

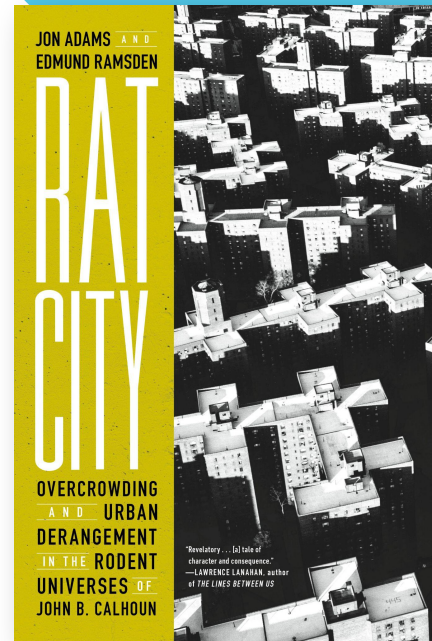
RAT CITY

Overcrowding and Urban Derangement in the Rodent Universes of John B. Calhoun

Jon Adams, Edmund Ramsden

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“A largely fascinating book combining sociology, nature, and urban studies.”
— *Kirkus*

“*Rat City* deftly explores his vision and its reverberations on the social life of Americans, with our lonely crowds, empty skyscrapers, and psychotic incels. It’s history that feels all too relevant.”
— *Dan Piepenbring, co-author of *The Beautiful Ones**

NOTE TO THE READER

In 1946, John B. Calhoun, an ecologist from rural Tennessee, was employed to help suppress a booming rat population in Baltimore. Working in the city’s back alleys, he discovered that rat behaviour was governed by a complex network of social relations. The crucial factor controlling their numbers wasn’t only available food, but available space. When population density increased, rat society broke down.

To study the rats more closely, Calhoun built an artificial city block—the first of his legendary “rodent universes.” Over the next three decades, Calhoun constructed a series of evermore elaborate enclosures—rat cities—where he modelled in miniature the urban condition. Against a backdrop of slum clearances, rising crime, and civil unrest, Calhoun came to believe that for humans, no less than rats, where we lived affected how we behaved. With Cold War America focused on the Space Race, Calhoun assembled his own team of “Space Cadets”—comprising anthropologists, architects, city planners, psychiatrists and sociologists—to lobby for the importance of personal space.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Of all the available animals, why do Calhoun and so many of his contemporaries consider the rat such a good model for experimentation? In what ways are comparisons between rats and humans controversial?
2. Ecology is a relatively new field when Calhoun begins his research, but very soon, the term “ecology” starts appearing in the social sciences, health research, and even computer programming. What is “ecological” thinking, and why does it become so popular?
3. What is meant by “overpopulation,” and why did it seem so important in the 1960s? Why were concerns about overpopulation so controversial? Do you think overpopulation remains a problem?
4. Calhoun encounters many different “model” environments—Sherman’s swift tower, beetles in a test tube, mites on an orange, and of course Calhoun’s own rat cities. What are the advantages, and the drawbacks, of studying an organism in an artificial habitat?

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5. Calhoun remembers that the metal crates used by his fellow animal researchers in the 1950s make him “squeamish.” How does Calhoun’s approach to animal research differ from his contemporaries, and—considering the conditions his rodents endure—is his version of animal research any more ethical?
6. In what ways were studies of crowding useful to public policy? What are some of the benefits and limitations of using density as a measure of health and welfare in public policy, e.g. housing reform, slum clearance, institutions?
7. Having argued both that the crowding in cities is harmful and also that the bustle of city centers can be positive, Calhoun’s group of Space Cadets settle on “privacy” as a crucial requirement for mental wellbeing and social harmony. How does “privacy” differ from “isolation”?
8. Why did social and behavioral studies of urban environments fall out of favor in the National Institute of Mental Health in the 1970s?
9. Calhoun’s later work involved designing systems for global communication: why did he think that communication networks were so important? What did Calhoun mean by a “Global Alerting System,” does such a system exist today?
10. Between the few dominant rats and the masses of low-ranking submissive rodents, Calhoun identified a class of “creative deviants.” What did he mean by “creative deviant” and why did he think they were valuable?



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Edmund Ramsden is an historian of science at Queen Mary University of London, with an interest in the history of the social, behavioral and biological sciences in the 20th century.

Jon Adams is a former BBC New Generation Thinker and author of *Interference Patterns: Literary Study, Scientific Knowledge, and Disciplinary Autonomy*.

They both previously worked at the London School of Economics, where they began collaborating on the history and influence of John B. Calhoun’s rodent crowding experiments.



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