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0521417341 - The Pre-Industrial Urban System: France, 1740-1840

Bernard Lepetit

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This is a landmark publication for urban studies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which appears here for the first time in English. Highly acclaimed in the original French edition, it provides one of the first synoptic views of the evolution of the French urban system before the Industrial Revolution by examining not only the major cities but the wider urban hierarchy. The innovations of this study lie in Lepetit's methodology: his use of models of urban interaction and the unravelling of the complex spatial dimensions to urbanization. He also sets up a detailed analysis of French urbanization and regionalism, and the different aspects of urban society: finance, building, trade, images and innovation. Towns are treated not merely as sites of human settlement, but as the focus of conflicting ambition, theatres of innovation and centres of territorial organization.

Lepetit's ideas will be of major interest to scholars of urbanization and the Industrial Revolution.

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*Themes in International Urban History*

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## Themes in International Urban History

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This series examines from an international perspective key themes in the historic development of cities and societies. The series is principally, although not exclusively, concerned with the European city, with an emphasis on the early modern and modern periods, and it will consider urban systems, structures and processes. Individual volumes will bring together and present in an accessible form the best work of the wide variety of scholars from different disciplines and nations currently engaged in research on urban history. The series is published by Cambridge University Press and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in association with the Centre for Urban History, University of Leicester. The first volumes in the series comprise collections of commissioned pieces organized around certain key themes that lend themselves to comparative analysis. Each includes a substantive introduction by the volume editor/s, making explicit linkages between individual essays and setting out the overall significance and context of the work.

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# The pre-industrial urban system: France, 1740–1840

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Bernard Lepetit

*Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris*

*Translated by*  
Godfrey Rogers



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‘Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular and uniform houses.’

L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. Anscombe  
(New York, 1953), p. 8

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## Foreword

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*Themes in International Urban History* is a series designed in the belief that a comparative, international approach to urban history may help diversify the study of the city and its past, opening up new perspectives for research. In the process we hope to raise if not resolve some of the major epistemological issues of disciplinary scope and definition, while exposing the distinctive nature of particular national methodologies. The series is primarily concerned, though by no means exclusively, with urban structures and processes in Europe, and embraces studies by individual authors as well as collections of essays organized around key themes in the history of urban development.

This book makes available for the first time in English one of the most important works of French urban historiography published in the last two decades. With its questioning intellectual framework, rich matrix of approaches, exploitation of sources, and major findings on the changing nature of the French urban system during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Bernard Lepetit's book opens important new doors for the study of European urban history.

In the post-war era, notably in the 1960s, French historians dominated the historiography of the European city in the early modern period. Massive studies by Maurice Garden on Lyon and the Lyonnais, by Pierre Goubert on Beauvais and its region, by Pierre Deyon on Amiens were matched by a phalanx of works on the great cities of the Mediterranean world – for instance Bartolome Bennassar on Valladolid and Jean Delumeau on Rome and its region. The general emphasis on a multi-faced approach, in the *Annales* tradition – looking at the interaction of demographic, economic and social structures and the interplay between town and countryside – constituted a break-through in historical research which influenced a generation of scholars across Europe. After the 1970s this exciting crescendo of work abated, though further major case studies appeared, usually with a more dynamic and thematic focus: thus Claude Perrot's seminal book on the modernization of social relations in eighteenth-century Caen, J.-P. Bardet primarily on

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the population of Rouen, and J.-P. Poussou on migration to Bordeaux. In recent times French scholarship has moved in fresh directions, with a surge of research on the networks, strategies, situations, and processes of urban social life, while there has been new attention to those types of towns previously neglected: for instance, the multiplicity of small towns or the industrializing towns on the Belgian border. But the recurring problem has been the lack of an overall framework in which to relate and comprehend all these studies. As Lepetit remarks, ‘satisfactory answers are unlikely to be had by simply juxtaposing all the available urban monographs’.

Lepetit’s book is fundamentally important not only because it focuses on the French urban system as a whole, but because it confronts the question how and why that system was shaped and remodelled in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Lepetit is by training a historical geographer and he brings to this work a deep sensitivity to the complexity of spatial relationships and their implications, together with a commitment to establish a quantitative underpinning to the argument. But there is no bleak retreat here into mechanistic model-making or quantification for its own sake. Sources, techniques and methodologies are constantly challenged and re-examined. Lepetit’s rigorous, hard-pounding approach does not always make for easy or comfortable reading for those historians accustomed to more empirical and descriptive tradition in historiography. But perseverance will be rewarded.

The book is in two main parts with an introductory survey. The survey (chapter 1) examines the broad pattern of urbanization in France from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Lepetit argues for phases of recovery and decline against a background of limited secular growth; this was combined with significant shifts in the urban hierarchy, particularly with regard to the bigger provincial cities. After this the first main part of the book deploys a range of different approaches to understanding the nature of French urban society before the Revolution. Chapter 2 takes relatively unused sources – geographical surveys, guide-books, maps and travellers’ accounts – to suggest a progressive change from a closed vision of the civic community, with its preoccupation with physical monumentality, to a new view concerned with population and urban functions. Chapter 3 follows this up with an examination of the writing of political economists to discuss how far there was a conception of urban hierarchy. In the next chapter Lepetit uses factor analysis to analyse a large cross-section of provincial towns in the 1780s, investigating their different economic, administrative and other functions, and arguing that the urban system at this time reflected in large measure the power structures of the state.

The second main part of the book is primarily concerned with the transformation of the French system during and after the Revolution. Chapter 5 uses variations in the rank size distribution to point to a decisive reorganization in the hierarchical pattern of French towns, to the advantage of the middle-rank and lesser centres. Here and in later chapters there is an emphasis on growing regional divisions particularly between the North and the South. In chapter 6 we see how the new geography of power created by the Revolution through the new allocation of *chef-lieux* or department capitals led to greater upheaval in the North than elsewhere. At the same time, the new system rapidly stabilized itself with departmental capitals consolidating their position as social centres through the growth of public sociability, investment in public works and other amenities, and high levels of municipal expenditure. The identification made by Lepetit between politics, administration and public finance is particularly valuable. On another tack chapter 8 criticizes conventional ideas about the innovative impact of road-building by arguing that the road network, like the railway network, later was fashioned to the contours of the existing urban hierarchy, accentuating differences between the increasingly integrated urban system of the North and the more fragmented, multi-polar pattern in the South. Chapter 9 is one of the most important. It uses evidence for distribution networks (markets, fairs, shops), the geography of grain prices and the diffusion of urban innovation (savings banks) to highlight the development of more advanced marketing in the Paris basin, fortified by transport advances – a trend which was mirrored by the growth of more integrated grain markets in the region and the rapid penetration of savings banks in the area.

The overall theme of the second part of the book is the growing tension between a traditional urban system and economic change. This tension was in part resolved by the division of the country into a northern region dominated by Paris with its emerging integrated central place network of towns and outside this areas shaped by separate regional poles focussed on mercantile capitals such as Bordeaux, Marseille, Lyon and Nantes. Chapter 10 looks at how far these changes were reflected in new representations of the city by political economists of the early nineteenth century. Throughout this book one gets a vivid impression of the dense mesh of the multi-layered palimpsest of French urban society with its powerful forces of ancient cities and their infrastructure, of competition between cities and towns, of the impact of the state, and of the abiding but changing importance of regionality. For British historians accustomed to regarding urbanization almost as an inexorable, ineluctable process this kind of approach with its recognition of the difficulties and

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disjunctures of change – not limited of course to France but visible in other countries – makes a strong case for the re-examination of conventional assumptions about the making of the first urban nation.

Lepetit's argument is both forceful and provocative, raising many questions and issues for the student of the European town. Naturally, given the constraints of space and the structure of the book, not all areas of interest to urban historians can be treated in detail and more work needs to be done to refine and extend the analysis presented here. The study is primarily concerned with the external impacts on the French town – of central government, transport and innovations. Rather less is said about the internal structures of towns and the mechanisms by which they responded to the challenge of change such as with the departmental administrative reforms of the early 1790s. Again, while stress is put on towns as centres of consumption and social interaction, there is more to be said about how the social life of French towns was organized, and different types of urban identity were created and renewed. In terms of the French urban system Paris itself is discussed only tangentially in this book and remains a large, somewhat indistinct, brooding shape on the touch-line. As Lepetit says, detailed discussion of Paris would have absorbed a significant portion of this book, upsetting its balance. But this book emphasises the need for further work which addresses directly the impact of the capital on French society in the *ancien régime* – facilitating comparisons with recent research on Madrid, London and other European capital cities. Another area of further work suggested by this volume is on the wider functions of the new industrializing towns near the Belgian border. To what extent do they fit into Lepetit's French system or did they also look outside to a different industrializing world in Belgium and Britain? This raises the issue as to whether the French urban network was a closed system, and how far some of Lepetit's provincial networks interacted with other cities and networks across Europe? To what extent indeed should urban historians be focusing on the interaction of national and regional urban systems rather than looking at the creation of international networks of commercial cities as the key to understanding the making of urban Europe?

These and other questions illustrate the stimulating quality as well as the importance of this study. Lepetit's work not only provides the first convincing picture of a dynamic urban system on the eve of large-scale industrialization, inviting comparisons with other European countries: time and again through its methodological inventiveness it forces urban historians to re-evaluate their ideas and approaches to the general study of the European city and its past.

PETER CLARK  
DAVID A. REEDER

## Abbreviations

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|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| <i>Ann. ESC</i> | <i>Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations</i> |
| AN              | Archives Nationales                                |
| BN              | Bibliothèque Nationale                             |
| <i>RHES</i>     | <i>Revue d'Histoire Economique et Sociale</i>      |
| <i>RHMC</i>     | <i>Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine</i>   |