

## Introduction

The Paris that inhabits imaginations around the world is a “moveable feast” of pleasure, beauty, and elegance. The Paris that most Parisians know is a workaday big city with traffic jams, supermarkets, and skyscrapers; it is also a sprawling multiethnic *agglomération* of ten million people. The Paris that the city’s recent mayors have promoted is a world cultural capital—or the “new Athens.” Those different versions of the city, along with a few others, are the subject of this book. We should think of Paris “in the plural,” writer Julian Green has urged.<sup>1</sup> Taking that idea as a starting point, I have written an account of how and why those several “Parises” became important and how they have together shaped the fabled, flawed great city of our time.

Paris is not just a city, it’s a “world,” the Emperor Charles V remarked (reportedly) in the sixteenth century. The city’s multiple facets and identities, together with its size, have made it difficult to comprehend and describe—from the Middle Ages on. In our time, the problem is even more daunting than ever: how can that great variegated “world” be captured or represented in words and images?

French phrases describing Paris over the centuries may offer us some help on that question, though they all have limitations, focusing as they do on one or another feature or role. Some writers have pictured the city as a vital organ—the heart and the brain of France, and the head (*tête*) of the world. To some it has been a “paradise,” to others a “new Babylon,” a hell, and a “stinking ulcer.” Poetic minds have also portrayed the city as a lion, a spider, a ship, an ocean, a volcano, a furnace, a sewer, a brothel, a labyrinth, a beacon, a star, and . . . The list goes on and on.<sup>2</sup>

Only a few of the images have become conventions—or what scholars call social representations, widely shared by Parisians and foreigners alike. Those few play leading roles in this study of modern Paris. As widely accepted ways of perceiving and imagining the city, they can tell us much

about the sources of Paris's extraordinary appeal. Of course, they are not faithful likenesses of quotidian realities—as my chapters show in detail. They have nonetheless played leading roles in the history that has produced the city we can visit today: they have been primary frames of reference for Parisian decision-making and common experience over time. To grasp their historical importance, we need to track the multiple Parises in their interplay and their relation to documented events and experience. Viewed in those ways, they can help us understand the multifarious city better than monographs focusing on a single identity or theme, such as revolution, capital of modernity, or capital of the world (excellent though the monographs may be in their own right).

Perhaps the best known of those representations is the phrase “the city of light,” which has been a premier identity of Paris for more than a century, despite the persistent reign of darkness in many quarters. Others include the aesthetic “old Paris,” the “capital of pleasures,” the folksy hometown known in French slang as “Paname,” and a stylish woman. How and why did such images come to represent Paris? And with what consequences for the city itself? My answers follow in the first four chapters of this book, period-by-period accounts of the city's history from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The first chapter is a look back at the crucial formative period of Paris's modern identities and experience—from the Second Empire to the First World War. The next three chapters carry the story through the rest of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. By zooming in on the last century-and-a-half, this short history can concentrate on showing how the city of our time developed its distinctive combination of identities and its mystique.

A final chapter examines another classic way of characterizing Paris, which is to describe the city's singular “atmosphere,” its spirit, and its persona. Writers have regularly expatiated on Paris's charm, wit, and personality, usually with a feminine figure in mind. Others have told us about the city's spirit and soul. The personality, the spirit, and the soul of Paris? Those are subjects that I have long wanted to understand—without knowing how. How to access such ethereal matters? I still wondered after more than thirty years of annual sojourns in the French capital. Eloquent writing on such subjects, unfortunately, often ends in vagueness: the key

turns out to be a *je-ne-sais-quoi* essence. Paris's charm, we learn, is . . . undefinable and inexplicable. Just what is that elusive something that makes the city more than the sum of its parts . . . or something other than that sum? What exactly has enchanted so many people? How did Paris get its exalted reputation, its prestige, and its romanticized imagery?

For answers to the questions about its spirit and soul, I concluded, we must listen to what Parisians themselves have said about their city, because they have been the primary exponents of those notions and presumably have intimate knowledge on which to draw. Accordingly, I have taken stock of the views of a wide range of Parisians and sources (see Chapter 6)—from writers and municipal officials to ordinary people, public opinion surveys, sociological studies, and the Parisian popular press (the *métro's* free weekly, for example, and the mass-circulation *Télérama's* special issues on the capital).

For a historical perspective on the city's extraordinary fame and prestige, I have surveyed the centuries-old tradition of high praise and awestruck description of Paris. This book spotlights the modern forms of that tradition—in particular, a handful of representations that became core identities of the city from the nineteenth century to the present. French scholars, whose example I follow, call the ensemble of such representations an “imaginary.” By using that term, they are not deeming it inconsequential fantasy, illusion, or “phantasmagoria.” Nor am I. The Parisian imaginary highlighted in this book, I have tried to show, has guided the construction of piece after piece of the world called “Paris.” Its images and scenarios, crystallized as collective memories, have structured how Paris has been viewed, described, and admired. They have also made their marks on the built city by shaping the consciousness of administrators, urban planners, and decision-makers at many levels. For example, painterly images of pre-1914 Montmartre served as models for preservationist planning half a century later (see Chapter 2). And the old popular-culture dream of warm local community (*Paname*) has inspired municipal programs for revitalizing social and cultural life in the *quartiers* since the 1980s.

The importance of these long-term cultural structures—representations, memories, imaginaries—tends to get lost in accounts of the tumultuous events, acts of the powerful (kings, presidents, urbanists), and grand

monuments in Paris's rich history. This study, countering that tendency, highlights the Paris that has lived for centuries in hearts and minds, transcending political crises, revolutions, street battles, wars, and urban-renewal "massacres." That enduring Paris has been endlessly described and praised, painted, photographed, filmed, romanticized, dreamed, remembered, lamented, and loved—but not investigated with a focus on the perspectives and questions that drive this work.

Particularly important for that Paris—and this study—are Parisian places and times that have loomed large in popular culture dreams and memory. They include such iconic glamour spots as the Moulin Rouge and Maxim's, but also lowlife haunts, the city's "villages," and selective images from the period called the "Belle Époque." This book attempts to explain how and why such disparate set pieces became popular favorites, mainstays of collective memory, and focal points of dreams about Paris as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

Pieces of this story have been set out in specialized studies examining representations of Paris in one genre or another—above all, in literature, painting, cinema, and photography.<sup>4</sup> My aim, as far as is possible in one relatively short volume, is to show how the various strands have converged at points and together made certain kinds of images vivid in the mind's eye—even in the minds of many who have never set foot in the French capital. I have taken a wide-angle view of Paris image-making and its many sources—from the arts and state-sponsored projects to commercial entertainments and tourist guides. The goal is to understand the city's several faces *and* the multiform whole, the metropolis that is at once world capital *and* village, modern *and* old.

To that end I have drawn on the testimony of a wide variety of observers—Parisians, provincials, and foreigners. They have told us, from their different perspectives, what the city has meant, how it has rated when compared with rival cities (Chapter 5), and what has been most important over the decades.

Of all the observers considered, the admirers and aficionados of Paris (self-styled "lovers of Paris") have given us the most evocative readings of the city, and they have addressed my more difficult questions most directly. Writers who were inveterate strollers, in particular, have provided many

fine-grained descriptions—of everyday sights as well as special places and moments they found most beautiful and enjoyable. They have also written about the city's soul and spirit with the most authority (see Chapter 6). Though they tell us little about demographic changes, building codes, and urbanist plans, they have given us eloquent accounts of aesthetic and affective experience. Theirs is an intimate, sentimental, and picturesque Paris. Their enthusiasms and dreams may help us see more in Paris and understand better its extraordinary mystique and appeal, if not its soul.