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James Cannon, *The Paris Zone: A Cultural History, 1840-1944*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015. xv + 248 pp. 47 color plates, bibliography, and index. \$119.95 U.S./ £70.00 UK. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4724-2831-8; \$92.09 U.S./ £66.50 UK. (eb). ISBN 1472428315.

Review by Lynne Taylor, University of Waterloo.

The peripheral, the marginal, the liminal have always been sources of fascination. Like moths to a flame, it draws people to it, out of curiosity and out of a desire to experience life “on the edge”—an appropriate turn of phrase, in this context. James Cannon’s exploration of the *Zone* of Paris is an insightful examination of just one such space. Technically, the *Zone* was the *zone non aedificandi*—a narrow strip of land running parallel to the city’s fortifications and just outside of the walls—an area thirty-four kilometers long and 250 meters wide that encircled Paris and was meant to provide a clear view of any advancing army. In reality, the area in question was much wider, a loosely defined space that divided the city proper from the rural countryside surrounding it, still discernible in present-day Paris’s landscape, most notably in the form of the *boulevard périphérique* (built between 1956 and 1973).

This zone was truly a liminal space, caught between Paris on one side and the suburbs and countryside on the other, and with a legal, administrative and territorial status that was both ambiguous at the best of times, as well as constantly changing. A territory that was supposed to remain empty for military purposes was one which, in fact, was rapidly colonized at least twice over by marginal populations drawn from both the city and the countryside, as well as traversed by all entering and leaving the city itself. Economically, militarily, physically and culturally, the zone served as a borderland, a no man’s land, a space “in between,” a refuge, and a site of prurient voyeurism.

The *Zone* went through numerous reconfigurations and repurposing, government-sanctioned and not. In response to a diplomatic crisis in 1840 that threatened France with war (the Orient Crisis), fortifications were constructed around Paris, including a wall, a number of detached forts, and the *zone non aedificandi*. This cut a huge swathe through the suburbs and disrupted the pattern of points of entry into the city. It became a visual moat around Paris, if you will, an empty gash. When the threat didn’t materialize, the *Zone* proved too valuable a space to leave empty, and the marginal, as well as industry and businesses, moved in, pushed out of Paris by Haussmannization which had begun in the 1850s.

The *Zone*’s ambiguous status, caught as it was between urban and rural (and later, suburban) spaces, was in part because of its hazy legal, administrative and territorial status—not a part of Paris, yet encasing the city; the responsibility of the military, but occupied by civilians; impossible to ignore because it encircled the city and one had to traverse it to get in and out of Paris. Its primary function was in reality to provide cheap housing for a diverse, largely poor population drawn from Paris, the provinces, and other countries, ranging from rag-pickers and prostitutes to factory workers. A largely squalid area for much of its existence, it was a belt of mixed housing, ranging from shanty towns that rivalled those of the South African townships or the Brazilian favelas to shoddily-built walk-ups, as well as neat timber houses and multi-story apartment buildings. It also had a thriving economy, industrial and recreational, which included heavy industry, railway yards, flea markets, military parade grounds, cabarets, *guinguettes* and *ratodromes* (gambling venues where wagers were placed on battles between rats and

dogs) and prostitution. The working classes were also drawn to its wild, open, natural spaces—spaces used for recreation and leisure—an untamed, unkempt “green belt,” to use a twenty-first-century term.

With the threat of Prussian invasion in 1870, the zone was once again razed by the French military and the local population displaced, albeit only temporarily. Once the war ended, the area was soon resettled by various groups, but especially by rag-pickers, carnival performers, and gypsies, workers who couldn't afford housing in Paris or who preferred the pseudo-rural villages to the crowded city, and prostitutes. By the early 1890s, the zone had a reputation as a dangerous place, linked closely in the public's mind with a professional criminal element, violent street gangs, anarchist terrorism, and serious threats to public health—a site of “a heady mix of violence and sex” (p. 88). It was soon badly overcrowded and became linked with more generalized fears of national decadence and decline, both moral and physical. The truly nasty living conditions fed into a “burgeoning medical discourse that emphasized the links between insalubrity, disease, alcoholism and lawlessness” (p. 80). It also became a hotbed for anarchist terrorism in the early 1890s, and of gangsterism and revolutionary syndicalism in the early 1900s. By the turn of the century, its reputation as “a cesspit of crime, sex and violence” was well established (p. 91).

Ironically, this nasty reputation resulted in its becoming a fashionable, if risqué place to hang out among the middle class (the danger being a large part of the attraction for non-residents). Guided night-time tours of the zone brought Parisian socialites and international dignitaries to its streets (echoes of the tours one can do today of the favelas in Rio de Janeiro). Its cabarets played to this upper- and middle-class desire for vicarious thrills. Fashionable slumming became quite popular, creating and feeding a local industry. The yellow press further fed this prurient interest in the zone, its criminal element and its immorality, encouraging a kind of voyeurism on the part of its readership.

In the late nineteenth century, the *Zone* became the focus of a drawn-out debate over its re-development in response to its seedy reputation, its overcrowding, its threat to public health, the frustration of the municipal authorities who resented the flood of displaced Parisians forced into the area in search of affordable housing, straining the capacity of the municipalities with no assistance from the city, and the potential value of the land. The conversation began in the early 1880s, but little happened, as no one could agree on who should pay for the demolition of the fortifications, and both the military and the Ministry of Finance were reluctant to see the lands transferred to the city of Paris. Nor could anyone agree on what should be done with the land. There was little popular support for redevelopment, as those who used the *Zone* were content with it as it was, but the landowners in the area, whose property abutted the *zone non aedificandi*, were keen. By 1912, thirty years later, a city-state agreement was finally struck. The fortifications were torn down by 1929, freeing up 444 hectares of land. The intention was to construct cheap housing on the site of the fortifications and a green belt in the *Zone* itself. This would address the perceived decline in the calibre of both the French population and of French power by providing both decent housing, open recreational spaces and sporting facilities that would shape a new generation of citizens able to defend France militarily and culturally. An extraordinary variety of projects sprang up, ranging from military barracks to blocks of cheap apartments and chic private residences, from schools and churches to sporting facilities and public gardens. The Cité Universitaire was constructed on these grounds, as well as a *parc des expositions*. Yet, vast sectors of the *zone* remained untouched, as there was nowhere for the residents to move if the *zone* was converted to a green belt. By 1939, only 152 hectares had been cleared, while the population continued to grow. It shifted in composition too, to a more ethnically diverse population. The living conditions remained appalling, in fact worsening, as both landowners and municipal authorities refused to invest in infrastructure that was, at least theoretically, going to be torn down soon.

It took Vichy to sound the death knell for the *Zone*. Within four years, the state had taken responsibility for its redevelopment, expropriated the land, and razed many of the buildings. Its plan of building a network of physical education centres for students and the public (making the green belt one dedicated

to the physical prowess of the next generation) and a *boulevard périphérique* to facilitate the movement of traffic around the city was stalled for lack of building materials and German approval, but it did succeed in removing most of the residents--by 1944, 6800 of 8000 families had left the area. It would take the postwar period to complete the destruction of the *Zone* and its incorporation into the city. However, it took Vichy and an authoritarian government to implement its demolition (something that Vichy took pleasure in pointing out--that it was just doing what the republicans had been unable to do, in spite of talking about it for decades).

Throughout its history, the *Zone* attracted attention, not just from politicians and land developers but from artists and writers. It is this group's exploration of the *Zone*, physical and metaphorical, that lies at the core of Cannon's book--how French artists and writers understood and represented it in their work. The conclusion he reaches is that there was little agreement as to how to understand or explain it. For these writers and artists, the *Zone* functioned not just as a physical space that provided cheap housing but as a metaphor for French society and French national identity. Some saw it as emblematic of the decline and decay pervasive in France. Others saw it as a potential source of revolutionary energy and hope, "a salve for fin-de-siècle anxiety" (p.76). For every writer or artist who saw the *Zone* as a threat to Paris, it seemed another saw it as the essence of Paris, "an antidote to the soulless forms of *hausmannisation*" (p. 73). Some were repelled by the decay; others savoured it. Some saw it as picturesque, benign; others as dangerous, repellent. A few used the *Zone* to look forward, attempting to capture what they saw as its creative energy, its sheer playfulness; most used it to look backwards. Some saw it as the last bastion of Frenchness, especially as the urban city itself modernized architecturally and culturally; others saw it as an increasing threat to French values, especially as the immigrant population in the *Zone* grew and property values exploded in the face of early-twentieth-century speculation. Some saw it as representative of a broader trend towards social exclusion and segregation; others saw it as "a social utopia [in the making] which effaced not only the divisive consequences of [WWI] but also the upheavals of the entire post-Revolutionary period" (p. 125).

This wide spectrum of interpretations of the *Zone* and its significance was not just a phenomenon of the journalistic and artistic milieus, but also of the political. Just like the artists, politicians disagreed markedly about how to understand the *Zone*, and more so over time. Intriguingly, the disagreements among both artists and politicians did not line up neatly with political camps, but instead, there was serious disagreement over both what the *Zone* represented and what the solution was to whatever challenge it was believed to pose, even within political and artistic camps.

In the end, after a careful and thorough trolling through the literary and artistic canon of the period, as well as the various artistic movements (ranging from Romanticism to Cubism) in question, the author is unable to find any clear patterns in the response to the *Zone*, let alone any clear parallels between artistic and political opinion. Initially, this might frustrate a reader, as the responses to the *Zone* refuse to be neatly categorized. There are hints that Cannon himself might have been frustrated by this, as it would have been a clean conclusion to be able to draw--that certain circles, artistic movements, and political camps thought X of the *Zone*, and others thought Y. Instead, the book is forced to work its way through the various interpretations and to set them in their political, economic and social contexts, allowing the confusion of those commenting on the *Zone* to shine through. The *Zone* seems to serve as a kind of blank canvas, onto which viewers can cast their own particular concerns, predilections, fears, and hopes. A space that was constantly morphing, largely in response to pressures coming from elsewhere, the *Zone* had no identity of its own, which allowed observers to project an identity onto it.

This is, I think, the book's key strength. Rather than forcing a fit, by letting the indecisiveness and inconclusiveness of the observers shine through, Cannon makes clear both why the *Zone* remained a netherworld for so long and the observers' inability to agree upon what was the essence of France, much less its future. In this way, Cannon has nicely revealed the tremendous intellectual uncertainty, as well as diversity, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this way, the *Zone* truly served as a

liminal space, a borderland between urban and rural, past and future, decay and renewal, despair and hope—an effective metaphor for the nation of France at the time, a nation on the cusp.

Lynne Taylor
University of Waterloo
ltaylor@uwaterloo.ca

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