

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean-Luc Pinol, ed. *Atlas historique des villes de France*. Paris: Hachette, 1996. xv + 318 pp. 395 FF (cloth), ISBN 978-2-01-235192-9.

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This volume is part of a ten-volume project on European cities set up by the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB). A review of the Iberian work (1994) and a review on the French and Iberian volumes as part of the larger series will soon be published by H-Urban. So I have left aside, deliberately, any comparisons with the first volume on the Iberian Peninsula. Let's pretend, for the purpose of this review, that this volume is a detached one. And, indeed, the French editor Hachette has done all that it can to that end, keeping away from the cover all reference to the European series. A flower for market necessities, but in my opinion also a slap in the face of all those who devoted themselves to an international project. This poor attitude is enhanced by some minor typos and caption mistakes that a big multimedia editor should prevent.

But let's look at the book. The 38 authors, 10 cities, 336 pages, and more than 900 coloured illustrations in a volume covering more than two millennia of French urban history call for admiration. It takes us on a Tour de France through Paris, Rouen, Lille, Strasbourg, Lyon, Marseille, Montpellier, Toulouse, Bordeaux and Nantes that leaves the reader with gleaming memories and solid knowledge given by a concise and efficient text as well as by splendid contemporaneous engravings, plans or paintings, enriched by a huge number of thematic maps that were especially drawn for this volume by the CCCB cartographic team. Each city has been assigned to a town-coordinator who gathered a team (in six instances) or worked by himself (four cities), in connection with this CCCB team. The cartographers can sometimes be blamed for the difficulty of reading some maps presented in too similar colours to be perceived by the common eye, or some rare plans too small to be read (p. 211, no. 13),

but its work raises respect and envy for our Spanish colleagues.

It was not possible before this atlas to have an easy access (or any access at all) to such a vast amount of mapped information about those ten large French towns, and this would be enough to make it an invaluable tool for each urban historian's library. But this is not all: the common guidelines given to the authors, and the huge cartographic work of the CCCB team allow the reader to compare different cities on different grounds, from topographic or morphologic features to demographic, electoral, or land-use patterns.

This ten-fold portrait does not express all the richness of the book. It is preceded by an in-depth essay on the French urban system by Jean-Luc Pinol, the master builder of the volume. This dense, 23-page essay provides an overview of the twenty-five centuries-old system, that takes together more time-focused essays like that by Bernard Lepetit (author of *Les villes dans la France moderne, 1740-1840*, Albin Michel, 1988), who left us this spring and to whose memory this book is dedicated. It also completes them, with imaginative ideas like the police and welfare statistics for the nineteenth century, or the work around the administrative reform of 1926 that suppressed the administrative function of 106 French towns. This introduction is a synthetic piece, but worthy of interest by itself, supported by a constant interrogation about the significance, perception, and measurement of what is a system, with the problems of size, threshold, and site.

The end of the volume holds another surprise: even if the WWW sites could quickly make its use obsolete, the non-connected historian will certainly appreciate that

someone strained himself to compile the population of 1,762 French cities from 1600 to 1990, using and completing the works of P. Bairoch, P. Batou, and J. Chevre (*La population des villes europeennes de 800 a 1950*, Droz, 1988) and of Georges Dupeux (*Atlas historique de l'urbanisation de la France*, Editions du CNRS, 1981).

In brief, this book makes the urban historian happy: one can easily imagine how it can be used for teaching and research. Charles Tilly asked what good was urban history: this atlas is an answer, even if not in the directions Tilly indicated. For what the book tells, it is a base to present history of cities in a way that neither the five volumes of *Histoire de la France urbaine* (directed by Georges Duby and edited by Le Seuil between 1980 and 1985) nor *The making of urban Europe, 1000-1950* (Paul Hohenberg and Lynn Hollen Lees, Harvard University Press, 1985) allowed. But the volume is also food for thought for what it shows and allows us to reflect upon. A new companion on the basic books shelf, the one near our working desk.

Given the difficulties that one can imagine, the remarks on such a book must follow the point of views and aims that its initiators put forward. To quibble on some details in the history of a specific town, to discuss the individual understandings of authors about what is economic, political, or town-planning history is pointless: the media (atlas) asks for a message that can be translated in maps and pictures, and the reader/reviewer must avoid doing wrong trials for bad causes. Finally, the reviewer can notice that some cities were handled by a single person, but he does not know why: a lone ranger, a brave volunteer, or a self-supposed expert? When the result is brilliant, as for Toulouse by Robert Marconis, when you like it, as for Jean-Clement Martin's Nantes or Maurice Garden's Paris, you just don't care. But when, with Jean-Pierre Poussou's Bordeaux, you feel the essay weakens the collective work, it is much more damaging.

But to go further, one should know why the town-coordinator was alone. It must be stressed that neither the reviewer nor the reader know enough about the difficulties in choosing relevant towns with enough research and human resources, in finding people to whom to assign a town, suggesting that they form a team, and encouraging them to work with scholars to say that this one would have done better, that the work of this other would have been useful—first, because this comes to mind only a few times with this book, and second because one doesn't know the pros and cons. But this does not prevent the reviewer from commenting on the final result.

And it also does not prevent him from noting how much the volume is faithful to its main aim: to “explain and make understood the history of each city and the evolution of their urban fabric.” You bet it does! I've chosen several points for remarks and questions, because they were formally asserted by the Spanish initiators of the project (Manuel Guardia, Francisco Javier Monclus, Jose Luis Oyon) and by its French master builder Jean-Luc Pinol, and because I feel they can be of interest to many urban historians, providing basis for further discussion.

One of the stated aims of the volume is to “collect, spread and produce a vast amount of information on cities chosen owing to their place in History” (an approximate translation of the dust jacket). The first part of the sentence is our common task, but the second, on the choice of cities, raises some question. Elsewhere, it is said that the cities will be chosen according to hierarchy (namely, size of population), but also for what they can reveal of particular trends and features. For example, decaying cities or promoted ones can be of as much interest as big cities. The choice that was made in this volume can point to some conflict in knowing what cities are “deserving” to take place in an atlas. I don't care that much that cities/built-up areas as big or bigger than the ten selected have been left aside—for example, Nice or Grenoble. I do care more that cities like Saint Etienne, Le Havre, or even Brest are omitted. They could have stood for a different figure of the big city than the ones overlooked here—for the nineteenth- or twentieth-century breed, precisely those that don't have a “place in History.” A black sheep would have been welcomed in this flock of high-brow cities, which have all played a too important role in History to stand for all that history (with a small “h”) calls for.

The coordinators claim that they provide a tool for comparative history. They are, as we all are in our own attempts at comparative history, aware that their attempt is a tool and a start for this. And it is indeed a good one, symbolised by the effort to provide the reader with maps on a scale as similar as possible. But some things could have improved the effort.

For example: the very useful synthetic map of urban growth is absent for Paris, Toulouse, and Nantes. The atlas has not taken full advantage of the engravings, plans, or pictures that could have showed us the cities at exactly the same time. If the satellite shots provide a large view of our ten cities in 1990, if the three wonderful views drawn by Alfred Guesdon from his fire-balloon in

the 1840s are here, only one of Belleforest's 1575 engravings are shown when six were available. The collections of aerial pictures from the years 1955-1962, available for all the French "communes" of more than 500 inhabitants, could have made a strong connection between the ten cities. They could have been chosen over the brand new topographical plans made in the early 1950s, all gathered at the French National Library. More limited series could have been taken as strong landmarks for each cities, as the *Atlas des ports de France* of 1875-1879 or the *Plans et profils de toutes les principales villes et lieux considerables de France* by the royal geographer Tassin in 1644-1652. Technical factors can also weigh on this kind of question, but facilitating comparison by using series of plans or engravings might have been more systematic. Some thematic maps could also have been more frequent: the map of parish reforms of 1790 and 1801 that one finds for Rouen could have been introduced for each city, as the reforms were national ones.

The link between image and text is at the core of this project, as the coordinators wish to use images not as illustrations but as part of the explanation: images as text and not as para-texts. This link is in general excellent, as the first chapters on Rouen by Bruno Gauthiez perfectly show. But such a task needs constant attention and endeavour, as some texts use images only as ornaments. The whole Bordeaux part, or the Rouen chapter on the rebuilding after 1944 show how mutilating this lack of connection can be, in contrast with the rest of the volume. Where image and text are two separate spheres, the very effort of explanation about the urban fabric loses its efficiency.

Also there are more serious problems, about comparative history again, in the way each city was handled. Three of them appeared to me to be important.

1) The first is about the priority that the coordinators wanted to give to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a general equilibrium formulated as this: as much space for preindustrial town, 1800-1940, and "temps present" as we say in French (recent time, namely, post-World War II). Obviously the town-coordinators did not understand those guidelines in the same ways. Where Toulouse, Montpellier, and Lille offer strong "recent times" chapters, where Paris, Strasbourg, Marseille, and Nantes offer a general balance, Rouen, Lyon, and Bordeaux offer an unworthy view of the post-1945 period. It is an unpleasant surprise to see that on the eight chronological parts for Rouen, five are devoted to the pre-industrial period, one to the nineteenth century, and two

to the twentieth century (with one on Rouen's rebuilding after the bombing of 1944). Recent times seem in general difficult to handle: some texts on post-1945 sound like reprints of a tourist office brochure, others as marketing campaigns for promoting eurocities or raising funds for urban renewal. Jean-Clement Martin escapes this Scylla and Charybdis by giving us a view of the "imagined Nantes," but does not prevent us from noticing his witty trick. To escape those damaging aspects, an analysis of the French aspects of "edge cities," to name an angle familiar to the American reader, would have been more useful, and analysis in general would have been better than description or self-achieving prophecies. Look also at the way in which large housing estates (the "grands ensembles") are depicted, too often with small and therefore useless ground photographs: the nice aerial view in the Montpellier section is a good counter-example of that. The end pages that analyze the result of the 1990 census for the ten cities is, in my view, an attempt by Jean-Luc Pinol to compensate for this deficit regarding the post-1945 period.

2) Despite the general commitment to examine the place of cities in their regions, the Rouen, Lyon, and even Strasbourg parts are focused on the cities themselves, and hardly go out of the administrative limits of the "commune." This is especially damaging for Strasbourg, where the proximity of the German frontier provides interesting questions. The Marseille, Lille, and Montpellier sections offer highly interesting maps and texts on their urban region that show what was lost for the three cities cited above.

3) Town-authors have not always respected the themes announced by the project coordinators: for example, the fine chapters on public transportation for Toulouse and Paris don't find an echo in other cities. Mentioning Sam Warner in the introduction is not enough to forgive this! The treatment of infrastructure in general varies greatly from city to city: the very interesting maps and texts about sewers in Paris, or public lighting in Rouen don't have their equivalent for each city. It is for example a pity that Franck Scherrer's work on the Lyon sewers and the water system was not used. The same can be said about architecture, especially for housing, where Marseille, Rouen, and Bordeaux contain precious information that the reader misses for Strasbourg or Lyon. On the other hand, the political commitment for all cities is totally not covered for Toulouse.

This leads to the "means of production" of this volume. Collective work is surely what turned the squirrel

crazy, and it is a problem for each of us. When we coordinate, we wonder how to make our colleagues respect the guidelines and give a harmonious chord. When we are coordinated, we wonder how to escape the guidelines and present our own solo. The difficulty is even greater here, as the coordination is mediated through general, national, and local coordinators. This is why this book helps to raise questions concerning these difficulties.

The first question is about the milieu in which the collective work is made. Obviously, Jean-Luc Pinol had to deal with urban studies as they exist in France. The general coordinators mention this “tradition” in their general introduction, and Pinol as well, to explain that some tolerance was granted. Seen from that point of view, it is hardly a surprise, for example, that the Bordeaux piece is disappointing: after all, it can be argued that Jean-Pierre Poussoux, its author, has always been more interested in history “in the cities” than “about the cities.” This is how French urban history was born, so it is not a surprise. When Jean-Luc Pinol says that the French atlas gives great attention to social groups’ disposition in urban space or to political and electoral aspects, it is clear that it would have been difficult for historians, a majority of the contributors, to do something else. We’ll come back to that on the joint review of the Iberian and French volumes, so I won’t dwell on it.

The second question is about the way in which collective work is done. Once again, the coordinators were tolerant, leaving an opportunity to each author to express scientific sensitivity. This means that the authors must bear responsibility for what they wrote. I do appreciate the use of this tolerance, because it leads to brilliant chapters like “Images of Rouen in the XVIth and XVIIIth centuries,” the Toulouse essay about the Capitole Square, the overview of Strasbourg’s relation to its fortifications, the attention to Lyon elites and their location in the city, or to Maurice Garden’s constant concern about the administrative outer and inner boundaries of Paris.

But the chapter on Bordeaux wine, even if it might help the commercial balance of France, seems out of place. I cannot believe the only way to evoke the im-

portance of wine for the fate of Bordeaux and for its influence on the urban fabric was to include what looks like an ersatz tract by the Association of Wine Producers. The chapter on the Lyon siege in 1793 by Bruno Benoit seems irrelevant. In my opinion, the atlas genre has nothing to do with the “city biography digest,” which should include all notable events or facts: Jean-Clement Martin, though a specialist on the French Revolution, shows how it is possible to escape one’s own specialty by indicating the dramatic events in Nantes only when necessary for the general understanding. Freedom to express individuality also leads to some egoistic “coquetteries” in bibliographies, where some authors seem to suggest that their works are the only available and useful items on some themes (see for example Bernard Gauthiez on “La ville sort de ses limites” in the Lyon part). This, and sometimes the non-updated bibliography (Bordeaux for post-1945 chapters) causes some bibliographic holes in a picture that is rich in precise information, with an overwhelming majority of bibliographies including students’ unpublished works or learned society journals, as well as well-known books and exhibition catalogues.

Of course, one can say that this is the fate of collective work. But I believe it possible, by a collective consideration of our professional ethos and habits, as Gerard Noiriel proposes (*Sur la “crise” de l’histoire*, Belin, 1996) to get a grip on those problems.

But is this excess of individual freedom not suggestive? Is French urban history not rich enough to be stringent and to prevent such mistakes? It might be. But it was strong enough to produce this atlas, a work of reference whose very high quality can only make obvious the fact that some chapters do not take full benefit of the opportunity that was offered to their authors. May they be all thanked anyway for having given flesh and bones to this project.

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