysis that includes cultures of, for example, the South, could shed a critical and informative light on water resource management practices in the North, and vice versa. Informing future water policy and planning will come down to advances in collaborative governance and the adoption of critical ecosystem perspectives: “Given that ecosystems transcend typical jurisdictional boundaries, ecosystem management calls for structures and procedures that enhance cooperation between governments, agencies, and communities in ways that have often been lacking in our response to wastewater” (p. 331).

Overall, Benidickson, a scholar of law and social and environmental history, has written an important book that fits well with the work of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens on ‘risk society’, and will be of interest to specialists in public policy, environmental history, law, political ecology, environmental anthropology, and public health. Without a doubt, *The Culture of Flushing* makes for great bathroom reading.

Peter C. Little <littlepe@onid.orst.edu>, PhD candidate, Department of Anthropology, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, USA.

**Electronic Green Journal, Issue 27, Fall 2008, ISSN: 1076-7975**