



**HAL**  
open science

# PARIS, 1830-1850: THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GAZE

Jean-Samuel Bordreuil

► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Samuel Bordreuil. PARIS, 1830-1850: THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GAZE. Conference "Dissecting Society. Periodical Literature and Social Observation (1830-1850)", Center for International Research in the Humanities and the Social Sciences New York University, Mar 2015, New York, NY, United States. hal-04127608

**HAL Id: hal-04127608**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04127608>**

Submitted on 13 Jun 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

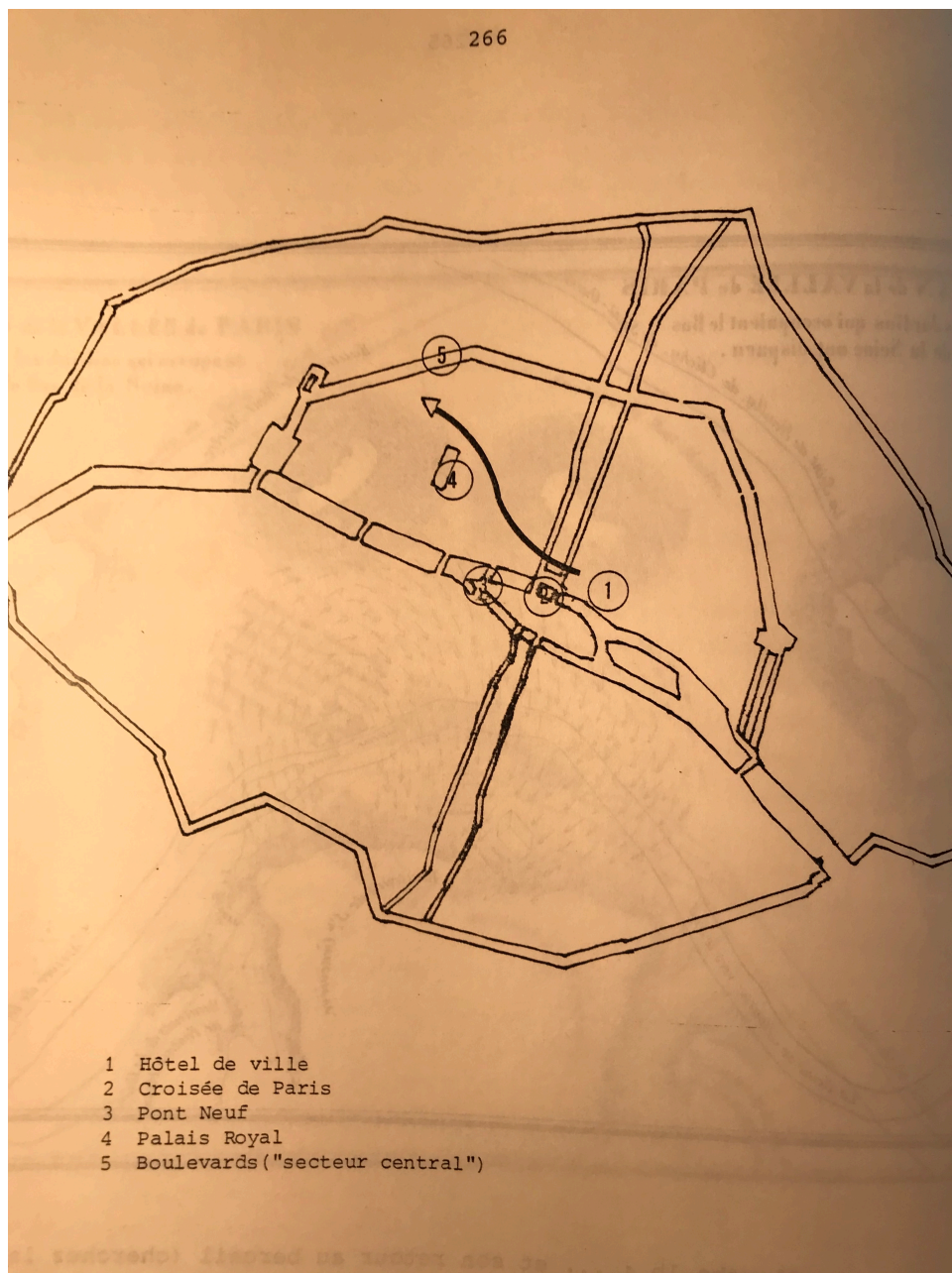
L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## PARIS, 1830-1850: THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GAZE

**Forewords:** This paper was originally presented, on March 20th 2015, for the Dissecting Society and Periodical Literature Conference, CIRHUS, NYU (Christiane SCHAWB and Ana PENAS RUIZ dir.) It draws its materials from a segment of my Thesis work (Bordreuil 1987): *La Production de la Centralité Urbaine*, covering the pre-Haussmannian moment of Paris's centrality. Beneath the rendering of this singular and quite striking urban moment there lies a more theoretical topic: in order to grasp what was then taking place, rather than choosing in between some macro or micro approaches, there is no better way than to crisscross their respective scopes.

### 1. A fleeing urban center as a harbinger of the advent of a more liquid society.

**Setting the scene: La Question du déplacement du centre de Paris :** from *les Halles*, to *les grands boulevards*, via *Le Palais Royal* et *le Passage des Panoramas*.





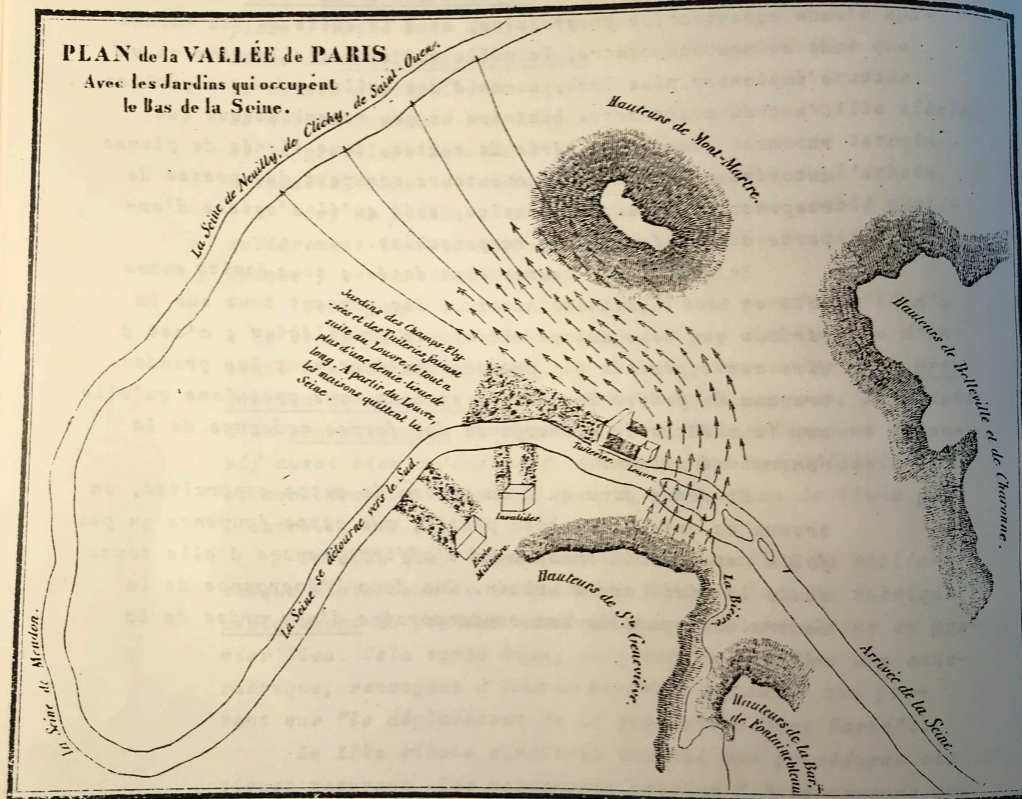
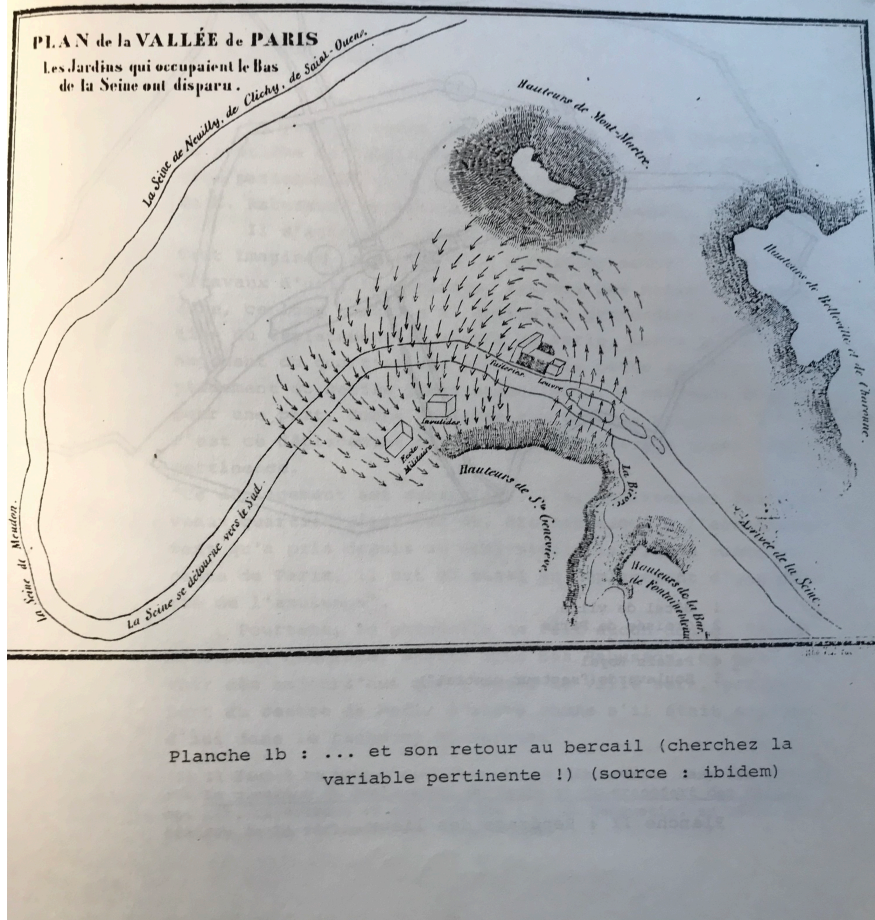


Planche Ia : La fugue du centre..  
 (Source A. Rabusson, "La rive gauche menacée de devenir ville de province", op. cit., infra)



Our paper draws on already collected archival materials to address the historicity of the “city center” as a prototypical urban form. The bulk of my material – popular literature and iconography, statistics, geographical data, as well as analysis written by “experts” mandated by civic bodies – focuses on the pre-Haussmanian moment (1830-1850) in Paris’s city life, precisely that critical period of the “displacement of the center” from the city’s heart to its outer limits (on the Grand Boulevards built, as we know, on the very rubble of the city walls). The issue of the city center’s migration to its very northwestern edge hovered above the local civic mindedness of the time (see Pierre Lavedan’s work (1969) on this “question”<sup>1</sup>).

This historical moment proved worrisome for its contemporaries precisely because they attributed this spatial drift to an underlying logic of growing importance according to which the future would belong to more fluid societies. As they redefined the center as “a center of movements”, the somewhat threatening prospect of a future center “landing” in places where movements would be given freer reins – that is, beyond the old city – made sense to them.

<sup>1</sup> See LAVEDAN, P., *La question du déplacement de Paris et du transfert des Halles au Conseil municipal sous la monarchie de juillet*, Paris, Imprimerie municipale, 1969. For a more in depth approach of that critical moment the main sources are the numerous « Mémoires » written by experts and/or by members of civic bodies, in between 1835 and 1845 (JS Lanquetin, A Rabusson, Perreymond, Victor Considerant being the most noticeable among them).



Further - to the extent that "*le mouvement va au mouvement*" -- this prospect was compounded by the notion that not only a new dynamic was taking hold in Paris Northwestern fringes, but that it belonged to the category of the "self generating" ones (the "snow ball effect" trope being used at length by the commentators of the time)<sup>2</sup>. In other words, this recursive loop (in that case a positive feed back loop) was granted an ominous strength that will subdue urban life as it used to be.

This rather somber scenario – it must be said – was mostly promoted by citizens (landlords, merchants) living on the opposite side of the city (that is in the southeastern quarter of the city)<sup>3</sup>. And it is also true that this "question of the displacement of the center" lost some of its criticality in the following years. Yet, if this alarm was tamed down, it was precisely because the new spatial features their "prophets" had come to elicit as keys to modernity (the easiness of movements) were soon enough implemented, but in all directions. In other words, rather than an exiting centrality, what took place was an enlargement of the urban centrality - a Haussmannian enlargement, to name it. Therefore, there is no reason to overlook the rhetoric they used in their campaign; to the contrary and on two accounts. The first one is that the rationale their analyses had constructed was endorsed in the guidelines of the Haussmann enterprise. The second, being that these analyses – their emphasis on a "mobility turn" of the city life – appear well grounded in what historical approaches tell us about that moment in urban life.

Indeed, those were times of growing mobility (re traffic flows), of a re assemblage of the city material infrastructure so as to give free way to these growing flows and, finally, of a close policing of "urban manners", city dwellers being a quintessential component of this new liquid order.

Traffic wise, we should not underestimate the swelling of it during the first half of the century, a period during which Paris's population doubled (from half a million of inhabitants to one million). If we focus on passenger transportation, a turning point seems to be the launching in 1828 of "Omnibus" services: 30 thousand users at the beginning of it; but a doubling up of this number in just one year (60 thousand). To these numbers one should add the customers of "voitures de place" (our modern "cabs") whose number doubled in between 1819 and 1853 (whereas omnibus would carry 14 passengers, "voitures de place" could cater for 12). All in all - and notwithstanding the weight of the "voitures bourgeoises, the heir of "aristocratic equipages" - this translated into a huge pressure on the uses of city streets, a contested turf in between pedestrians and their rolling others<sup>4</sup>.

So much so that it comes as no surprise that the rulers of the city tried to put some order in the ensuing "traffic jams", mostly in allotting separated paths to the two halves of humanity<sup>5</sup>: sidewalks, to name them, was the desired solution. The increase of the overall length of this new amenity is quite striking: 16 kms in 1833, 240 in 1848, 1 100 in 1870. Yet, this was not enough, since the use of sidewalks should be itself rendered more liquid. Here we turn towards the last layer of implemented urban policies. At stake, there were not only material fixtures that should be realigned so as to ease the flow (signboards flattened on the walls rather than sticking out of them in order to catch the attention of coming passers by; but, too, all sorts of protuberances, be they benches or all kinds of corbelled constructions). Further, human beings and their active

---

<sup>2</sup> See: Michel Serres book: *Feux et signaux de brume – Zola*, Paris, Grasset, 1975. A book where the recursive loop is a central trope, as it was for the experts of the « question of the displacement of the center of Paris ».

<sup>3</sup> Lanquetin, one of the spearheads of this alarming campaign was himself a wine merchant from Bercy.

<sup>4</sup> On this topic Alfred Martin's works are very useful. See: MARTIN, A., *Etude historique et statistique sur les moyens de transport dans Paris*, 1894, BHVP, 30881.

<sup>5</sup> Quoting Balzac : « Les pauvres vont à pied, les riches en équipages ».

propensities had also to be smoothed out of the flow. A constant thread of “police orders” running during this first half of the century, would prevent any kind of laboring activities on the sidewalks. To which must be added that, eventually, these “police orders”, widened their target, beyond the busy endeavors, to any kind of sedentary use of the street (that is sidelining the “Casaniers” in favor of the “Mobiles”<sup>6</sup>) of the street. In 1862, one ordinance was edited which would go further than the aim of regulating moves as they come. It stated that the movement itself was the root principle of law: consequently, the right to station, to stay in place, became subordinated to the superior public good of moving.

In one word, the increasing fluidity of urban life was both a driving force of urban changes and an imperative worthy of abiding by.

## **2. Effects of growing urban fluidity on the daily management of gaze.**

The driving hypothesis of this presentation is that the gathering of all the elements that enter in the framing of whatever “sense of place” (sketches, panoramas, tourist guides, ads, and “talk of the town” columns of a flourishing new press) was made possible by a critical shift in the delicate exercise of the reciprocal gaze in public space. How can we draw this link tying fluidity to visibility (or, so to speak, *gaze-ability*)?

Addressing that question by its geographical dimension we propose to consider that this (gaze) shift found some grounds in the deterritorialization of pre-existing urban social spaces; that is, through a progressive but steady “disowning” of urban places and their reassembly from a juxtaposition of turfs into the seamless texture of a public space. Indeed, integral to the ideal of “public space” is the notion of freedom granted to whoever comes and goes in it; in short “universal accessibility” constitutes its ruling principle. Thus one can get a sense of this reshuffling of urban social spaces in the ways it came to be welcomed by commentators of the time. For instance, they would marvel at the new afforded possibility to go through and through in Paris<sup>7</sup>. Another critical symptom of this reshuffling was the terminological battle that raged about the proper naming of its urban ways: “Streets” or “Roads”? That is, should the circulating component be emphasized in naming those ways as “road”? Or not?

Then, is a street something else than a circulation way? To be sure, it was, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and it continued to be so in neighborhoods not yet affected by the rising liquidity of urban life. Arlette Farge<sup>8</sup> convincingly describes the street as a locus where not only people would live outdoors (working, chatting), but would make a living out of their street lives (sometimes barely surviving). The typical profile of the “*petit commissionnaire*” helps to grasp some features of this local life (and its relationships with “non local” life, that is the rest of the urban world). Very often he is young and his business is to offer assistance to those foreign to the neighborhood. Commentators describe him as being both generous (he offers services, often of the piloting kind) and mischievous (he can trump his clients, force their hand or, worse, react back if he judges that he was not “tipped” enough<sup>9</sup>). In any case there is some sense in framing him as a “gate keeper”.

Then, one understands well that the “watch out” side of his activities was vital for his prosperity; and this will afford us a transition to the second plane of the analysis – shifting, so to speak, from the *goings* to the *gazing*. Indeed, commentators describe that type of “*petit industriel en plein*

---

<sup>6</sup> To refer here to the wording of the time.

<sup>7</sup> « Aller par monts et par vaux » ; see Walter Benjamin quote in the “Arcades Project” (M3, 2). To which must be added that this new possibility was taken as a mark of the superiority of Paris in comparison with others cities.

<sup>8</sup> Farge, Arlette : *Vivre dans la rue à Paris au 18<sup>ème</sup> siècle*. Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

<sup>9</sup> See : *l'illustration*, February 10th, 1843. In this article the « *petit commissionnaire* » is dubbed « *le petit boueur* ».

vent” as masterful in the art of “voir venir” (of seeing who is coming); as “subtle observers<sup>10</sup>”, skilled at guessing from where and for what needs a coming body was entering his turf. Conversely the entering person was well aware that he or she was placed under close scrutiny and would be better off behaving accordingly. In that kind of circumstances the exchanges of gaze could trigger some significant consequences. To which must be added that, to the extent that street life was very often both unpredictable and unstable<sup>11</sup>, that it could at any moment nurture some local turbulence or turmoil and these consequences could always turn bad. In short, the prospect of being **embroiled** in situations that could go awry was part of the urban experience.

Having placed the growing fluidity of urban life upon that (schematized) backdrop, we then can more easily delineate how it impacted the texture of social spaces. On the one hand, it tended to erase, or smoothen, the gate component of the urban structure – the disappearance of urban thresholds was both pointed to and celebrated by the contemporaries<sup>12</sup> - thereby weakening the grip of the gate keeper’s gaze mentioned above. On the other, it prompted in every local site a more intricate overlapping of different urban dwellers trajectories. Specifically, whether these citizens would come from nearby or would be transiting from far away, they would fray the same arteries, thus becoming hard to discern from each other. Therefore, local communities being routinely crisscrossed by non-locals, the profile of the outsider lost some of its salience, giving place to the anonymous “passer by”. In other words, the meaning of “strangeness” shifted from being foreign to the place, to that of simply being an unknown among others equally unknown to each other. Hence, the *topos* of the (more or less) “Lonely Crowd” (David Riesman) could enter the place.

To go back to the theme of “gaze ability”, our proposed analysis would be that, given the new mobile circumstances, the complex economy of rights and duties that tied the onlookers to each other (both as subject and object of gaze) and ruled their reciprocal involvements as such, was displayed in a renewed fashion. One instance of that shift would be that the moral economy commanding some discretion re the **doings** of others was loosing some of its grip. For a part, given the fleeting side of urban encounters, the possibility of correctly inferring the whole of an ongoing activity from a segment of behavior could no longer be presumed. For another, we have to keep in mind that the monitoring of one’s doing is critical but only (or all the more) when it is enacted by “significant others”: meaning ones being known to the person under consideration and, as such, appearing as possible “book keepers” and/or custodian of a reputation<sup>13</sup>. To the extent that local life would be progressively drowned under trans local flows, the corporation of those “local book keepers” would shrink and/or be sidelined.

To sum it up, the reshuffling of social spaces considered as fields of gaze-ability, would bear upon the following features:

A sidelining of the monitoring of “activities in course”; that is the visual tracking of walkers in order to know more about what they were “up to”. And also that this visual tracking would lose

---

<sup>10</sup> « Subtils observateurs, ils pouvaient voir si vous veniez de Londres ou bien d’Anvers ». in L. GOZLAN, *Le triomphe des omnibus, poème héroïco-comique*, 1828, BHVP.

<sup>11</sup> To quote Arlette Farge, op cit

<sup>12</sup> See Walter Benjamin (« Arcades Project ») on this theme of the erasement of thresholds in the urban life.

<sup>13</sup> What is a Biography? At one point in *Stigmas*, Erving Goffman answers « along the lines of » nothing else than a white page « darkened » or written over by others.

some of its undesired and perilous consequences, thereby granting onlookers the possibility of a more innocuous exercise of their scoping abilities.

Obviously, this is not to say that they could walk “eyes wide shut”, so to speak. Rather, it meant that the irreducible task of monitoring other’s acts tended to fold back to the strict control of their walking ways. Or to put it otherwise, the visual monitoring would stem from within a “walker’s perspective” and embrace the other as such - that is another walker coming by, thus leaving aside any kind of attention as to what his or her walk would conceal.

As we know well, this sort of **close range** mutual checking relies also and entirely on a quick exchange of gazes; and we owe Erving Goffman a nice analysis of its ritual delicacies. As a reminder, “Civil Inattention”, to name this basic ritual display, is a two steps process. It starts with an exchange of gaze between passers by, so as to ensure each of them that they are mutually aware of their common presence (a “notification of presence”, so to speak). Then, it closes by a sort of “dimming of the light” (using here a Goffman’s metaphor), that is a synchronized withdrawal of gazes, so as to signify to the other that he or she is no longer the subject of any kind of lasting attention<sup>14</sup>.

Although we will not apply in the following this micro analytical “lens”, it is worth mentioning it, insofar as this helps us to better locate our focus of attention re the scoping abilities of urban dwellers. Indeed what was at stake in the reshuffling of the urban visual field relates mostly to the “**long range**” component of their visual attentions. That is, the ability to observe the observing behaviors of others (third parties, as it were) and in so doing, not risking (or risking less) to be trapped in some sort of embroilment.

In this regard, the flourishing of urban depictions centering their scope on what uses fellows urbanites would make of their eyes is quite striking; to the point that some typologies were built up according to differences re these uses. A case in point is the opposition in between the “badaud”, the “physionomist” and the “flaneur” types. In short, a “badaud” could be defined as an avid observer, so much engulfed in its activity that he would forget that he could himself be a subject of observation. To the contrary, the “physionomist” and the “flaneur” belonged to the category of the “unobserved observers”. These two socio types, in turn, gave ways for some nuances, the physionomist’s gaze being more of the staring kind, whereas the flaneur’s one could indulge in some sorts of musing digressions<sup>15</sup>.

### **3. The license to watch: Balzac and the new field-stations for the study of social order**

But what were the cognitive effects of the gaze thus transformed? We turn here to two essays in which Balzac, as a third observer, privileges sidewalks as “field-stations” for understanding the very stuff of the social order. In so doing, he endorses the position of the “unobserved observer” proper to the *flaneur*.

I rely on two non-fiction texts by Balzac (1966), “*Le traité de la vie élégante*” and la “*Théorie de la Démarche*”. I have chosen them because they make ample room for visual observations; particularly some insights caught from some cafés terraces, on the Boulevards.

Placing Balzac in its own time and space gives some credence to his treatment as a forerunner of the Social Sciences to come. Time wise (and I am following here Robert Nisbet’s *Sociological Tradition*) Balzac’s post-revolutionary era progressively yielded a sense of society as a “sui generis” entity (to use Durkheim’s words); a meaning that was accessible to ordinary actors. Spatially speaking, the

---

<sup>14</sup> In GOFFMAN E. (1963), p. 83 – 88.

<sup>15</sup> See Walter Benjamin notes about this difference in the flaneur section of the *Arcades Project*.



local concentration of so many socio-types, coming from so many different back grounds, the profusion of new commodities (“all that is elsewhere is here”, to quote a W Benjamin quote in his “Arcades Project”), nourished the sentiment that the whole of society was “out there”, graspable by an encompassing gaze. We know that Balzac took Cuvier’s tables of comparative anatomy as a model, striving for its **synoptic** ideal as applicable to social matters. His aim was to reveal the laws that rule the social order (as Cuvier had done for the natural order). And his method was similar: to spot some tiny material details that would allow for a classification in all certainty of the bearers of that mark in that (sub) species rather than in another one. Thus, in so doing, his “enquiries” in social life deliberately remained at the level of appearances; Balzac’s take was that by simply sojourning in the realm of what is left to see (and to be observed) the underlying layer of the overall picture of the different social conditions was entirely accessible and readable.

The two texts develop the rationale for such a “superficial” gaze. In one word, the surface, the clothes, the gestures tell the truth of their bearers. Here an underlying ontology is at play: one that seizes material forms as **crystallizations** of embedded values. To cite Balzac, those values are akin to a “vapor” that cannot help to perspire at a behavioral level. To the extent that for Balzac the social order is a hierarchical one (and this appears to him as a good thing!), one can read those two texts as attempts to ground the superiority of the elites by demonstrating the superiority of their “body language”. To be able to spell out the code of their “elegance” and demonstrate its intrinsic superiority suffices to warrant the inherent superiority of the members of these elites.

The reader can nevertheless note that, in order to spell out this code of *excellence* Balzac the observer devotes much attention to those who, on the sidewalks of the city, try to “pass”, fabricating or counterfeiting their true social identity. But his stance consists at poking fun at them – “outsmarting” them by simply detecting the ensuing lack of unity of their performances (“unity” for him is a keyword to define what “elegance” is about).

Thus, two conceptual schemata appear at work in Balzac’s dialectic of appearances and essence: the first is akin to the modern one of “**embodiment**” (social values, habitudes making their ways through bodies). The second relates to the trope of **fetishism**. That is to the gullibility of masses engaged as they were in their “home made” fabrications; or fooled as they were by their own duperies. But obviously for Balzac the question was not, as it would be the case in a Marxist vein, to help those masses to get rid of their illusions. The bad thing for him (and one not to be corrected) was not that they were entertaining fictions but more likely that they opted for the wrong ones: “contra natural” kind of fictions.

To conclude in an interrogative mode: one finds in Balzac some conceptual tools that became central in our critical “tool box”; yet he devised them in a markedly different spirit. The depictions of city life at that time were a fertile ground for their elaboration; but to clarify those concepts is a task contemporary sociologists are still busy at.

Jean Samuel Bordreuil, March 2015

### **Bibliography**

Honoré de Balzac, « Traité de la vie élégante », *La comédie humaine 7*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1966 (pp.564-580).

Honoré de Balzac, « Théorie de la démarche », *La comédie humaine 7*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1966 (pp. 580- 596)

- Walter Benjamin, *Paris Capitale du XIXème siècle. Le livre des passages*, Paris, Cerf, 1989.
- J Samuel Bordreuil, *La production de la centralité urbaine*, Thèse d'état, Toulouse le Mirail, 1987.
- J Samuel Bordreuil, « La ville, les flux », *Espaces et Sociétés*, N° 43, juillet- décembre 1983.
- J Samuel Bordreuil, « Dans la compagnie des passants », in *Marcher en ville*, (sous la direction de Rachel Thomas), Editions des Archives Contemporaines, Paris, 2010 (pp 99-114).
- Collectif, *Paris ou le Livre des Cent-et-Un*, publié par la librairie C. Ladvocat de 1831 à 1834. <https://www.bmlisieux.com/litterature/bibliogr/10101.htm>
- Michel Coste, "Perreymond, un théoricien des quartiers et de la reconstruction", *Annales de la Recherche Urbaine*, 1984, n° 22, pp. 47-57
- Arlette Farge, *Vivre dans la rue à Paris au 18<sup>ème</sup> siècle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992
- Léon Gozlan, *Le triomphe des Omnibus* ; poème héroï-comique, Paris, (1828) 2018, Hachette Livre BnF.
- Erving Goffman. *Behavior in Public Places*, The Free Press of Glencoe, NYC, 1963.
- Isaac Joseph, *Le passant considérable*, Paris, Librairie des Méridiens, 1985
- Pierre Lavedan, *La question du déplacement de Paris et du transfert des Halles au Conseil municipal sous la monarchie de juillet*, Paris, Imprimerie municipale, 1969.
- Robert A. Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition*, Routledge, 1993
- Michel Serres, *Feux et signaux de brume -Zola*. Paris, Ed Grasset, 1975.