



4-1-2007

Patrice Higonnet, *Paris, Capital of The World*

Andrew Targowski
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

Recommended Citation

Targowski, Andrew (2007) "Patrice Higonnet, *Paris, Capital of The World*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 56 : No. 56 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol56/iss56/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Comparative Civilizations Review* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Patrice Higonnet, *Paris, Capital of The World*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002.

“Paris, Capital of the World” is the title of a wonderful book written by Patrice Higonnet about this beautiful city. The title is intriguing. Thousands of books have been written on Paris, and nowadays the electronic bookstore Amazon.com sells 13,601 such books, mostly in English. Therefore, it is difficult to write a new and interesting book on this city.

From a civilizational perspective, it is necessary to notice that Paris is the capital of a state, which in 800 AD began to develop the Western Civilization. Consideration in the book begins about 1750 with the birth of “salons,” first in Versailles and later in Paris, when the weight of political and social activities moved from this royal suburb to the city. After the bloodshed of the Napoleonic Wars, France became a super-power, and ever since has been involved in analysis or in the enlightened education of “mankind.” A part of this education is the search for the art of living as a citizen of the state, not, as before, a subject of a king. Paris was at the center of such education in the first part of the 19th century.

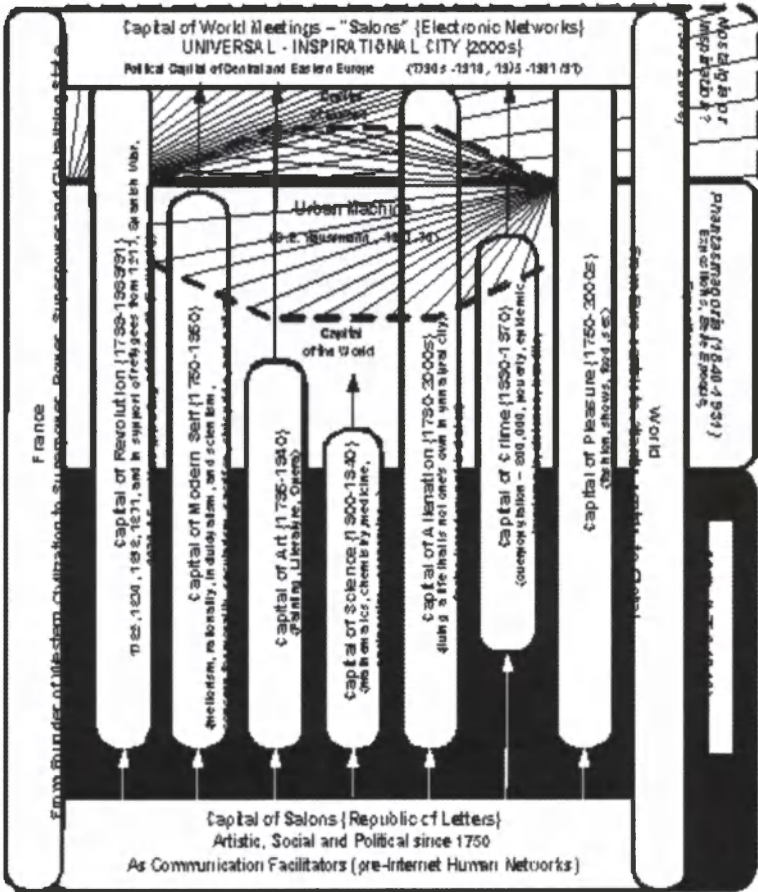
Taking into account its civilization infrastructure, Paris was the first city in the world which had paved streets, but realistically speaking it was a backward city. In 1853, G.E. Haussmann became a Prefect of Seine Department (de facto Paris), and Napoleon III asked him to rebuild Paris into a modern city. The author very often writes about the Haussmann model of transformation (“Urban Machine”) but mostly in terms of its technocratic advantages. However, the Prefect—a chief of police—had in mind also the political-social strategy of transforming the city. Until Haussman’s time, upper class citizens and poor people lived in the same building, the latter in the upper floors. Haussman introduced elevators in buildings and developed city sections for rich and poor citizens, dividing them physically and providing a good infrastructure for the developing bourgeoisie. To protect this new class, he developed wide avenues, three lanes wide in one direction, in order to make it more difficult for revolutionists to build barricades. He also connected these avenues by star-shaped plazas in order to more easily move the police or army against protesters. Furthermore, in order to bring these forces in quickly, he developed railroad stations in the city’s downtown. This sort of “fortification” helped in the quick suppression of the 1871 Revolution.

It is questionable whether the connection of the avenues via star-

oriented plazas was a good solution for a new network of streets. It is certainly a nice solution optically, but from the point of view of the movement of vehicles it is the worst solution, since it leads to traffic jams. Were better solutions known in that time? Yes, Manhattan was better planned as a street grid and the French must have known it. Enough to say that, nowadays, the Internet has a “Manhattan” topology, which secures a smooth flow of messages.

The book is written for a reader who knows Paris and most of the facts about it, but is curious about relations among them. The book is written according to a pseudo-system approach, since it covers the subject of the last 250 years of Paris in so-called “vertical” blocks, such as: Capital of Revolution, Capital of Modern Self, Capital of Art, Capital of Science, Capital of Alienation, Capital of Crime, Capital of Pleasure. The “horizontal” blocks, such as: City of Myth, City of Phantasmagoria, and City of Nostalgia, function as a mechanism to view the relationships among the “vertical” blocks. The book is complex in its approach, and the reader can be easily lost among the richness of evidence presented in a very erudite manner.

Paris has good maps, particularly of its metro, but is short of maps of the ideas that have been created in this great city; therefore the author of this review took the liberty of developing a graphic model which reflects the idea-driven architecture of Paris.



One can state that if Paris was the capital of the World in the 19th century, then in the 20th century it was “only” the capital of Europe. However, due to its own request Paris in 1967 lost its last capital, when the NATO headquarters was moved from Paris to Brussels, the current capital of Europe (European Union). Was this move right? It was driven by General Ch. De Gaulle’s dislike of Americans, his superiors during the Second World War. This decision was of questionable benefit to France.

Paris saw much and ruled the World and Europe, but what is it

today? Just a city of nostalgia for old good times? Not so; Paris became a universal city, tolerant of multi-culturalism (though paying for it by young Muslim revolts). But such a model of toleration we require for every city on the Earth, and Paris is not a “normal” city. Paris deserves more than normalcy. Paris has always inspired us, and should do so nowadays, should be the Inspiring City through being the Museum City (cultivating the great past) and the Communicating City (“Paris=conversation”) in the modern salons of international gatherings, which have been taking place there since the 1750s.

This latter factor was the one of the most important elements of Paris’ success. What other factors grounded this city’s fame? Avoiding a long systematic list, one can say that a nice climate and *joie de vivre* (a hearty, carefree enjoyment of life, including good wine and cognac) contributed to Paris’s achievement. Although, as Rousseau stated “Paris was a place where it was possible to become more intelligent – but generally only at the cost of unhappiness.” In reality, very often difficulties create opportunities and lead to greatness if somebody desires and knows how to handle them.

After a broad discussion of the topic, the author concludes that Paris was the capital of the world in the 19th century and now is only a universal city. This is an honest statement, since Paris was not and is not the “world capital” in the 20th and 21st centuries. Perhaps this sad fact (not only for the French) should be included in the book’s title. Paris, we wish you well in the 21st century and *merci Paris beaucoup*; and at the same time, I thank the author and its translator, Arthur Goldhammer, for this beautiful book.

Andrew Targowski
Western Michigan University