

H-France Review Vol. 4 (May 2004), No. 54

Nobuhito Nagai, *Les conseillers municipaux de Paris sous la IIIe République (1871-1914)*. Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002. 375 pp. Tables, annexes, bibliography, and index. 30.00 € (pb). ISBN 2-85944-440-8.

Review by Patricia R. Turner, University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire.

Nobuhito Nagai begins his prosopographic analysis of Parisian municipal council members in the Third Republic with what may seem a credulous contention: that French urban historians have traditionally paid insufficient attention to the nation's capital (p. 9). His claim merits attention, however, when viewed within the context of recent trends in French urban history. Inspired in part by the monumental collaborative project which produced the five-volume *Histoire de la France urbaine* (1980-85), numerous studies of modern French urban politics and municipal administration have been published in the past two decades.[1] Much of this research has been fruitfully grounded in the binary concepts of state versus periphery, local autonomy versus central authority, and centralization versus decentralization. In *Democratizing France*, for example, Vivian Schmidt argues that local municipalities under the Third Republic--particularly after the municipal laws of 1882 and 1884--gained considerable autonomy and thus served as decentralized counterweights to centralized political authority.[2]

Nagai, however, maintains that the conceptual focus of recent French urban historiography marginalizes Parisian municipal politics--particularly after 1871--for two reasons. First, it too often conflates Paris with the state, thus ignoring the capital's role as "the place where contesting political forces come to confront the State and its representatives" (p. 11). Second, the issues of local autonomy and decentralization, so germane to studies of provincial municipal institutions, have little relevance to Paris, which formed a "special case" in French administrative law. Parisian municipal politics, Nagai argues, cannot hence be treated adequately within either general analyses of central governmental administration or comparative studies of local communal institutions; rather, they must be examined within the singular context of Parisian political life and society. In his book, which grew out of his doctoral thesis, Nagai hopes to fill this "historiographical lacuna" by examining prosopographically the Paris municipal council between 1871 and 1914 (p. 14).

In the book's first two chapters, Nagai summarizes the regime of state tutelage established for Paris by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1800 and maintained in its essentials until 1977. The law of 28 Pluviôse divided the department of the Seine into three *arrondissements*, one of which was comprised solely by the capital. The thirteen municipal *arrondissements* in Paris were retained but given only minor, secondary functions. The Paris municipal council and mayoralty, both dissolved in the aftermath of the Terror in 1795, were not reestablished; instead, their functions were replaced by the *Conseil général* of the Seine and by the prefects of police and the Seine. The municipality of Paris was hence "completely absorbed by the department and placed under the strict tutelage of the State" (p. 21). Although later municipal reforms (most notably in 1834 and 1871) recreated a municipal council elected by universal manhood suffrage, Paris throughout the Third (and Fourth) Republics was denied a mayor and real municipal autonomy. Following the collapse of the Second Empire in 1870, the "special regime" for Paris was reestablished by the municipal law of 14 April 1871. Compared to all other municipalities, the authority and autonomy of the Paris municipal council were highly circumscribed: it could not meet without being convened by the prefect of the Seine and it could be dissolved by simple governmental decree; it was prohibited from deliberating on any matter not directly related to communal administration; and nearly all council deliberations lacked executive authority until they had been approved by either the prefect of the Seine, a government minister, or the president of the Republic. Enacted during the height of the Paris Commune, the 1871 municipal law reflected the deep-seated fears of many conservative deputies, who believed that the Paris municipal council, unless tightly controlled, "will be more than a municipal council; it will be a veritable parliament that will at times hold in check the National Assembly itself" (p. 40).

Although, as Nagai repeatedly emphasizes, the Paris municipal council had little real power during the Third Republic, it nonetheless represented "the place where diverse political and social interests were expressed and came into confrontation with one another" (p. 14). During this period, Nagai argues, the council reflected the

intensification of political and electoral conflicts and continued opposition between Paris and the state. It constituted a “primordial scene” which revealed, to some extent, the conflicts inherent in the Third Republic (p. 14). To better understand these divisions, Nagai aims to situate the members of the council during this period socially and politically within local municipal politics, the state, and Parisian society.

The bulk of Nagai’s book is a meticulous prosopographical analysis of the 452 men who served on the Paris municipal council between 1871 and 1914.[3] Nagai limits his biographical analysis to several key questions, including: “Who were the political-administrative actors in Paris? From what social milieu did they come? Which interests did they represent? Is the sociological diversity within the Parisian *arrondissements* and districts reflected in the municipal personnel? What became of these councilors?” (p. 15) For an individual scholar, this, nonetheless, represents an ambitious undertaking, particularly given the paucity of primary sources. No archival collections of personnel dossiers exist for the Paris municipal council, and there are relatively few published memoirs or biographies of council members in this period. In addition, restricted access to biographical information for individuals born in the last 100 years leads Nagai to limit his study to the pre-1914 period. Despite these limitations, Nagai amasses an impressive array of source material, drawing upon hundreds of *actes d’état civil*, obituaries, biographical notices, personnel dossiers of functionaries, and police reports. Parisian newspapers and journals are mined for evidence of political allegiance, professional affiliations, and social networks.

In part two of his study, Nagai painstakingly assembles this material into a composite, heavily quantitative picture of Paris’ municipal councilors, with chapters devoted to family origins, education and professional training, occupations, financial situation, political careers, provincial versus Parisian roots, and sociability. Embedded in these statistical analyses are a number of conclusions that speak to Nagai’s central questions. During the early Third Republic, the Paris municipal council was surprisingly meritocratic; family origins did not, in themselves, convey greater electability, and numerous councilors were self-made men from modest social backgrounds (p. 115). After 1871, moreover, Nagai notes a democratization of municipal personnel, with the proportion of manual workers, employees, and *cadres* in the council increasing at the expense of merchants and industrialists. Still, Parisian councilors in this period continued to be drawn disproportionately from the more affluent classes even as the city’s active population and electorate became increasingly working-class. Throughout this period, workers comprised only about 7 percent of councilors. In contrast, nearly half of the councilors, and two-thirds of council presidents and vice-presidents, were liberal professionals (pp. 168-69). There were also significant demographic and political shifts in council membership. The average municipal councilor during the early Third Republic assumed his mandate at a significantly younger age than in previous regimes (44 years versus 50) and about a third successfully used their council position to ascend to national elected office in the senate or chamber of deputies (pp. 195, 202). The political careers of former Parisian councilors such as Alexandre Millerand, Charles Floquet and Georges Clemenceau support Nagai’s contention that the Parisian municipal council, while institutionally impotent, nevertheless served in this period as a potent stepping stone for ambitious politicians.

Nagai’s study succeeds admirably in its primary aim, which is to compile a detailed collective biography of Paris’ municipal councilors in the early Third Republic. It is less successful, however, in addressing the central issues he raises at the outset about the uniqueness of Parisian politics and state-capital relations. The book would have been strengthened with the addition of a substantive conclusion to tie together its diverse empirical threads. But the difficulties Nagai encounters in connecting biographical data to larger political questions run deeper. His material does not speak to specific actions and debates within the municipal council and to particular roles played by individual councilors. It is hence unclear how the council functioned as a “primordial scene” for state-capital contestation, particularly given its lack of political autonomy. Nagai suggests that the council’s political power, both vis-à-vis the state and Parisian society, was vested in the personal authority and social connections of the councilors, who wielded considerable symbolic power as the official representatives of the capital. Councilors were, in essence, central nodes in socio-political networks which local organizations and institutions could use to gain visibility and influence. However, it is precisely in this socio-political arena that Nagai’s otherwise encyclopedic datasets are deficient. Although he is able to trace broad political shifts in the council, Nagai concedes that the lack of permanent, centrally organized political parties prior to 1900 meant that coalitions within the council were highly fluid, making it difficult to ascertain a particular councilor’s political allegiances outside of electoral periods (p. 58).

The municipal council’s role in Parisian politics and society might alternatively have been discerned by situating councilors within their broader socio-cultural milieu: that is, their connections to local *syndicats*, philanthropic

societies, clubs, and other municipal agencies and committees. Here, however, the sheer enormity of relevant source material leads Nagai to adopt a “minimal” approach and to restrict his analysis to a general typology of the forms of sociability in which municipal councilors were most active (pp. 227-28). As a result, the reader comes away with a general appreciation of the social world in which Parisian councilors operated but little insight into how their social networks may have shaped local political alliances, allocation of municipal resources, systems of political patronage, and so forth. Nagai readily acknowledges the limitations of his study, arguing that further work is needed to identify the diverse political forces operating within contemporary Paris and its municipal institutions (p. 47). His monograph nonetheless makes an important contribution to our understanding of Parisian political elites in the Third Republic and will undoubtedly prove a valuable resource for future research.

NOTES

[1] Georges Duby, ed., *Histoire de la France urbaine*, 5 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 1980-85). See, for example, William Cohen, *Urban Government and the Rise of the French City: Five Municipalities in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Pierre Deyon, *Paris et ses provinces: Le défi de la décentralisation (1770-1992)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1992); Bruno Dumons, Gilles Pollet, and Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Les élites municipales sous la IIIe République: Des villes du Sud-Est de la France* (Paris, CNRS Éditions, 1997); Pierre Machelon, “Pouvoir municipal et pouvoir central sous la Troisième République,” *Revue Administrative* no. 290 (1996): 150-156; John Merriman, *The Red City: Limoges and the French Nineteenth-Century City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Merriman, ed., *French Cities in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981), and Denis Menjot and Jean-Luc Pinol, eds., *Enjeux et expressions de la politique municipale (XIIè –XXè siècles)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997).

[2] Vivien Schmidt, *Democratizing France: The Political and Administration History of Decentralization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[3] Prosopography--alternatively referred to as collective biography or multiple career-line analysis--is a heavily quantitative methodology that draws upon the collective biographical characteristics of a defined group of individuals to reveal common relationships within the group, and to locate it socially and politically within a broader universe. In a seminal article on the subject, Lawrence Stone noted that “the purpose of prosopography is to make sense of political action, to help explain ideological or cultural change, to identify social reality, and to describe and analyze with precision the structure of society and the degree and the nature of the movements within it.” Lawrence Stone, “Prosopography,” in *Historical Studies Today* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), 108. For a discussion of the use of prosopography in French administrative history, see Michel Fleury, “Prosopographie et histoire de l'administration” in *Histoire de l'administration française depuis 1800* (Geneva: Droz, 1975): 91-99.

Patricia R. Turner
University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire
turnerpr@uwec.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 4 (May 2004), No. 54

ISSN 1553-9172