

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Rupert Christiansen.** *City of Light: The Making of Modern Paris.* New York: Basic Books, 2018. 224 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-5416-7339-7.

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The city of Paris that so many have come to appreciate, with its recognizably spacious, tree-lined boulevards; ample parks and squares; and iconic apartment buildings, was not always so. In his book *City of Light; The Making of Modern Paris*, Rupert Christiansen tells the fascinating story of how Paris was transformed from a cramped, unhealthy medieval city to a grand, modern European capital during the heady days of the Second Empire (1852-70). Not only was the renovation of Paris all that then emperor Napoleon III had envisioned and demanded, it also became an enduring model of mid-nineteenth-century urban planning, one that cities around the world sought to emulate. In Christiansen's skillful hands the story of how the extravagance, prosperity, and order of the Second Empire were written on the cityscape, along with the corruption, division, and destruction that accompanied those herculean efforts, is told with precision and flare. The author calls attention to two constructions in particular that he suggests may be read as emblematic of the contradictions and legacy of this "New Babylon"—the Opéra Garnier and the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur. For Christiansen, they represent respectively the profane and the sacred in mid-nineteenth-century Parisian urban space. Together they serve as a starting point for his exploration of how such striking bifurcation occurred during the Second Empire and the days that followed, and what it communicates about a pivotal moment in the development of the city and its history. In this concise and artful narrative, the author synthesizes existing scholarship on the topic and emphasizes historical actors who played a significant role in altering the urban space of the French capital.[1] The telling is further enhanced by commentary drawn from the writings of midcentury authors and journalists to capture more fully the spirit of the era. In-

deed, it is in this, in evoking Second Empire Paris with all of its "marvels" and "pleasures," that the book particularly shines.

In his opening chapter, Christiansen tells of the early misfortunes and subsequent rise of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte. Once he became emperor, it was his vision for Paris and French society that determined the city's path forward. Following chapters explore the implementation of the plan and introduce the man entrusted with its execution, the arrogant, doggedly pragmatic, and undeterred Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, along with his array of innovative contributors—engineers, architects, gardeners, bankers—who would play a role in realizing the ambitious plan for the city. Here Christiansen's rich characterizations of these men are revelatory and help bring into sharp focus the relationships among these professionals, Haussmann, and Napoleon III. In his dealings with the emperor, Haussmann could be outwardly unassuming, yet all the while clever and strategic. With regard to those who worked for him, we learn that he was "relentlessly strict and impeccably fair, entirely unloved but greatly respected" (p. 39). We encounter Victor Baltard, a respected architect who designed the central market Les Halles. Baltard, "who considered himself a votary of Michelangelo" and an artist, resisted the emperor's preference for glass and iron over marble, only to surrender in the final design (p. 65). We meet also the architect of the Opéra, Charles Garnier, described by Christiansen as "intensely nervous, whippet-thin, and sickly," but "buoyed up by a keen sense of humor and an underlying steeliness that came from his working-class origins," as the designer struggled to manage the challenging construction of a flamboyant articulation of Second

Empire style amid skyrocketing costs (p. 76). Men such as Jean-Charles Alphand, Eugène Belgrand, the Péreire brothers, and Gabriel Davioud are similarly highlighted in vignettes throughout as key collaborators in the effort to modernize Paris. On the “pleasures” of the Second Empire, we hear from familiar observers such as Maxime du Camp, Gustave Flaubert, Hippolyte Taine, Charles Baudelaire, Victor Fournel, and the Goncourt brothers. Yet Christiansen’s story of a Paris transformed does not end with the “carnival of excitement and extravagance” he describes (p. 142); rather, he continues through Haussmann’s seemingly inevitable decline to the deprivations and defeat of the Franco-Prussian war and the upheaval of the Commune, all of which left a mark on the capital’s cityscape and its history.

Many of Christiansen’s sources reflect a tendency in the scholarship on nineteenth-century French urbanism to adopt a top-down perspective, obscuring the experience of ordinary Parisians who navigated the rapidly changing urban environment. Urban historians may wish for more extended analysis of the social, economic, and environmental changes wrought by this dramatic

transformation and their impact on the lives of city dwellers, which appears here in a limited way. Nevertheless, what *City of Light* does in offering a panoramic view, it does exceedingly well. Christiansen’s delightfully vivid narrative adds significantly to the accessibility and general appeal of the book, which has as much to impart to those who know the city and its history well, as it does to the uninitiated. It is a most engaging popular history, an intriguing view of a city in the throes of reinvention, and a story of the past well told.

#### Note

[1]. For example, Michel Carmona, *Haussmann: His Life and Times and the Making of Modern Paris* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002); J. M. Chapman and Brian Chapman, *The Life and Times of Baron Haussmann* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1957); David Jordan, *Transforming Paris: The Life and Labors of Baron Haussmann* (New York: Free Press, 1995); John Merriman, *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); and Matthew Truesdell, *Spectacular Politics: Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte and the Fête Impériale 1849-70* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), among others.

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