



Charles Rearick. *Paris Dreams, Paris Memories: The City and Its Mystique*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. 296 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7092-7; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-7093-4.

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## Dreaming of Paris

In *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolutions* (1993), literary scholar Margaret Cohen describes beginning a survey of thousands of “nonfictional, descriptive writings on Paris” with no little “trepidation.” She quickly found, however, that these books associated each Parisian monument with only a handful of historical events. “An exhaustive consultation of Parisian panoramic literature of the time,” she concluded, “[would have been] redundant.”[1] In other words, although perhaps to generalize Cohen’s words further than she would like, all books about Paris say the same thing. In *Paris Dreams, Paris Memories: The City and its Mystique*, cultural historian Charles Rearick draws on these generic discourses about Paris as they appear in books, promotional tourism materials, the press, popular songs, and a handful of films since the late nineteenth century to answer the somewhat slippery questions of what characterizes “the city’s spirit and soul” and “what has made Paris so beloved” (p. 2). He determines that odes to Paris always repeat one of four things: discursive myths of Paris as “the City of Light,” “Old Paris,” “Capital of Pleasure,” and “Paname” or popular Paris (p. 10). The book offers an overarching narrative of the city’s development and identity in the twentieth century that traces the shifting deployment of these discourses in urban planning and discussions of Paris’s identity.

It is impossible to separate Paris from its place in the global imagination, and Rearick’s book is the most recent iteration of studies that trace the capital’s leading role in

any number of discourses of grandeur.[2] Unlike many of its predecessors, however, *Paris Dreams, Paris Memories* betrays none of the distrust for the capitalist sleight of hand that reduces real social relationships to images (according to Guy Debord) and meaningful cultural signs to myths (à la Roland Barthes).[3] Rearick glosses over others’ arguments about the relationship between discourses and Parisian social relations, instead mining secondary literature for details relevant to his pursuit of the definition of Parisian greatness. He takes these mythic discourses as a real barometer of Parisians’ relationship to their city and what exactly they have found to love there. Scholars or students looking for the standard narrative of twentieth-century Parisian history or a survey of recent literature might want to start with this book. The average reader of H-Urban, unhaunted by a lifetime of her own Paris dreams and memories, may find this book frustrating: for all its discussion of Paris’s unknowable complexity, it pays little attention to the outpouring of urban theory and history in the last half century that has wrestled with the very question of defining both “the urban” and what makes cities “great,” much of which was written in or about Paris.[4]

The six chapters of *Paris Dreams, Paris Memories* fit together both chronologically and thematically. The first sets up the nineteenth-century (and earlier) origins of the city’s four identities, while the next three explain how those completing conceptions shaped the familiar story of Parisian history from 1914 to the present. Chap-

ters 2 through 4 blend the city's physical transformations with readings of various books, novels, images, and films. Readers could choose to read the first four chapters as a mini-history of twentieth-century Paris. The fifth chapter examines how Parisians have rated their city compared to other metropolises, and the last attempts to identify what constitutes Paris's "soul and spirit" at the time of writing.

Using guidebooks, popular histories, and novels, as well as information from secondary literature, chapter 1 outlines the nineteenth-century origins of the four dominant "popular conventions passing as truisms" that served to counterbalance the city's association with dangerous and bloody political revolution. Paris, "City of Light," refers to the capital's embrace of progress from Georges-Eugène Haussmann's renovations and the installation of gas and electric street lighting to its intellectual renown since the Enlightenment. Propagators of this discourse turned a blind eye to what sixteenth-century essayist Michel de Montaigne described as the city's "warts:" giant rats, stinking sewers, crime, disease, and decrepit buildings. Others embraced the decrepit, rooting the true Paris in Old Paris of narrow streets and compact neighborhoods built in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Paris's strong draw as the "Capital of Pleasure" depended on the mixture of old and new, or the possibility of seedy and dangerous encounters with locals (often staged by enterprising café owners) on offer alongside the glitz and glamour of the trendiest nightspots, as well as the sexual availability of Parisian women and the image of Paris itself as a woman. Still others saw the "good ordinary people" of the city's working-class neighborhoods such as Belleville, Menilmontant, and the Faubourg Saint-Antoine as the embodiment of its soul (p. 38). Parisians commonly express their love of "Paname," a term that denotes no one working-class neighborhood, but rather encompasses all of Paris's working-class peoples and cultures. Rather than reducing the city's complexity to one of these narrative strategies, Rearick declares (in perhaps a truism of his own): "For historical understanding, a better approach is to see all the identities as parts of a large, unwieldy whole, each revealing some truths and dreams about the city-while concealing others" (p. 43).

The period around 1900 continued to live on in Parisian imaginations long after its end, and chapter 2 traces this period's appeal from the outbreak of World War I until roughly 1960. Drawing on urban planning and preservation decisions that affected iconic nineteenth-century construction and neighborhoods as

well as descriptive literature and film, Rearick argues that an understandable longing for prewar life crystallized around threatened sites of turn-of-the-century Paris (called the Belle Époque only after 1945). *Paris Dreams, Paris Memories* is at its most interesting here as it describes how Parisians turned Montmartre into a Disneyland version of 1900. They reopened the Moulin Rouge in 1924, transformed a proposed site of cheap housing into a vineyard (first vintage in 1936), and restored the facades of the Place du Tertre in the 1950s in order to recreate the community's distinctive pastoral, bohemian culture. Rearick ties this period's resonance to his main line of inquiry by arguing that the period endured because it "highlighted the multiple faces of the city more than any other period memory has, drawing strength from them all" (p. 80).

Using secondary sources, newspaper reports, and the occasional official government report, chapter 3 presents the city's modernization of the 1960s and 1970s as the story of how "modernizers fixed so single-mindedly on just one of the faces of Paris (Ville Lumière [or "City of Light"]) to the detriment of the others" (p. 84). Rearick traces this thread through the otherwise standard narrative of modernization that began at Paris's edges with the construction of high-rise housing projects in outlying arrondissements, before creeping into its very heart with the destruction of the central markets at les Halles and the construction of a 210-meter tower at Montparnasse. By the 1970s, Haussmann's Paris—the glass and iron pavilions of les Halles and the Gare d'Orsay—had become Old Paris standing in the way of the city of 2000, the shimmering vision that drove modernizers.

Based on secondary literature, newspaper coverage, and Rearick's own experiences as a frequent visitor to the city, chapter 4 recounts its physical, cultural, and social developments since 1974. He characterizes them as "postmodern," or marked by "a fresh appreciation of local community, culture, festivity, and play" (p. 123). The proliferation of street festivals from techno parades to the annual "Paris Plage," the preservation of old buildings (such as the Hôtel du Nord), and the prevalence of museums in the city have given new life to Paris's identities as "Capital of Pleasure" and Old Paris. As for "Paname," Rearick cites increased rhetoric about the importance of little people alongside conflicting statistics that indicate working-class white Parisians have fled the city for the suburbs. It might have been interesting here to consider whether the robust immigrant communities in the capital, from Chinese populations in the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement to the mix of Arabs, Africans, and Asians

in Belleville, have become the most recent iterations of typically Parisian “villages.” Defying debates over Paris’s global importance in the twenty-first century, Rearick confidently concludes: “Paris [still] has a unique claim to the title of world city” (p.157).

Chapter 5 breaks with the chronology of the preceding three chapters to return to a global view of the capital since the nineteenth century, asking, “what makes Paris—different from—and greater than—other great cities of Europe?” (p. 181). The chapter situates Paris in relation to its closest competitors—London, Berlin, and Vienna—which have succeeded Paris as international hubs of finance, industry, culture, and the arts, before turning to what nonetheless drives commentators’ abiding love, namely Paris’s “human qualities” and “beauty” epitomized in vistas and monuments (p.176). Here Rearick mixes evidence from quantitative studies with various fanciful writings and alarmist discourses. Readers should follow the footnotes closely, for at times it is not clear which is which. This chapter raises an important methodological question for urbanists: at what point do alarmist discourses become not just evidence of expectations or interpretations of the city but actual serious indicators of its decline?

*Paris Dreams, Paris Memories* ends with an attempt to compile the “images, places, and memories” that matter most to contemporary Parisians (p. 187). Again, Rearick rejects the idea of Parisian decline to argue that the French capital is indeed alive and well ... and living in Paris. After determining that discussions of Paris’s soul “have been a prime vehicle for ahistorical generalization and airy flattery, which also serve to gloss over some ugly history” (p. 195) and that Paris’s spirit has something to do with “love, pleasure, and sex” (p. 198), Rearick turns his attention to accounts of the less frequented places of “secret” or village-like Paris that seem, for many residents, to define the whole. The book ends with an almost guidebook-esque description of the cafés, clubs, restaurants, and neighborhoods that, to Rearick, seemed the most alive in the first decade of the twenty-first century. He rejects official attempts to rebrand Paris as “le Grand Paris,” the city and its suburbs as one entity, and instead urges Parisians to invent better ways of imagining the city (without its suburbs) that account for its many historic faces and the richness of its present.

Rearick’s lively prose and knack for description make *Paris Dreams, Paris Memories* a pleasure to read. These very strengths at times, however, make it difficult to distinguish between his interpretation and the generic de-

scriptive literature he cites. Rearick repeatedly anticipates potential criticism that historians should not concern themselves with things like the soul, spirit, or greatness of a city by insisting that the amount of time and effort Parisians spent on these ideas justifies historians’ subsequent interest. Most cultural historians of cities would surely agree with Rearick but wish that he had spent less time justifying his study and more time analyzing the material it produced. Does Paris, for example, especially promote such rich description, or have all cities inspired generic outpourings? Why have commentators so often described Paris as a sexually available woman and what are feminist historians to make of subsequent historians’ parroting of this language (and their laments about the disappearance of working-class prostitutes and their pimps from the city’s streets)?

The more than two dozen illustrations that dot *Paris Dreams, Paris Memories*, help provide a rich portrait of a city torn between the imperatives of history and modernization. Rearick himself took many of them, and they, along with the indexes of “Unusual and Unexpected Paris” and “Landmark Paris Imagery,” also provide documentation of his long-standing relationship with the city. In fact, *Paris Dreams, Paris Memories* may be best read as Rearick’s own tribute to the capital, a sort of addendum to *Why France?*, the 2007 volume of essays by major American historians of France about how they chose the field (or in some cases, the field chose them).[5] Many of these historians studied France in order to go to Paris, and Rearick’s latest book reads like his own ode to the enduring appeal of the city, traced in a decades-long pursuit of songs, films, and books that pay tribute to its greatness.

#### Notes

[1]. Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 82.

[2]. David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Patrice L. R Higonnet, *Paris: Capital of the World* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002); Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris* (London: Macmillan, 2002); Colin Jones, *Paris: Biography of a City* (London: Allen Lane, 2004); and Graham Robb, *Parisians: An Adventure Story* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

[3]. Rosemary Wakeman’s *The Heroic City, 1945-1958* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) takes these arguments as its departure point, arguing that “images” did not replace real social relations until the late 1950s:

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, first paperback ed. (New York: Zone Books, 1995); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957).

[4]. At various points in their careers sociologists Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau both lived and wrote in Paris, and a discussion of cities and their greatness would not be complete without urbanist Peter Hall's chapters about Paris: Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Black-

well, 1991); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Peter Geoffrey Hall, *Cities in Civilization: Culture, Innovation, and Urban Order* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998).

[5]. Laura Lee Downs and Stéphane Gerson, eds., *Why France?: American Historians Reflect on an Enduring Fascination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

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