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William B. Cohen. *Urban Government and the Rise of the French City: Five Municipalities in the Nineteenth Century.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. xiv + 338 pages. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-17695-2.

Reviewed by Isabelle Rabault-Mazieres (Centre d'histoire urbaine de Fontenay-Saint-Cloud)
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Urban history of French cities should not be the personal field of French urban historians. John Merriman has already shown this in *The Margins of City Life. Explorations on the French Urban Frontier, 1815-1851* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991) how an American point of view can improve the knowledge of French suburbs. William B. Cohen's work gives another lesson to French urban history. Focusing on the municipal government of French cities in the XIXth century, his study presents many interesting points.

First of all, it needs to be said that the subject had not attracted the attention of many French historians. If Jean-Paul Brunet studied the municipal government of Saint-Denis (*Un demi si'cle d'action municipale a Saint-Denis la Rouge, 1890-1939*, Paris: Cujas, 1981), most urban studies include a chapter on municipal policies without putting them at the centre of the analysis. It is all the more true for the XIXth century. J.P. Brunet's work reflects the fact that most studies have concentrated on the interwar period or the very recent years (cf. Philippe Nivet, *Le conseil municipal de Paris, 1944-1977*, Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1994). Yet, William Cohen's book may be the sign that this apparent lack of interest has past. In the last International Conference of Urban History which took place in Venice in 1998, several sessions were devoted to municipal policy and municipal actors. Second, it is crucial that the books does not deal with Paris but with 5 large provincial cities (Lyon, Bordeaux, Marseilles, Toulouse and Saint-Etienne). Given the French tradition of parisianism, this is worth mentioning. Third, it is a truly comparative perspective. Whereas John Merriman's *Margins...* is a quite anecdotal "Tour de France" of suburbs, William Cohen's study is a real analysis of the urban government through 5 examples. A monographic style is used within a thematic approach. Fourth, this work offers a broad approach to historical municipal administrations and policies in large cities. As a general study, it draws a large picture of municipalities based on a great number of published and unpublished studies. But that does not mean that this is a second-hand work. The author has made what appears to be a tour of local archives ('departementales' and 'municipales'), and he has made large use of his own personal research. [1] Last, but not least, the study also presents a guideline: it argues that contrary to what is often thought of French centralization, large cities kept an important autonomy throughout the XIXth century.

After a short presentation of the 5 cities, the first 3 chapters deal with the powers of the municipalities and the means they used to apply their policies concerning finance and administration. The importance of the 'octrois' ("the tolls collected on goods entering the city" (p. 43)) was obvious: after the mid-century, they represented "two-thirds of the ordinary income of a city (p. 45)." However unfair to poor people and debated for this very reason, these taxes were not easy to abolish because municipalities could not find (or did not want to find) a real alternative source of income. If Lyon was the first large city to abolish the 'octrois', the other large cities did not follow its example until the 1920s. Beside the 'octrois', loans became more and more important as time went by. From the mid-century on, cities began borrowing money to finance urban improvements as the author explains in another chapter. To have a municipal policy, cities need a municipal bureaucracy. In an interesting development, Cohen shows how a small and rather incompetent, sometimes dishonest, staff, recruited by the 'spoils system', and bound to be fired at each local power shift, began to give way to more numerous civil servants, recruited by an examination, and provided with a real statute.

In a second part, the author analyzes the services performed by the municipalities, among them police and fire services. Municipalities progressively expanded the services for the urban dwellers, improving water supplies and waste disposal, being more involved in welfare and public health, developing a modern educational system, and reorganizing urban space to meet the population growth and the modernization of city life. In many occasions, the author shows that "municipalities preceded the

central government" (p. xii) and pioneered varied policies. For instance, they instituted virtually free schooling for all before the national legislation in 1882. As to social policy, William Cohen argues that the notion of welfare society was "developed in a rudimentary fashion within the walls of the city before it became national policy in the twentieth century (p. 209)." This argument means that large cities were autonomous actors which played a great role in the birth of contemporary France.

On the whole, this study provides a very interesting light on the XIXth century French municipalities, even though more detailed developments on city budgets or on the struggles for power within municipalities and the consequences they had would have been useful. As a substantial introduction to the study of the XIXth century French urban government, it also gives ideas for further research.

[1]. By the way, it would have been useful to include a list of sources.

Commissioned for H-Urban by Pierre-Yves Saunier. saunier@sunlyon3.univ-lyon3.fr

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