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Keith Reader, *The Place de la Bastille. The Story of a Quartier*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011. viii+184pp. Maps, note, bibliography and index. 25 GBP. (hb). ISBN 978-1-84631-665-4 cased.

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It is probably fair to claim that no city has generated more significant reflections on what it means to write about a city and the processes of material, capital and symbolic accumulation that shape it than Paris. Even leaving aside fictional and/or poetic endeavors which we might expect to be marked by attention to the sort of narrative strategies available to us in the pursuit of what a city “means,” we are quickly overwhelmed by the variety and scope of historiographical experimentation that the city has provoked. Casual comparison of the radically different choices favoured, for example, by Pierre Nora’s team in the *lieux de mémoire* project to those that inform Jacques Rancière’s archival investigations is enough to realise that the writing of Parisian history is particularly rich in questions of writing as such, with, of course, Walter Benjamin as inestimable tutelary figure in this respect. [1]

Keith Reader knows all of this, and he rallies these and other references in his brisk introductory chapter outlining his ambitions and methods in putting together this enjoyable and informative book. Questions of *longue durée* versus “event” are allowed to settle loosely over a distinction between the place de la Bastille with its 1830 Column and the *quartier* of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. The former is designated as a locus of historical events and concentration of symbolic power, a potential *lieu de mémoire* according to Reader, while the latter is reflective of the longer and deeper processes that one associates with Braudel’s school of history. But the Benjamin reference is the more important one for Reader, relayed as it is by a series of secondary references to writers operating in and around the surrealist tradition from Caillois to Réda. Their rejection of any systematicity in favour of encounters with the city in and through its endless capacity to surprise underpins Reader’s choice of an unabashedly eclectic approach.

Indeed, the interest of this book lies in the way it weaves together different sources of imagery, information and iconography, ranging from historical eye-witness accounts to contemporary strip cartoons, with far more emphasis placed on the way the *quartier* and its “denizens” (a favourite word) get represented rather than on questions of material and political history. This opens up all sorts of perspectives, and the reader is regaled by a display of tenacity in tracking down visions of the Bastille and the Faubourg as they are expressed in a vast range of material. He or she is also left, on finishing the book, with a wealth of possible new avenues to explore, leading deeper into the Faubourg. In this respect, this book exemplifies a sort of *flânerie*, and indeed Reader is explicit in claiming to follow modestly in Benjamin’s footsteps: Hence its almost compendium-like aspect, and the decision to switch abruptly from radically different types of material, moving swiftly between them, sometimes quoting at some length and announcing the significance of the long quote, but generally leaving the material quoted to stand for itself. Zola’s *Debâcle* and Vallès’s *Insurgé* follow hot on contemporary filmmaker Peter Watkins’s vision of the Commune, rounded off by Alphonse Daudet’s *Contes du lundi* (p. 71). The novels of ex-*Paris Match* journalist Jean Diwo get recurrent attention, second only to Victor Hugo in terms of the number of citations.

The pace is invigorating, sometimes surprisingly so for a book that takes *flânerie* as its model. Indeed, Reader’s approach to this well-established Parisian mode of exploration is quite different than what one might expect. He foregrounds it in his introduction where he acknowledges the vast amount of material and the finite space at his disposal, a particularly Parisian dilemma given the inverse relation between apartment sizes and bibliographical possibilities. This dilemma leads Reader to introduce the idea of “*flânerie* at a computer,” an activity with which we are all familiar, although arguably a strange way of formulating what Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* is about (p. 12). In fact, Benjamin premised his own working method on a self-conscious refusal of what one might otherwise call surfing, which he associated with the great technological innovation particular to his time: aviation. In *One Way Street*, he drew a crucial distinction between merely reading a text and copying it out, a distinction he likened to the discovery of a road:

The power of a country road when one is walking along it is different from the power it has when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text when it is read is different from the power it has when it is copied out. [...] Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, it calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front. Only the copied text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text, that road cut through the interior jungle forever closing behind it.... [*Selected Writings*, vol. 1, p. 447-8]

Aerial vision inevitably prompts us to look for landmarks all the time, and this is reflected in Reader's book where the signposting is quite recurrent. Slightly tighter editing could have helped here, potentially removing the impression particularly in the opening chapters that we keep finding ourselves back with another "panneau d'affichage," telling us the significance of 1851, or the importance of the furniture industry. Moreover, a certain number of regrettable typos have slipped through. But the problem with *flânerie*, and particularly "*flanerie* at a computer," is perhaps more far-reaching than this. For either we have to allow that *flânerie* is a very particular mode of walking, one that precisely submits to the "command" of the road and doesn't establish its perimeter in advance, or we need to prise apart the writing from the *flânerie* to enable it to engage with ways in which the Faubourg, or the Bastille, start signifying beyond their geographical parameters. In other words, either the spatial premises of the project lead us beyond the stock representational configurations produced of a *quartier*, that is deep into the archives of an area with all the surprises they are liable to hold, or we forgo the spatial constraints and observe the fascinating translation of meaning as "le Faubourg" and "bastilles" (interestingly often pluralised) become iconic figures called up in all sorts of contexts. *Flânerie* is liable to lose all of its charge—its spirit of adventure, which is also its nerviness—if we find ourselves constantly reminded of where we are and what we are about.

The attachment to the spatial constraints that define his project sometimes prevents Reader from unpacking the suggestions lurking even in some of the texts he quotes. Thus his quote from Vallès strings together a personification of the Faubourg Antoine with references to the people of Charonne and Puteaux, a suburb on the other side of town as Reader points out in a note: "Et que je lui dirai-je à ce faubourg Antoine?" (p. 71). It would have been interesting to explore this "figure of style" that the Faubourg has become, perhaps more so than to inform us that Puteaux has been under a right-wing municipality for the past forty years. Equally, the quote taken from Daniel Halévy's *Pays parisiens*—"Aussi longtemps que dura la crise dreyfusienne, le Faubourg Saint-Antoine fut notre forteresse" (p. 74)—is referring both specifically to a gathering instituted by a militant typographer on the rue Paul Bert and more generally, as Halévy says, to "les faubourgs": Grenelle, Belleville and particularly La Chapelle, where Halévy will set up his own *Université populaire*. His discovery of "les faubourgs" comes when the whole city divides into a series of fortresses: "each one raised its *pont-levis*... the Sainte-Geneviève district withdrew within its walls, the faubourg Saint-Germain raised the flag over its mansions..." (*Pays parisiens*, 1932, p. 170) Halévy's encounter with the "Faubourg" is conditioned by the same "dramatisation" of urban geography that his friend Marcel Proust uses in his depiction of the "faubourg Saint-Germain" which he very firmly located on the *right* bank.

This is not to dismiss "la proposition spatiale" or processes of historical investigation proceeding from geographical parameters, which in the Parisian context have produced some fascinating recent work. One thinks in this context of Claire Zalc's work on Belleville's immigrant shopkeepers and the insights that book offers to the history of a *quartier*.^[2] Reader is writing for a different public and with different objectives, and the result is undoubtedly more entertaining and liable to grab the interest of students and visitors to the city. But there is still something to be said for getting down among the belvederes and the clearings and measuring the distance between them at the cost of a little more exertion. For instance, one wants to slow down a little when one reads a sentence such as this one: "Two-thirds of the Faubourg's 43,000 inhabitants—and all of its female ones—were ineligible to vote under the largely property-based franchise established in 1789, but class consciousness was strong, and Monnier estimates that seventy percent of those who took part in the

assault on the fortress lived in the *quartier*.” (p. 36) Admittedly, that sentence does offer a pause, breaking its flow in order to remind the reader, perhaps usefully, that women were not included in the new voting rights established by the Constituant in 1789. Yet, this pause is somewhat misleading, reflective perhaps of contemporary critical agendas, but nevertheless an obstacle to understanding the terms in which voting rights were construed at the time. In fact, Monnier-Raymonde (and not “Raymond” as Reader has it) tells us that only approximately 4,000 people were registered as active in the Faubourg in 1790, and half of these were ineligible, making a total of 1,755 voters, which was around 4% of the total population. This figure offers an interesting comparison with the second snippet of information, that 70% of those who took part in the taking of the Bastille resided in the Faubourg. Here Monnier is referring to the list of the Vainqueurs de la Bastille, an official register associated with a medal, which the proud recipients were subsequently required to return. Though there is some dispute about the validity of the names that appear on the final version of the list, the total comes to 954 names. [3] Among them the furniture makers and carpenters, shoemakers and locksmiths, metalworkers and *gaziers* were well represented, and in this respect, as Monnier concludes, the list offers a close reflection of the social profile of the area at the time. But the question remains as to whether these independent artisans and workers (only 11% of those on the list were employees) coincided significantly with the group of twice the size of eligible voters, and further how this comparison in turn might be related to an assessment of class consciousness. The number of Vainqueurs from the Faubourg itself is somewhere around 660, 1.5% of total population, a noisy minority responsible for sealing the Faubourg’s reputation as seedbed of revolution, but only one “face” in a complex political and social drama in which questions of representation need to be unpacked very carefully. Even rapidly assembling some of these figures from behind Reader’s sentence calls forth “distances... prospects” such as Benjamin envisaged. Reader’s book is a good place to start in setting out to explore them.

Notes

[1] I am referring, of course, to Pierre Nora’s landmark project published first in an abridged version as *Realms of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-98) and subsequently in 4 volumes as *Rethinking France: les lieux de mémoire* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999-2010). For Jacques Rancière, see the recently re-issued *Proletarian Nights: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-century France*, (London: Verso, 2010). For Walter Benjamin, see his *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, (Cambridge, Mass. and London; The Belknap Press, 1999).

[2] Claire Zalc, *Melting Shops : Une histoire des commerçants étrangers en France* (Paris : Librairie Académique Perrin, 2010).

[3] Christopher Prendergast writes about this in a very engaging way in *The Fourteenth of July and the Taking of the Bastille* (London: Profile Books, 2009).

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