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# Merriman, John M., T*he Margins of City Life: Explorations on the French Urban Frontier 1815-1851*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. Pp. 318. Illustrations, maps, black and white photographs. $63.00

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See table of contents

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He also argued that the area was not one undifferentiated city but contained forces and counter forces which ultimately would contribute to an ethos of cultural and social diversity. In an article in 1976, he identified five additional such centres internationally and predicted the emergence of three more.

One of the aims of *Since Megalopolis*, it seems, is to clarify previously stated ideas and to preserve the term "megalopolis" from misuse. Megalopolis, Gottmann writes, applies to "very large polynuclear urbanized systems endowed with enough continuity and internal interconnections for each of them to be considered in itself." The area must be separated from non-megalopolitan areas by substantial and less urbanized spaces, and its population density and intensity of activities must be substantially greater than that of conventional cities. Gottmann's efforts to refine the definition of Megalopolis are aimed at critics who appear to have understood the term only as an "overgrown metropolitan area."

*Since Megalopolis* is a delight to read, for Gottmann brings an erudition to his writing that is uncommon in the literature of North American urban studies. A superb essay on archaeological excavations on the Aegean islands of Santori and Delos, for example, provides an occasion for illuminating a discourse on the Platonic notion of cities as isolated, largely self-contained units, and Alexander of Macedon's pluralistic, expansive, commercial model which defined cities as parts of larger networks. Another essay examines urban planning in modern Japan and assesses the attempts of Japanese planners by the late 1970s to subordinate economic growth to the "non-material" needs of urbanites. In an engaging article entitled "The Ethics of Living at High Densities," (originally published in 1966), Gottmann stresses his argument from *Megalopolis* that increases in population density have historically caused only temporary difficulties for urban dwellers. "The lesson from history seems fairly simple and clear," he writes in one of his characteristically sweeping positivist statements, "high density creates a challenge to improve, through better organization and fairer distribution, the lot of the people." Gottmann remains optimistic about the future of cities and about the capacity of thoughtful planning to cope with modern urban problems.

Readers will find these books useful, even occasionally intriguing. North American readers will particularly appreciate the many forays into non-Western arenas of urban politics and development. Many of the articles are written in a spirited and heartening tone, emphasising the possibilities of an urban economics based on human need and environmental sustainability. Historians, however, may have a difficult task in puzzling out a relationship to the efforts of planners to make sense of the contemporary scene. Readers will notice that there is almost no attention in these books to the peculiarities of race, gender, and ethnicity that has so enriched recent work in the discipline, such as Lisabeth Cohen's *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1934*, and Susan A. Glenn's *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation*. We are traditionally hesitant to embrace generalizations that are not rooted in time and place, and we resent the efforts of social scientists to ransack the past, as many of the contributors do, for evidence to support universal propositions. We are trained to account for change over time and to maintain a healthy distance from our informants, rather than to praise or criticise them. Perhaps, however, our dialogues with the practitioners of other disciplines are too infrequent, our abilities to wander in the literature of other fields too stunted to appreciate fully how our own work might be different. These books invite us to try.

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**Merriman, John M., *The Margins of City Life: Explorations on the French Urban Frontier 1815-1851*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. Pp. 318. Illustrations, maps, black and white photographs. $63.00.**

John Merriman continues his exploration of French cities during the nineteenth century in his latest monograph, *The Margins of City Life*. While his previous work concentrated on one city, Limoges, this work deals with several towns, including Perpignan, Paris, Reims, Nîmes and Poitiers. The social, economic and political consequences of urban development between 1815 and 1851 are examined.

The over-arching theme of the book is that of marginality in all its aspects: cultural, geographical, social and economic. Merriman tells the story of spatially isolated suburbanites who also were marginal in a social and economic sense. Perpignan most graphically illustrates this inclusive marginality. As Merriman brilliantly demonstrates, the working class inhabitants, the Catalan population, lived on the outskirts of town and were distinct from the French population of the city centre, linguistically, culturally, and religiously. The popular religious beliefs and practices of the Catalans conflicted with the orthodoxy of French Catholicism. These cultural differences bolstered the Catalan opposition to the French state.

Merriman reminds us of the importance of studying the marginal. Like other scholars in the field, such as Bernard Vincent and Roger Chartier, he believes that marginality served as a "mirror," meaning

that through the examination of the marginal, one reaches an understanding of the whole society. Merriman argues that the working class *faubourg* usually identified with the second half of the nineteenth century must be located within the period of great economic change during the first part of the nineteenth century. He asserts that the edge of the city was the future, meaning the future of urbanization and industrialization, long before Napoleon III came to power.

Merriman argues that fear was one of the animating principles of nineteenth century urban development. Throughout the period under consideration, class fears intensified and assumed new form. The bourgeoisie had traditionally feared "outsiders," meaning beggars, prostitutes and criminals. This group was expanded to include urban workers who inhabitated the periphery. The changing nature of fear was intrinsically intertwined with local politics and industrialization.

This is as much a book about politics as it is about anything else: the domination of the periphery by the centre and the imposition of law and order on the increasingly restless urban workers. To understand the periphery, one must look at the relationship between city and state. The changing character of the *faubourg*, not a new place during the nineteenth century, is examined within this context. Merriman contends that the *faubourg* originated during the Middle Ages. The medieval *faubourg*, however, was very different from the one emerging during the early years of the nineteenth century. Previously the *faubourg* had been rural and agricultural. Throughout the years from 1815 to 1851, it became increasingly urban and industrial. This led to an alteration in the meaning of the term which took on a pejorative connotation. Those who inhabited the *faubourg* were feared by the bourgeoisie of the centre.

This is a well-researched book based mainly on archival sources. Merriman has made creative use of national, departmental and municipal archives. Moreover, he has utilized a diverse array of sources from police records to administrative and military reports and surveys. Military reports proved to be an especially rich source for this type of social history, including information about the daily lives and habits of the local population. Merriman also demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge of the current literature in the field.

Not surprisingly with such an ambitious book, it has some problems. The explanation of the changing *faubourg* is not always entirely clear. Merriman's examination of Nîmes does not wholly conform to the model of marginalization which he established in previous chapters. He forces the model on the Nîmes data. The conflict in Nîmes was not between centre and periphery, but rather between religious groups.

*The Margin of City Life* is a complex book which may attempt too much. And, some necessary work remains undone. No real attempt is made to compare the various cities under consideration. Were the transformations which these cities were undergoing similar or different? Did the *faubourgs* of Perpignan share common characteristics with those of Poitiers?

In spite of these quibbles, this is an excellent book which fills a gap in our knowledge of the growth and development of nineteenth century French cities. Merriman has produced a meticulously researched monograph on a neglected and interesting subject.

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**Merriman, John M. *The Margins of City Life: Explorations on the French Urban Frontier, 1815-1851*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. Pp. 318. Illustrations, maps, black and white photographs. $63.00.**

One of the defining characteristics of the renewal of historical method since the 1960s has been the extension of the historian's gaze to objects earlier scholars deemed marginal and passed over in silence. One of the enduring methodological difficulties that studying dominated groups, daily lives, popular cultures, and other problems hitherto largely ignored, has forced scholars to confront is how to decipher the sparse and coded traces that the past has reluctantly handed down, how to "faire parler le silence," as Michelet once said.

Marginality, be it social, economic, spatial or cultural—the term is polysemantic—is a case in point. The margin has long ceased to occupy only the blank space between the historian's text and the edge of his page. Studying the margin nevertheless raises serious source and method problems. Elite discourse, too often our only witness, is not only coded but, we have come to realize, serves more the ideological function of reinforcing the centre and elite identities than the descriptive one of seizing reality. Besides, there is no agreement as to how the margin should be analyzed: as an object in its own right or as a product of wider processes that can only be understood in relation to the centre.

In *The Margins of City Life* John Merriman proposes that urban historians also extend their gaze to the urban frontier. He is not the first to do so, but it is