

Book Reviews

ANN-LOUISE SHAPIRO, *Housing the poor of Paris 1850–1902*, Madison and London, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, 8vo, pp.xx, 224, illus., £32.50.

It is tempting, from the perspective of London, to assume that the interest in the history of Paris in the nineteenth century is in the grandiose schemes of reconstruction associated with Haussman, which surpassed in scale the endeavours of the Metropolitan Board of Works or London County Council. The virtue of Shapiro's brief study is to direct our attention away from the *grands boulevards* to the problem of housing the working class, which was merely exacerbated by the wholesale demolition needed to remodel Paris. Her concern is with the shanty towns of the periphery rather than the splendours of the centre, concentrating on the period from the first legislation allowing inspection of the interior of houses in 1850 to its replacement by a more vigorous sanitary law in the public health act of 1902. The emphasis is upon policy and the way in which the housing problem was viewed by politicians and sanitary reformers, yet she never loses sight of the underlying trends in the housing market which conspired to create particular points of tension demanding responses from the authorities.

The legislation of 1850 was associated with Armand de Melun, a proponent of "social Catholicism", which stressed paternalistic responsibility to the poor. The so-called Melun law allowed incursions into the home under the auspices of the Commission on Unhealthy Dwellings, which began functioning in 1851, with the intention both of sanitizing the homes of the poor to remove the danger to public health, and also neutralizing the threat to political stability which was assumed to arise from moral degeneration in bad housing. But this strategy was undermined by other policies pursued during the Second Empire as the central city was rebuilt and pressure mounted on the available stock of housing. Shapiro sees an interplay between two policy prescriptions: the continuing demand of the sanitary reformers for tighter regulations and stricter enforcement, which culminated in the act of 1902; and the spasmodic concern for conditions of supply, which usually only gained attention during periods of crisis as demolitions and rent increases imposed serious strain upon landlord-tenant relations. The solution stressed by Le Play and others in the 1880s and 1890s was to convert the tenant into a worker-proprietor; the result, it was hoped, would be to regenerate the morals of the working class by creating a stable family life in the privacy of a self-contained home, separating them from the unregenerate poor of the slums. This trend culminated in the law of 1894, which aimed to provide funds and tax subsidies for such a purpose. The practical results were disappointing, and attention turned away from the attempts to increase the supply of housing to more limited sanitary objectives of wiping out "microbe factories". The focus was narrowed, without solving the housing problem of high rents and overcrowding produced by shortages of accommodation. Shapiro ends on a note of pessimism.

There are interesting parallels between this account of Parisian housing policy and events in London, where there was a similar fear that sanitary reform might intensify or merely displace the housing problem. There was, as in Paris, concern in the 1880s that a housing crisis might endanger political stability by threatening family life and bringing the respectable into contact with the degenerate poor. There were also, however, differences in response, most obviously in the trend in London towards greater municipal involvement in the housing market, but also in the importance attached to the "land question" as a solution to the housing problem and to remedies operating through the labour market. Shapiro's work forms a useful companion to A. S. Wohl's *Eternal slum*, the account by another American historian of trends in housing policy in London; perhaps it is time that a French or British historian repaid the debt by writing about New York.

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