H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joachim SchlÖ¶r. *Nights in the Big City: Paris, Berlin, London, 1840-1930.* London: Reaktion Books, 1998. x + 304 pp. $26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86189-015-3.

Reviewed by Lutz Musner (Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften, Vienna)
Published on H-Urban (January, 1999)

Joachim Schlor's monograph on the perception and experience of the night in three major European capitals between 1840 and 1930, originally published in German as *Nachts in der grossen Stadt*, is an elegantly written and well balanced book based on a broad variety of sources ranging from literature, journalistic reports, and police records to official documents of the cities' administration. It offers a detailed history of the epistemological and behavioral changes which modernization brought to the nocturnal culture of metropolitan life. It sketches how the lighting up of the city by gas and later on by electricity created a new relationship with the night; it reconstructs how the idea of "night life" emerged and how new ambivalent urban narratives of pleasure and entertainment, of horror and threatening danger, of enchantment and nightmare came into being since then, feeding a solid ensemble of associations, metaphors and images.

The contradictory and polyphonic nature of the modern city which inspired so much of twentieth century fiction, literature, film, and reportage can be traced back to the powerful trajectories which industrialization, electrification, mass consumerism, and rationalization introduced into the skeleton of the metropolis, and these forces, as a result, restructured the concept of time and space, of day and night, and of accessible and inaccessible urban spaces and topographies. The modernization of the nightly metropolis created its own specific topography of paths of flight and pursuit, of spaces of security and insecurity, of confidence and fear, of domination and subordination.

In mid nineteenth century, a process starts which "opens up" the nocturnal city, dissolving the solid walls and barriers within it that had existed before. The new freedom of market liberalism did not only offer new opportunities for trade, mobility, and migration but also posed a security problem for the authorities. The conflict between the desire for freedom and movement on the one hand and the pursuit for order and control on the other configured a broad spectrum of discourses about the ambiguities of the metropolitan night, generating not only models for urban administration but also conflicting images of the night.

Schlor is able to demonstrate that the features of the nocturnal city might even better reveal basic fundamentals of the "modern" than do the structural elements of the metropolitan day with its all too visible facts and realities of labor, leisure, economy, environment, traffic, and communication networks. The nocturnal city points at key discourses of the urban experience as the very child of the modern. It stirs up both the many opportunities for consumption and pleasure and the illusions of glamour and seduction, as well as the scandals of deviant desires and excesses, of forbidden intoxication, prostitution, and moral decay. The development of large entertainment industries such as nightclubs, variety theaters, bars and cabarets–the very core of the desired beauty of the night–was accompanied by horrifying images of an uncanny nightly underworld populated by criminals, homeless people, murderers, prostitutes, and dubious vagabonds. Criminologists, social scientists, missionaries, clergymen, and conservatives, as well as engaged social reformers and leftwing activists, engaged in a hot debate regarding how to compete with the dark site of urban modernity, how to overcome poverty, alcoholism, prostitution and crime. Schlor perfectly reconstructs the different phrasing and content of these "discourses of the criminal world" for London by using the famous case of Jack the Ripper, for Paris by pointing at the notorious street gangs called "Apaches," and for Berlin by analyzing its unique dazzling 1920s cultural arena of economic and political crisis, sparkling night life and grave social disaster.

The period from 1840 to 1930 subjected the nightly sphere of London, Paris, and Berlin to a process of far-reaching transformations which changed patterns of work and recreation, introduced new time schedules such as working hours and closing time, provided a new means of mass culture and mass entertainment, and ini-

tiated the implementation of differentiated and rationalized measures of police surveillance, public order and social reform. It also started a process of "internal urbanization," shaping a complex relational system of interaction with a rapidly developing urban environment and its manifold social fabric composed of inhabitants and migrants, locals, and strangers. These transformations brought to the fore a wide range of non-simultaneities and a-synchronicities in urban perception, exposing different social groups to different experiences and patterns of behavior in order to meet and to manage the new challenges of the industrial age. New social roles to cope with the demands, excitements, and dangers of the nocturnal metropolis–such as those of night-revelers, city travelers, flaneurs, urban reporters, night-workers and night-merchants and last but not least undercover police detectives–emerged and staged the urban theatre with hitherto unknown genres of narration and identification.

Joachim Schlor's skillful investigation of the cultural history of the nocturnal metropolis represents a fine piece of interdisciplinary research, using not only well known sources but also a variety of highly significant but so far little-known facts, texts, and stories. His interpretations are sound, sober, and thorough, and they demonstrate a gifted and productive blend of ethnographic inquiry, literary study, and historical scholarship.

However, what he could have added would have been some empirical and theoretical investigations into the ways through which the transformations of the metropolitan night life have or have not contributed to new modes of constructing remembrance and forgetting. Recently Matt Matsuda presented a thoughtful study called "The Memory of the Modern" (Oxford University Press 1996) in which he shows–by using the Parisian example in the period between 1870 and 1914–that modernity did not only favor Baudelaire's celebration of "the transitory, the fugitive, and the contingent" but also created its own evolutionary epistemology of history and new techniques of recording the past. Matsuda analyses how the locations and practices of commemoration became increasingly socially differentiated and politically instrumentalized–ranging from the new neurology about the brain's center of memory to radiographic and photographic technologies serving medical and police archivists in recording names, dates, and faces to phonographs preserving musical traditions and the voices of the so called "primitive" on wax. Matsuda shows which memories thereby were celebrated and which abolished, which traditions newly created and which discarded, and he elaborates on who got in power to control, what is remembered, and who can be trusted bearing legitimate witness and informed judgment.

Equally, Schlor could have much posed more explicitly the question how the new social and science-based techniques of managing the nocturnal metropolitan world contributed to new modes of recording and bearing witness of nightly urban life. This might have led Schlor to a different view on the many sources used–it might have led him to recognize them as contested sites of memory which actively privilege certain facets while excluding and silencing out others. It might have brought him to develop a perspective on the nights in the big city which is less descriptive and uncannily romantic, and much more shaped and informed by notions of political conflict, social tension, scientific ideology, and market logic. But all in all this critique does not gravely endanger a masterly piece of work which deserves unconstrained academic awareness and can be highly recommended to anyone interested in modern European urban history.

Review commissioned and edited for H-Urban by Pierre-Yves Saunier, <saunier@sunlyon3.univ-lyon3.fr>, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Lyon, FRANCE

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Lutz Musner. Review of SchlÖ¶r, Joachim, *Nights in the Big City: Paris, Berlin, London, 1840-1930.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2656

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.