

Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution: Writing the 19th Century City*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xiv + 261pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$17.95 US (pb.). ISBN: 0-520-20887-0.

William B. Cohen, *Urban Government and the Rise of the French City: Five Municipalities in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. xiv + 338pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, index. \$49.95 US (cl.). ISBN: 0-312-17695-3.

Review essay by Scott Haine, Holy Names College, Oakland California, for H-France, February 2000.

These two very different but excellent studies reveal the vitality and breadth of French urban history in both subject matter and methodology. Priscilla Ferguson's book is one of the best of the recent literary studies using a wide range of literary and critical theory to forge a new understanding of the historical relationship between nineteenth-century literature and urban life. William Cohen's study is the best overview of the development of urban government in nineteenth-century provincial French cities. Both authors explore how writers and administrators faced the dramatic political, demographic, and industrial changes brought to French cities during the nineteenth century.

Ferguson explores how both great writers (Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Gustave Flaubert, Jules Vallès, and Émile Zola) and authors of the more mundane genres of guide books conceptualized Paris after, and amidst the Revolutions of 1789, 1830, 1848, and 1871. She demonstrates that these authors transformed the meaning of Paris in the wake of each new revolutionary event. In doing so, she displays a perceptive sensitivity to how the stones, streets, buildings, and people of Paris influenced these authors. Cohen shows how urban elites in five of France's most important provincial cities (Lyon, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Marseille, and Saint-Étienne) coped with the new administrative universe bequeathed by the 1789 and subsequent revolutions, population explosion, and industrial expansion prior to World War I. Although he deals with such prosaic subjects as the rise of municipal bureaucracy, police, taxation, sanitation, fire, welfare, and urban renovation, he also shows that these municipal bureaucrats had an appreciation for the poetic as they put much of the city's resources into the theater. By 1900, however, Ferguson shows that writers no longer tried to provide a comprehensive conception of Paris, and Cohen demonstrates that urban administration placed much less emphasis on the theater. These books provide both a contrasting and complementary view of how nineteenth-century administrative and intellectual elites responded to the challenge of the modern city.

At first glance, Ferguson's book seems similar to Christopher Prendergast's *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1992). Both are literary scholars and explore the meaning of "writing the city" (the title of the series edited by Tony Tanner in which Prendergast's book appears). Tanner in the introduction defines this as the ways in which the city is lived and constructed (and reconfigured) through literature as much as through physical building. He also notes a theme elaborated upon by Ferguson: during the nineteenth century the meaning of cities increasingly derived from their own industrial, commercial, cultural, and literary activity rather than from the definitions imposed on them by crown and church.

But Prendergast and Ferguson take their analyses in very different directions. Inspired by Walter Benjamin's notes on the Paris arcades and Raymond Williams's work on the relationship between economics and culture under capitalism, Prendergast explores how such major writers as Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, J. K. Huysmans, and Jules Laforgue registered and critiqued the increasing hegemony of capitalist economic and social relations in Paris. Capitalism's impact on the city could be summed up in images and metaphors of speed, efficiency, and commodification. Prendergast concludes that their work reveals a city in which the possibility of finding a coherent meaning had crumbled under the stresses of capitalist accumulation. Ferguson uses a much wider theoretical net (drawing upon the theories of such literary scholars as Mikhail Bakhtin, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, and the philosopher/historian Michel de Certeau), and analyzes a vast range of literary sources as well as urban spaces and symbols. Her guiding concept is Bakhtin's notion of chronotope, that is, the link between history and literary creation. Revolution as event and literary process was the means by which the great nineteenth-century novelists restored a coherent meaning to Paris after the events of the 1789 Revolution. Ferguson's study focuses on attempts to comprehend the fast changing city and does so perceptively through the notion of revolution. It is difficult in the short space of this review to do justice to her incisive readings and interpretations based on literary texts, philosophical works, and urban monuments and symbols. But the main argument holds that the 1789 Revolution, by severing the king's head, also detached the royal city from the monarchical meanings which had anchored the city's sense of identity. Into this vacuum stepped the authors of guidebooks who tried to find a new coherence by enumerating Parisian places and personalities. This vast literature which had proliferated even before 1789 (especially in the figure of Louis Sébastien Mercier) did not provide a coherent and comprehensive view of the city.

Coherence was restored in the works of the great romantic novelists Balzac and Hugo. Through romantic panoramas, bird's eye views, and the notion of the *flâneur* (an idler or stroller) as a detached and informed observer tracking the dynamics of city life, their novels brought order to the dynamism of Paris between 1820 and 1848. Hugo's

massive introduction to the Paris guide for the 1867 International Exposition brought this romantic conception to its culmination. Hugo asserted that Paris was the brain of the universe that through the agency of revolution would lift up the rest of humanity.

While Hugo remained undaunted by the failure of the 1848 Revolution, Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* registered the disappointment caused by this aborted attempt to extend and expand upon the promise of 1789. Ferguson provocatively asserts and persuasively demonstrates that Balzac's heroic notion of the *flâneur* is transformed by Flaubert into an observer who is mastered by rather than master of the flux and turmoil of Paris. The failed revolution leads to a loss of meaning. Ferguson then turns to Émile Zola's novel about the Second Empire's urban renovation under Georges Haussmann, *La Curée*. Ferguson illustrates how dynamic Balzacian figures, such as the Baron Nuncian, become reborn and transformed in Zola's novel. Here revolution becomes part of the rampant change and speculation brought by urban renovation.

The Paris Commune of 1871 brings two very different interpretations of revolution from the pens of the aging Hugo and the young insurgent journalist and novelist Jules Vallès. Again, as in *Notre Dame de Paris* (set in the Middle Ages) or *Les Misérables* (set in the July Monarchy) Hugo in his *1793* transposes the problems of contemporary Paris into an earlier historical period. He examines the meaning of the 1871 Paris Commune through an analysis of the 1793 Terror. By placing the Terror into historical perspective, Hugo argues that these bloody scenes proved to be only a temporary set back along the path toward revolutionary justice and freedom.

On the other hand, Vallès views the 1871 Commune as an immediate event in his novel *L'Insurgée*. His standpoint is that of a militant participating in the struggle on the streets. Vallès' duty is to combat the reactionary bourgeoisie by every means necessary. Vallès presents the revolution as an ongoing process compared to Hugo's retrospective synthesis. Despite Vallès' hopes, the crushing of the Commune brought the revolutionary era of Paris to an end, and this is recorded in Zola's later novels. Zola shifted the city's identity from revolution to science. Rather than Hugo's poetics of transcendence, Zola likens Paris to agricultural fields and to the sun. Zola's uses these organic and regenerative images to demonstrate that Paris had been reborn. His novels, *Le Débâcle* and *Paris*, tell the tale of the decline of radical politics and the rise of experimental and practical science. In Paris, according to Ferguson, Zola creates the figure of the modern intellectual who speaks, not in the name of the Parisian revolutionary tradition, but in the objective, and hence placeless name of science. Paris, in short, loses its historical specificity. Nevertheless, the Eiffel tower, as the symbol of the new age of science, subsumes, in her analysis, the Vendôme column, the symbol of the revolutionary age.

Ferguson's analysis, due to its broad sweep, is dazzling but also debatable. Nevertheless, the author's study is exemplary in its historical imagination and reasoning. French historians will be inspired to find new methodologies to link history and literature. She persuasively shows the value of discovering the ways in which historical events prompted literary responses.

Cohen's book is also exemplary because he has exhaustively explored both local and national archives, tested his evidence against various social and historical theories, and buttressed his narrative with relevant historiographical asides. His book thus provides not only the essential reference in English to provincial municipal government but also a cogent introduction to the field of nineteenth-century French urban history. Cohen's book, although not as theoretically ambitious and expansive as Ferguson's, presents a more compelling argument because of his exhaustive exploration of the primary and secondary literature.

The author selected his French cities because of their size and the variety of their urban functions. Lyon and Marseille, he notes, battled for the title of France's second largest city and inflated their population statistics to do so. Two of Cohen's cities were primarily ports (Bordeaux and Marseille), one an administrative center (Toulouse), another a new industrial city (Saint-Étienne), and, finally, a traditional manufacturing center (Lyon). Although Cohen is correct that the southern location of all these cities is not a major impediment to his analysis, his book would have been richer still if he had examined a major northern city. Lille, for example, could have illuminated more fully the municipal response to industrialization. He could also have elaborated upon instances in which municipal innovations and reforms by these major cities inspired similar measures in smaller cities.

Cohen focuses on the central problem these cities faced during the nineteenth century: how to cope with massive population growth with limited resources? French urban growth in the nineteenth century far outstripped growth for the country as a whole. Although all of Cohen's cities (except Saint-Étienne which became a city only during the nineteenth century) had long traditions of urban autonomy (symbolized in majestic city halls), they had few financial resources. Their primary sources of revenue, as under the Old Regime, were taxes on products, especially food and drink, entering the city. Known as *octrois*, these taxes were regressive, taking a much larger share of lower class incomes. Compounding their financial problems was the central government's discouragement, for most of the century, of deficit spending. The mayors and municipal councils of these cities, however, did not wish to run up large urban debts due to their general adherence to nineteenth-century *laissez-faire* liberalism and to their upper class *mentalité*. Access to the positions of mayor or municipal councilor was virtually restricted to the bourgeoisie because these positions did not pay a salary.

Despite their elitist character, Cohen shows that these municipal governments played a vital role in expanding and modernizing local government. By World War I some cities helped forge a municipal civil service by instituting pay scales and entrance exams. Several cities owned and operated services such as water, street cleaning, gas, and transportation, even before the rise of municipal socialism. The liberal bourgeois who municipalized such services did so out of a sense of economic efficiency or to cut taxes rather than because of any belief in the inherent superiority of public ownership. All five of these cities were active in creating primary schools and renovating the Old Regime's charity schemes. By 1914 they had established a system of outdoor relief and medical care targeting the most needy. These efforts, as Cohen demonstrates, occurred well in advance of directives and laws from Paris. The five cities had less success professionalizing and expanding their police forces. Even so, and to the chagrin of the central government, they retained a great deal of power over local law enforcement. By 1914, the foundation of contemporary municipal administration and services had been laid. Pragmatists rather than ideologues had accomplished these feats.

Cohen brings great vivacity and complexity to his account. His narrative is filled with arresting detail. Municipal employees had a weakness for drink and the café, almost as great as that of urban workers. But city halls also had dutiful employees. One, known as "the little mayor of Lyon" worked from 5am to 8pm during the first three decades of the nineteenth century and kept the records in his mind rather than on paper. Innovations in city services varied dramatically between these cities. While Lyon and Marseille led in the creation of a local civil service, Marseille lagged in the creation of a fire department and Lyon, in a police force. Cohen also uncovers much ideological ambiguity: while bourgeois liberals in the early part of the century provided Saint-Étienne with a head start in the creation of a modern sewage system, the socialist administrations at the end of the century failed to update and improve it. Toulouse improved its water service, but not in its waste disposal. Finally, in some cases, such as Lyon's trash removal system, provincial innovations influenced Paris. Cohen also shows that the Second Empire's urban renovation programs had been anticipated in the provinces before the arrival of Haussmann at the prefecture of the Seine. But he also shows that these cities lagged in the area of housing reform and the creation of health commissions. Wherever relevant Cohen relates his material to historiographical or sociological theories. For example, he finds that welfare provisions arose out of a desire to stem disorder rather than an economic imperative to maintain a ready reserve army of unemployed (as postulated by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward). Cohen convincingly establishes his thesis that these major cities exercised a significant degree of autonomy even after Revolutionary and Napoleonic centralization. He is also excellent on sketching the end of this era of

municipal autonomy. During the decade before 1914 increasing numbers of cities followed Lyon's lead in abolishing the *octrois* and shifting to other forms of taxation.

Cohen also focuses on municipal administration of the theater, showing that city elders believed art could play a significant role in urban life. For the first half of the century most cities spent more on their theaters than on their schools. They did so because they saw theaters as a sign of their city's cultural prowess and as a means of social control. The police in particular preferred to have crowds in the theater rather than in the café or the street; and believed that crowds could be more easily controlled in the enclosed space of the theater. Despite this instrumental view of culture, perhaps these city elders and the police had an intuition that culture could provide to the people a coherent sense of the city. Here Ferguson's perspective could enrich Cohen's.

Future French urban studies should strive to combine, where possible, these literary and social perspectives. Ferguson, Prendergast, and other contemporary literary critics are correct: cities are not merely places, cities are also texts that generate meaning. In short, more reading across the disciplinary and archival boundaries is necessary. Ferguson could have read Haussmann and other administrators, and Cohen could have explored provincial literature.

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