

*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.

Response by Richard C. Keller, University of Wisconsin-Madison

It's an extraordinary honor to have one's book as the subject of an H-France Forum, and I'm thankful both to H-France for assembling such a fantastic group of reviewers, as well as to the reviewers for their generous and careful readings of the book and their incisive comments on the project. Moreover, although each reviewer has clearly brought his or her particular expertise to the project, resulting in a forum that moves in many directions, there are several common themes throughout the responses. In their disparate approaches, these reviewers draw attention to the interdisciplinary nature of a book that draws on a single event—the heat wave of August 2003—to explore a range of debates about social citizenship and vulnerability in contemporary France. Although I do not have sufficient space to address all of their concerns, I will do my best to respond to a number of the important questions the reviewers raise.

When measured by mortality, the 2003 heat wave was the worst natural disaster in contemporary French history. Temperatures spiked in early August, and the combination of high heat, humidity, and ozone pollution killed nearly 15,000 in just over two weeks. The mortality burden was heavily concentrated among the elderly, with eighty percent of deaths occurring among those over seventy-five years old. It was also disproportionately concentrated in French cities, with Paris suffering the highest toll. These disparities are in many ways the focus of the book, which explores the cases of roughly a hundred victims of the disaster whose bodies were never claimed in the heat wave's aftermath, and who were buried at public expense in early September 2003. Beginning at the cemetery where they were buried, I traced the social histories of many of these so-called “forgotten” victims, visiting the buildings where they lived and discussing their lives and deaths with those who knew them. The result is a book that, as Catherine Clark notes in her review, attempts to contextualize and to reconcile three distinct types of narratives about the disaster that emerged in its aftermath: the official story of the heat wave, as represented in political discourse and in the news media; a scientific narrative of the catastrophe as rendered in epidemiological reports; and popular imaginations of the disaster, through the social histories of marginal citizens. The book explores these stories by developing an account of the mediatization and politicization of the catastrophe, a study of the geography of vulnerability in contemporary Paris, an exploration of the politics of aging and marginalization in modern France, and a critical engagement with the epidemiology of disasters. In doing so I drew on the practices of a range of disciplines, including not only social history, but also ethnography, human geography, environmental history, and science and technology studies.

As the reviewers note, I sought to tell the stories of those who died by seeking traces of their lives in a number of ways. One method consisted of exploring the sites where they lived and died: the

book thus engages with architecture and urban form. I visited their addresses in part to interview those who might have known the victims, however fragmentarily. But I also visited in an attempt to see how certain places and spaces might have contributed to the vulnerability of their inhabitants, and to consider residential spaces as historical artifacts in their own right. I documented these visits with over a thousand photographs, a number of which appear in the book. I also sought to place their lives in broader context of long-term historical trends that might have influenced their vulnerability, including the changing nature of the cityscape and shifts in social attitudes toward old age over the past century.

As both Catherine Clark and Alexia Yates point out, the vast literature on Parisian urbanism has focused on rupture and novelty. Yet there is much to be said about the changing uses of existing spaces, as Clark notes. As I argue in *Fatal Isolation*, the heat wave's forgotten victims lived throughout the city, but were concentrated in a particular social geography. That is, although there are few obvious concentrations by neighborhood, they shared a geography of vulnerability. Many of them lived in *chambres de bonne*, or the ubiquitous rooms directly under the zinc roofs of many of the city's buildings in neighborhoods rich and poor alike. Such environments overdetermined risk for their inhabitants. The heat load of the top floors of buildings combined with uninsulated rooftops made for suffocating temperatures. Such spaces are markers of poverty, another risk factor for dying during the heat wave. Although they are among the most expensive properties in Paris by square meter, they are so small that they are among the most affordable as well. They tend not to have bath facilities or toilets, and are often accessible only by staircase, even if the rest of the building has elevator service. Given that many who live in such apartments suffer from disabilities related to old age, tenants not only suffer these conditions, but are trapped by them.

Catherine Clark poses important questions about this aspect of the project. She asks whether it might have proved helpful to include a visualization of what I call a vertical geography of vulnerability, possibly a "plotting of deaths by floor," and also asks useful comparative questions about environment and risk: why did fewer people die in Marseille than in Paris, for example, and what might the inclusion of the suburbs have brought to the book? I wrestled with how to provide a visual reference to the vertical axis of vulnerability—one option was a table that would have indicated deaths by floor of residence. In the end I abandoned the idea, because elevated residence was only one of the main risk factors I identified in this social geography. Although some forty percent of the population I studied lived on high or top floors, they nearly all shared residence in precarious housing of one kind or other: they lived in tiny *chambres de bonne*, or in cheap residential hotels, or in abandoned buildings, or were homeless. I focused the book's third chapter on the *chambre de bonne* because of its iconic status in Parisian architectural history, but also as just one kind of marginal housing among many.

Clark asks whether the more common red-tile roofs of Marseille might have offered some protection to that city's inhabitants. Here I must plead ignorance. Marseille suffered elevated mortality, but nowhere near what Paris experienced. The best explanation I found for this disparity was that Marseille experienced its own devastating heat wave in 1984, which killed hundreds in the city, and developed a municipal alert system (as well as a more general awareness of the dangers of extreme heat), both of which likely offered some protection in 2003. She also wonders what a comparison between Paris and its periurban environment might yield to investigations of the role of the built environment in heat disasters. I agree that this is a critical question. The Ile-

de-France contains about eighteen percent of France's population, but suffered roughly a third of excess mortality during the 2003 heat wave: this represents an elevated mortality rate only slightly lower than Paris's. Given the staggering rates of economic dislocation in the *banlieue*, as well as a notably different urban form, inclusion of the region would have made for a fascinating comparison. I was unable to take on that kind of scale in the course of this project, but I hope that other researchers will rise to that challenge in the future.

Clark also asks a number of pointed questions about the use of images in the text. These are mostly documentary photographs showing buildings or interior spaces in which the heat wave's forgotten victims lived and died. I very much appreciate Clark's note that these photos, most of which show living conditions in marginal spaces, constitute "a type of serial memorial" to those who died during the disaster. One critical aspect of the photos is that there are no people in them; they are a documentary of absences that reinforces their broader social isolation as an invisible population. I selected them on aesthetic grounds, including those that offered the most accurate reportage of the scenes in question. They came to be an important resource in writing the book, allowing me (in conjunction with interview data) to reconstruct habitats of vulnerability and isolation.

Perhaps the most important sources of evidence, however, were the anecdotes that informants shared with me in the course of my fieldwork. Alexia Yates and Paul Stephenson raise important questions about the uses of the anecdote as a form of historical evidence in the project. As Yates writes (after her brilliant caricature of the conference paper), "the plural of anecdote is not data." Indeed. And far too often, colleagues in the sciences will dismiss evidence as "merely" anecdotal. As Yates recognizes, it is important to note that anecdotes and data are not necessarily in competition with one another. In its traditional usage by historians, the anecdote is illustrative: it complements data and compels evidence to tell a story. But the anecdote serves a different purpose here. In this study, I'm fascinated by the rhetorical work of the anecdote in storytelling about victimhood and social isolation. When I conducted my fieldwork, I found it astonishing that informants tended overwhelmingly to relay narratives about the heat wave's forgotten victims in the form of anecdotes.

As Yates notes, such anecdotes illuminate the life histories of these victims, but they also constrain them. The stories these informants told brought to the fore all the ambiguities and complexities that surrounded the lives and deaths of the forgotten. They portray the victims as difficult subjects whose alienation from the community was self-induced; they were at best figures who had tried the patience of those who surrounded them for decades. They therefore operate as a kind of marginalizing memory of the heat wave's forgotten victims. Such anecdotes had a redemptive function, casting the narrator in a positive light and emphasizing the ways in which the victims themselves had pushed away offers of help throughout their lives.

Paul Stephenson focuses much of his review on the construction of these anecdotes in the book's second chapter, as well as the relationship between these portraits of the heat wave's victims and the place of the state in their lives. He asks, regarding the portrayal of these victims in their complexity, whether a given death should be considered more of a loss because one might have been a sympathetic figure, or less of a loss because one might have been aloof, guarded, or cantankerous. Here I would suggest that neither of these is the case; rather, these were curious particularities that emerged in the course of my interviews with those who knew the victims. I

found it essential to include those particularities in order to render a more human portrait of these casualties of disaster, who were neither fully the agents of their own disaster nor fully victims of an uncaring society.

Stephenson suggests that these come across as caricatures or cartoon-like images of the victims. This is in part a function of the fragmentary nature of the stories I was able to collect from those who knew the heat wave's victims. As social isolates, they had few strong connections with those who surrounded them. Yet the caricature-like nature of these portraits is also a critical component of the rhetorical function of the anecdote. By beginning with a horrifying death in isolation, these stories could only lead back to the inevitability of such a death: the death became the anchor that grounded the entire narrative of the victim's life. And these narratives highlight a fracture in social citizenship. Although the heat wave's forgotten victims were politically enfranchised subjects, they failed to benefit from the protections of the state or from any form of social solidarity. The anecdotes I relate in *Fatal Isolation* are only fragmentary evidence of the lives these subjects lived, but they constitute an important form of evidence pertaining to a broader social memory of the disaster.

Two of the reviewers offer useful and significant criticisms of my historicization of the disaster in two distinct areas: in my exploration of Parisian urbanism and in my assessment of the political marginalization of the elderly in France. Alexia Yates, whose excellent work on real estate in fin-de-siècle Paris gives her extraordinary insight into the intersection of housing, urban planning, and architecture in the city, argues that I place too much emphasis on Haussmann and the mid-nineteenth century in my analysis of the historical roots of a social geography of vulnerability in Paris. She notes that the regulatory regime that structured a new form of housing inequality as well as the near eradication of socio-economically mixed housing long predate Haussmann's reconstruction of the city; likewise, deregulation in the 1880s and afterward played critical roles in shaping inequality in the city. To concentrate so closely on Haussmann is therefore to miss the fact that many of the critical changes in Parisian housing stock that played a role in structuring vulnerability during the heat wave happened either well before or after Haussmannization. This is a legitimate criticism, and I wish her book had been available before I published my own!

That said, I think there remains a strong rationale for generalizing these changes to the phenomenon, if not necessarily the exact period, of what we might reasonably consider Haussmannization. Indeed, part of what I'm attempting in this chapter is to engage with two principal trends in the historiography of Parisian urban planning in the nineteenth century. One is the notion that Haussmannization pushed poverty to the city's margins. While urban renewal did generate a new socioeconomic geography in Paris, staggering inequality persisted in the new city. Yates is correct that such changes were already under way before the Second Empire. Yet the scale of these changes expanded dramatically with the remaking of the city. Likewise, there is an important paradox at work in the process of Haussmannization. At least one of Napoleon III's rationales for rebuilding the city was the restoration of public health by bringing light and air into Paris's insalubrious neighborhoods, where cholera, tuberculosis, typhus, smallpox, and other infectious diseases devastated populations. It is curious, then, that a move intended to improve public health in the mid-nineteenth century could so dramatically exacerbate vulnerability in a different health crisis a hundred fifty years later. It is this tragic irony that led me perhaps to oversimplify the chronology of when such changes took effect.

Timothy B. Smith offers generous praise for much of *Fatal Isolation*, but has a critical take on two different aspects of the book. Smith offers a minor criticism about the use of the “theoretical flying buttresses” that I employ alongside empirical material, indicating that the inclusion of ideas from Giorgio Agamben or Judith Butler adds little to the project. He brings a much more profound criticism to chapter four of the book, which describes a process of the gradual political marginalization of the elderly in France in the course of the twentieth century. Smith contends that France is in fact a gerontocracy, a society ruled by (and with benefits disproportionately skewed toward) the elderly. As Smith argues, retirement benefits have increased dramatically since the 1970s, with a concomitant drop in poverty among the elderly. How, then, he asks, could one consider the elderly a marginalized population, especially in comparison with French youth, who suffer from exceptionally high rates of unemployment and poverty?

Yet these two notions—those of elderly prosperity as a function of welfare benefits, and those of elderly marginalization—are not necessarily incompatible with one another. Although social spending on the elderly has increased significantly, there is strong evidence of a building resentment of the elderly over the course of the twentieth century, as well as of a pervasive sense of worthlessness among many elderly themselves. And much of this sentiment could well be the consequence of that social spending. In the late 1980s, for example, one journalist described the elderly as “gluttons” of the health care sector.[1] Finance minister Francis Mer echoed this idea when he announced at the end of July 2003 his “solution” to high health costs in France: “Quite simply, get rid of the last year of life, because that’s what costs the most.”[2] Even as a joke, Mer’s comments reiterate the scathing (and thanatopolitical) rhetoric of anti-aging fanatics such as Fernand Boverat, who flirted with the idea of allowing the elderly poor to die rather than expand social security. Likewise, when asked why heat warning systems had not been put in place in the summer of 2003, health minister Jean-François Mattei replied, “You know, the elderly, as they don’t have very good memories, often from one moment to another, so the preventive messages that we could air ... well, they’d forget them the same day!”[3] Aside from its shocking insensitivity, the statement—in combination with Mattei’s broader trivialization of the heat wave’s death toll among the elderly in general—highlights a kind of dehumanization of the elderly in France that has strong echoes elsewhere. It is not surprising that the author Michel Houellebecq describes France as seeing “the increasingly ugly, deteriorated bodies of the elderly” as “the object of unanimous disgust.”[4]

Differing approaches to the history of aging in France might thus bring different results, but both may well be true. France may spend a disproportionate amount on the elderly in general, but there can also be a pervasive contempt for the elderly. As I note in the book, longitudinal surveys of elderly Parisians undertaken between the 1970s and early 2000s indicate that many have felt utterly discarded by society. Although France may well be the gerontocracy Smith describes, that is not incompatible with a widespread ageism in French society. And this is where I think that the work of thinkers such as Agamben and Butler are useful to the project: they offer a mechanism for understanding why elderly deaths have become, to use Butler’s term, “ungrievable.” Smith argues that I overgeneralize by speaking of a marginalization of the elderly. While a socioeconomic history of aging supports that claim, a cultural history of aging might not. As I argue in the closing pages of chapter four,

Despite dramatic increases in pension spending since the 1940s, many of those who most needed the state's help found themselves in desperate circumstances not only in 2003, but in the decades that preceded.... Data may suggest that contemporary French retirees are in the aggregate better off than the average French person, and are indeed the country's best-protected generation. Yet a tour through the dilapidated halls of the heat wave's forgotten dead indicates that such a frame is rhetoric rather than reality for many for whom the state's protections have constituted a state-sponsored preservation of bare life rather than a retirement package. (pp. 148-149)

I'd also like to respond to one final criticism in Smith's review. He asks (although not in so many words), why France? Spain and Italy suffered equal, if not higher, mortality during the summer of 2003, so why the hand-wringing about the French case? Here, it is important to focus on not only on the mortality figures in each country, but also on the chronological distribution of mortality in 2003. There is a widespread misconception that Europe experienced 70,000 excess deaths in the August heat wave. This is not the case. The August heat wave was merely one extreme event in a summer of extreme heat. The figure of 70,000 excess deaths is for the entire summer, not merely one month. Spain and Italy suffered a general elevation of mortality throughout the summer of 2003, with a notable increase in August. To be precise, Spain experienced about 10 excess deaths per 10,000 population in June, about 6.5 per 10,000 in July, and about 15 per 10,000 in August. For Italy, the figures are 10, 7.5, and 17 respectively. France, however, only experienced 2.3 excess deaths per 10,000 in June, and 2.7 per 10,000 in July, but experienced a staggering 25 excess deaths per 10,000 in August. From July to August, the excess death rate about doubled in Spain and Italy, but it increased by a factor of 10 in France. Where there was a steadily elevated rate of excess deaths in Spain and Italy for the entire summer, France bore almost its entire burden of excess mortality in only two weeks. Spain and Italy, therefore, did not have to resort to storing the dead in refrigerated trucks and food storage units for weeks on end; nor did morgue and funeral workers suffer exhaustion while working in unspeakable conditions. No wonder the August heat wave entailed a broader social and political crisis in France, but not in the other countries.

Both Smith and Stephenson ask about the role of the state in protecting its population during such a disaster. Smith asks specifically about the role of voluntary collective action as an alternative or complement to state-sponsored interventions, wondering whether organizations akin to the North American Meals on Wheels might have played a role in protecting vulnerable French citizens. These are excellent questions. I do not wish to revive the debate about whether the unbelievable mortality of the heat wave of August 2003 resulted from a failure of social solidarity or from the inadequacy of the state response (to some extent, both were responsible). I go to great pains to make clear in the book that the disaster and the deaths it wrought resulted from exceptional complexity, involving extreme weather; an aging society; a vacation period that had many critical first-responders, family, and medical staff away from the nation's largest and most vulnerable cities; and a complicated mortality reporting system that largely hid the crisis from view. One thing, however, is clear. This is not the last time France will need to face serious environmental challenges with a fractured society. The country witnessed some 2,000 excess deaths from extreme heat in 2006, and some 3,000 in 2015. Paris experienced its rainiest May since 1873 in 2016, weather that prompted a 30-year high on the Seine and dramatic flooding elsewhere in the country. Meanwhile the country and its political system are reeling after a series of terrorist attacks. A

changing climate will continue to bombard France with extreme weather; the question is whether French society and politics can develop sufficient resilience to withstand such crises and to protect the country's most vulnerable citizens.

#### NOTES

[1] Gérard Badou, *Les nouveaux vieux* (Paris: Le Pré Aux Clercs, 1989).

[2] "Le comique de Bercy," *Le Canard enchaîné*, 6 August 2003.

[3] "Canicule 2003," Canal +, aired 26 December 2003.

[4] Michel Houellebecq, *La possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), 90.

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