



Paris: Capital of the World

By Patrice Higonnet

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In an original and evocative journey through modern Paris from the mid-eighteenth century to World War II, Patrice Higonnet offers a delightful cultural portrait of a multifaceted, continually changing city. In examining the myths and countermyths of Paris that have been created and re-created over time, Higonnet reveals a magical urban alchemy in which each era absorbs the myths and perceptions of Paris past, adapts them to the cultural imperatives of its own time, and feeds them back into the city, creating a new environment.

Paris was central to the modern world in ways internal and external, genuine and imagined, progressive and decadent. Higonnet explores Paris as the capital of revolution, science, empire, literature, and art, describing such incarnations as Belle Epoque Paris, the Commune, the surrealists' city, and Paris as viewed through American eyes. He also evokes the more visceral Paris of alienation, crime, material excess, and sensual pleasure.

Insightful, informative, and gracefully written, *Paris* illuminates the intersection of collective and individual imaginations in a perpetually shifting urban dynamic. In describing his Paris of the real and of the imagination, Higonnet sheds brilliant new light on this endlessly intriguing city.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In 1323, the first book to treat Paris exclusively appeared; the number since then has grown to about 10,000, notes Higonnet, a professor of French history at Harvard who seems to have read them all before adding this original and illuminating work to their number. In constructing "a history not of factual events but of the way the city has been perceived, conceived, and dreamed," Higonnet (*Sister Republics; Goodness Beyond Virtue*) draws a fresh social, cultural and political portrait of Paris from the mid-18th century through the 19th century, augmented by some looks back and forward. Higonnet manages to be both intensely intellectual and deftly vivid as he escorts readers through a very wide range of reading. Organized thematically ("Capital of Revolution"; "Capital of Science"; "Capital of Sex"; "Capital of Crime"; "Capital of Art"; "Capital of the Modern Self"), the book uses three dates as focal points: "1750, when the first secularized myths of Paris appeared; 1830, the point at which they started to flower; and 1889, when they began to atrophy [and] 'phantasmagoria' comes into its own." Higonnet appears to have missed nothing that touched or was touched by Paris-Twain and James, Balzac and Zola, sansculottes and surrealists, salons and expositions. In passing, his eye takes in clothes, gastronomy, street names and panoramas. Tidbits of historical gossip color the densely imbricated text: an 18th-century architect's plan for a bordello in "the form of an enormous phallus"; *Les Lesbiennes*, Baudelaire's preliminary title for *Les Fleurs du mal*; Marx meeting Engels for the first time at the Cafe de la Regence in the Palais Royal, "a mecca for the city's chess players." Higonnet, in a remarkably readable translation, achieves a seamless synthesis between the myth and the history of modern Paris.

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From Library Journal

This is a complex work of cultural and intellectual history that should interest specialists in the field. Higonnet (French history, Harvard) has drawn from a vast array of sources to produce an "urban biography" of Paris from the mid-18th century to World War II. The result is not a standard chronological and political narrative but a history of how the city has been seen, remembered, conceived, and visualized. The organizing construct used is the concept of myth, which Higonnet defines as life stories used by societies to explain themselves. Citing 1750, 1830, and 1889 as critical years in the creation of key Parisian myths, Higonnet shows that Paris has alternately been seen and has seen itself as the capital of modernity, revolution, self-identity, pleasure, and culture. The author also demonstrates how myths change and even engender opposition. Thus, a Paris perceived as a symbol of freedom and revolution later came to be seen by others through the lens of a "counter-myth" that viewed it as the site of revolt, crime, and immorality. The author also explains how myths are made real through visible landmarks like the Eiffel Tower and the basilica of Sacre Coeur. Higonnet's comparative references to similar developments in London and New York are also helpful. Recommended for academic collections.

Marie Marmo Mullaney, Caldwell Coll., N.J.

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Review

In his new book...Higonnet looks back, to a time when the city was, arguably, the capital of it all...Higonnet's discussions of Paris as a city of revolution, or of the social alienation modernity brought to Parisians...are compelling. Such historical depth gives weight to the experience of anyone drawn to modern Paris, once or a dozen times. (Tom Haines *Boston Globe* 2002-09-01)

Original and illuminating...Higonnet draws a fresh social, cultural and political portrait of Paris from the

mid-18th century through the 19th century, augmented by some looks back and forward. Higonnet manages to be both intensely intellectual and deftly vivid as he escorts readers through a very wide range of reading...[He] appears to have missed nothing that touched or was touched by Paris...In passing, his eye takes in clothes, gastronomy, street names and panoramas...In a remarkably readable translation, [Higonnet] achieves a seamless synthesis between the myth and the history of modern Paris. (*Publishers Weekly* 2002-09-09)

This is a complex work of cultural and intellectual history...Higonnet has drawn from a vast array of sources to produce an "urban biography" of Paris from the mid-18th century to World War II. The result is not a standard chronological and political narrative but a history of how the city has been seen, remembered, conceived, and visualized. (Marie Marmo Mullaney *Library Journal* 2002-09-15)

This beautifully produced study of Paris--elegant layout, many illustrations--adopts a "mythic" approach to the city's tumultuous, many-faceted past...[This] is the kind of history of Paris we might expect from a Roland Barthes (cf. *Mythologiques*) or Walter Benjamin (cf. *The Arcades Project*). If this prospect excites you, here is your book. (Michael Dirda *Washington Post* 2002-11-10)

Unobtrusively learned master of ceremonies, [Higonnet] draws on a vast knowledge of the culture and history of the 19th century. He misses very little: gastronomy and cafes, Haussman's urban facelift, museums and stations, the Parisienne, "le tout Paris", modernism and its enemies...Higonnet's high-octane thesis of an "inauthentic" but powerful mythic residue is seductive. (David Coward *Independent Magazine* 2002-12-21)

Higonnet's [book], with its cream-and-blue cloth binding, wide margins, elegant typeface and generous illustrations, has a clear edge in *belle époque* opulence. Higonnet's intention is to explore the myths of Paris. He focuses on well over a dozen familiar and less familiar themes--including revolution, crime, the self, la parisienne, literature, art, alienation and pleasure--that compose the city's heady mythic cocktail. His wide learning is worn lightly, and his technique is a pointilliste application of quotations, incidents and images. (Robert Tombs *Times Literary Supplement* 2002-11-22)

Already known for his incisive books on eighteenth-century France and the French Revolution, Higonnet will now be celebrated as the author of a beautifully produced work on the Paris of a century ago....All Francophiles will be enriched by this book and grateful to both the author and his perfect translator. A rich and intelligent tour of Paris by an erudite guide with an acerbic, playful mind and a passionate heart. (Stanley Hoffman *Foreign Affairs* 2003-03-01)

Users Review

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