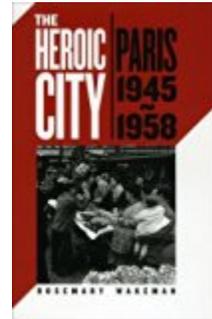


Rosemary Wakeman. *The Heroic City: Paris, 1945-1958*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 416 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-87023-6.

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Published on H-Urban (March, 2012)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari



The Multiple Spaces of Postwar Paris

Most histories of postwar Paris describe its transformation via Americanization, the emergence of mass consumer culture, and the urban planning decisions that destroyed nineteenth-century neighborhoods and replaced them with tower housing blocks. *The Heroic City: Paris, 1945-1958* joins a number of recent French histories that upend the traditional periodization of 1945 to 1975, known as “The Glorious Thirty.” [1] Rosemary Wakeman breaks with this familiar narrative, arguing that urban planning and mass consumer culture did not start to alter Paris until the mid 1950s. The first decade and a half after WWII constituted a sort of perfect lull before the wrecking crew’s arrival, during which authentic populist, humanist, and working-class values, cultures, and communities—brought together under the umbrella of “poetic humanism”—gave new meaning to the many spaces of modern Paris. This is a true history of the city, firmly rooted in its physical, lived, represented, and imagined spaces. *The Heroic City* applies the finely textured quality of the regional analysis that characterized Wakeman’s first book about the postwar modernization of Toulouse to the French capital. [2] While this book covers many familiar elements of Parisian history, their synthesis creates a rich and novel portrait of Paris in the 1950s, which reveals working-class Parisian public spaces as fully realized sites of populist culture rather than decaying slums.

The urban historian will find that Wakeman’s most interesting contribution lies in her deft deployment of space as a historical category. Drawing on theorists from

Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau to Mikhail Bakhtin and Marc Augé, Wakeman employs films, television programs, photographs, novels, newsreels, newspaper and magazine coverage, memoirs, histories and sociological studies, city archival records, and planning documents as evidence of how Parisians understood, represented, and imagined the spaces of their city. To say that *The Heroic City* is a history of Paris, however, is somewhat misleading, for Wakeman intentionally presents Paris as a fragmented collection of nearly self-sufficient neighborhoods that frustrate attempts at overarching characterization. The reader will encounter certain Left Bank neighborhoods, such as Saint-Germain-des-Prés, that are often familiar even to those who have never visited Paris, while also exploring, perhaps for the first time, La Chapelle, Belleville, and Ménilmontant to the north. The reader looking for histories of Paris’s wealthy western districts or famous monuments would be advised to seek them elsewhere. Wakeman avoids them because they do not fit into her narrative of the postwar flourishing of a poetic humanist populism.

The seven chapters of *The Heroic City* move thematically rather than chronologically. The first chapter sets up how the postwar period developed as it did, and the last chapter explains why it ended, but the middle chapters all cover roughly the same years. Each begins with 1945 or before and describes the characteristics that made the postwar era unique, before identifying a point of rupture sometime in the mid to late 1950s. As such, each chapter is understandable on its own and could be read

independently of the rest of the book.

Wakeman describes working-class neighborhoods as spaces of “collective public theater,” and chapter 1 uses newspaper and newsreel coverage, memoirs, and secondary sources to set their physical and emotional scenes (p. 79). The conditions of the German occupation and the events of Paris’s Liberation help explain the extraordinary city culture that followed them. In 1944, members of the French Resistance as well as countless average citizens turned on the city’s German occupiers, effectively launching the Liberation days before the arrival of Allied troops. Their heroism and celebratory reclamation of urban space colored the decade of collective public spectacles and celebrations that followed (and provide inspiration for the book’s title). As Wakeman reminds us, the Liberation, however, did not bring immediate relief from inadequate housing and shortages of major goods. Until physical reconstruction began in earnest during the late 1950s, the central paradox of uneven recovery defined Paris: despite economic recovery, large numbers of Parisians made do without basic amenities such as indoor plumbing.

Chapter 2 argues that the celebratory people of Paris starred in a new “mythic urban folklorism” (p. 63). Using newspaper and newsreel coverage, memoirs, poetry, photography, official documents, and secondary sources, Wakeman shows how the French rejected the figure of the peasant, who had served as a heroic national figure under Vichy. Instead they drew on a long tradition of urban representations in order to reimagine *le peuple*, or the urban working classes, as the embodiment of French unity. Wakeman traces urban populism in the poetry of Jacques Prévert and in the photographs of Willy Ronis, as well as in the atmosphere of popular open-air entertainments: the *fêtes foraines* or carnivals, street music performances, and the *Fête de l’humanité*, a festival hosted every summer by the French Communist Party (PCF). She presents cultural and political history as inextricably linked: fun was political, especially when it was organized by the PCF. Paris’s “landscape of populism” also took physical form as spontaneous dedication ceremonies renamed streets across the capital in honor of heroes of the Resistance and Liberation (p. 62).

Increasingly politicized in the wake of the Occupation and Liberation, Parisians staged public protests as often as celebrations. Chapter 3 discusses a series of demands and conflicts that played out in the city’s streets: PCF protests against Americanization and the Cold War, the movement led by the former Resistance

member Abbé Pierre to house the homeless, and street violence and protests against the presence of Algerian immigrants and the Algerian War (1954-62). Even after the government banned most political protests in the mid 1950s, Wakeman argues that commemoration ceremonies and other conflicts over public space remained political. As Parisians used the metro to swarm the streets at a moment’s notice and clashed violently with the police, Wakeman presents a public sphere closer to Bakhtin’s vision of riotous chaos than the rational ideals of Jürgen Habermas. This chapter incorporates archival documents from the city’s administrative library, police archives, and the papers of the prominent socialist activist Marceau Pivert alongside analysis of how visual media forged public opinion and helped shape police action.

Chapter 4 moves from the physical spaces of Paris to urban space as a unifying theme of postwar “avant-garde” intellectual production. Wakeman warns the reader that this chapter does not uncover any forgotten postwar intellectuals. Rather its value lies in demonstrating how “the quest to define a relationship between space, culture, and society” underpinned the ideas of familiar figures (p. 165). These range from historian Louis Chevalier, Catholic sociologist Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, and Marxist Henri Lefebvre, to architects and planners Robert Auzelle, Gaston Bardet, and Pierre Lavedan, as well as Guy Debord and the Situationists, and novelists Léo Malet and Henri Calet. While historian Tony Judt has characterized these thinkers’ interest in the urban working classes as “slumming,” Wakeman argues that they were motivated by a genuine desire to “find common cause and a unity of spirit with the working classes” (p. 169).[3] They shared a humanist worldview as well as a belief in the transformative power of urban spaces. They believed that understanding urban spaces better and rebuilding them according to the historical and cultural significance of place might guarantee France’s successful postwar reconstruction.

An interest in the spaces and people of working-class Paris, chapter 5 argues, also unified postwar film and television. For scholars of Paris and French film, Wakeman offers an alternative to previous work about postwar Technicolor Hollywood reconstructions of Paris and the films of France’s New Wave: the mainstream French productions that continued the prewar conventions of poetic realism.[4] She shows how film and television shaped public life as Parisians flocked to the movie theaters and, because few could afford televisions, gathered in groups to watch those displayed in shop windows and outside

of televised venues. What they saw there were often representations of their own lives. Television programs, which Wakeman describes as precursors to today's reality television programming, featured ordinary people of working-class Paris broadcast live from the streets. Films such as Jacques Becker's *Antoine et Antoinette* (1947) and Jean-Paul Le Chanois's *Sans laisser d'adresse* (1951) recounted stories of honest, hard-working Parisians triumphing over the difficulties of postwar life. Using reviews and the films themselves, Wakeman argues that these representations helped distract Parisians from postwar realities. The heyday of Paris's working-class neighborhoods as sites of popular and heartwarming tales waned as *film noir* such as René Clair's *Porte des Lilas* (1957) presented sentimentalized, nostalgic views of Paris and the films of Jacques Tati literally foretold working-class Paris's demise at the hands of modernists and modernism.

Chapter 6 zooms in on two particular Left Bank neighborhoods and the youth cultures that flourished there. Saint-Germain-des-Prés was a hotbed of the jazz scene, frequented by young people fascinated with America, while the Latin Quarter housed an increasingly politicized student culture. Youth culture, Wakeman argues, also colonized the imaginary spaces of the city, becoming a highly mediated focus for hopes and fears about the nation's future. Drawing largely on press coverage, memoirs, and fictional representations as well as police archives, Wakeman explores how Saint-Germain became another site of the politics of fun. For many participants, however, it embodied the combined dangers of drug use, Americanization, and existentialism. At the same time, the Latin Quarter witnessed traditional student revelry (the *mônôme du bac*) morph into militarized political demonstrations (the *manif*). By looking at these two cultures together, Wakeman emphasizes the tensions that defined the postwar period and created the conditions under which, by the late 1960s, Saint-Germain-des-Prés became a tourist trap and the Latin Quarter an important site of the '68 protests.

Postwar urban and national planning policies were responsible for changing Paris from the site of an authentic and fully realized working class to a sanitized theme park for tourists. In a wonderfully original chapter, Wakeman concludes with a spatially innovative retelling of this familiar story. Skillfully integrating analysis of imagined, pictured, and physical space, chapter 7 explains how the conflict between national and local interests shaped the master plan for Paris. It opens by returning to Paris under Vichy, when planning Paris first

became part of a national agenda. Vichy technocrats planned slum clearances that they believed would fix the moral threat that Paris posed to France. After the war, national interests perceived Paris as an economic threat, draining wealth and production from the rest of the nation. They argued in favor of zoning Paris in order to encourage industrial production to move to the provinces. Defenders of Paris fought to preserve the particular identity of its working-class neighborhoods. The spatial abstraction of zoners largely triumphed in the master plan for Paris, *le Plan d'urbanisme directeur*, passed by the municipal council in 1962. When reconstruction finally began, this plan preserved Paris's historic core but organized the destruction and reconstruction of large sections of the capital: precisely areas such as Belleville, Ménilmontant, and the Place d'Italie where, Wakeman argues, a populist, humanist, and working-class culture briefly flourished after the war.

Curiously enough, for all of the attention Wakeman gives to the visual representations of Parisian space, *The Heroic City* does not contain a single map. A map of Paris would have been helpful to readers less familiar with the layout of the city. Others may wish that Wakeman had included copies of some of the striking visualizations of space that she describes, from Chombart de Lauwe's "sociopsychological" maps of the city that translated everyday life into cartographic symbols, to planner Raymond Lopez's map of Paris, whose color-coded zones of preservation and development would shape Paris's eventual reconstruction (p. 175). The absence of these images raises other questions about Wakeman's use of the term "image" and suggests research questions that will become necessary to subsequent scholarship. Responding to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Wakeman often refers to Paris's reduction from a site of authentic working-class culture to a collection of empty images. Coupled with her detailed attention to physical pictures of Paris consumed by its citizens, this argument raises important questions for all historians of postwar cities and postmodernism: what does it mean to say that the city is an image? How does that characterization relate to physical pictures of the city? And how, through research into the use and reception of images—both real and imagined—can we best make use of the visual sources that offer so much (and still too often overlooked) information about urban space?

The thirty-four figures that accompany the text, nonetheless will allow the reader to glimpse Paris of the 1950s for herself. They, in addition to Wakeman's footnotes, suggest that urban historians are as likely to find

useful documents in television archives and photo agencies as they are in the archives of municipal governments. *The Heroic City* is highly recommended, although readers should be warned that in addition to intimately acquainting them with the authentic working-class culture of Paris in the 1950s, this book may leave them more than a little nostalgic, as Wakeman is, for what has been lost.

Notes

[1]. W. Brian Newsome, *French Urban Planning 1940-1968: The Construction and Deconstruction of an Authoritarian System* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009); and Philip Nord, *France's New Deal From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

2010).

[2]. Rosemary Wakeman, *Modernizing the Provincial City: Toulouse, 1945-1975* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[3]. Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 211.

[4]. Vanessa R. Schwartz, *It's So French! Hollywood, Paris and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

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Citation: Catherine Clark. Review of Wakeman, Rosemary, *The Heroic City: Paris, 1945-1958*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 2012.

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