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Pavement politics

The history of the French street

By Emile Chabal

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HISTOIRE DE LA RUE

De l'Antiquité à nos jours
528pp. Tallandier. €34.90.
Danielle Tartakowsky et al

Except for the use of the word “street” to describe them, there is little to tie together Oxford Street in London, Fifth Avenue in New York, the micro-streets of the *medina* in Marrakesh, the *grands boulevards* of Haussmann’s Paris and the overflowing bookstalls of College Street in Kolkata. Nor is there a single sensory universe of the street: at any time you might hear a fruit vendor calling out to his clients, the noise of buses going past, the sound of protesters marching or the wail of a police siren.

This mass of associations makes the street one of the backbones of everyday, primarily urban, life. It is the site of birth, death, wars, love, passion, education, illness and the quotidian interactions that bind together communities. It is also, of course, a site for revolt and revolution – and, as observers of the enormous protests against Emmanuel Macron’s pension reforms will recognise, the French have often used the streets in highly public and well-documented ways.

The power of the street in France lies in its potential and its plasticity. Sometimes protesters occupy streets and erect barricades; at other times they disappear down side streets, leaving burning tyres and smashed windows in their wake. The sight of heavily armoured French riot police facing off against flag-waving activists might make it seem that the state has the upper hand, but the police and those who command them know that they are vulnerable. In France, monarchs, politicians and administrators have rightly feared the unilateral judgement of the street.

Such a powerful symbolic legacy makes the task of writing the history of the French street over a 2,000-year period rather intimidating. Fortunately the team in charge of this book, led by the eminent social historian Danielle Tartakowsky, have mostly succeeded in taming their source material. For those who enjoy the French tradition of encyclopedic historical writing, this book is a treasure trove. The contributors deal with an astonishing number of themes, ranging from Juvenal's complaints about excessive traffic in ancient Rome to Abbé Pierre's campaigns to end homelessness in the 1950s. There are delightful anecdotes about the polyphonic cacophony of Parisian streets in the mid-seventeenth century, disturbing stories about the slaughter of Protestants during the St Bartholomew's Day massacre in 1572, pointed descriptions of the French state's numerous attempts to "order" the public space over the centuries, and several lengthy passages on the politics of street lighting.

Early in the book Catherine Saliou attempts to explain what a street is in the following terms: "the street is defined conceptually by words, a legal system, a discourse, and materially by practical operations that are all the object … of theoretical reflection". This somewhat capacious definition provides an organizing principle for most of the subsequent chapters. The contributors move deftly between the words people use to describe the street; the various legal contestations over the ownership of the street and the things that travel on it; the discourses surrounding the people who live and work on the street; and, finally, the materiality of the street, from road surfaces to rubbish collection. For the most part it works: the contributors bring Saliou's abstract concepts to life through narrative, and rich illustrations add depth to the accompanying prose.

Question marks remain, however, about what the street really is. Take the relationship between streets and urban spaces. There is no a priori reason why a rural street through a small village should be less interesting than

one that runs through a large city. The primary function of streets in prehistoric or ancient times – and still today in many rural areas – was to move people and things from one place to another. But the emergence of towns and cities created large communities of people who just happened to live on or near a street, without necessarily always using it to go somewhere: cue all manner of collisions and controversies when horse-drawn carriages hit pedestrians or motor vehicles began to spew toxic fumes over passers-by.

With the growth of cities in the late antique and medieval periods, the street slowed down as people started to take over, leading to endless complaints by travellers of "choked" arteries through towns filled with people and animals. But echnological innovations in the twentieth century put mobility centre stage again: streets were adapted and enlarged to accommodate public transport and private vehicles. In recent years there has been a backlash against the fetishization of mobility, especially in Europe. While streets in many Asian and African cities have expanded to make room for mushrooming private car ownership, European cities such as Paris, London and Barcelona have started to penalize private mobility and force cars off the road altogether.

This tension between stasis and mobility underpins another of the book's main themes: the politicization of the street. Ask a French person what la rue evokes and they are likely to say something about strikes, protests or barricades. Indeed, France can lay claim to being the birthplace of street protest. The French elevated it into a sophisticated and clearly articulated political act over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From the revolts, riots and violence of the Wars of Religion onwards, ordinary French citizens learnt how to use the street to their advantage. This culminated in the intense mobilization of the street during the French Revolution and its aftermath.

In this period the street became both the site and the embodiment of the people – that elusive concept over which all French political movements sought mastery in the nineteenth century. Barricades – the quintessential symbol of French protest – were deployed again and again by insurgents seeking to stymie the mobility necessary for capitalist economic growth and efficient state surveillance. By recreating communities in life and death around the barricade, protesters built visible resistance to state authority. This logic still applies to French protest movements today. Since January millions of people have walked the streets to express their dissatisfaction with Macron's pension reforms. Students have cut off streets outside universities; workers have blocked streets outside refineries; frustrated drivers have queued for petrol on the street; and the international media have shown endless pictures of Parisians navigating their way around mountains of uncollected rubbish spilling out onto the streets.

These repeated attempts to claim the streets have inevitably elicited a robust response. Since the nineteenth century the French state has developed multiple strategies of pacification. It has commissioned urban planners to destroy existing neighbourhoods to make way for much broader streets that could be easily monitored. It has also trained police and military forces to repress street protests. Two notorious examples of such repression are the *Semaine Sanglante* during the Paris Commune and the police violence that accompanied the demonstrations by the Algerian Front de libération nationale on October 17, 1961. Still today the police are on the front line: in recent years French protestors have been killed, maimed or severely injured in confrontations with law enforcement. This violence is a direct consequence of the police being asked to tame streets famed for their insurrectionary qualities. There are few overt references to the revolutionary potential of the street in the book, but they lurk in the background. Tartakowsky is a child of a family of communists, and a communist herself, and she has devoted much of her career to writing

about protest; her scholarly and political DNA is visible everywhere in the final chapters.

Surprisingly, though, the book shies away from offering an overarching theory of the street. The contributors do not celebrate it as the site of resistance to authority, nor do they denounce the environmental consequences of motor traffic or attempt to cast the street as the authentic site of "popular sovereignty", a consistent refrain of far-left politicians who want Macron to back down. Instead, they offer a beautiful panorama of the street through history. This shows us much but explains relatively little.

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