

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jacques-Guy Petit, Yannick Marec, eds. *Le social dans la ville en France et en Europe 1750-1914*. Paris: Les Editions de l'Atelier, 1997. 352 pp.p. ISBN 978-2-7082-3210-5.

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This book is a publication of the papers presented at an international meeting which took place in Angers in April 1995. It focuses on the origins of the social policies in the city, that is the social policies of the urban actors (the elites, the Church, the municipal administration), mainly dedicated to the urban people.

These urban policies were slowly growing, replacing, as the editors write, "the religious, family and proximity solidarities" (p. 17) as the city became "the heart of social policies" (p. 18). The point of this review is not to summarize the twenty-four papers (this would not make sense), but to insist on the diversity of their themes (the hospitals, the children social policy, the municipal social aid boards, etc.) and the variety of the local examples (every part of France but Paris, which is noteworthy given the French tendency to parisianism).

The book is divided into five parts. The first part goes back to the very beginning of the social policies. It appears that the motivation of their instigators was not always charity: in the XVIIth and XVIIIth century Rochefort, it was one way to recruit seamen (Martine Accerra). The second part focuses on the hospitals that used to play a social role before becoming centers of medical care, and reveals the disciplinary and moral intentions of the different forms of social aid. For instance, in Geneva, charity's interest in children's issues was linked to its wish to inculcate a new urban *savoir-vivre* (Martine Ruchat) in the population. The third section of Petit and Marec's collection is supposed to analyse the links between social aid and urban space, but most of the papers deal with municipal social policy without any reference to urban space. In a way, these essays could have been better situated in the fourth part which sheds light on the

diversity of the social actors. At last, the fifth part allows us to compare the French experience to other European countries.

Interesting as the book may be, there are some limits to these papers. First, they do not pay much attention to the people who had the benefit of social aid. Of course the recipients do appear from time to time—we know, for instance, how many persons this or that hospital could help—but they are presented as objects of social aid. How social aid really helped them, or what their reactions were to it, are some questions we would like to be answered. Obviously this was not the theme of the conference, but is it really possible to study social policies without a special interest in the people to whom the aid is dedicated?

Second, the title lets us think that urban space and forms will be major concern of the papers. But it does not appear so. The social policies that are discussed are urban just because their actors happened to live in the city and because they were mainly dedicated to the urban poor, but the city is almost invisible in the studies. Third, it may seem strange that no paper deals with the housing problem and the very beginning of social housing, at least to note how shy it was.

On the whole, this is a book which cannot but be of great interest to researchers working on social aid and social policies.

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