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1

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Parisian Palimpsest: Monuments, Ruins, and Preservation in the Long Nineteenth Century

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Ruth Fiori (2012). *L'Invention du vieux Paris: Naissance d'une conscience patrimoniale dans la capitale*. Preface by Dominique Poulot. Wavre: Mardaga. 327 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, €35.00 (paper).

Eric Fournier (2008). *Paris en ruines: Du Paris haussmannien au Paris communard*. Paris: Imago. 279 pp., notes, €22.00 (paper).

Michael Marrinan (2009). *Romantic Paris: Histories of a Cultural Landscape, 1800-1850*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. xviii + 467 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, \$85.00 (cloth), \$36.00 (paper).

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While working on the *Passagenwerk*, Walter Benjamin touched on the material conditions that still make the long nineteenth century such a rich, yet frustrating, period for a historian. “With the rise of the mass-circulation press, the sources become innumerable,” he wrote.¹ Since then, monographs on modern Paris have proliferated like issues of the penny press. Anyone wishing to tackle the city has to face a massive literature with a Rastignac-like determination and confront the following question: “What else can be said?” After all, the association of nineteenth-century Paris with urban modernity is about as close as we get to an academic cliché, and scholars have mined archives, novels, and newspapers in search of its different manifestations. Nevertheless, three recent books show that by applying innovative methodologies to well-trodden historical terrains, one can find new vantage points from which to appreciate and interrogate the City of Light, plucking new insights that show why Paris remains relevant to urban history and why the debates regarding urban modernity—when did it begin, what were its political implications, and what did it encompass?—are far from over.

Michael Marrinan’s *Romantic Paris: Histories of a Cultural Landscape, 1800-1850* is a tour-de-force cultural history of the developments that took place in the Parisian urban matrix during the first half of the nineteenth century. Marrinan covers a broad spectrum of the period’s visual culture, from canonical paintings to popular woodblock engravings. At a first glance, the book may seem like an idiosyncratic tour through images that we have come to associate with the city, since chapters follow a loose chronological order. But part of *Romantic Paris*’s appeal is the cross-referencing of multiple narratives, a method that avoids the “illusion of a mastering voice” (3). In taking this approach, Marrinan expresses his debt to Henri Lefebvre, invoking the French theorist’s metaphor of a mille-feuille to explain the intersecting layers of narrative that make up urban space.² The book, therefore, emulates the city, showing that art did not emerge from a vacuum, but was produced in—and in turn helped produce—a specific urban milieu.

Romantic Paris touches on just about every cultural phenomenon of the period—from the orientalist moment in painting to the invention of the daguerreotype—but some chapters are of more interest to urban historians. Chapters two (“The City as Witness and Battlefield”) and three

(“Writing History on the Cityscape”) place the emergence of monumental Paris in relation to the crowning of Clio as the queen muse of the sciences. While influential figures like François Guizot and Adolphe Thiers championed historiography as a venue to articulate French bourgeois identity, the Parisian cityscape became an arena for political contestations regarding what role the Ancien Régime and the Revolution would play in the construction of French memory. The Revolution tried to desacralize the city by appropriating royal and Catholic buildings and by displaying confiscated works of art at the Louvre, rendering the country’s cultural treasures accessible to all. Napoléon, to a certain extent, continued with this democratizing effort. He also envisioned a monumental city fit for a modern empire, but the expansionist wars being his priority, only the Vendôme Column was completed by Waterloo. The Corsican’s biggest contribution to the Parisian landscape ended up being the rue de Rivoli, which set some of the foundations to Haussmann’s later works.

With the return of the Bourbons to power, imperial monumentalism gave way to the restoration of royal buildings and churches, both because empty coffers following years of warfare precluded more ambitious works and because the reactionary regime wanted the return of a pre-revolutionary social space unmarred by anti-clericalism and anti-royalism. The July Monarchy (1830–1848) tried to conciliate these different political strains and foster a common national heritage. Marrinan addresses in detail the attempt to defuse the politicized aesthetic debates surrounding the construction of the Arc de Triomphe (during the Restoration, the initial imperial design had been changed to celebrate Charles X) by transforming it into a monument to militarism. Nevertheless, Parisian monuments remained spaces for political contestation, and Marrinan focuses a little too much on how those in power desired a specific monument to be read. Ultimately, there was no such thing as a hegemonic reading of a monument. Even Louis-Philippe’s anodyne Arc de Triomphe later became a highly symbolic reference point in Paris’s political geography.³

One of the triumphs of Marrinan’s book is his vivid depiction of the emerging modernity of Parisian life during the first half of the nineteenth century, making it an important contribution to a burgeoning literature that argues for the recognition of urban modernity *avant* Haussmann.⁴ The city portrayed in chapter seven, “A New Paris,” is feverishly consumerist. Marrinan explains how the Palais-Royal and the arcades became alternatives to Paris’s filthy and inhospitable streets (sidewalks were a rarity until the 1820s) while also pioneering techniques of consumer capitalism. Shopkeepers marked merchandise with fixed prices while covered galleries protected consumers from the outside environment, thus encouraging a window-shopping audience that transcended class boundaries. Arcades like the Passage des Panoramas took a step further in transforming the commodity into spectacle, their owners investing heavily in an elaborate aesthetic that blurred the differences between interior and exterior spaces. Thus, the arcades became inside streets that were “urban laboratories in which new social practices were tried out” (283). Benjamin’s shadow looms large in this chapter, and Marrinan marshals literary and visual sources to illustrate the German critic’s argument that the arcade was the ur-site of modern consumer capitalism. But Marrinan also risks overemphasizing the theme of historical continuity, since what made Haussmannization unique was the unprecedented scale at which state and private sector colluded to transform the city according to capitalist interests.⁵

One cannot have consumption without commodities, and the following chapter, “Art and Industry,” addresses the complicated relationship between these two fields of production. According to Marrinan, bourgeois consumers did not just rush to the lowest-priced commodities, but in fact prized skilled craftsmanship. Technological developments like electroplating facilitated the production of luxury items, fostering a market of *populuxe* items that crowded the bourgeois interior. Although Marrinan does not discuss it, tensions between the artistic merit of skilled manual labor and the profitability of mass industrial production remained a defining feature of the Parisian economy, and by the end of the century the French government still encouraged a crafts-based system of manufacture.⁶

The Romantic period was also defined by a reinvigorated historical imagination. In making a conscious break with the Ancien Régime, the Revolution helped foment a nostalgic mode of history drawn to the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. Marrinan addresses this phenomenon by looking at several institutions. The Musée des Monuments français, founded in 1791, became a place to travel back in time by strolling through “period rooms” (a new feature developed by Alexandre Lenoir). The fascination with the Gothic style also took institutional form through the Commission des monuments historiques, which after 1837 restored cathedrals and chateaux across the country (including a controversial renovation of Notre-Dame de Paris).

But Marrinan does not discuss the nineteenth-century fascination with ruins. Thankfully, Eric Fournier tackles the subject in *Paris en ruines: Du Paris haussmannien au Paris communard*, explaining how Romantics experienced ancient ruins and how Parisians interpreted the new ruins created by Haussmannization, the Prussian siege, and the Commune. Fournier’s analysis centers on the 1871 Commune, but he also offers a nuanced reading of the ways Parisians experienced the city throughout the nineteenth century, as it became increasingly modern and alienating.

According to Fournier, a specific culture of ruins emerged with the Romantics. It prized the solitary savant who, through a quasi-religious communion with old stones, could experience longer temporalities that “expos[ed] the fragility of human works” (177).⁷ The nineteenth century saw a vulgarization of this poetics, and Haussmannization further titillated the urban imagination by exhuming ancient ruins and producing ephemeral ones. Ruins were central to the Parisian perception that the city was a civilizational capital like Athens, Jerusalem, or Rome—a sentiment that was a source of pride and of anxiety, given that all these cities shared the common destiny of decay.

Fournier skillfully shows how Haussmannization actualized the Romantic discourse on architectural vandalism. The *démolisseurs* inherited its negative imagery, often being portrayed as barbarians tearing down the jewel of civilization (hence Haussmann’s nickname, Attila). According to Fournier, the making of a new Paris was a traumatic process (Haussmann himself estimated that 13 percent of the city was torn down from 1851 to 1859). As the source of noise, dust, and debris, the demolitions unleashed an omnipresent aural and visual violence. Parisians experienced a crisis of identity in an increasingly denaturalized city (the theme of Baudelaire’s *Le Cygne*), and hyperbolic accounts of Haussmann’s work “transformed the construction sites into a telluric maelstrom” (19).

An even more common metaphor was that of a battlefield, and the war imagery became all too real with the shelling during the Prussian siege of 1870–1871. No major building was destroyed, but Fournier argues that “the psychological impact on the population was terrible” (42). In response, a distinct Parisian culture of war developed—one defined by an urban pride that appropriated the Haussmannized city as an endangered center of civilization. Urban pride also defined the Communard defense of the city against government forces—the Versaillais troops. In developing his argument, Fournier draws on Michel de Certeau’s theorization of how ordinary people appropriate the city by creating their own spatial narratives (in contrast to the official urban vision imposed by those in power through planning).⁸ If the Second Empire tried to control the city by building large boulevards and organizing *fêtes*, the Commune was a paroxysmal appropriation of urban space. According to Fournier, the toppling of the Vendôme Column and the demolition of Thiers’s home were both examples of a regenerating revolutionary vandalism that expressed a new spatial politics.

Fournier is adamant that to understand the Commune we must look at its fires, since they “were the application of a political rationality and of a sensitivity to the capital’s space specific to the Parisian revolutionaries” (9). He argues that the Commune discussed destroying Paris in case the Versaillais verged on taking it back. Those who fought for the Commune—the Fédérés—were heirs to a revolutionary grammar and repertoire that went back to the French Revolution. Purification through annihilation was a leitmotif of revolutionary discourse, while the barricades

were charged symbols of revolutionary practice. Both military tactic and an appropriation of urban space, the barricade tied the city and the revolutionary project in a symbiotic bind, “demonstrat[ing] to the enemy and the population that to reconquer Paris they would have to destroy it house by house” (58). The utterly unprepared Commune had to improvise against the more powerful Versailles, who planned for urban warfare and made their way carefully through the city, encircling barricades by treading through houses instead of engaging in a head-on attack. As a last resort, Fournier argues, the Fédérés set fire to houses, the flames becoming “the last avatar of the Parisian barricade” (103). But Haussmann’s boulevards and disencumbered monuments undermined this strategy by serving as firebreaks. Still, if the fires failed as a military tactic, they became “the Commune’s last celebration of sovereignty” (102).

But how did non-Communards interpret the fires? According to Fournier, civilians resorted to the same telluric and military metaphors used to describe Haussmannization, while the Versailles turned to demonizing tropes—the *pétroleuses* (women arsonists) and *pompiers pyromanes* (pyromaniac firefighters). Ultimately, the Versailles failed to comprehend that the fires revealed a “sensitive geography” (152) specific to the revolutionaries. The spatial practices of the Fédérés were not like those of the Second Empire flâneurs: whereas the latter valued erudition and read the urban text on buildings and monuments, the former sought to inscribe a new page in the history of the city by altering its landscape. Given the recent experiences of the Occupy Movement and the demonstrations in Tahrir Square, Fournier’s analysis of the revolutionary uses of urban space is especially relevant.

The practices and meanings associated with ruins changed as the century unfolded. Observers did not see beauty in Haussmann’s ruins, which “were often compared to decomposing cadavers” (193). But these were uncanny “cadavers,” for the pickaxes revealed intimate interiors at which Parisians gazed with a mix of nostalgia and violation. The Commune’s ruins triggered a different kind of reaction. Some, like the Hôtel de Ville, became popular tourist attractions—a fundamentally different experience from that of the Romantic period, when ruins were sites for solitary reverie. Nevertheless, tensions remained in interpreting these sites, for how could one attribute their preternatural beauty to the Communards? According to Fournier, aesthetes sidestepped this issue by personifying the fire as a kind of “demolitionist artist” (208). Campaigns took form to preserve some ruins, but these were urban scars that evoked a bloody civil war—memories that an infant Third Republic wanted to efface. By 1882 most ruins had disappeared from the cityscape and the last, the vestiges of the Palais d’Orsay, were torn down to make way for the Gare d’Orsay for the 1900 Exposition Universelle. Yet, ruins—and memories—continued to occupy a prominent place in the Parisian imaginary. Debris became souvenirs, “the collector striving to reconstitute the order of a lost world inside the reassuring intimacy of the private sphere” (244).

According to Fournier, the suppression of the Commune and the disappearance of its ruins from the cityscape consolidated Haussmann’s vision for the city—a sensible argument, given that his works continued well into the Third Republic (the Opéra and the eponymous avenue being prominent examples). Yet, an urban vision that prized modernization at all costs did not reign triumphantly by the turn of the century, as Ruth Fiori’s *L’Invention du vieux Paris: Naissance d’une conscience patrimoniale dans la capitale* demonstrates. Drawing mainly from the collections in the Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris, Fiori reveals how a network of Parisian associations helped bring the notion of historic preservation to the forefront of municipal planning through a discourse elevating the old city, *vieux Paris*. She also contributes to the literature on the Third Republic’s thriving associational universe, showing how effective these parapolitical organizations were in promoting their vision of the city, which later made its way into legislation (notably the 1962 Malraux Law).⁹

Fiori begins with a genealogy of the vieux Paris idea. Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* was a foundational text that ascribed to the medieval city the status of urban art by praising its picturesque qualities. A new literary genre appeared later on in response to Haussmannization.

Popularized by Édouard Fournier and Victor Fournel, histories of vieux Paris “blended the anecdotal history of places and characters with the reconstruction of the ambience of streets” (74). These works helped foster nostalgia for the organic neighborhood life destroyed by modernization, thus encouraging a preservationist impulse. The vieux Paris discourse reached its maturity under the Third Republic, following the creation of institutions that championed local history (like the Musée Carnavalet) and a growing visual rhetoric that valorized old neighborhoods (like Eugène Atget’s photographs).

Central to Fiori’s story is the Commission municipale du Vieux Paris, established in 1898 as “a semi-administrative commission comprising representatives of the municipal authority and external stakeholders” (30), thus creating a formal channel between civil society and the state. The Commission and other associations produced numerous articles against the architectural vandalism that was destroying vieux Paris. By 1900, the general appeal of vieux Paris was so strong that a pavilion dedicated to the idea was one of the Exposition Universelle’s most popular attractions. Organized by Albert Robida, the pavilion consisted of three neighborhoods featuring buildings with styles spanning the fourteenth to eighteenth century, people dressed in historical costumes, and various trinkets for sale. Fiori argues that while on the surface Robida’s project seemed like a paradoxical celebration of the old in an event dedicated to the new, it in fact “embodied the clearest evidence of the importance of the idea of vieux Paris around the 1900s, and of its non-contradiction with the idea of modernity” (99).

The book’s second part addresses how the vieux Paris discourse encouraged authorities to reconsider their ideas concerning urban heritage. In the 1880s, preservationists started advocating an understanding of heritage that went beyond monuments and encompassed anything in the built environment that was of archeological, historical, or artistic interest. According to Fiori, this new way of interpreting heritage led to “the inclusion of buildings that were not considered works of art or monuments” and “the rehabilitation of monuments whose architecture did not meet the criteria of the reigning taste” (128–29). A series of case studies show how preservationist groups presented themselves as new authorities on matters concerning the city’s heritage, undertaking long press campaigns to mobilize public opinion and putting forward an apolitical reading of buildings to pressure municipal authorities into action. However, even with political support, preservationists faced challenges when negotiating with *propriétaires*, who often put financial interests ahead of the heritage status of their property and tore down architectural relics for speculative redevelopment.

Fiori moves on to show how the preservationist discourse ushered in new ideas concerning Paris’s broader aesthetic identity; sowing the seeds for the idea of urban sites deserving of global protection. Preservationists opposed not only those projects that threatened the integrity of monuments but also those that would change their surrounding environment (a famous example being the campaign against the elevated metro). These ideas matured with the efforts to protect the Places Royales (Concorde, Dauphine, Vêndome, Victoires and Vosges), which came to be seen “as spatial ensembles whose preservation must prevail over the interests of owners and those of the city” (254). Meanwhile, the long struggle to protect the panorama of the western point of the Île de la Cité showed that through concerted action preservationists could mobilize public opinion and defeat the Conseil Municipal. Local associations were also crucial in protecting Montmartre’s picturesqueness and bohemian identity. According to Fiori, the opening of the avenue Junot in 1910 sparked a series of protests that helped solidify a neighborhood consciousness based on the myth of a village within a city. Then, in 1911 preservationists rushed to protect Montmartre’s two remaining windmills, which greet tourists to this day.

These debates fostered a broader reflection about what made Paris special in comparison to other cities. The expression “la beauté de Paris” was rampant in the beginning of the century, and preservationists were critical of verticalization, associating it with a vulgar American model. Instead, they argued that Parisians should protect the city’s monuments, old neighborhoods, and monumental

perspectives—"artworks" that made Paris the world's most beautiful city. In this sense, visions of the city reflected more general turn-of-the-century anxieties stemming from the effects of industrialization and the perceived decline of France's global stature. As Fiori explains, the championing of Paris as the "capitale de la beauté . . . sought to maintain the symbolic domination of Paris over other capitals; that is to say, at maintaining France's cultural domination over other nations" (295).

While Fiori highlights the inherent modernity of the preservationist movement, she does not sufficiently address just how well adapted turn-of-the-century capitalist culture was in appropriating its ideas. The medieval revival of the late nineteenth century featured prominently in the commercial sphere, where people could consume the Middle Ages through paintings, books, pilgrimages, and more.¹⁰ People also turned their eyes toward old streets and buildings, seeing in these picturesque arrangements a spectacle of their own. The maturity of the vieux Paris idea coincided with the congealment of mass consumer society, and vieux Paris became an essential part of a modern Paris catered toward tourists.

If the urban experience is largely visual, it follows that its historical analysis should take visibility seriously, and all three authors engage carefully with these types of sources (Marrinan and Fiori are both art historians). *L'Invention du vieux Paris* features high-quality colored illustrations that are wonderful pieces of evidence in support of Fiori's argument. *Romantic Paris* also overflows with images (165 total), but they are all black-and-white. This leads to some frustration when trying to follow Marrinan's readings, like when he asks us to focus on the bottom right corner of Jacques-Louis David's *The Distribution of the Eagle Standards*, where a soldier with a *tricolore* treads in the opposite direction of the painting's movement—an important detail made nearly invisible by the book's reproduction. *Paris en ruines* features no illustrations, which is a shame, since Fournier analyzes books that feature mesmerizing depictions of the Commune fires (the reds and oranges dance on the plates of Victor Fournel's *Paris et ses ruines en mai 1871*). In an ideal world, texts and images should complement one another to offer the reader a more richly layered narrative, but in these days of tightened purse strings, presses might not want to make the investments necessary for the printing of monographs featuring quality illustrations. Still, the digital age may offer alternatives, such as companion websites.

Minor aesthetic deficiencies aside, these three books build on and problematize the rich literature on the Parisian experience of modern urban life during the long nineteenth century. Marrinan challenges the narrative that Haussmannization was the defining divide between old Paris and modern Paris, showing instead that the processes that transformed the city into a paradise of consumption—and into a consumer product—"took root and began to germinate in Romantic Paris" (5). Fournier uncovers a politics of urban sensibilities and practices, making the compelling case that "the ruins of Paris could define the nineteenth century just as well as the Expositions Universelles" (274). And Fiori's book shows just how modern the cult of the old was, and how essential non-state actors were in making the Paris we know today.

Modernity is messy and unresolved; as Lynda Nead points out, "the discourses that constitute that historical temporality bear the ghosts of the past, of modernity's own other."¹¹ The urban experience can never fully escape the double-helix relationship between the old and the new—a relationship that is always political insofar as we look upon cities as both treasure chests of memory and laboratories for new practices. To use Lefebvre's mille-feuille metaphor, the city is made up of layers and resists a hegemonic temporality; nostalgic and utopian counter-narratives can always resurface. In Paris, the tensions between the old and the new have continued to draw emotional reactions, from Louis Aragon's surrealist homage to the Passage de l'Opéra, to Louis Chevalier's zealous attack on the destruction of les Halles, to Eric Hazan's erudite criticism of the museumification of the city's central arrondissements.¹² As Marrinan, Fournier, and Fiori show, nineteenth-century developments made the city a fertile ground for these types of debates. After all, in Paris conflicting histories linger on the surface of monuments, street names invoke legends of revolutionary upheavals, and glittery boulevards coexist with the shadowy Marais.

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 466.
2. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 86.
3. Maurice Agulhon, "Paris: A Traversal from East to West," in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. I, *Symbols*, ed. Pierre Nora, English ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 523–53.
4. Karen Bowie, ed., *La modernité avant Haussmann: forms de l'espace urbain à Paris, 1801-1853* (Paris: Recherches, 2001); Nicholas Papayanis, *Planning Paris before Haussmann* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); H. Hazel Hahn, *Scenes of Parisian Modernity: Culture and Consumption in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
5. David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
6. Whitney Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois Taste and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Deborah L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
7. All translations from French are my own.
8. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), in particular, part 3, "Spatial Practices."
9. On the importance of associational life in strengthening early Third Republic civil society, see Philip G. Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Janet R. Horne uses the term *parapolitical* to describe organizations like the Musée Social that did not fall strictly within the formal structures of the French state but managed to exert significant influence on public policy: *A Social Laboratory for Modern France: The Musée Social and the Rise of the Welfare State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
10. Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz, *Consuming the Past: The Medieval Revival in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003).
11. Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 8.
12. Louis Aragon, *Le paysan de Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1926); Louis Chevalier, *L'assassinat de Paris* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1977); Eric Hazan, *L'invention de Paris: il n'y a pas de pas perdus* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

Author Biography

Patrick Luiz Sullivan De Oliveira is a doctoral candidate at Princeton University and received a BA and BSJ from the University of Kansas. He is currently working on his dissertation, "*Dans l'air*: The Emergence of Modern Airmindedness in France." His other research interests include urban history and Franco-Brazilian cultural exchanges in the long nineteenth century.