



[book review] **Urban Histories of Science: Making Knowledge in the City, 1820–1940** , by Oliver Hochadel and Agustí Nieto-Galan, eds.

Déborah Dubald

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A collection of ten contributions, *Urban Histories of Science* takes the reader across Europe to Athens, Barcelona, Budapest, Buenos Aires, Dublin, Glasgow, Helsinki, Lisbon, Naples, drawing on the important renewal of the history of science through the perspective of place, and urban spaces in particular. After over a decade of research programmes, the book was also the culmination of editors Oliver Hochadel and Agustí Nieto-Galan's effort in bringing together a diversity of researchers to question the relations between science and the city. Far from being isolated in the historiographical landscape, the book stands next to a wealth of important contributions on the history of how cities were paramount as sites of the production of science and knowledge, as much as they were themselves objects of scientific inquiry.¹ On a larger scale, this collective work also appears as a strong response to the spatial turn and the school of historical geography's plea to place science and take a localist turn.²

Urban Histories of Science not only stands in the wake of earlier research. It also offers a contribution to the urban history of science by shedding new light on how sciences and knowledge produced urban hierarchies, and by seeking to frame the very notion of periphery and its applicability to this field of study. Almost all cases are national capitals, unevenly consolidated in times of bolstering nation-building, but all of them caught in tensions between political centrality and geographical periphery, especially in relation to models of modernity represented by the great European centres. Through the diverse spatial coverage of the cases studied, ranging from South to North, East to West of Europe and an extension branching out to Argentina, the book engages fruitfully in documenting and analysing cities of 1900, escaping any overarching discourses of modernity. The width of the chronological scope of the work also serves to accommodate the many contexts and temporalities of the 1900 turn, challenging a classical chronology of progress.

Provocatively, the authors opted for the rejection of the term "periphery" to designate their cases, despite their research having been partially conducted under the flag of the "Science and technology on the European Periphery (step)" network. At the time of formalising their publication, authors eventually regarded "periphery" as lacking consistency, being too

¹ Antonella Romano and Stéphane Van Damme, "Sciences et villes-mondes, XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 55, no. 2 (2008): 7–18, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rhmc.552.0007>; Sven Dierig, Jens Lachmund, and J. Andrew Mendelsohn, "Introduction: Toward an Urban History of Science," *Osiris* 18 (2003): 1–19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3655282>; Bert De Munck and Antonella Romano, eds., *Knowledge and the Early Modern City: A History of Entanglements* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2020).

² David N. Livingstone and Charles W.J. Withers, *Geographies of Nineteenth-Century Science* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); Steven Shapin, "Placing the View from Nowhere: Historical and Sociological Problems in the Location of Science," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 23, no. 1 (1998): 5–12, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/623153>.

“mainstream” and posing even more difficulty: the fixation on the term “periphery” entailed “[perpetuating] stereotypes and colonial vistas” (p. 3), authors explain in the introduction.

The book was therefore freed from the term “periphery” as a way to challenge the “myth of modernity” (p. 4) associated with Parisian and London metropolises, and to “liberate narratives” and embrace context-dependent, plural modernities (p. 5). Through a “side by side” disposition of cases in the chapters, the book does indeed produce a strong impression of plurality, woven together by a theoretical introduction that guides understanding in this rich panorama of situations. The book aims at going beyond historians’ positivistic reflexes and provides methodological tools for this purpose. In most contributions, cities are examined through the lens of specific places of knowledge or scientific events—which feeds into an interesting analysis of the city through a nesting of scales. By no means does the urban space find itself miniaturised within these places. Rather, the articles show how designated points of the city contained, absorbed, and diffused imaginaries of modernity, like Trinity College and the Royal College of Science in Dublin (O’Sullivan, pp. 102–121), the Stazione Zoologica in Naples (Steiner, pp. 80–101), the Dublin zoo (Adelman, pp. 122–140)—or precisely remained cut off from it like the observatory in Athens (Rentetzi & Flevaris, pp. 16–36). The case of the Hungarian Society for the Advancement of Science’s meetings in Budapest (Straner, pp. 59–79) helps better understand how the scientific question, in a moment of intense faith in progress, went far beyond certain institutions to take shape in the whole urban fabric but also in extended social worlds. This is particularly salient in the collective expertise in Helsinki urban planning (Karppinen, pp. 164–185): the sciences supplied legitimacy to the municipal power in Budapest or to the national power at an exhibition in Barcelona (Mallart, pp. 208–226), fed urbanistic projects of modernisation in Buenos Aires (Armus, pp. 186–207), reached the less literate social groups through the illustrated press in Lisbon (Simoes, pp. 141–163), provided work for the poorest working-class of Naples. Thus, the study of processes of scientific knowledge production illuminates cases of cities grappling with symbolic power as they relied on expertise and know-how (e.g. learned societies) together with specific materialities (e.g. collections), and reveals the concrete articulations between science, urban social spaces and identities, as in the case of Glasgow (Marsden, pp. 37–58).

The cases in this volume are mostly national capital cities or cities ambiguously representing national communities without the political title, like Dublin. The ambition of the book is to offer a fresh examination of the science-nation-city triangle by looking through the glass of the city, namely taking a step back from state to smaller scales of nation-building. This approach is useful to take distance from an all too normative reading of the triangle. A possible pitfall of bringing together undifferentiated examples of capital and non-capital cities bound together with an assumed peripherality as a sole common denominator may have led to excessive smoothing out of power relationships and hierarchies. On the contrary, quite a few resonances between cases appear on the question of the negotiated centrality of these urban centres, and notably the constructed dimension of their political identity. In this respect, the book succeeds in showing in a very concrete way how science integrated a political discourse of legitimation and naturalisation of dominance—one surprising case being the story of the lion-cubs nursed by an Irish setter (p. 135) in an attempt to naturalise

Dublin as the second capital of the British empire. These individual and negotiated situations have the great merit of offering a dynamic landscape, far from the fixed image of long-established hierarchies.

The announced ambition, at the start of the work, of highlighting the agency of urban space led to perhaps less convincing results, especially as this interrogation suffered from insufficient theoretical framing and uneven questioning throughout the contributions. The very interesting question of the “natures” of the city could have provided a more fruitful weaving thread: the notion of “socio-natural” (p. 10) relationships in the introduction was indeed thought-provoking but was hardly mentioned after. Some chapters did provide detail of how material environments and urban societies were finely linked. However, attention to the urban environment as a relational space between humans and non-humans, partly explored with the animals of the zoo in Dublin, the urban presence of water and marine species, could perhaps have strengthened the authors’ ambition to demonstrate that the urban space is not just a surface on which actor gameplay unfolds.

In conclusion, *Urban Histories of Science* is a welcome contribution to strengthen a literature of de-naturalization of science, by effectively accounting for its social and political essence.

Déborah Dubald,
University of Strasbourg, Strasbourg, France