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Patrice Higonnet, *Paris: Capital of the World*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2002. Illustrations, maps, notes, and index. 493 pp. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-674-00887-1.

Review by Pamela Pilbeam, Royal Holloway, University of London.

This book started life as a series of lectures at the *Collège de France*. The finished product seems more directed to an American audience, perhaps because the material was subsequently used in classes at Harvard. The author is well known to historians of modern France, particularly for *Class, Ideology and the Rights of Nobles during the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1981). This volume is very different, painting a word picture of the author's dreams of Paris, once the cultural capital of the world, still the capital of many people's hearts. The volume is not in the least autobiographical in terms of content, but intensely so in spirit.

Higonnet ranges from the early modern period to the present. The structure is not chronological, but thematic. Many of the topics supposedly centre on myths, although reality tends to assert itself and time dominates, with most emphasis placed on the period from around 1750. The book starts with Paris as a city of myth which, the author contends became potent between 1830 and the 1860s. He is fascinated by myth, or phantasmagoria, as he prefers to dub it. Phantasmagoria is not the simple magic lantern show with which performers like Philipstal delighted a naïve taste for the ghoulish, but 'a self-deluding, self-indulgent fantasy', (p.5) a typical modern example being the Pompidou Centre. In the second chapter we encounter Paris at the point in the late eighteenth century when the 'modern self' emerged from earlier corporate identities. Turning to Paris as a capital of revolution, Higonnet reminds us that the week-long Gordon riots in London in 1780 caused more damage to property than all the unrest in Paris in the whole decade of revolution (p.49), but he avoids a comparative head count. A distinctive feature of nineteenth-century Parisian revolution was the barricade, the term itself dating back two centuries when barrels were packed with earth for defence (p.51). Next Paris is explored as a centre of both crime and prostitution.

In a more positive vein, we turn to science. The importance of its world class institutes making Paris a Mecca for science was reflected in the astounding figure that, in 1900, 87 percent of world congresses were located there. Possibly the most successful chapter is 'The Urban Machine' (chapter eight). Higonnet is intrigued by the men who haunted the boulevards, the *chiffonnier* or rag picker and the *flâneur*, a blend of dandy and bohemian. We explore not merely the geography of Haussmann's transformation of central Paris, but also his psychology. Chapter ten, 'Paris in the World', ranges from a comparison of London (capital of empire) to New York (capital of capitalism), concluding that Paris was quintessentially capital of France, and, for a time, of world opera. Perhaps if Higonnet had taken *Money* as an example of Zola's novels about Paris, Paris might have figured as the heart of capitalism. Instead, in his examination of literature, Higonnet preferred *Le Ventre de Paris* and *Au Bonheur des Dames*, contrasting Zola's presentation of the capital with that of Balzac and Baudelaire.

From literature we turn to other Pleasures, including food and sex. Sex is rather underplayed, aside from the interesting statistic that the *Folies Bergères* took more than the *Opéra* in 1923 and Walter Benjamin's neat definition of a prostitute as 'saleswoman and wares in one', which would also define the modern 'celeb'. Of the final chapters the most evocative are those that recapture Paris as the capital of an art world in which price was king. The surrealists, who dominate a whole chapter, caused Paris to lose its artistic lead to New York, because their interpretation of art was a minority taste.

This is a book to dip into and enjoy. The illustrations are a delight; a visual comparison of mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth-century salons, the former open to debate, the latter physically and intellectually closed and stuffy; the *chiffonnier's* hut (p. 222), a nightmare Paris of 1922 overwhelmed by an army of skyscrapers; but where is *La Parisienne*? The statue launches a chapter on Parisian women, but there appears to be no reproduction of the image

here. At times this volume is infuriating for its lateral wanderings and recondite asides, for the absence of adequate footnotes to some of its most intriguing items. However the book is not directed at fussy academics. It will charm educated Americans who can feel part of a secret cultural world without even crossing the Atlantic. Readers will be delighted to discover that the *Métro* interchange at Châtelet is so circuitous because the members of the *Académie Française* refused to allow any burrowing under their headquarters. The casual reader may know that a *poubelle* is named after the official who insisted that rubbish be placed in a bin. Few would have known that M. Poubelle's efforts to outwit the *chiffonniers* by insisting that no dustbin be put out more than fifteen minutes before the municipal cart arrived were thwarted and *chiffonniers* continued to rent boxes at the opera. In the next twenty-first century power cut, a reader may be comforted to know that in earlier times Parisians were sometimes very cold in winter when the Seine froze and logs could no longer float down the Seine from the Nivernais (p.237).

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