

H-France Forum

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Richard C. Keller. *Fatal Isolation: The Devastating Paris Heat Wave of 2003*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 244 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-226-25111-0.

Review Essay by Alexia Yates, York University

Historians frequently use anecdotes without much reflection. Their place in conference presentations, for example, is formulaic: opening anecdote, followed by an exposition of the broader historical/historiographical context, move to a presentation of evidence to support a particular interpretation of the episode and scholarly debate, then revisit it in the conclusion, repositioned in light of the new insights now accumulated. This format stands out to (other) social scientists. A talk that begins with an episode of thick description that plunges a listener into a world—rather than a deft outline of the principal hypothesis, analytic framework, and findings of a paper—can be a source of frustration to economists or political scientists, accustomed to different presentation styles. Which is more effective or engaging is open to discussion. But historians' use of this approach is not without significance. The anecdote traffics in history's disciplinary attention to the local, the particular, the individual, and the rupture—an attention that informs rather than rejects or undercuts its study of the global, the general, the collective, and the continuous. As a historian working in this book at the intersection of the humanities and the biomedical, natural, and social sciences, Richard C. Keller has likely encountered some version of the aphorism “the plural of anecdote is not data.” In response, *Fatal Isolation* offers at once a thorough assessment and important example of the methodological work of anecdote, of its analytic horizons and its political possibilities, and of the way its effacement threatens not only historical understanding but also the implementation of public policy. *Fatal Isolation* offers an eloquent example of how to weave (statistical) outliers into the centre of our stories and understanding of historical events, insisting on the enlightening capabilities of the unrepresentative, deploying anecdote as both argument and evidence for the necessity of a historical perspective on diverse phenomena of our contemporary world.

Keller begins at the gravesites of individuals buried at public expense as victims of the 2003 heat wave. As he proceeds through the city, climbing stairwells and surveying hallways, alighting in the offices of policymakers and on park benches alongside elderly dog walkers, he unpacks the complexity of these taciturn, nondescript graves and the seemingly straightforward events that led to their central place in a public burial ceremony in September 2003. They are individuals killed by a heat wave—but in what sense “individual,” and how were they victims of a heat wave? These forgotten bodies, identified but without families to claim them, were intensely individual in the sense that their isolation determined and defined the timing and experience of their final days on earth. Yet this isolation was both the condition and result of their degraded social and political individuality, of their progressive erasure from the social fabric and their inability to maintain meaningful, consequential membership in the polity. They were, to use the theoretical framework of Giorgio Agamben and Hannah Arendt that Keller deploys, *only* human, reduced to bare life or

mere existence. The stories subsequently told about these abandoned lives by acquaintances, journalists, and researchers often participate in this marginalization by constructing narratives of difficult individuals defined by their lonely deaths. Anecdotes, Keller shows, can constrain rather than emancipate. He is careful to note the truth behind these accounts, just as he is careful to stress the validity of the social scientific surveys that constructed the “typical victim” of the heat wave. Yet both are incomplete perspectives, preventing attention from being focused on the broader processes degrading individual citizenship in the contemporary era and failing to account for the atypical victims of heat disasters in public policy. Sympathetic musings on the demise of a lonely neighbor and correlational tabulations of death rates reinforce the isolation, both political and statistical, that proved fatal to so many in August 2003.

By using “an anomalous group who represent an ordinary phenomenon” (p. 65)—everyday deaths in social isolation—Keller reclaims the individuality of these forgotten dead by firmly re-embedding their lives in the collective, thus revealing its limits of inclusion. While not discounting the role of, for example, an individual’s alcohol addiction in their eventual death, Keller argues that more substantial insights can be gained by tracing the historical process by which multiple factors aligned to unevenly distribute the burden of risk that governs how a disaster unfolds in the urban setting. Thanks to a rich sociology and anthropology of disasters upon which he draws extensively, the status of “natural” disasters as social events is by now well established. In Keller’s view, however, we have yet to achieve a consistently historical perspective on these phenomena. From the evolution of the built environment to transformations in the social standing accorded the elderly and the impoverished, risk and resilience are the products of particular and contingent political, economic, and cultural changes.

Keller dedicates particular attention to the ways that this vulnerability manifests itself in the spatial marginalization of the forgotten victims. He argues that despite the disparate locations of their deaths, they are unified by a social and physical geography of poverty and precarious life. (90) Unsatisfactory housing, especially the meager dwellings directly under the roofs of tall apartment buildings, combined with poverty to become the site, symbol, and agent of ostracism and untimely death. Keller uses his anecdotes to great effect in his urban dissection, plunging beneath the correlative data on *quartier-* by *quartier-* death rates to unearth what he calls microgeographies of vulnerability: how place conditions risk and resilience. The *chambre de bonne*, individual rooms on the top floors of apartment buildings often lacking water or access by elevator, anchors his analysis as he reconstructs the genesis of deeply unequal housing conditions lurking behind the “deadly charm” (p. 188) of Paris’s famous facades.

Keller’s architectural forays are productive. They draw attention to the enduring ability of built space to shape the life chances of individuals. As accumulations of material and capital, the apartment buildings visited in this book have outlived their builders, initial regulators, and first inhabitants to determine the conditions of daily life for Parisians today. As sites that, more particularly, have outlived those who met their end within their walls in 2003, they are also sources for the historian interested in the experiences of those who leave few traces. And Keller is correct that few historians give mass-produced vernacular architecture and the banal spaces of speculative development much attention.

As with much of the familiar historiography on Parisian development, his historical narrative pivots on Haussmannization and its legacies for the socio-spatial evolution of the city. Keller's introduction of the capital city's famous renovations during the Second Empire—the reconstruction of the city orchestrated by Napoleon III and the Prefect of the Seine Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann—is balanced and judicious. Whether the infamous prefect simply exacerbated preexisting tendencies or introduced an entirely new social geography to the capital, this era marks the beginning of Paris's pronounced gentrification. Keller tries to detail the geography of that process somewhat more finely, noting that a mythologization of the displacement of the city's poor to the peripheries has meant that the renovations' contributions to the emergence of a pernicious, cheek-by-jowl arrangement of inequality within the city has not been adequately assessed. After Haussmann, the mixed apartment house in which artisans, clerks, professionals, and rentiers might find themselves under the same roof was impossible. Mixity persisted, but in a degraded form: lower class residents in new apartment buildings were servants rather than independent tradespeople, consigned to inadequate accommodation on upper stories that they reached through separate stairwells, perched precariously above tenants who belonged to ever more distant and homogenous social worlds.

Nevertheless, I would suggest that there are shortcomings to placing Haussmann at the center of this story. The regulatory environment Keller maligns did not originate with the Second Empire, and innovations in building forms during that period were few. The building of six and seven-story buildings certainly increased, but developers and property owners by no means automatically filled their building envelopes in a scramble for maximum returns; this is why municipal building contracts, under Haussmann and after, often included a condition requiring builders to construct as high as regulations allowed. Significant pushing against the boundaries of height restrictions occurred in the building booms of the 1880s and the turn of the century, resulting in the loosening of earlier limits in new regulations of 1882/1884 and 1902. Important for the *chambres de bonnes*, the vertically integrated apartment house was already a nostalgic caricature of a bygone age, rather than a social reality, by the time of Haussmann's appointment.[1] And the replacement of servants' accommodations with rentable apartments on the top floor, even in new buildings in the city's affluent west end, was increasingly common in the 1890s and 1900s. This did not automatically make these units vastly more comfortable (though they were often larger and had more amenities than a typical servant's room), but it indicates more social complexity to Paris's seventh floor landscape than descriptions of archetypical buildings from Second Empire architectural treatises convey.[2]

None of this infringes on the central takeaway of Keller's urban history: that the nineteenth century city, whose landscape largely remains the stuff of daily life for Parisians today, was deeply unequal, even unjust, in its distribution of space, amenities, and opportunities to the city's residents. Yet just as the particular narrativization of the 2003 heat wave has important consequences, it also matters which narrative of Paris's structural inequality we deploy. The core of Paris's building stock today was constructed between 1870 and 1914, when the city was the world's most indebted and boasted a municipal council—elected for the first time in decades—that proved unwilling and unable to firmly govern private development. Speculation was fueled by a system of financing institutions whose relations were perfected in the last decades of the century, and looser incorporation laws, as well as the emergence of large corporate property investors, changed the business of housing in the city. The rue Ambroise Thomas in the ninth

arrondissement, to which Keller tracked one of the abandoned, “Louise,” is a prime example of the small-scale corporate development that proliferated as speculators gained easier access to credit. This narrow street was constructed in 1896 by two developers, Bloch and Péretmère, and remained a private street outside many municipal regulations until 1986, at which point it was partially turned over to public domain. It is the (literal and judicial) spaces of authority allowed private property, and how those spaces evolve over time, that are perhaps more pertinent to the city’s persistent spatialization of inequality than the operations of Haussmann per se.[3] The dramatic changes introduced by the World Wars, such as rent control legislation and the spread of *copropriété* or individual apartment ownership, have changed the relations that shape social space. Drawing a line from Haussmann to the early twenty-first century, skirting important transformations in the political economy of housing in between, implies a sort of path dependency at odds with both the uses of built space and the book’s ambition to infuse historical particularity into our understanding of contemporary disasters.

Many of the forgotten dead who occupied these precarious dwellings had aged in place, along with the buildings that housed them. “Pedro” had owned his top-floor rooms for several decades; “Louise” had rented her apartment for sixty years; “Marie-France” had lived on the seventh floor for as long as anyone could remember; even “Patricia,” a younger victim and resident of a furnished hotel, had been in her unit for five years. They were durable presences; you might see them as part of the biography of a building. Keller’s Paris, then, stands in contrast to narratives of the modern city that focus on (and glamorize) the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent; the stones of his city do not change faster than the hearts of men. This is an important methodological intervention, particularly for the “capital of modernity.”[4] Keller shows the insights to be gained by training our sights on the enduring social and physical landscape of the city. He is able to construct an embodied history of the city that privileges the bodies of the excluded.[5] The contrast between these bodies, whose biological frailty is reinforced by the fragility of social bonds necessary to live with consequence, and the material solidity of the built world that survives them, adds poignancy to an already moving and sensitive narrative of the city’s (and society’s) forgotten.

NOTES

[1] The invaluable works on this period are Adeline Daumard, *Maisons de Paris et propriétaires parisiens au XIXe siècle (1809-1880)* (Paris: Editions Cujas, 1965) and Jeanne Gaillard, *Paris, La Ville: 1852-1870* (Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion, 1977).

[2] These spaces are among those explored in Chapter Six of my *Selling Paris: Property and Commercial Culture in the Fin-de-siècle Capital* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015)

[3] For an example of work moving our understanding of Paris’s structural fragility beyond Haussmannization, see Peter Soppelsa, “The Fragility of Modernity: Infrastructure and Everyday Life in Paris, 1870–1914” (PhD diss., University of Michigan 2009), and his article, “Paris’s 1900 Universal Exposition and the Politics of Urban Disaster,” *French Historical Studies* 36, no. 2 (2013): 271-298.

[4] David Harvey, *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003)

[5] Keller notes that elderly women constituted the majority of victims of the heatwave, and also that single women represent a defining demographic amongst the French elderly more generally (pp.118-120). He thus suggests, but does not pursue, the importance of a gendered analysis of the feminization of old age, and the significance of older women as a key category for approaching the experience of the modern city. For a sophisticated treatment of housing disaster and gender, see Michael Mulvey, “The Problem that Had a Name: French High-Rise Developments and the Fantasy of a Suburban Homemaker Pathology, 1954-73,” *Gender & History* 28 no.1 (April 2016): 177-198. More generally, see Michèle Perrot, “Le genre de la ville,” *Communications*, no. 65 (1997): 149–163; Jean- Paul Barrière, “Les veuves dans la ville en France au XIXe siècle: Images, rôles, types sociaux,” *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l’Ouest* 114, no. 3 (2007): 169–194.

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