

H-France Forum

Volume 11, no. 4 (2016), No. 1

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 Catherine Clark, MIT

I spent the summer of 2003 in the Enclave des Papes, in Provence. Like many language learners, I watched the 8 o'clock news with devotion, and the biggest story in August was the *canicule*, the heat wave, that enveloped the country. My experience of it was relatively defanged. It was really hot in Provence. The nearby river dried up. Plants wilted. But the family I was living with had an old, thick-walled stone house that stayed cool even in the fiercest heat, and there was a swimming pool in the now-parched garden. For me that summer's *canicule* was something that happened to other people—as reported by the media. People stuck in traffic jams in sweltering temperatures. People getting sunburns on the beach. People arriving in overwhelmed emergency rooms. And, as the month wore on, people found dead in their apartments. People who, as the media reported, had been forgotten by their communities, failed by the state, and abandoned by their families.

In *Fatal Isolation: The Devastating Paris Heat Wave of 2003*, Richard Keller tells the stories of not only those who died but also those who collected their bodies, buried them, cared for heat stroke victims, responded (or not) to the growing public health crisis, and packaged all of it for public consumption. It analyses the confluence of human, social, and environmental factors that produce natural disasters of this scale. The heat wave of August 1 to August 20, 2003 was, as Keller tells us, “the worst natural disaster in contemporary French history” (p. 2). Authorities estimate that it killed “some 15,000” people (p. 3). *Fatal Isolation* tells three stories – the “official” one of the crisis as recounted by the state and the media, anecdotal accounts of the “lives and deaths of its victims,” and a narrative of “scientific understandings of the catastrophe and its management” (p. 4). Running underneath it all is a disciplinary argument about the importance of including historians in disaster analysis and prevention.

The book is about both France and Paris. It analyzes national responses to the heat wave but focuses on its effects in the capital. Its central subjects are the victims who died there and, because they were unclaimed by family members, were buried at public expense in the cemetery of Thiais, a southern suburb. These were the victims I had heard about on the news while in Provence who had already come to represent the disaster of the heat wave's mismanagement. Keller draws on the methods and approaches of contemporary history and the history of the present to trace the social factors that rendered these Parisians—often poor, elderly, homeless, sick, addicted, or disabled—particularly vulnerable, namely the types of housing available to the poorest Parisians and the twentieth-century conceptualization of old age as a “vexing economic, political, and social problem” threatening the welfare state (p. 118). The book also questions the very ability of social scientific analysis, in particular epidemiology, to make sense of the crisis. It explains how these approaches helped marginalize its victims even in death. Ultimately, *Fatal Isolation* is about the

factors that produced (and continue to produce) “vulnerability, invisibility, and marginalization” in Paris, the ability (or inability) of the state and community to prevent such deaths, and how analysis of them, on the part of the media as well as state statisticians, policy makers, and researchers, can and cannot account for the past and help prevent similar disasters in the future (p. 19). There is much one could say about this rich, well-researched, smart book, but it spoke to me most as a history of Paris and its built environment, as part of a much larger history of the intersection of the heat wave and social isolation in the popular imagination, and as a history of images.

To tell the story of those who died in Paris is, as Keller makes clear, to recount not just *who* lived and died in the city but *how* they lived and where. *Fatal Isolation*'s third chapter offers a history of the *chambre de bonne*, or servants' quarters. These spaces abound in Paris, for they were standard features in the model of bourgeois building constructed in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. And yet, just like many of the individuals whose lives ended in one in 2003, the *chambre de bonne* has been curiously neglected. Historians have shown no shortage of interest in urbanization in the French capital since the nineteenth century.[1] They have written about infrastructure, large-scale public projects, the destruction of neighborhoods, and the construction of housing. The servants' quarters are only a small part of this larger history. But Keller's contribution here is to propose a shift in the types of questions historians of the urban built environment ask. His analysis suggests that in order to understand how the urban built environment shapes social relations we need to study not just what was built, when, and why (by, for example, incorporating the voices of architects and urban planners), but also how those spaces actually end up being used decades later. Instead of always looking at the new spaces, Keller seems to suggest, what if we looked at changing uses of old ones? *Fatal Isolation* offers up a hint of the possibilities for work that would leave the discourses of architects and planners to the side and write instead about the rental market, the renovation of old buildings, the history of the *syndicat d'immeuble*, or even the social history of the Parisian landlord and his tenant.[2]

Pursuing the history of the *chambre de bonne* allows Keller to change the history of spatialized marginalization in Paris. While the nineteenth-century city was structured by vertical marginalization, as we see in the Edmond Texier cross-section of an apartment building, included in *Fatal Isolation*, when discussing the twentieth century, scholars have, for the most part, conceived of its marginalization along a horizontal axis (p. 104). The standard narrative describes the removal of the working classes from the city center and their relegation to distant suburbs, often poorly served by public transportation.[3] This framework, Keller explains, cannot account for the 2003 deaths, which occurred, as a map of death by arrondissement demonstrates, even in, and evenly throughout, the city center (p. 90). Instead he proposes that vertical marginalization, the isolation born from living underneath the roofs of Paris, has continued to exist. I would have loved to see a map or other visualization of this vertical axis of marginalization—perhaps a plotting of deaths by floor? The inclusion of such an image could have driven home one of Keller's main points about the value of historians' input not just into discussions in the social sciences but also into rethinking the types of tools, such as maps and statistics, that they use.

Although this analysis is very much about Paris, a story of lodgings up in zinc roofs, I would have liked to hear more about those who died in the suburbs, which also experienced much higher than usual mortality rates that August. The question of the inclusion or exclusion of the suburbs is

always an issue in Paris books, and something for which they are often criticized. I do not mean this question here as a criticism, but more as a potential for another means of addressing the question of the urban built environment and its role in heat disasters. When such heat reoccurs—and it already did in the summer of 2015—it will also affect those in apartments designed in the twentieth century for optimum living. As I read *Fatal Isolation*, I was reminded of Le Corbusier's *Cité de Refuge*, completed in 1933 for the Salvation army.[4] The building included dormitories with a south-facing sheer glass curtain wall. The air conditioning system meant to keep the rooms inhabitable in the summer never functioned, but the wall was not modified to include windows until 1952. I was also curious about comparisons with Marseille, large parts of which look like Haussmannized Paris. Did people there die in lesser numbers thanks to the city's more common red tile roofs? Or do the most vulnerable Marseillais not occupy these types of rooms? Has the history of the use of the housing stock evolved differently there?

The French popular imagination abounds with the type of accommodations that this third chapter describes, for a small rented room or rooms, running water out in the hallway somewhere, a shared toilet on the same floor or maybe on a different one, were quite common housing conditions in Paris for most of the twentieth century. Such arrangements were the stuff of nightmares long before 2003. Walter Benjamin expended much energy during his Parisian exile of the 1930s looking for suitable housing and living in tiny, sometimes even shared rooms. Only once did he have an apartment with its own bath.[5] In Roland Topor's 1964 novel *Le locataire chimérique*, adapted for the big screen by Roman Polanski as *The Tenant* (1976), the protagonist finally finds a decent two-room apartment, but the toilet is on the other side of the courtyard. His neighbors—or maybe the building itself—slowly drive him insane. In Georges Perec's 1967 novel *Un homme qui dort*, a student's *chambre de bonne* becomes the site of a more voluntary isolation from society. The young protagonist retreats to this room, indifferent to the world outside. Even today, come September and October, Parisian student Listservs abound with offers of miniscule rooms at astronomical prices, often posted by the student—usually not French—who lived there the previous year and has somehow been charged with finding his or her replacement.

While *Fatal Isolation* explores the place of the heat wave—and death—in the French popular imagination with readings of novels, media coverage, as well as one art project, I could not help but think of the third part of a common trope in the French popular imagination even before 2003: heat, death, and sex. The August 13, 2003 cover of *Charlie Hebdo* drawn by Wolinski features a man and woman having sex in an open refrigerator. As the man moans with pleasure, the woman responds “Done already? I was just starting to cool off.” The picture evokes the link between heat waves and sex—selfish sex—as much as it did the just-developing conversations about whether refrigerated trucks might offer a solution to overflowing morgues. While Keller analyzes the main character's distaste for the elderly in Michel Houellebecq's 2005 novel *La possibilité d'une île*, the character also presents a thoroughly misogynistic, egocentric, commodified approach to sex. This, in fact, is one of Houellebecq's favorite symptoms of the breakdown of society. It should come as no surprise that in Eva Husson's 2015 art house film *Bang Gang (une histoire d'amour moderne)*—which premiered at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival—the havoc of the heat wave becomes the backdrop for a series of adolescent orgies in Biarritz, a story of selfishness, the hollow pursuit of pleasure, the cruelty of the young, all shot in the beautiful saturation of summer light. The heat wave as a trope has a much larger cultural presence, seeping into other works, framing what becomes an essential and essentializing assumption about the selfishness of

contemporary society that is not just about the abandonment of the other but the cruelty of the possibility for social isolation even in the most intimate of contact.

Finally, images abound in *Fatal Isolation*. Some are mental—ghastly images of decomposing bodies, of squalor, of isolated and isolating housing. Many though are actual pictures. Keller analyzes, for example, the appearance of then Minister of Health Jean-François Mattei on TF1 on August 11. Mattei appears in front of a hedge at his vacation home, wearing a polo shirt. “*Le polo*” became in turn a symbolic image of the government’s mismanagement of the crisis. I wanted more such analysis, particularly of the cartoons that appeared in *Charlie Hebdo* and *Le Canard Enchaîné*. These often departed from and commented on the government and media’s actions and inactions. Most of the images in the book, however, are ones that Keller took himself. They are photographs that document the lives of the forgotten victims of the *canicule*. Keller does not address these as pictures, but rather as evidence of housing conditions—exposed wires, zinc roofs, mousetraps—or the physical traces, such as marks of police tape, that remain from that summer. The photos thus function as artifacts, indices of the objects and architecture that Keller tracked down in the course of his research. But they seem to serve another function that Keller never expressly discusses. They become a type of serial memorial. From the images of the Thiais cemetery and its concrete tombs, to the hallways that the victims walked, the buildings they lived in, the views from their windows, these pictures become a record of Keller’s own movements through the city, a sort of heat wave pilgrimage. And they demand a consideration of the importance of photography in contemporary historical research. Photography was part of Keller’s method but absent from the methodological discussion in the introduction. I would imagine he has hundreds of similar photographs—how did he select these photos for inclusion? Did he use them as he was writing? Did he see new things in them, things he had not noticed while visiting the sites? Did anyone object to his taking photographs? As historians today, we are all also photographers, and Keller’s book reminds us of the role that photography plays especially as we track our subjects outside of traditional archives. For me, they were more moving and effective as memorials than the series of paintings by Constance Fulda that Keller describes in detail. The book does not include photographs of the victims themselves. The images of the spaces through which they moved take their place, coming to function as a tangible and moving testimony to their Parisian lives and a manifestation of Keller’s desire to do right by the victims of the 2003 heat wave.

Since 2003 record temperatures in France have only increased. During the worst of the record-breaking heat in late June and early July 2015, the city of Paris kept parks open at night so Parisians could sleep there. Anne Hidalgo has implemented a number of new policies aimed at weathering if not stemming the effects of global climate change in Paris, such as limiting automobile traffic in the city. Pedestrians last summer may have encountered mini weather stations put in place to trace the microclimates of urban heat islands. But the city’s prevention tactics aimed at the most vulnerable all date from over a decade ago. They, as Keller describes, require often already isolated individuals to request help from their neighbors, to place themselves on city monitoring lists—to take the sort of proactive steps that the anecdotal lives and deaths of the 2003 victims suggest they may not be capable of. Most authors want their books to increase in relevance as the years pass. I would imagine that some part of Keller hopes his will not. But the social conditions that *Fatal Isolation* excavates show no signs of disappearing, and it seems that the book may become even more significant in the years to come.

Review Essay by Catherine Clark
 MIT
clarkce@mit.edu

NOTES

[1] Classic texts include: David H. Pinkney, *Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958); Anthony Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris: The Defeat of Town Planning, 1850-1970* (London: Edward Arnold, 1970); Norma Evenson, *Paris: A Century of Change, 1878-1978* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

[2] And, Alexia Yates's new book about Parisian real estate in the early Third Republic includes the history of marketing and management. Historians of the suburbs are much better at looking at how people actually inhabit spaces. Alexia Yates, *Selling Paris: Property and Commercial Culture in the Fin-de-Siècle Capital* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Annie Fourcaut, Emmanuel Bellanger, and Mathieu Flonneau, *Paris-banlieues, conflits et solidarités: historiographie, anthologie, chronologie, 1788-2006* (Paris: Creaphis éditions, 2007).

[3] T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, Rev. ed (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Tyler Edward Stovall, *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

[4] The building is actually in Paris on the boulevard Cantagrel in the 13th arrondissement but typifies much of the modernist-inspired architecture subsequently built in the suburbs.

[5] For more about Benjamin's housing all over Europe see: Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

Catherine E. Clark
 MIT
clarkce@mit.edu

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

H-France Forum
Volume 11, no. 4 (2016), No. 1