

# *Fatal Isolation: The Devastating Paris Heat Wave of 2003* by Richard C. Keller (review)

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Richard C. Keller. *Fatal Isolation: The Devastating Paris Heat Wave of 2003*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 244pp. Ill. \$35.00 (978-0-226-25111-0).

On a normal August day, Paris's municipal funeral services can expect to take care of 38 bodies. During a two-day period in mid-August 2003, however, a stunning 790 bodies required attention as the city suffered through a heat wave that claimed an estimated 70,000 people throughout Europe.

Though lethal, the 2003 European heat disaster is hardly at the forefront of collective memory. And those Parisians who died and whose bodies remained unclaimed have been doubly forgotten. Enter Richard Keller on a scholarly mission of mercy. Keller has tried to reconstruct the lives of ninety-five of these forgotten victims, visiting their erstwhile homes and listening to reports of those who lived nearby. Keller's goal is to create a set of individual histories and "put a human face on the catastrophe" (p. 74). He thus uses history from the bottom up to counter both the official account of the disaster (created by the media and the state), as well as scientific understandings. Moreover, in contrast to sociological studies on the production of risk that tend toward the synchronic, Keller is at pains to show the ways in which long-term historical change structured the disaster.

The official narrative of the heat wave obscured the state's mismanagement of the calamity and instead placed responsibility on a number of forces seemingly beyond government control, such as weather extremes, demographic trends, and a supposed lack of social solidarity. Interpreting the disaster this way, Keller writes, "ultimately redirected blame from the state to the heat wave's victims by underscoring their marginality" (p. 26). Seeing the disaster as simply a case study in the social abandonment of vulnerable populations (such as the elderly) robs the disaster of its complexity and especially the role that history had in shaping the multitude of disastrous, indeed deadly, outcomes. **[End Page 358]**

As the book's title suggests, the ninety-five individuals who formed the basis for this study had lived their lives in a way that predisposed them to isolation, either never marrying or going through a divorce or being widowed. On closer inspection, it turns out that although the data on global mortality reveals that elderly women suffered disproportionately, Keller's prosopography of Paris's forgotten reveals a disaster that was especially hard on men who tended to be younger and, in some cases, suffered from problems with addiction or from disability.

Poor housing played an especially important part in the demise of the forgotten. Many lived in pitifully small lodgings of a mere one hundred square

feet located right below the roof. These so-called *chambres de bonne* would not exist but for the remaking of the city under the direction of Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann. Haussmann's projects, it is well known, created enormous social dislocation. Building codes combined with economic imperatives to incentivize developers into partitioning apartments in such a way that population density on the upper stories of buildings increased. These small apartments, originally occupied by domestic servants, typically had only a single window, making cross ventilation impossible. They also normally did not have baths or showers. And, perhaps most devastatingly for those who lived there in 2003, these apartments rested just below zinc roofs. These roofs give the city its charm. But they also turned these apartments into ovens that baked residents to death.

Keller's focus on individual histories highlights the potential flaws with epidemiological profiling. Models assessing heat-related risk in the aggregate have focused attention on the elderly. But Keller's research shows that such models are blunt instruments that obscure the part that both poverty and isolation have played in heat waves. As he concludes, "A focus on the vulnerability of elderly populations is essential, but it risks overlooking some 3,000 other victims who died during the crisis, and the role that state and community can play in extending its protections to them" (p. 180).

This is an imaginative book that shows the powerful intellectual contribution that social history...