

Paris: Capital of the World

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Never mind the cover (lovely though it is). Readers who are fast to judge and slow to think will be tempted to judge *this* book by its title alone. What, they will want to ask, could Patrice Higonnet possibly mean by calling Paris ‘capital of the world?’ Does the world have a capital? Since when has it been located in Paris? Higonnet may be the Robert Walton Goelet Professor of French History at Harvard University – our hypothetical prickly positivist might well grumble – but he’s a little vague on political geography.

This review will happily be little concerned with such silly objections (which could derive any force they might carry only from a wilful misreading of Higonnet’s argument). As he makes clear from the very beginning, Higonnet understands this book to be about ‘Paris’ as one dream – one noble dream – of what modern urban life might be like. As in Martin Luther King, Jr’s famous speech of 1963, ‘dream’ must here be taken in its most positive sense: as something toward which people actively strive. Higonnet, it could be said, is analyzing Paris as a secular promised land; hence it should not be surprising if some of his claims mesh only imperfectly with received, work-a-day wisdom. For, like any other promised land, the Paris of this book lies as much in the future as it does in the present or the past. Or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that this city exists not only in the future but also in the conditional perfect and the future anterior. Higonnet’s is a history of Paris as it could have been, and may still be.

Higonnet is not proposing that life in the city on the Seine has ever actually been all milk and honey. Rather, he is concerned with the many influential individuals who have thought it could become such and have worked (consciously and unconsciously) to make it so. Yet the word ‘individuals’ strikes a slightly false note here, since Higonnet is at pains to demonstrate that people have had this dream not just for themselves, but for others as well. Indeed, when people start trying to keep their Paris dreams to themselves (when they

refuse to divulge their favourite restaurant's location or insist on writing verses intelligible only to the few), then something has already gone wrong. Higonnet's preferred term for the nobler dream is therefore 'myth'. For while 'dreams', in our loosely Freudian world, belong to the individual, 'myths' imply community. Myths connect individuals; myths provide words for a conversation.[\(1\)](#)

Once upon a time (c.1750-1957), all educated men knew that myths were chiefly a feature of non-modern social groups. Ancient civilizations had complex myth systems. So, too, did many of the peoples studied by anthropologists. But 'modern man' did not have myths. He had science. (Modern woman was not really very modern after all, and so she had religion.) In such a context, historians of early modern or modern Europe wrote of 'myths' only in order to reveal systematic untruths or to challenge seriously flawed understandings. (Hence Peter Laslett contrasted Sir Robert Filmer 'the man' with the distorting 'Whig myth' about that gentleman's paternalism[\(2\)](#)) In short, myths were somebody else's misguided beliefs.

All that has, of course, changed. Inspired by the work of Roland Barthes, Edward Said, Pierre Nora, and Walter Benjamin, cultural historians during the past fifteen years have found modern Europe to have been (and to be) an especially myth-ful place. In this vein, Higonnet's evocative book offers a rise-and-fall analysis of the dominant myths of Paris since the middle of the eighteenth century. Higonnet takes care to define myths as spontaneous, universalising perceptions that help people to understand and make sense of the world they inhabit. In their capacity for universality, myths are unlike personal fantasies (though in order for a myth to be meaningful, it must play a part in individuals' fantasies); in their spontaneity, myths differ from concerted attempts to change individuals' beliefs or practices. A sales pitch – even a manifesto – is not, according to Higonnet, part of a mythology.

His insistence on myth's spontaneity and universality may seem a bit far-fetched, but it allows Higonnet to draw an important distinction between two sorts of imagining: the mythical and the phantasmagorical. The former just happens, the latter is planned; the first includes, while the second excludes. The first is revolutionary France in 1789-1790 as described by Jules Michelet; the latter is the Colonial Exposition of 1931, as orchestrated by Maréchal Lyautey. Higonnet maps this analytic distinction across time, suggesting that while myth and phantasmagoria have always co-existed, certain eras have been more prone to one than the other. In his diagnosis, the twentieth century suffered from a particularly severe imbalance: too little myth, far too much phantasmagoria.

It is – oddly – more difficult to summarize the content of *Paris: Capital of the World* than it is to analyze the overall argument. Higonnet begins the book by expressing his desire to do something new, something other than 'rehearse material ... already familiar'.(p. 1) Yet pursuing that project by giving an account of myths, of how 'the city has been perceived, conceived, and dreamed' (p. 1) creates a peculiar paradox – in what sense can a myth *not* be something that is familiar and often rehearsed?

Like myths (and lectures), this book therefore pieces together elements generally available elsewhere. We are told of Paris as the centre of Enlightenment sociability and the hub of revolution; what aspiring *philosophe* or revolutionary did not make his way to Paris eventually? We are reminded of the many writers, artists and critics who lived in Paris (think of Baudelaire and Balzac, Marx and Manet) and who did so much to define and de-limit the distinctive characteristics of modern life. Thanks to them, Paris had a reputation that extended far beyond its *arrondissements*. As the physical site of innumerable exhibitions, fairs and conferences – in 1900, Higonnet tells us, 87 per cent of self-styled 'world congresses' were held in Paris (p. 147) – Paris attracted visitors from literally around the world.

If some of these topics will be familiar to many readers, there is still much to be learned from the transitions and juxtapositions. Higonnet has little real patience with the Surrealists (who, despite André Breton's efforts to hitch his cart to Communism's star, were never really concerned with anyone but themselves), but on first reading there is something of the 'sewing machine and umbrella together on an operating table' to his argument, nonetheless. For example, Chapter 2 moves quickly from the now-canonical analysis of eighteenth-century cultural developments as the emergence of a new sense of the 'public', to a much less expected commentary on sadness and melancholy. (p. 39)

When loneliness and ennui strike suddenly in a crowded room, it is hard not to think of Charles Baudelaire (or, perhaps, Jean-Jacques Rousseau). Higonnet's most direct inspiration is, however, neither of these. Nor is it Louis Aragon. Instead, Higonnet's Symbolists and his Surrealists are filtered through the work of Walter Benjamin, that most endearingly epigrammatic of Frankfurt School fellow travellers. Like Benjamin, Higonnet is mainly concerned with Paris as the capital of the nineteenth-century world, but his is so very long a 'nineteenth century' (approximately 1750-1914), that it renders the chronological marker misleading if not almost irrelevant.⁽³⁾

In Higonnet's words, 'Paris, more than any other city in the world, can serve to explain the course of Western culture'. (p. 434) Were one feeling churlish, one could easily think of examples with which to challenge such a sweeping statement. What about Venice or Amsterdam or Seville, one might ask, with an eye to those cities' obviously crucial roles in the history of international trade and commerce? Are not New York and The Hague home to at least as many international organisations as Paris? Have not Los Angeles and Bombay sparked as many fantasies? Why the boulevards of Paris and not the Ringstrasse of Vienna? Why the re-building of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century and not the conjuring from scratch of St Petersburg in the first decades of the eighteenth? Why the fairs of Paris and not those of Chicago or San Francisco? And if I, a historian of modern France myself, can think of so many cities that trump (or, at least, match) Paris in some way, just think of the rivals that might be suggested by historians of Asia or Latin America!

Nevertheless, such objections would, I think, miss much of the point. For while all those other cities have their marvels and their miseries, their novelists and their historians, they simply are *not* Paris. Paris, Higonnet argues, has been effectively unique in knitting political transformations and cultural energies together. The Crystal Palace may have been built for the Great London Exhibition of 1851 but it was possible to visit London in the 1850s without ever seeing it (for the Crystal Palace was moved to Sydenham between 1852 and 1854). The structures built for the first universal expositions held in Paris (1855, 1867) are less famous and far more ephemeral. In many senses, however, it was the entire city – then being re-built under Haussmann – that was on exhibition. Visitors to the 1867 Exposition toured the city's sewers and its *abattoirs*; they were the first tourists to travel by steamboat (*bateau-mouche*) along the Seine. By the time that fair architecture in Paris consisted of recognisable, permanent structures (the Eiffel Tower was built for the exhibition of 1889, the Grand Palais for that of 1900), the city's lustre was already fading.

In part, it might be worth noting that Paris's comparatively small physical size did much to enhance its reputation as the display model of nineteenth-century modernity. Like those of London, the suburbs of Paris grew dramatically throughout this period, but they were never absorbed into juridical, administrative or even cultural definitions of 'Paris'. (A comparable distinction might be made between the City of London and 'London' but in that case, it is the physically larger entity that has primarily fascinated writers and artists.) If the size of Paris contributed much to its special status, so too did its historical moment. As Higonnet notes, Paris was prominent in the nineteenth century, a time when it might just have been possible to imagine concentrating all artists and scientists, musicians and philosophers in one urban centre. Paris could be the capital of everything; the city to which everyone aspired to travel. With the explosive twentieth-century growth of both populations and knowledge, such centralization not only does not happen – it cannot even be imagined. And if that failure to imagine a single centre is in many respects beneficial (even Higonnet recognizes that Paris's glory came at the price of its vampiric relation to the French provinces and colonies), it has also had its costs. If the myths of Parisian modernity provided words for a conversation, the

globalization and diversification of that modernity has, one concludes from Higonnet, left many people feeling speechless. There are, hence, fewer conversations.

The Paris of the 1950s through the early 1970s – the capital of France’s economic miracle and of the first mass American tourism to continental Europe – barely appears in these pages. When it does do so, Higonnet’s tone is frankly scornful; long one of the most prominently outspoken critics of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France at Tolbiac (4), he here reveals himself (unsurprisingly) to be no bigger fan of the Porte d’Italie, the Gare Montparnasse or any of the other architectural and urban-planning innovations of the post-war period.(p. 210) Nonetheless, I think one could argue that the book, perhaps unwittingly, owes as much to *that* particular moment of French intellectual ascendancy – the Paris of Audrey Hepburn in *Funny Face* (1957) – as it does to earlier ones.

The debt is neither to existentialism, nor to the events of May 1968 (which Higonnet effectively ignores), but to structuralism. For if *Paris: Capital of the World* rejects the heavy-handed scientism of some of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s own study of myth, it shares a tone – romantic, weary, world-travelled, wise – with Lévi-Strauss’s arguably greatest work, *Tristes Tropiques* (Paris: Union Générale d’Editions, 1955). As Lévi-Strauss memorably begins that volume lamenting that he, who hates travellers and travelling, is nonetheless writing a travelogue, so Higonnet ends his introduction by reflecting that ‘to paraphrase Simone Signoret, Paris, like nostalgia, is not what it used to be’.(p. 17)

Like *Tristes Tropiques*, *Paris: Capital of the World* is a beautifully crafted book that enacts and participates in many of the myths that it identifies. When Higonnet writes (as he often does) that a particular episode or artefact ‘reminds us’ of something about Paris, the tone is not that of the earnest doctoral student or monograph author, keen to tell us what s/he (and no one else!) has found in the archives. Rather, like Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques*, Higonnet strikes a slightly melancholy chord of ‘We all know this. We’ve all known it. But maybe we’ve forgotten. Sigh.’

If throughout this book, Higonnet tends to overstate the abruptness of change as regularly as he exaggerates the uniqueness of Paris, both tropes can nonetheless be seen to betray an unexpected yearning. Underpinning this book, I think, is the somewhat wistful, but never abandoned, hope that it might be possible to change everything in a moment once again, yet without being brutal, repressive or violent. That is, this book emerges from the hope that it might prove possible to revive a specifically ‘French’ or ‘Parisian’ revolutionary tradition. Stripped of the ideological muck of nightmare phantasms such as Stalinism, this revolution would be inclusive and generous, welcoming and self aware.(5) It would also have to be mythical, in the way that Higonnet has defined myth: universal and spontaneous. Then, and only then, will Paris have fulfilled its promise and many people’s dreams.

Notes

1. For an especially thoughtful analysis of Hollywood cinema from the 1930s to the 1950s as providing just such ‘words for a conversation’ (about what life in the United States might be about), see Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1981).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Peter Laslett, ‘Sir Robert Filmer: the man versus the Whig myth’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 5:4 (1948), 523-46.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Benjamin’s brief, but densely suggestive essay, ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century’ was long the only segment of his extensive writings on Paris to be readily available in English; it was published in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz and trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978). Two versions now also appear in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999). On the relations between Benjamin and the Surrealists, see Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. See his brief comments on the Bibliothèque Nationale on p. 210, and his more extensive contributions to the *New York Review of Books*: ‘Scandal on the Seine’ (vol. 38, no. 14: 15 August 1991); ‘The New Bibliothèque: An Exchange’ (vol. 38, no. 20: 5 December 1991); and ‘The Lamentable Library’ (vol. 39, no. 9: 14 May 1992).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Higonnet’s previous book was also much concerned to distinguish French revolutionary Jacobinism from the Bolshevism with which it is so often confused: *Goodness Beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1998).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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