

Goulet on Cannon (2015)

Cannon, James. *The Paris Zone: A Cultural History, 1840–1944*. Ashgate, 2015, pp. xv + 248, ISBN 978-1472428318

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If, as Eric Hazan suggests in *L'Invention de Paris* (2002), the limits between different Paris arrondissements are vague and ambiguous, the same would not seem to be true of the boundary between the capital city itself and what lies outside of it. From the fortified gates and battlements of the wall erected by Philip Augustus around 1200 A.D. to the trucks and traffic of today's ring road (the *boulevard périphérique*), the line between city proper and non-Paris has been defined for centuries by barriers as real as symbolic. And yet, even with this map of expanding concentric circles in mind, many would have a hard time distinguishing with terminological precision among *zone*, *barrière*, *périphérie*, and *ceinture* (not to mention *faubourg* and *banlieue*). Having recently co-taught a seminar on the literature and built environment of modern Paris, I am particularly aware of how useful James Cannon's book on the Paris *zone* is for those of us looking to get beyond the simplified abstraction of a geometrical perimeter and closer to an understanding of an actual area, as it emerged, shifted, and informed notions of city and nation. In particular, Cannon provides a rich account of the *zone non aedificandi* that was established in the 1840s and survived until World War II. The book is subtitled "A Cultural History" and it is an exemplary one at that. Cannon's interdisciplinary expertise, based on thorough research, shines through in his nuanced discussions of urban planning history, socio-political thought, journalism, popular songs, fiction, poetry, painting, photography, and film.

Organized in chronological chapters, Cannon's book takes us through five phases of the *zone*'s incarnation, with an emphasis on the fluidity of cultural associations that allowed it to become a metaphor for everything from modern France's filthy underbelly to a revolutionary utopia. In Cannon's account, the *zone*'s mythic power spans the low (as a *bas-fonds* habitation for squatters, ragpickers, gypsies, and thieves) and the high (as a romanticized incubator of social progress and idealism). Although it does not explicitly invoke a spatial prism à la Gaston Bachelard, Michel de Certeau, or Henri Lefebvre, Cannon's book gives us—through its pairing of material history and artistic mythologies—an "espace vécu," "perçu," and "conçu" that exceeds any official goals of city planners or univocal establishments of meaning. As Cannon reminds us, it is the *zone*'s liminal location that makes it especially evocative: "[t]he *zone*'s potential as a metaphor resided [...] in its precise location at the threshold and on the circumference of Paris" (13). Thus, it could be understood to embody both (and either) the urban and the rural, the familiar and the foreign, the inside and the outside of the City of Light.

Some sprawling, interdisciplinary cultural histories excite in their broad lines but disappoint in their particulars. *The Paris Zone* is not one of those. Cannon is a meticulous researcher, who takes care to distinguish among types of sources, to note when authors use the term "zone" or just evoke it as an undefined space, and to differentiate specific areas within the *zone* (in the 1880s prevalence of ragpickers in the northwest sectors of Levallois and Clichy, for example, or the slumming practices on the Route de la Révolte and later working-class uprisings at the Butte du Chapeau-rouge). No shortcuts or confluences here. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, Cannon is a gifted reader of cultural texts. I found myself continuously impressed by the literary sensibility in his discussions of specific authors, artists, and works. Edmond de Goncourt's evocations of the sights, sounds, and *fracas* of demolition scenes are seen to reflect that author's disdain for the uncouth poor and his legitimist fear that the Third Republic would erode class distinctions, while Émile Zola and others are read as grappling with ambivalent political dimensions of the mixed-population zone at the fin de siècle. J.-K. Huysmans's journalistic and literary descriptions are paired with Jean-François Raffaëlli's paintings and sketches of suburbs like Asnières to reflect on the way in which the *zone* myth combines nostalgia and modernity in response to the Franco-Prussian War. And a subtly contextualizing analysis of Guillaume Apollinaire's *incontournable* poem "Zone" connects physical displacements to the jumble of form. Throughout Cannon's wide-ranging study of numerous writers and artists—including George Seurat, Camille Pissaro, Eugène Atget, Georges Grison, Jules Vallès, Jean Lorrain, Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre, Colette, and Louis Ferdinand Céline—he returns consistently (and convincingly) to the *zone*'s central paradoxes. Does it represent the muck and mire of decline or the promise of moral order and public health? pessimism or hope? the myth of the *bas-fonds* or the fantasy of social utopia? the carnage of war or a freedom from the city's constraints? vulnerability to foreign incursion or "a last bastion of Frenchness" (125)? In examining this urban borderland as both exception and essence of Paris, Cannon fittingly connects aesthetic and political histories, citing for example the artists who used their military experience to reflect on the *zone* during key moments like the Prussian Siege and the two World Wars.

Finally, it is doing no disservice to the written portion of Cannon's book to add that the book's illustrations are themselves a highlight. Consisting of forty-seven color plates, this treasure trove of images—maps, paintings, engravings, photos—reflects extensive archival work and provides a fertile visual complement to Cannon's rich textual history of the Paris *zone*.

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