

Book Reviews

Judith Walzer Leavitt. *The Healthiest City: Milwaukee and the Politics of Health Reform* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

When analyzing the progress and growth of any major American city, one might believe those responsible for creating and sustaining a suitable environment for healthy citizens would have a sufficient system in place for the welfare of the common good. As Judith Leavitt discussed in *The Healthiest City* (1996), appearances, even on the highest of government levels, are not always as they seem.

Leavitt focused on the city of Milwaukee and its rapid growth and development from 1850 – 1930. The city, as she describes was ill-prepared to face a major population boom, industrial growth, and pollution. Leavitt addressed the major issues and solutions associated with each and researched how the practice of politics harmed and helped the city to be named the healthiest city in America in 1930. The positive and negative occurrences of political and public discord, as citizens established programs and municipalities sought to establish stable health programs to combat “infectious disease, sanitation, the environment, and food regulation” was the central focus of the transition of Milwaukee.¹ Leavitt’s focus on Milwaukee’s triple-digit growth from 1850 to the turn of the century substantiates the city’s inability to compensate for its growth and lack of preparedness was essential to her work. From 1850 to 1880, the population increased by over 200%. The population rate increased over the next thirty years and by 1910 Milwaukee’s population increased by another 150%.²

Like the population increase, immigration into Milwaukee also played an important role in the overall ability to combat disease. As German and Polish immigrants migrated into Milwaukee, their desire for autonomy and freedom from big government was often met with conditions in the city such as filth, disease, and an intrusive government. Unfairly, these new residents were often characterized as “dirty” and as a part of the problem versus pieces to the solution.

Despite the population boom and immigration difficulties, it was the inability of the government to connect with the population that posed the greatest problem. Leavitt often described city officials as those who bore the brunt of dismayed citizens. Leavitt addressed two underlying reasons for the dissention between both parties: personnel and money. In the early boom between 1878 and 1881, politics became a major obstacle as various factions sought power as health reformers focused on profit over people and each were “reluctant to allocate new funds until situations proved so desperate they had no choice.”³ She also drew an interesting correlation between the ineffectiveness of municipalities when corporate interests become involved in matters

¹ Judith W. Leavitt, *The Healthiest City: Milwaukee and the Politics of Health Reform* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), xiv.

² Leavitt, 11.

³ Leavitt, 49.

of public interest. As Republicans and Socialists battled for political ground in 1889, the public suffered the consequences of political neglect.

When politics failed to stem the tide of disease in the city, the citizens of Milwaukee formed various groups to create change and progress. Physicians, politicians, clergy, and other volunteer groups such as: The City Club of Milwaukee, Child Welfare Commission, and the Society for the Care of the Sick, all worked together to establish citizen-based organizations designed to aid the sick and reform municipal deficiencies. Even under the banner of common good, many things affected their ability to work together such as “medical or technical knowledge, economic interests, inter-urban competition, political ideologies, ethnic diversity, corruption, inefficiency and simple frustration.”⁴

One victory came in the establishment of The Health Commission in 1878. Leavitt summarized the office as successfully instituting an increase in vaccinations and improving city-wide sanitation despite the growing concern for lack of monetary surplus to do so. While the office was often swayed by political influences, a handful of hard-working physicians dedicated themselves to its office and the prospects of successful reforms often falling short of its mission.

Despite its small success, the office of The Health Commissioner fell short of becoming a vital part of Milwaukee’s overall change. Politics, often a failure according to Leavitt, achieved collective success in 1910. The Socialist party, consistent of a diverse group of people ranging from “professionals, trade-union Socialists, Populists, and reform Republicans” who all place political ambitions aside all to combat illness and government corruption.⁵ This was a key component to the Socialist philosophy as they sought to end corruption from the process of health reform to benefit the collective masses by municipal ownership verses a decentralized form of government control. The Socialist movement started strong, however, the many different levels of belief and philosophy ultimately led to the party’s demise. Despite the short two-year stint of political control the Socialists effective measures carries over into the twentieth century.

Overall, Leavitt was able to assess the problems of the coming of age of Milwaukee at the turn of the twentieth century. If the “job of government is by constitutional and legislative definition to protect and preserve the public good” then it can be determined by Leavitt’s research that Milwaukee’s government initially failed.⁶ These failures originated at the grass roots level of its citizens and ascended to municipal levels. This “gap” in caused public mistrust and damaged credibility of Milwaukee’s government. She addressed the eventual changes within the health department and its ability to bridge the gap between citizen and government for the common good. Leavitt displayed credible evidence showing the evolvement in Milwaukee’s government and how its vision and philosophy, not just of healthcare, but of the care of the public went beyond politics to the care of Milwaukee’s most important asset- its people.

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⁴ Leavitt, 5.

⁵ Leavitt, 21.

⁶ Leavitt, xvi.