H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew Trout. *City on the Seine: Paris in the Time of Richelieu and Louis XIV.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. x + 275 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-12933-0.

Reviewed by William Beik (Emory University)

Published on H-France (June, 1996)

Seventeenth-century Paris has not been well served in the literature, perhaps because of the complexity of its institutions and the archival losses suffered in the destruction of the *Chambre des comptes* in 1737 and the *Hotel de Ville* in 1871. Those looking for studies in English can consult Barbara Diefendorf's *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (1991), which offers a rich picture of Parisian associational life in the 1560s and 1570s, or Hillary Ballon's examination of the physical city in *The Paris of Henri IV: Architecture and Urbanism* (1992). For the seventeenth century, older studies are still the best: Orest Ranum's short essay ,*Paris in the Age of Absolutism* (1968), does a brilliant job of sketching a series of political and cultural settings, while Leon Bernard, *The Emerging City: Paris in the Age of Louis XIV* (1970), is an excellent, underappreciated study of Parisian urbanism which emphasizes that it was Louis XIV who laid the groundwork for the Paris we know today.

Nevertheless, there is plenty of room for a new study of Paris, whether providing better chronological coverage, incorporating recent research, or delving deeper into the social and economic history of the population. Andrew Trout's volume touches on all of these aspects without really covering any of them. He has produced a readable volume, aimed apparently at a popular audience. Like Ranum and Bernard, he has relied on published studies, although his narrative is enhanced with valuable examples drawn from Parisian archives. He divides the book chronologically into two parts covering before and after 1661, each of which weaves together anecdotal accounts of national politics, urban governance, various neighborhoods and their activities, certain social milieux, accounts of various ceremonies, crimes, and punishments, aspects of corporate life, and Jean-Baptiste Colbert's urban development projects. The book is attractively produced with eleven excellent illustrations. It highlights certain recent preoccupations of scholars, such as the importance of corporate squabbling, the influence of financiers, offices, and financial politics, the importance of war budgets in hindering urban development, certain aspects of criminality and policing, and the establishment of tontine schemes, one of the author's personal research interests.

Unfortunately, the book is also confusing and uneven. The occasional gems are scattered through twenty short chapters that are in turn broken down into innumerable subsections, the sequence of which makes little sense. Trout gives the reader no framework to hang onto. He never lays out the overall topography of the city, and there is no map to situate the districts described. Thus the "panoramic view" in chapter 1 gives a confused account

of the jurisdictions of the Chatelet and the *Hotel de Ville*, evokes coffee vendors and the sound of bells, mentions streets, carriages, the Saint Germain Fair and the *Cours la Reine*, but gives no hint why these particular features have been covered to the exclusion of others. A chapter on the "Gothic City" lingers briefly on Notre Dame and a few other churches, only to turn to the Italian opera, the baroque style, seventeenth-century public squares, Andre Le Notre's Tuileries gardens, and the Marais. This mixing of times and categories is typical. A section on *lettres de cachet* and the Bastille would fit better in a book on the eighteenth century. At the same time the accounts of national politics in the chapters on Cardinal Richelieu, the war with Spain, the Fronde, and the advent of Louis XIV are sketchy and derivative. So are the treatments of Vincent de Paul's reforms and the prosecution of financiers. The chapter on "Louis XIV and the Parisians" resumes the national narrative and then returns to tontines and gambling, concluding with a perfunctory nod toward persistent poverty, covered in three short pages. And why does the final chapter, "From Baroque to Rococo," retreat in time to discuss celebrated Italian architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Louvre designs (1665) and then jump ahead to the constructions of the end of the reign?

There are attractive sections. Trout's emphasis on the Seine as the lifeline of the city is interesting, and he mobilizes colorful details about transport and provisioning. His chapter on *lieutenant de police*, Marc-Rene Voyer de Pulmy d'Argenson, and the Paris police uses telling examples drawn from his own research. In general the second half of the book, covering the reign of Louis XIV and often extending on into the eighteenth century, is more interesting and more fully documented. But overall, the book is disappointing. General readers will look in vain for a clear discussion of topography, governance, national politics, daily life, or social structure, all of which are discussed anecdotally without any thematic or chronological consistency. If the goal was to discuss major landmarks, there are glaring absences. There is no discussion of the University, the Champs Elysees, the *Hotel des Invalides* (as opposed to the church), Les Halles or other markets, *Les Innocents* or other cemeteries, Saint Eustache, Port Royal, the Luxembourg Palace, the Gobelins manufactory, or Louis XIV's *Observatoire*. If the topic is the history of the Parisians, there are also great gaps. Focusing on innovations in policing at the end of the century, Trout misses neighborhood groupings like militia companies or parishes and ignores the work of Robert Descimon, probably the best living historian of seventeenth-century Paris. He describes the more ludicrous aspects of the regulated guild system without any systematic coverage of trades and workshops, and he slights merchant activities while focusing more successfully on the important officer and financier class. There is no coverage of convents or religious life.

Although this study has its charms, it will prove too confusing for students and too elementary for specialists. We are still waiting for a great book in English on Bourbon Paris.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

http://www.uakron.edu/hfrance/

Citation: William Beik. Review of Trout, Andrew, *City on the Seine: Paris in the Time of Richelieu and Louis XIV*. H-France, H-Net Reviews. June, 1996.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=482

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.