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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Manuel Guardia, Francisco Javier Monclus, Jose Luis Oyon. *Atlas historico de ciudades europeas. I Peninsula Iberica*. Barcelona, Salvat / Centre de Cultura Contemporania de Barcelona: Hachette, 1994. xv + 335. ISBN 978-84-345-5681-2.

Jean-Luc Pinol, ed. *Atlas historique des villes de France*. Paris: Hachette, 1996. xv + 318 pp. 395 FF (cloth), ISBN 978-2-01-235192-9.

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As a reader, I must say I hardly wait for the next issue of the historical atlas of European cities, which should be devoted to the British Islands. It will, indeed, be a pleasure to see Manchester, Dublin, Edinburgh and others submitted to the treatment that already has analyzed ten French cities, nine Spanish towns and the two largest cities in Portugal. Waiting for this moment, I feel like throwing a first glance to compare the two existing issues.

Those who would like to imagine the difficulties confronted by the project leaders can read Terry Slater's review about the historical atlases of towns, initiated by the International Commission for the History of Towns in 1955.[1] It is a heavy burden to establish guidelines, to have them respected, to find scholars for the unthankful task of synthesis, to mobilize energies in several cities and countries. The fate of this other international project shows these difficulties: incoherent scales of the maps, very different approaches, and various contents or sizes of the local and national items make their comparative use impossible. Or so Slater wrote, with a bit of disillusion in his pen. I must share his opinion, considering the French outcomes of his project (some forty items on small and medium cities). Well, of course, taken one by one, they bring valuable information. Consider side by side two booklets, let's say the one on Provins and the one on Epinal (Editions du CNRS), two small French provincial towns. The plans are of different sizes, scales and dates, they are difficult to read, and they give information only for the medieval and 19th century. As for the

texts, it is very short for Epinal and very developed for Provins. They are, like the maps, essentially focused on public buildings, but the Provins one contains useful elements on sewers and other urban infrastructure. They are nevertheless close to the genre of the "historical digest" that is more interested in the "great hours" of the cities than in the viewing of the urban fabric. Anyway, in both cases, all information stops after the mid-19th century.

The aim of the *Historic atlas of European towns* is very different. Planned in 1991 by a European team (Manuel Guardia, Francisco Javier Monclus, Jose Luis Oyon, Richard Rodger, Thomas Hall, Michael Wagenaar, and Giampaolo Trotta), it aims to be an international and interdisciplinary project, rooted in the tradition of atlases as basic tools for knowledge, giving comparable information for a sample of big European cities (some ten per country). The two existing volumes are built on the same frame, with a general essay on urbanization, followed by the chapters devoted to each city, with each theme or period developed on two pages. The Centre de Cultura Contemporania de Barcelona cares for the iconographic side of the work, ensuring the homogeneity of the general product. A common set of questions was given to the authors, to assure comparability. Each of us can imagine how this aim was difficult to achieve, with national teams of some twenty to thirty persons, writing far away from the concerns and commitment of the project masterbuilders.

The comparison of the two existing volumes show that these hard tasks have accomplished as much as possible in the present state of the academic world. The reading of the two volumes gives me the feeling of a yet unreached richness of the European urban panorama, from the origins of the cities to nowadays, seen through different lenses, from the morphological one to the social one. Thus it provides a tool that we dreamt of sometimes: a mine of graphic and written information about cities in different countries. It is a common compliment to say, in a review, that a book “should be in each urban historian’s library.” It would be a crime to use here this long-lasting catch phrase. Just buy them to see what you can tell.

One can easily imagine that everything is not perfect. Of course, it can be difficult to use it for teaching. But the atlas does not pretend to be a textbook. Of course, the maps are not always of the same scale for each city. But technical factors prevent finding a common scale that could give justice to cities that are very different in size. Anyhow, the tendency to find close scales is strong. For example, the maps of growth of each city is always 1/15,000 or 1/20,000, and the reader can put two cities side by side. In this, as in all aspects of the two volumes, the success is much more important than the reproaches that can be made. So I won’t waste your time and mine underlining those criticisms.

Rather, I’d like to bring out elements that differentiate the two volumes, insisting on the way in which each one reflects a particular state of the urban studies. Of course, a complete study of the conditions through which they were produced would also imply a word or two on the human networks that were involved, but I confess not to be able to do that for the Spanish issue, so I will leave this aside, and concentrate on some formal aspects of the differences.

The first difference is regarding the authors. It is easy to notice that the Iberian ones are less numerous, but also more regularly distributed. There are fewer cities to be managed by one single author than in the French case, when the teams are nearly always made of two or three authors, and the team for Marseille reaches ten persons. Of course, it can be said that this shows the relative scarcity of Iberian urban scholarship but it also gives more coherence to each team. In fact, this is not what I found the more interesting. I’d rather underline the stronger interdisciplinarity of the Iberian team. Geographers, architecture or art historians and historians are represented in significant number, even as the leading team is composed of three architects. This strongly

contrasts with the very strong “historian” colour of the French team.

This first major difference partly explains other differences:

As I said in an earlier review,[2] the French volume devotes a large part to medieval or early modern history. The Iberian one shows the opposite balance, with a strong focus on nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially for the post-1945 period. Even if my suspect Spanish does not allow me to grasp all I seem to see when written in French, I also find these contemporary pieces much more useful than their French counterparts. Quite often, the French chapters on the post-1945 years sounded like reprints from city-boasting leaflets. Of course, the question remains of this relative lack of pre-1800 focus. The quick growth of some cities during the nineteenth century (Bilbao) can be a reason, but certainly not for Granada with its rich Muslim past, or Zaragoza with its royal heritage. What is the reason? It can be a choice of the authors, and then it might need to be explained. It could also be a consequence of a relative weakness of historical urban studies for some cities.

The general colour of the two volumes is clearly different. It can be seen from two points of view that contradict themselves. On one hand, the more complete view given by the French volume on the political and social life, compared with the Iberian focus on the urban fabric. Hence some acute contrasts: the interest in political life of the French volume is absent from the Iberian one, as the Iberian attention to technical networks is too rarely seen in the French one. On the other hand, the general feeling is that the Iberian volume is trying hard to convey a history *of* the city, as the French one tends to be about things that happen *in* cities. Hence a more encyclopedic view on the French side, but one that does not always succeed in giving us the strong feeling that radiates from the Iberian volume: being part of the growth of a city.

Of course, we know these contrasts also emanate from scientific as well as from national or disciplinary traditions. It has been a common argument about urban history to discuss the definition of a city and of urban history from Lampard, Dyos and Lubove to Charles Tilly.[3] Each of us has an answer, rather closely related to the genesis of his own interest into cities, and to his national or subdisciplinary historical ethos. Is it even useful to try to cut this Gordian knot? That would be losing the leisure of looking forward to each next issue of the Atlas, waiting to see how the British, German, and Italian urban historians will interpret their own urban partition. And

hoping that we'll see also the Slovenian, Greek, Swiss, and Scandinavian sides of this urban moon. *françaises.*

NOTES

[1]. See Terry Slater, "The European Historic Town Atlas", *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 22, no. 6, September 1996.

[2]. H-Urban, January 1997, *Atlas historique des villes*

[3]. See also Harry S. Jansen, "Wrestling with the angels: problems of definition in urban historiography", *Urban History*, vol. 23, part 3, December 1996.

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