**Roundtable Reflection: The Past and Future of French Urban History**

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**I. Introduction**
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Long before 2008, when the world’s urban population surpassed the rural for the first time, cities and their populations have drawn outsized attention by all kinds of scholars—less for their unique individual histories than for their ability to represent the human experience. Giovanni Botero (1544-1617), musing on the variability of population growth over time, wrote in 1588, “Let us settle this question insofar as it concerns cities, however, because that will also settle it for the world as a whole.”¹ To Botero the world does not hold cities; cities contain the world within them. Such a breathtaking claim of universality rests on the Aristotelian assumption that cities are a natural outgrowth of human nature: study cities and one will understand what makes people tick. And while scholars of the present may have a less rosy outlook on cities than did Botero, who saw reflected there both human and divine achievement, the universal quality of cities and their centrality for understanding the historical experience remains salient. As Daniel Roche noted, “Urbanity...brings together the whole gamut of questions posed by the development of our system of civilization over the centuries. To reconstruct its history is to indulge in nostalgia for a past which appears all the richer in comparison with the drabness of our own day. It is also to dream of a city of the future, capable of reconciling community

and social control, nature and culture.”

Urban history, even now, elicits the hope of understanding the past while bearing the promise of what is to come.

If the universality of cities has never gone out of style, the claim of a particularly French or francophone urban history remains less assured. “But while social history found new dimensions in France,” notes American urban historian Raymond Mohl, “urban history has not developed as a conceptual category among French historians.”

Not that there are excellent works lacking. There are rich studies of individual cities in particular periods, local and global economic transformations, relations between urban elites and state authority, analyses of religious ceremony and political resistance, to name a few. In my period alone, roughly 1100-1700, historians have provided illuminating works on these and other topics for French-speaking Marseille, Dijon, Amiens, Lyon, Lille, Tours, Poitiers, Troyes, Reims and Toulouse as well as the ever popular Paris. Despite this variety, 

synthetic or comparative approaches, such as those edited by Philip Benedict in 1989 or Michael Wolfe in 2009, have been few and far between, as have discussions of the field of French urban history itself. There is no recent French equivalent of the three-volume Cambridge urban history of Britain. Why is that? And what would such an approach add?

In the major syntheses that discuss European urban development in the last millennium, such as the second edition of Hohenberg and Lees' *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000-1994*, French cities often provide representative examples of economic growth, political changes or intellectual life, but rarely are seen as participating in a particularly French urban system. The dense network of cities found in the Low Countries, particularly

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Flanders, and in northern and central Italy, where people busily traveled from city to city, exchanging goods and ideas, holding performances and engaging in competitive and not always friendly rivalry, have dominated the historiography, and even more so since the rise of network theory as an explanatory framework. The neglect of France emerges partly from demography: if the Low Countries had 30-50% of population living in cities during much of the medieval and early modern period, and Great Britain had 50% urban dwellers by the mid nineteenth century, this was not true of France until the 1930s. Paris, largest city in Europe for much of the seventeenth century, third largest (next to Istanbul and London) by 1700, and given (perhaps more than) its fair share of scholarly attention, still contained only 15% of city dwellers in France and only 3% of its total population. Even by the admittedly uncertain standards of pre-modern Europe, where some have estimated the urban population to range between 10-15% of the total, France was more rustic than most. And in the story of nineteenth-century urban industrialization, Hohenberg and Lees describe French efforts as reflecting more

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retardation than growth, somewhere between the backwaters of Spain and Italy and the powerhouses of Britain and Germany.\textsuperscript{10}

Despite this treatment, cities and the process of urbanization has not been a neglected subject among scholars of France although it remains debatable if and in what ways cities tell its history. Michael Wolfe writing in 2009 that, “the history of France can be read on the walls of its towns,” and that the genesis of modern France is largely an urban phenomenon, still comes as something of a surprise, not only because of the assumption discussed above, that France historically lacked a dominant urban culture, but also because the complexity and diversity of French and francophone cities in relation to the state seems to defy a unifying historical experience.\textsuperscript{11} In earlier accounts, French cities may have been important in providing capital (economic, intellectual and social), people and strategies of political organization, but they were overtaken by the state, a larger and more powerful entity that saw urban corporate status as something needing regulating, limiting and eventual quashing.\textsuperscript{12} While more recent work on this period—that of Hilary Bernstein, Michael Breen and S. Finley-Croswhite, to name a few—has emphasized the survival of city corporations and collaboration of its governing authorities within the growing state, I would argue it still competes with rather than replaces the declensionist narrative popularized in the early years of urban history scholarship.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{hohenberg-lees} Hohenberg and Lees, \textit{The Making of Urban Europe, 1000-1994}, 166.
\bibitem{wolfe} Wolfe, \textit{Walled Towns and the Shaping of France}, v.
\end{thebibliography}
Strategies of survival remained local and the experience of urban magistrates in cities like Lille or Lyon, for example, because of their relatively late arrival in the French kingdom, differed significantly from those of their contemporaries in Paris or Rouen. If unifying factors remain elusive, however, the complexity of these urban histories, their continuities alongside social unrest and innovation, is what makes them so fascinating to study.

Where French theorists have done groundbreaking work is in interrogating the definition of city itself. As a category city is more fluid than not, oscillating between community and society in Tönnies' formulation, but also between people and the institutions they create and places they inhabit. For every ancient and medieval author that sought to untether cities from the ground and find meaning in society rather than in stones, as did Aristotle, Augustine and Isidore of Seville, numerous paean to walls and gates, markets and cathedral spires tell an equally compelling story of place. It is this divide that Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre and both geographers and cartographers have sought to bridge by forging links between lived experience, imagined landscapes and concepts that both describe and produce a given space, and which informs work on the meaning of urban territory, from medieval to modern, today.

Their work leads us to consider anew the nature of cities as well as their historical presence. The assumption that a city of both past and present inhabits the same category of identity, that it endures from ancient Babylon to modern Hanoi, rests more on the

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idea of city as a strategic placeholder than any conceptual certainty it holds over time. With no consensus that a city of ancient world had same meaning as city in the 21st century, is this really a category that can be used to apply to the *longue durée*? Can we talk about what it means to be a French or francophone city when city itself has multiple and not necessarily unified meanings? Such broad ontological questions certainly have not stopped either the brisk production of urban histories, nor historians from labeling cities as French, Polish or European, but it is worth thinking about the city-ness of French cities as much as their French-ness.

The roundtable at the WSFH’s Atlanta meeting in 2013 and this follow-up essay created by its four contributors attempt to address changes in French urban history in the past 20 to 30 years and suggest productive avenues of inquiry. Ellen Wurtzel, Jeff Horn, Catherine Clark and Michael Vann bring together their disparate chronological and geographic interests under the rubric of several larger questions: is it still useful to place urban history in its own interpretive framework? What kinds of sources are particular to urban history, or how can we think about older kinds of sources to tell us newer kinds of stories? Finally, is there a process by which cities become French? In the following, I loosely group our thoughts under three themes to consider: places and privileges, sources, and power, while acknowledging that there are more connections to be made, and more questions to pursue. Our findings, though, suggest that French urban history ought to have a stronger presence in the literature on the development of cities from the medieval to the modern era.

Places and privileges. Both Jeff Horn and Ellen Wurtzel argue that the impact of early modern cities and the stories told about cities in French history cannot be understood without consideration of what lay within and around them—the privileged enclaves and suburbs where all kinds of economic, religious and social activities took place, often in competition with nearby urban privileges. Their accounts emphasize that the story of cities in this period was not just about city and state locked in some kind of eternal dyad but was a much more dynamic and multivariable process. Horn notes that the French state systematically supported these enclaves, thus allowing flexibility and growth in French economic development against the urban guild structure and other privilege holders. In contrast, Wurtzel examines the city of Lille and sees the contests between city corporation and these other legal entities producing increased urban status and visibility vis-à-vis the state and a limitation of the power of other groups to
act within territory claimed by the city. Part of the difference between their two accounts is about different kinds of sources—economic vs. legal—but also that they are talking about different states altogether. Horn focuses on France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; Wurtzel the Habsburg Low Countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth, to which Lille belonged until 1667. The differences they raise point to the heterogeneity of state development in the early modern francophone world while their exploration of enclaves emphasizes what Horn calls the hybridity of urban spaces.

Sources. Catherine Clark’s intervention brings us to Paris, icon of the modern. While touching on the spatial dynamics discussed by Wurtzel and Horn, she incorporates the visual turn by French historians to think about images—in particular rich urban photo archives—as collections of primary source documents rather than fodder for illustrations. To Clark, such materials illustrate Parisian history but also enable historians to analyze the ways in which a particular medium, photography, has been used to construct an idea of the city’s past. Questioning whether pictures simply provide added value to existing narratives or allow for new questions and methodologies for the study of the urban, she argues for the latter, and in doing so, seeks to understand the process by which visual sources have been collected and preserved. She also asks whether or not the density of visual documentation of French cities provides us with not just with traces of particularly urban phenomena but is in and of itself part of what defines the urban.

Power. Michael Vann moves from Paris to the far-flung cities of colonial empire, and in a post-modern move, brings the imperial vision back again to shape the spatial politics of the metropole. Not only does he reflect on French colonial urbanism and urban historiography of cities in Morocco, Madagascar, Senegal, Vietnam and Indochina in the last 30 years, but he also argues that the racial-spatial divide produced in colonial environments is reflected in the configurations of metropolitan cities of today: what was produced in Hanoi, a site of imperial control, comes to fruition in 21st-century Paris and provides a roadmap for a (postmodern) future. His work thus brings the colonial past and post colonial present into Daniel Roche’s vision of urban history and its implications for the future. Imperial control is one permutation, however, of what links all four papers—the idea that urban history reveals the workings and limitations of power in different periods, environments and contexts.
In submitting these ideas, the four presenters do not argue that these are works of synthesis or together comprise a comprehensive new understanding of French urban history, as will be apparent in our brief concluding remarks. Instead, our interventions reflect the idea that whatever else they are, cities are profoundly historical and not merely evidence for universal human truths, as Botero would have it, and that the range of historical period described here demonstrates just how interesting that discussion over time can and ought to be. That cities tell the story of the state, but more than the state, and that it is in as many hands as those who live there, some of whom pick up a camera and take a picture for themselves.