H-France Review Vol. 25 (April 2025), No. 32

Laurent Cuvelier, *La Ville captivée. Affichage et publicité au XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Flammarion, 2024. 367 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. €24.90 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2080464033.

Review by David Garrioch, Monash University.

In 1753 the duc de Gesvres wrote to the Paris police chief with a complaint. The *afficheurs* who were responsible for posting the notices of plays being performed in the city's major theaters had yet again skipped the door of his residence, and he demanded that action be taken. The billposter responsible was duly locked up for two weeks. Such was the importance of public posters as markers of status. The duke might have been less concerned about advertisements for patent medicines or notices of lost dogs, though they were probably on his wall as well. There were other places, however, for royal decrees and police ordinances, which Parisians could find at the doors of police *commissaires*, in major squares and *carrefours*, at the entrances to the courts, and in similar official locations. Church doorways harbored parish and archdiocesan notifications, along with notices of rooms for rent, public auctions and lost and found objects. The walls of notaries' houses displayed offers of public bonds and newly created venal offices, while those of other legal officials notified passers-by of houses for sale and auctions of deceased or bankrupt estates. *La Ville captivée* demonstrates that posters formed an entire system of information, with codes that were partly imposed by the authorities, but also shaped by the conditions of production and distribution and by the nature of the medium itself.

Laurent Cuvelier's excellent book offers many revelations about this important form of communication, one that historians have generally overlooked. Just as poetry and song were open to a far wider public than books, so too was the writing on the wall. The work's title plays on the twin meanings of *captiver*: to hold captive and to fascinate. This reflects the overall argument that Paris was increasingly in thrall to commercial manipulation, a contention that, in turn, determines Cuvelier's focus on the century from 1720 to 1820. Those years witnessed the professionalization of billposting, while the mid eighteenth century saw "commercial capitalism" (p. 146) and consumerism take off in the French capital. The term "commercial capitalism" is arguably a little misleading, though, because the primary sponsors of posters, alongside the official and boulevard theatres, were shopkeepers, artisans, inventors, and authors.

The book starts with production and dissemination and describes the growing reliance of printers on this very lucrative business. The numbers of institutional and administrative posters grew, but advertising by individuals expanded even faster, at times indistinguishable from the trade cards and death notices that were often distributed by hand. Cuvelier also investigates the workers who

did the actual posting, each one capable of putting up around 150 bills per day. Many of these individuals belonged to close-knit family or neighborhood networks, and a surprising number lived in the streets of the inner Left Bank. During the period studied, the trade became more tightly controlled by the authorities and more concentrated in the hands of "entrepreneurs de l'information" (p. 55).

The second chapter deals with the changing appearance of posters. As they proliferated, printers and advertisers came up with new ways of attracting the attention of potential readers. Even official posters began to use new and larger fonts, as well as adopting a hierarchy of print sizes and types (including italic) and designs that emphasized the most important parts of the announcement. Commercial posters took these up and innovated further with decorative borders and other ornamentation and even woodcut pictures, as well as eye-catching titles and layouts. New types of presses and of paper facilitated the production of large numbers of posters at lower cost. In 1791 a new law restricted the use of white paper to official notices, requiring all others to use colored paper. Hand-painted posters appeared in the late eighteenth century and proliferated in the early nineteenth, since they were not subject to the stamp tax of 1797.

Chapter three, on the "urban ecology" of posters (p. 105), begins with the ways their multiplication and the new forms of presentation were understood by contemporaries. Many depictions of Paris leave out the untidy agglomerations of paper on the walls, which challenged their ideal of the city, but later urban landscape sketches and paintings included posters as part of the décor, albeit in tidied form. Commentators like Louis-Sébastien Mercier and some foreign visitors to Paris also reflected on the relationship between the bills and the city's population. Optimists believed them to be educational, but all observers saw them as intrinsic to the urban experience. The second part of the chapter considers the geography of posters: the locations of official and local notices that I mentioned above. Commercial bills were in principle banned from those places, but abounded in other heavily frequented spaces, such as the doors of shops and on street corners, where they put readers at risk of injury from passing vehicles. Advertisements sometimes targeted a wide public but were often for local businesses, sometimes doubling as shop signs and promoting goods and services available in the building. In this way, Cuvelier points out, they helped to mark and organize urban space. Some of them, notably those announcing plays, funerals, or other once-off events, in a sense structured urban time as well. The chapter concludes with critics of billposting, who added visual pollution to their list of the evils of urban life, since each day's additions were pasted over those from the day before, despite the work of ragpickers who collected and recycled the paper. Bills were also attacked for their lack of literacy and literary merit, for excessive consumption of paper, and for encouraging an immoral desire for consumer goods.

The following chapter sets commercial billposting in the context of rising consumerism and new ways of disseminating information, notably in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It complemented the growth of advertising in the press, the proliferation of commercial guidebooks and, in the 1770s, new periodicals such as the *Affiches, annonces et avis* and the daily *Journal de Paris*. In a period when services like street cleaning and parcel delivery were being handed to single entrepreneurs, replacing the multiple actors who had previously provided them, there were proposals to create a centralized billposting business, although this never materialized. Curiously, the geography of theater notices is included in this chapter, although they began appearing in the

late seventeenth century in areas inhabited by their target audience. The chapter concludes with various forms of street furniture that appeared from the 1810s to the 1840s and that were designed to make posters more visible. They included horse-drawn billboards and sandwich-men.

Chapter five begins with the use of wall posters for policing but is primarily devoted to the policing of the posters. Although there were attempts, in the mid sixteenth century and again during the Fronde, to require government authorization for all wall posters, the eighteenth century saw far more systematic enforcement, linked to tighter controls over printers. It was also associated with growing attempts to protect official notices and to track down the authors of posters deemed seditious, often handwritten ones, that attacked the King and the government. Cuvelier looks closely at the structures put in place for these purposes, notably the role of police inspectors and of the rapidly developing police *bureaux*. The Revolution initially did away with all this, but very quickly confronted questions about who should have the right to post political notices. The popular societies claimed that preventing them from doing so was an infringement of freedom of expression, but the National Assembly disagreed. Throughout the revolutionary years, but particularly after 1791, the local police *commissaires* devoted much time to watching for incendiary posters and trying to protect official ones.

The sixth chapter begins with the idea, present during the Enlightenment and briefly victorious in 1789, that posters were a way of educating the population and democratizing politics. This was abandoned in 1791 and two years later posting on the walls was even discarded as a medium for announcing new laws. By the early nineteenth century, longstanding critiques of what was referred to as "puffery" and of the deceptive nature of posters were widespread in the press.

Chapter seven changes course and looks at the use of notices posted on walls, mostly in manuscript form, as a form of protest. Cuvelier argues that they became more important as posters in general grew more central as a source of information. Sometimes they attacked the government or specific ministers, while others threatened revolt if bread prices remained high. Up to the 1760s, Jansenists attacked the Jesuits and government religious policy. These kinds of subversive posters were sometimes very imaginative, adopting and parodying official or commercial forms and language, and they targeted a wide public. But Cuvelier also mentions the parallel use of notes left in churches by women complaining about violent husbands, or more publicly to denounce abuse by priests, addressing the local community. The Revolution brought veritable poster wars, and by 1791 a multitude of arrests, notably of members of the Cordeliers and other popular societies, either for putting up what were deemed incendiary posters or for tearing down others that they disagreed with. But this repression was not as draconian as it seems since most of those arrested were immediately released by the local *commissaires de police*.

The research on which all of this is based is impeccable. The subject is challenging, of course, given the ephemeral nature of wall posters. Cuvelier naturally relies heavily on the archives of policing across different regimes and on accounts by urban commentators and visitors to Paris, but he has also tracked down over 6,000 posters that have survived by chance or in dedicated but almost unknown collections. While the book has no bibliography, the extensive endnotes also reveal its author's familiarity with an enormous secondary literature, in French and English.

Appropriately, *La Ville captivée* includes more than a hundred well-chosen illustrations, some of them in color, that reinforce the book's arguments. A small number of maps and graphs complement the discussion, although the analysis of the dates of the author's corpus of posters and their classification according to type (commercial, official, and individual) are of limited value given the vagaries of survival. Charts showing the chronology and the targets of interventions by the revolutionary police are particularly interesting, revealing moments when the authorities became most nervous about what the walls were saying.

The book is a substantially revised version of Cuvelier's thesis at Sciences-Po, supervised by Stéphane van Damme and Antoine Lilti. Its origins are perhaps detectable in a certain degree of unnecessary repetition, and as I have already indicated, some topics are discussed in odd places. But the work is mature in its confident writing style, its sensible judgments, and its engagement with historical debates. I would have liked to know how far posters reflected the secularization of the city, and there is certainly more to be said about the use of hand-written placards in neighborhood disputes and in labor conflicts. But these would be small additions to the very wide range of topics to which the book contributes: the printing industry, commercialization and consumerism, Enlightenment and revolutionary thought, Old Regime and revolutionary policing, the real and imagined urban environment, literacy and information networks, the organization of labor and urban services, and more.

Certain parallels with today's information revolution are fascinating. As the book's introduction notes, clandestine posters offered possibilities for disseminating false news, calumny, and rumor. They brought novel types of information to people whom older forms of communication did not necessarily reach. Cuvelier cites and endorses the arguments of Pierre-Louis Roederer, in the late eighteenth century, that posters created new publics, both broad abstract ones and, concretely, groups who came together in the street to read (or hear read) and respond to their content. Roederer also contended that posters provided certain kinds of information more quickly than other print sources, in the process generating a new expectation of immediacy. Like today's new media, they shortened the news cycle, as another commentator, Louis Abel Beffroy de Reigny pointed out in 1801: "une affiche fait oublier l'autre" (p. 12). Cuvelier wisely does not labor these comparisons, but they help us to understand the considerable impact that eighteenth-century posters had.

The history of eighteenth-century Paris is a crowded field, but this very fine and welcome book offers important new insights into the culture and lived reality of the city.

David Garrioch
Monash University
David.Garrioch@monash.edu

Copyright © 2025 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

edistribution/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 republication 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.

ISSN 1553-9172