

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 Timothy B. Smith, Queen's University

Richard Keller's *Fatal Isolation* is a meticulously researched and deeply humane book that speaks to the heart of one of the central challenges all rich societies face: how to successfully integrate some of the most needy people in society, namely those over the age of 75 living alone. Such people accounted for a majority of the 14,802 people who died as a direct result of the devastating 2003 heat wave in France.

Keller's brilliant book is the product of a wide reading over more than half a dozen very large secondary literatures. Keller wears several hats: investigative journalist, social anthropologist, urban sociologist, medical historian, epidemiologist, political theorist, and a few others! The ambitious scope of the book is usually dazzling and often makes for a fascinating read—one learns a great deal in these 220 pages of text and notes. This is surely one of the most important books in contemporary French history and politics to appear in the past decade.

At the heart of *Fatal Isolation* lies the contrast between those who died in isolation in squalid housing conditions while their political leaders vacationed at the beach and were slow to grasp the gravity of the situation. A nation so rich, so officially devoted to the high ideal of solidarity had, its critics charged, failed to help its most vulnerable in a time of obvious need. Critics on the Catholic conservative Right like the editorialists at the newspaper *La Croix* charged that the deaths of thousands of elderly people signaled a society unmoored, in clear moral decline. Others pointed to the failure of the world's third most generous welfare state (in 2016 the most generous) to reach its most needy citizens—so much for “solidarity” said the headlines. Still others argued that a lethal combination of individualism, family breakdown, urban anonymity, the burden of a beautiful but difficult-to-modernize architecture, and political incompetence mixed during the height of the nation's holiday season—a perfect storm.

To its credit, France had the deepest collective soul-searching after the catastrophe. It's often forgotten that some 70,000 died across Europe. In Spain and Italy there were more deaths than in France, both in absolute and per capita terms. Nevertheless in Paris and throughout France bodies lay unclaimed for weeks in makeshift morgues. Understandably, the international press focused on France due to the gravity of the crisis in the capital city. The forgotten “bodies rapidly became the symbol of aging and isolation in the modern West, and a repository of [French] national shame with respect to both the origins and the management of the catastrophe” (pp. 3-4).

Keller's book devotes a good deal of time to tracking down the 100 unclaimed victims of Paris, buried in tombs in the cemetery of Thiais with leading politicians including President Chirac

present. In my view the book's most important contribution derives from good old-fashioned painstaking investigative work that sheds light on the humanity of the victims and rescues them from the condescension of posterity. "Although disparate in location, age, and social origins, they had much in common. They had no family to speak of.... Their neighbors recognized them, knew a bit about them, but did not save them from their fates. The French welfare state did little to stop their falls" (p. 6).

Single men were more likely to die and be buried as "forgotten" victims. Most of the "forgotten" of Paris were either widowed or had never married. They were completely cut off from regular social and familial contact. With the passion of a nineteenth century social investigator, the detective skills and fluid writing of today's best investigative journalists and the methodological rigor of a twenty-first century academic, Keller weaves a tragic and gripping account of the worst heat wave in European history, complete with personal histories of the victims as well as "expiatory narratives" of the bystanders, the disconnected neighbors who let people die in their midst. Many victims were estranged from family or, like one Marie France, had no family to speak of: "there was no one to abandon her" since "there was no easily identifiable party responsible for her care or well-being" (p. 82).

Above all one grasps the magnitude of the human tragedy that befell France in the hot August of 2003. Thousands of low-income and/or socially isolated individuals, living alone, "shared a social geography of poverty and unsatisfactory housing. In particular, [in Paris] many of these forgotten victims lived in *chambres de bonne*, the former domestic servants' quarters" that are grandfathered out of compliance with existing housing codes (p. 89). Under the hot zinc roofs of a magnificent but deadly architecture, people died alone in rooms so small, with ceilings so low, no modern civilized fire and safety codes would approve. To a certain extent we are talking of death by architectural and regulatory path dependency coupled with politicians' failure to grasp the situation in time. Cultural and social factors also came into play: With no insulation against the heat, often with no running water in their room, and with no strong tradition of using electric fans (let alone air conditioning), victims were condemned to death by dehydration if they remained in their apartments for extended periods.

One study of 250 victims and 250 survivors of the heat wave concluded, "those who lived on the top floors of apartment buildings were four times likelier to die during the heat wave than their neighbors on lower floors. Those who lived in apartments with no bath or shower were two and a half times likelier to die than their neighbors. And those who had little or no social interaction were six times likelier to die than their neighbors" (p. 108). Furthermore, many of the victims lived in *small* apartments on top stories.

In the roughly 30% of the book that discusses the victims in a direct manner, Keller shines. As a work of investigative historical anthropology (or however one chooses to classify Keller's multi-disciplinary approach), this is a remarkable book, gripping, original, daring, sensitive. For me, there's a rich trove of material that will provoke and likely be useful in the classroom for decades to come. Roughly another third of the book consists of Keller's attempts to situate the tragedy of 2003 within the *longue durée* of medical, social, urban and political history. I find these sections of the book to be overwhelmingly convincing and skillfully executed. Having said that, from an organizational and stylistic point of view I do find that this multi-dimensional approach leads to

an interruption of the book's narrative flow as there are frequent chronological zigzags, like using a 55 year old government report, or even the musings of pressure groups from the 1890s and the writings of Simone de Beauvoir to underscore contemporary attitudes toward the elderly. When Keller finds time for a poignant vignette of a victim and the dense theories of an obscure Italian philosopher on the same page the theory-averse among us may cringe. I find this excellent book to be so rich in empirical detail it needs no fancy theoretical flying buttress to stand. Of course I quibble—this is an expression of individual taste and it's Keller's book, not mine—but I do wonder how many non-academic laypersons will be turned off by the large doses of theory. In sum, to my tastes, about two-thirds of the book is either brilliant or first-rate. And two out of three ain't bad, I suppose.

Quibbles aside, I do have one major concern and it's more than a difference over semantics. In *Fatal Isolation* Keller insists France is unusually insensitive to the needs of “the elderly,” who, he claims, suffer from “political marginalization” (p. 4, p. 21). Keller repeatedly suggests that a significant number of thinkers and leaders in France detest the elderly, and have done for quite some time. I find this to be a bit of a stretch. What might have been true of some in 1891 or 1963, was not in 2003. I also find it difficult to reconcile Keller's account with the general consensus among contemporary French, British and American political scientists and sociologists that France is a gerontocracy, and has been for several decades. Yet throughout the book Keller argues “political discourse and public policy have pushed the elderly to the margins of society” (p. 17).

It's one thing to acknowledge that the overwhelming prosperity of the French elderly (a term generally applied to those over the age of 65 in rich nations) has left pockets of marginalized elderly behind. This is how I would, and have, described contemporary France. But it's another thing to conflate the poverty of one group—those who do *not* benefit from public pensions that are generally among the most generous in the world—with the “elderly” in general. And that's what Keller appears to have done. He never defines his terms: who exactly are the elderly? What's the age cut-off? He never says. Those who never benefitted from generous occupational-based defined benefit inflation-protected pensions have indeed fallen through the cracks and are vulnerable to slipping into poverty. They rely on the *minimum vieillesse* (a citizenship-based, as opposed to occupation-based, measure designed to catch those who fall through the welfare state's cracks, but never discussed in this book, neither on its own terms nor in relation to similar benefits in other European nations). One elderly person living in poverty is too many, of course, but the same could be said of children, and the child poverty rate in France is substantially higher than the elderly poverty rate. The general trend since the 1970s has been for the poverty rate of children and young adults to rise (now over 20% for some categories) and the poverty rate of the elderly to fall (now under 10%). Keller never mentions this. The general trend in France is to spend more, not less on the elderly. The poverty rate of the elderly has fallen from over 40% in the 1950s and today is more than three points below the Organisation for Economic and Co-operation Development average of 13.5%. The academic literature on aging usually portrays France in a positive light. Far from being marginalized, the elderly in general have never been more politically powerful. They have their retiree associations and there are over half a dozen national magazines championing their cause.

If Keller had been more precise with his definition of the marginalized elderly, I would have no problems at all with the book's main argument because it's hard to argue with the fact that a certain

portion of the low-income elderly surely were abandoned by public authorities. But as it stands I could not assign this book to students without providing them some basic statistics on the general prosperity of the French elderly population. Hundreds of political scientists, economists, sociologists and historians would disagree with Keller's statement that the elderly are politically marginalized; Parisian bookstores are filled with books decrying the capture of the polity by the baby boomers and the elderly, with their voting turnout over 90% in most elections. In 2003, the average age of a French politician was 10 years above his or her British counterpart. Youth unemployment in general, the unemployment in the *banlieu* in particular, and youth suicide rates are at tragic levels: *here* are the marginalized of France.

It might seem a little rich coming from the author of a polemical account of France's various economic and social problems, but I do find that *Fatal Isolation* is informed by a certain moral outrage in the face of the 2003 tragedy which sometimes prevents a more balanced portrayal of the general status of the "elderly" in contemporary France. Let me quote a prolific and widely respected scholar not known for having submitted to the temptation of polemics, Daniel Béland of the University of Saskatchewan, writing with his colleague Jean-Philippe Viriot Durandal:

The French pension system offers comparatively high replacement rates.... A 2004 study revealed that people born in 1934 with a full contribution record received the equivalent of more than 75% of their last salary in total pension benefits (Coëffic, 2004). This reality, alongside the existence of a "minimum pension" for low-income pensioners, goes a long way in explaining why France has been successful in reducing old-age poverty. In 1970, more than 25% of aged households lived in poverty (Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques [INSEE], 2001). By the mid-2000s, poverty affected fewer than 10% of the people aged 65 and older. This was a significantly better outcome than the one witnessed in countries such as Belgium, Italy, and the United Kingdom (Zaidi, 2009).... In France in 2007, public pension spending was the equivalent of 12.5% of gross domestic product (GDP), nearly twice as high as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2011) average. [1]

Does this sound like a country in which the "elderly" are "politically marginalized"? Keller seems scandalized that 10% of the poor of France consist of the elderly (p. 148), but the elderly make up over 16% of the population, suggesting that one has a higher risk of being poor if one is of working age. And French poverty statistics do not include in-kind benefits, tax preferences and various discounts and exonerations the elderly enjoy. Béland reminds us that the French were very quick to atone for their sins of omission:

In 2003, the heat wave created a major political shockwave in France, as it resulted in the death of 15,000 older persons. Limited access to air conditioning, as well as urban pollution, social isolation, and a lack of experience in handling such heat waves, led to dehydration and excessive sun exposure, which largely accounted for the high number of casualties. In the aftermath of the heat wave, efforts were made to deal with some of these problems and find ways to avoid future heat-related catastrophes. Moreover, at a broader level, this traumatic episode helped push aging onto the policy agenda. Partly as a result, the French government launched an ambitious Aging and Solidarity Plan (2003–2006), granting massive investments for the construction or renovation of nursing homes as well

as the development of new long-term care services. Additionally, another initiative launched in 2003 allocated more than 9 billion euros to the improvement of health care and home care for older people. Later in the decade, other French policy initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life of older people included a national campaign against elder abuse and the 2007–2009 “Bien Vieillir” (Age Well) National Plan, to promote healthy aging among people aged 55–75.... Additionally...[there is now a] plan against pain (Plan Douleur, 2006–2010), a plan for palliative care (2008–2012) and a plan for suicide prevention (2011–2014).[2]

I think this forum should discuss the degree to which France has indeed ‘atoned’ for its sins of omission during 2003.

Perhaps we could also discuss at length the historical aversion to air-conditioning (and even basic electric fans) in France. In 2003, France was home to one million people aged 85 and over (I cannot find any detailed discussion of this statistic in the book). About 10,000 senior citizens died in a country of 62.2 million with over 9.5 million people over the age of 65. That’s an astonishing 1 in 950 people, surely a catastrophe and a disgrace. To be sure, even in the best organized public health system several hundred would have died at home in the absence of air conditioning. But a country in which over 2,000 elderly people died *in nursing homes*, relatively well attended by nurses and doctors (unlike the socially isolated who died alone), due to heat, is a country that has failed to prepare for a potential disaster.

We can’t have it both ways—yes, air conditioning is bad for global warming, but in the absence of it, people die. Was the real scandal the lack of air conditioning in France? There was nowhere to go, no escape route, no public “cooling stations” like the ones sometimes opened up in North American cities during heat waves. Since 2003 the state has invested hundreds of millions of euros in air conditioning old age homes and medical facilities in general. This is perhaps the most important “lesson” the French state learned from the disaster.

France is not alone in its failure to foresee the impact of severe heat waves on an aging society. There were more deaths in Spain and Italy in 2003 yet Spain’s population in 2003 was 42.7 million versus France’s 62.2 million and Italy’s 57.3 million. As in France, air conditioning is rare. There were far fewer socially isolated elderly people in Italy and Spain, since the percentage of middle aged people who lived with their senior-citizen parents in those two nations (39% in Italy) was more than double the rate (17%) in France. In a May 2015 Pew Research Center report some 88% of middle aged Italians said they were in regular contact with and provided regular support to their parents. About one third of middle aged Italians live with their parents. And 85% of Italian men aged 18 to 33 live with their parents. Family support networks were clearly stronger in Italy in 2003. The majority of elderly Italians live near their children’s homes or even in the same building. Some 70% of the Italian elderly have regular and frequent contact with their children and almost 80% have frequent contact with their grandchildren. And yet more Italians died than French in 2003. These statistics don’t speak to a clear conclusion but they do complicate, I think, the general assumption that the French failed utterly, singularly, to rise to the occasion in 2003. Many European nations failed to grasp the gravity of the situation.

Keller summarizes this “perfect storm” argument even as often takes exception with it:

The heat wave was an extraordinary event. It combined an unprecedented extreme weather system with an aging society, but also with an exactly coinciding vacation period that placed many neighbors, family, medical staff, and the state away from the disaster's most affected zones. It involved difficult and fractured communications among a number of agencies and actors, with an important turning point in the disaster occurring over a weekend (9-10 August) that further complicated organization and increased response time.... The disaster exploited a near-perfect ecology for wreaking the maximum damage. (p. 53)

It seems to me that Keller's work calls out for discussion and further reflection on the following issues:

First, to what extent was this indeed a perfect storm? I read this book as a scathing indictment of France's political class and its public health system as well. Since the publication of the book has more light been shed on the response of other nations, including Italy and Spain? To what extent was the French response 'typical' of the general European pattern? Keller argues that the heat wave "revealed scandalous vulnerabilities in a number of French systems, including emergency medicine, public health responses, government leadership, and mortality reporting" (p. 11).

Second, to what extent has France "lagged" behind other rich nations in basic public health, consumer product safety, occupational health and safety? For example, only within the last year did French law finally require smoke detectors in all residences. These sorts of laws have been on the books in Canada for almost 40 years—you won't get home insurance without smoke detectors in this country. From lax fire safety codes, to a carefree approach to safety (children in Paris whizzing along sidewalks on scooters without helmets and on bikes too), to high smoking rates among youth in particular, to high levels of alcohol consumption, I wonder if France is not as effective as it might be in getting the word out regarding public health risks. Did the French state relegate the inhabitants of the *chambres de bonne* to death due to long-lingering insouciance in the face of such architecturally-based inequalities? Or was an insouciance in the face of public health risks, in general, partly responsible?

Third, to what extent was France's failure a failure of voluntary collective action? To what extent is France "lacking," vis-à-vis other rich, open societies, in truly voluntary organizations like North American style Meals on Wheels that provide for regular contact with the elderly? A majority of France's 'voluntary' organizations in fact receive the lion's share of their incomes from the state; do truly independent and private organizations fare better, spring to action quicker, than state adjuncts? (Or is this impossible to determine?) Perhaps the Forum could discuss the admittedly tricky and slippery notions of sociability, voluntarism, trust, the kindness of strangers, and attitudes toward charity. These issues are not discussed very much in Keller's fine book.

When the Ice Storm of 1998 knocked out electricity in Quebec, Ontario and parts of the Northeast U.S., millions of people were without power for several weeks. Immediately, voluntary groups sprung into action. Neighbors checked on old people, bringing them meals, wood for stoves and fireplaces, blankets, and so on. Police did door-to-door sweeps to ensure that the socially isolated were not left behind. Thirty-five people died but very few from hypothermia. To be sure, when

electricity is cut off (it was not in 2003 during the heat wave) the threat to normal life is clear and present. But what struck me about this episode, as someone who experienced it first hand, was how the community in which I lived (Kingston, Ontario) and the community in which my parents lived, in rural Quebec, immediately sprang to action and thought, immediately, about the elderly and how to ensure that their needs were attended to. When that proved insufficient, the Canadian government called in the army to help. The contrast with the French, Italian and Spanish responses (to a different sort of challenge) is striking. Keeping warm in an insulated house or apartment is often a matter of putting on one's winter clothing and staying in bed under the blankets. Most people managed just fine. And yet we called out the army in Canada. In light of this, Keller's damning indictment of the French response to 2003 might just have hit the correct tone.

Again let me conclude that I find this to be a brilliant, prize-worthy book, not perfect of course, but utterly compelling in its empirical work and written with great sensitivity. Richard Keller has written a fundamentally important book that cuts to the very heart of what it means to be a citizen in a rich democracy.

NOTES

[1] Daniel Béland and Jean-Philippe Viriot Durandal, "Aging in France: Population Trends, Policy Issues, and Research Institutions," *The Gerontologist* (2013), 53.

[2] Béland and Durandal, "Aging in France," 2.

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