**The Re-Invention of Modern Life**

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**Introduction**

The Ghost Map is a story by Steven Johnson. It has four main protagonists; a big city, deadly bacteria and two different men who both happen to be immensely gifted. These four protagonists accidentally meet in Soho, London’s Broad Street amidst human suffering and great terror. It is a interwoven story that touches on ideologies of life, changes in human society and how old ideas are continuously replaced by new ones. However, it’s most underlying issue is its argument on how a terrible week could turn out to be the defining moment in the invention of modern life. In this paper, I will use the existing conditions in Soho before the cholera outbreak of 1854 and the changes it brought to life in the city after. Hence, my focus will be on how that terrible week in Soho served as a defining moment in the invention of modern life for the city, London itself and the world over.

**Re-Invention of Modern Life**

In August 1854, London was a full of scavengers. These were classified into different classes with exotic zoological names to fit their line of work. These included the bone pickers, toshers, rag-gatherers, dustmen, mud-larks, and night-soil-men. These were typically the underclass members of the city and were at least one thousand strong. Their numbers were quite immense; to the point that they would have formed the fifth-largest city in England should they have opted to establish a city of their own. The intriguing part about them was their diversity and the precision with which they carried out their work. The tashers woke up early to wade through the low muck tide of the Thames River. “Accounts of London’s repulsive conditions inevitably imagined the city as a unified organism, a sprawling, cancerous body laid out along the Thames.” (Johnson 89) On the rivers sides, children dressed in tatters scavenged for all the waste that the toshers found useless including oak wood and lumps of coal. Pure Finders, on the other hand, eked a living by collecting shit from dogs. Sewer hunters worked in the underground tunnels beneath London’s streets. As can be seen, the scavengers can be described as living in a world of death and excrement.

Looking at today’s world, these homeless people continue to haunt the post-industrial cities. However, they differ slightly from the ones in Soho in 1854. First, the scavengers get government assistance and minimum wages which have been raised substantially. This assistance makes scavenging a less sensible way of making any economic gains. (Something to note is that in countries with no government support scavenging remains a viable occupation. Eg. Mexico) Two, cities have come up with elaborate waste management systems hence the bin collectors’ work is no longer needed.

Even by today’s standards, London was vast even in 1854 boasting a population of two and a half million people. The techniques used to manage such a population density had not been invented at the time including safe sewage removal, public health departments, and recycling centers. The city, therefore, improvised a way to deal with the growing population density. These ways included; underground markets developed for the vast refuse; specialists emerged to move this ‘good’ to the respective sites, and buyers knew from whom to buy their raw materials. (Dog shit was sold to tanners, bone sellers sold their products to bone-boilers.) This specialization of duties is widely spread across all walks of life.

Recycling of waste is one of the best ideas pushed by environmentalists. One is thus tempted to assume that this is an idea forwarded by the modern environmental movement. This includes the blue plastic bags which we currently fill with soda cans and detergent bottles. However, the assumption that waste recycling is a modern art is not valid. Waste recycling played a huge role in the growth of many medieval European towns. For instance, much of the building materials of medieval Rome were pilfered from the crumbling ruins of the imperial city. Further, decomposing waste from the towns was added to the soil to improve food productivity. The addition of decomposing waste increased food productivity for the growing population of people settling in the cities. Since the cities lacked highways and container ships to bring decent amounts of food, recycling waste ensured the people living in towns had a steady and reliable supply of food to sustain the levels of energy needed to build the city.

The above concept of waste recycling is clearly identifiable in the book The Ghost Map. The writer’s description of Victoria London does not fail to mention the stench in the city. While some of the stenches were attributed to the industrial fuels used at the time, the most profound source of this smell was the decomposing waste. Bacteria were steadily decomposing organic matter producing fumes of methane whose stench filled the entire public-health infrastructures. The late summer period of 1854 witnessed a revolution in waste disposal as London witnessed one of the deadliest battles between man and microbes. Steven described this aspect “Right now we’re in an arms race with the microbes, because, effectively, we’re operating on the same scale that they are. The viruses are both our enemy and our arms manufacturer.” (Johnson) Cholera was widespread across the city killing the residents in the numbers. Dealing with this epidemic led the city to come up with better ways of dealing with decomposing waste and up to date, London has a well elaborate waste disposal mechanism whose foundations can be traced back to the waste disposal mechanisms of the residents of Soho during the cholera outbreak.

In the decade following the plague of 1854, Soho would become one of the most fashionable neighborhoods in London. Going back to the 1690s, almost a hundred families were living in Soho. In 1717, Leicester House which is located in Soho was chosen by the Prince and Princess of Wales as their living place. Golden Square was also built with elegance like the townhouses of Georgian. Golden Square was thus a haven in comparison to houses in neighboring areas such as the Piccadilly Circus a few blocks to the south. The elites continued their inexorable march towards the west as they built even bigger estates and townhouses in the Mayfair neighborhood representing a new class of middle-class people. One of the most famous residents of Soho was William Blake, who would go on to become one of the best poets and artists England ever had.

Besides all this, Soho city increased its industrial growth, old money was replaced, landlords split the townhouses into different flats and the neighborhood became even grittier. Other notable changes included new stables, impromptu junkyards, and jury rugged extensions. These deplorable conditions were not welcoming to the wealthy and thus the city remained full of lower class citizens. Perhaps, due to the unsanitary and crowded conditions, the city became a hotbed of creativity. Poets, musicians, sculptors and philosophers settled in the city. Edmund Burke, William Hogarth, Fanny Burney are unique people who settled in Soho at one point in their life.

In the book Steven says “However profound the threats are that confront us today, they are solvable, if we acknowledge the underlying problem, if we listen to science and not superstition, if we keep a channel open for dissenting voices that might actually have real answers”. (Johnson 256) As can be seen from all the above, Steven Johnson shows how that one week in 1854 led to significant re-inventions of life as we see it today and continue to have significant benefits to human society. The recycling of wastes, specialization of people and the invention of new mechanisms of waste disposal are just some of the more prominent re-inventions that can be tracked back to that one fateful week in Soho in 1854. [[1]](#endnote-1)

References

Johnson, Steven. The ghost map : a street, an epidemic and two men who battled to save Victorian London. London: Penguin, 2008.

1. Read more of the re-inventions of modern life in the review of The Ghost Map by Mike Brooks [↑](#endnote-ref-1)