

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

Barrie M. Ratcliffe

Volume 21, numéro 1, octobre 1992

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019252ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019252ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Ratcliffe, B. M. (1992). Compte rendu de [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]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 21(1), 67–68. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019252ar>

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 inhabited 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.

Leigh Whaley  
Department of History  
University of Toronto

**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

undeniable that scholars could accord more attention to the margin. The moving frontier at the edge of cities has always been an integral part of city growth. The periphery is ambiguous in so many ways that, to use Lévi-Strauss' phrase, it should be "good to think." It is just as true, though, that to venture beyond city gates is to go beyond the pale, to enter a still-too-familiar world that is difficult to explore. It is not easy, for instance, to examine an often anarchic growth that took different and often transient forms, such as the shanties that served as workshops or cheap housing, or the cowsheds or market gardens that have often left but tantalisingly few traces in surviving sources.

Unfortunately, those who read this study in order better to understand the urban periphery in nineteenth-century France, how it was colonized, how its space was lived by those who came there, and what relation it had with the centre, will be disappointed. Apart from asserting, but not demonstrating, that the growth of suburbs was linked to the *octroi* barriers that surrounded French cities until 1939, and that margins developed because of the implantation of large-scale industries, the author makes no attempt to either determine or explain the changing functions of suburbs, which we know also served as larders, recreation areas, dumps, and suppliers of cheap land for industries, warehouses and housing. It is just as disappointing, for it is a crucial aspect of suburban growth about which we are surprisingly ill-informed, that he makes no effort to trace the social composition and geographical provenance of those who settled at the city margin.

There are two reasons why Merriman fails to help us understand suburban and urban growth. One is that his is the approach of the historian-tourist who, camera in hand (though he does not use it as Walter Benjamin believed scholars

should), has visited some forty departmental depositories as well as Justice Ministry and Army archives in Paris. However, Merriman has chosen to examine only two kinds of primary source. One is the little-used military surveys that Charles Tilly already consulted for his 1986 study, *The Contentious French*. These were made by young army officers charged with drawing up local maps and describing local resources as part of the preparations for a military map of the whole country. The trouble is that these surveys are descriptive and uneven, some containing but perfunctory information, others detailed statistics of varying reliability. The second limited kind of source the author has consulted are the M sub-series in departmental archives and the correspondence on law and order exchanged between Prefects and the Minister of the Interior in Paris. Certainly, this kind of elite witness, when properly decoded, can tell us something about political activity at the margin as perceived by police, police spies and administrators, but it can tell us relatively little about lived experience, everyday solidarities, oral cultures. These two sources, then, enable Merriman to offer vignettes on the margins of half a dozen provincial cities. They do not permit him to analyze process.

The second reason is that Merriman is less interested in the urban frontier *per se* than in demonstrating that workers at the periphery acquired solidarities and political consciousness in the first half of the nineteenth century, and especially during the Second Republic from 1848 to 1851, and that they did so, therefore, long before other scholars have assumed was the case. As a result, Merriman claims, elites ceased to focus their fears on traditional figures—vagabonds, beggars, prostitutes, criminals—invading the city, and came to dread increasingly organized groups of workers camped in growing numbers at city gates.

The thesis is challenging, but the arguments presented in favour of it are not always convincing. Merriman proceeds by examples, but nowhere does he justify the choices he has made. Some are apposite, such as the growth of the upper town of Reims described in Chapter VII. Others do not work. Thus chapter IV on three cities in the conservative West—Poitiers, Châtellerauld and La Roche-sur-Yon—is supposed to analyze power conflicts between centre and periphery, but succeeds only in offering short histories of the towns. Chapter V, the longest in the book, presents an interesting discussion of popular culture and the growth of political awareness in two working-class quarters of Perpignan, but it works only because the author studies not the spatial but the cultural margin, since the inhabitants lived in the heart of the city but had a Catalan culture, and many of them were agricultural workers and thus did not work in the city at all. Worse, although at several points he briefly discusses suburban growth in the Paris region, he is not able to show the existence of solidarities or political consciousness, even in the inner suburbs to the north of the city that underwent spectacular growth during the July Monarchy and were integrated into the city in 1860.

Merriman has qualities that we should not overlook. He is a sharp-eyed tourist with that flair for sniffing out human flesh that Marc Bloch rightly regarded as the essential quality of the historian. He also writes well and engagingly. Yet he has undertaken less the explorations promised in the subtitle of his study than brief excursions. We must hope, then, that his picture postcards from the archives will encourage urban historians to do further research on urban margins, their functions, their colonization and their cultures.

Barrie M. Ratcliffe  
Département d'histoire  
Université Laval