

Introduction to Urban History Pr. PARRINELLO and DELMAIRE

Itinerary Note:
Social identities and rival geographies in the Marché aux Puces of Saint-Ouen from 1912 to present days

Characters: 18,260

INTRODUCTION

With more than 5 million visitors a year¹, the *Marché aux Puces* in Saint-Ouen, a peripheral suburb at the Northern entry of Paris (Porte de Clignancourt), is the biggest and most vibrant flea market on Earth. Intrigued by such an emblematic place located in the fringes of Paris, we embarked on a historical journey to understand changes and continuities in the urban landscape of the *Puces*.

Our urban and historical analysis starts from a newspaper article (see Annex) from the beginning of the 20th century found in *Retronews*², the press website of the French National Library (BnF), dating from 17th september of 1912 and signed by André Warnod, a French writer and illustrator that has several publications and drawings about Parisian popular places³.

Contributing to *Comœdia*, a daily French cultural journal of the time⁴, Warnod's article takes place in a context of a soaring number of press articles about the *Marché aux Puces*, altogether with the multiplication of Saint-Ouen postcards revealing the flea market in a more touristic light (Bedel, 2012). Among the first records of the *Marché* with a positive perspective, this article can be seen as one step towards the valorization of popular activities to the XXth century *bourgeoisie*.

"C'est un marché très animé, on y marchande, on y discute avec acharnement. On s'y dispute même quelquefois et cela n'a rien de bien surprenant puisque les chiffonniers qui sont ici chez eux partagent avec les poissardes des Halles le privilège d'être passés maîtres en l'art d'injurier son prochain" (Warnod, 1912).

Choosing Warnod's article as a starting point for our itinerary was also based on his grassroots exploration of the *Puces*, almost through an

¹ *Le Marché aux Puces de Saint-Ouen: le plus grand marché d'antiquités du monde*, retrieved from <http://www.marcheauxpuces-saintouen.com/3.aspx> on 7 november 2018

² Warnod, André. *Le Marché Aux Puces*. *Comoedia* 17 september 1912. Retrieved from Retro News <https://www.retronews.fr/societe/long-format/2018/07/04/le-marche-aux-puces-de-saint-ouen> on 7 november 2018

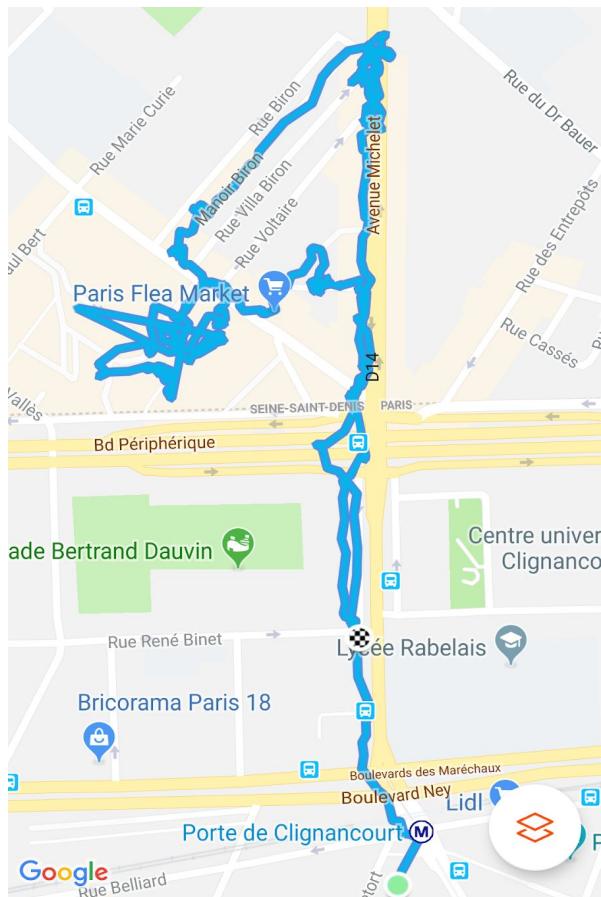
³ File of André Warnod in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, retrieved from http://data.bnf.fr/12419865/andre_warnod/ on 7 november 2018

⁴ *Comoedia* in Wikipedia, retrieved from [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Com%C5%93dio_\(journal\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Com%C5%93dio_(journal)) on 7 november 2018

anthropological dimension of this social territory, detailing people's practices, dialogues and body expressions with a clear taste for narrativity. The use of illustrations, instead of photographies, also reaffirms his intention to create a record that opens rooms to fantasy and imagination around it, even though his text is framed into a journalistic format.

Considering the limitations of a historical source that indicates some romanticized elements, the description of the flea market activities and territorialization of their practices revealed itself as a precious source for a human-based understanding of the urban past of the *Marché aux Puces*.

As André Warnod, we realised our fieldwork in the *Marché aux Puces* on a Sunday morning, together, to observe the dynamics of selling and buying at its peak. During one and a half hour, we then explored this dense territory, going from Paris to the inside of the markets, looking for continuities and changes between the early 20ths and present days.



Starting from the *Porte de Clignancourt* subway station around 11 AM, we walked through the *Avenue de la Porte de Clignancourt* towards the flea market, passing under the *Boulevard Périphérique* viaduct and continuing through *Avenue Michelet*. According to previous researches, we had to arrive to the *Rue des Rosiers*, a street that is the core of the *Puces* and where most of the antiquarian markets are located. From there, the idea was to be flexible enough and let the urban landscape drive us through the *Puces*, as *flâneurs* or situationist *dérive*. Such wandering is highly visible in our itinerary once we got into the markets, where our circulation gained a much more organic pattern of mobility in comparison with the straight lines along the avenues, entering and exiting the zone.

Map of the itinerary. Source: Google Maps, 2018.

After such wanderings, and based on our critical study of Warnod's article and of the literature on the urban history of Saint-Ouen, we argue that the *Marché aux Puces* is a territorially embedded palimpsest of urban conflicts that have participated to both its internal organisation and its integration to its urban milieux.

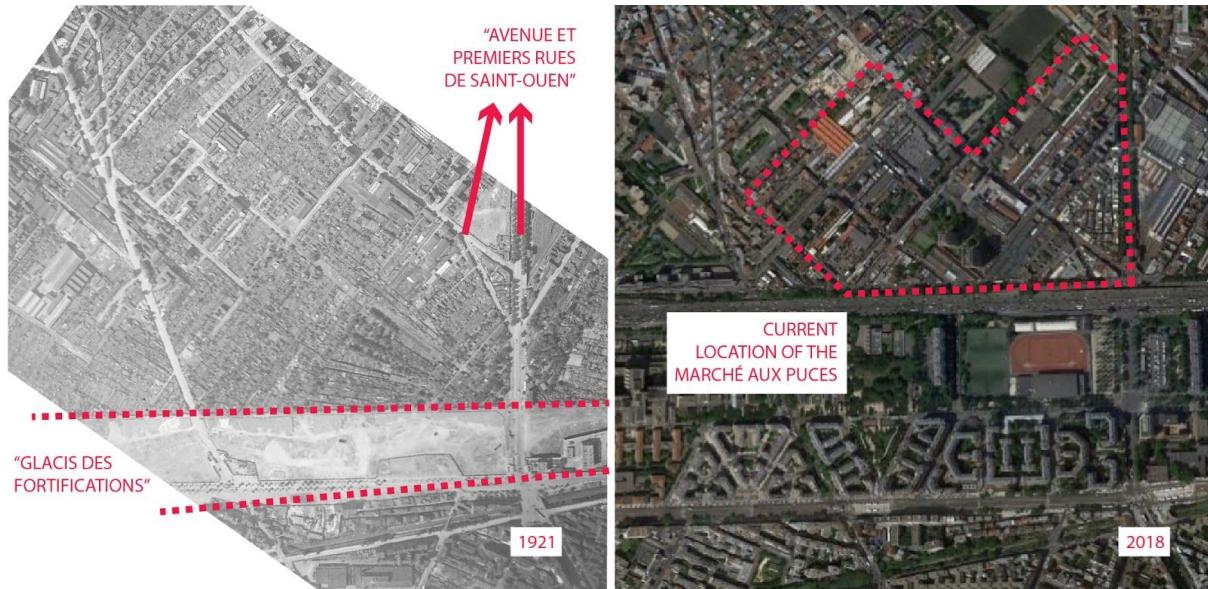
1. *The structuring effect of conflicting practices in the internal organisation of the Puces*

To begin with, the *Marché aux Puces* discovered in Warnod's article and through our itinerary struck us by the conflicting logic behind their internal organisation. Though not explicitly, Warnod does allude to the biggest "boutiques" located on the first streets of Saint-Ouen as opposed to the "*marchands des fortifications*", described as a more unsettled and less financially valued form of commerce.

"Le marché se continue le long de l'avenue et des premiers rues de Saint-Ouen, mais les boutiques sont ici bien plus importantes, les objets en vente sont installés sur des tréteaux qui, parfois, comble de luxe (...) Mais ce commerce-là est loin de valoir celui des marchands des fortifications" (Warnod, 1912).

Behind the author's romanticization of what appears as arduous working conditions - and which are extensively documented as such by historians (Bedel, 2012) - we actually get an idea of the ferocious economic competition in the everyday interactions between the "*biffins*" (notably, the final dialogue between the "*gosse*" and its neighbours about who sold the most this day). Through the article, we discern a certain territorial logic to the internal organisation of the Puces - the most informal activities being closer to the fortifications. In fact, when the fortifications surrounding Paris are enacted in 1841 by the "*loi des fortifs*" of Prime Minister Adolphe Thiers⁵, the surrounding 250 meters zone was established as *non aedificandi*, forbidding any type of construction nor property in the benefits of a military use of the zone - which never took place. Such land-use vacuum was seen as an opportunity for "*chiffonniers*" constantly chased by public authorities in Paris who started the informal occupation along the Thiers Wall for commercial purpose in the second half of the XIXth century. Due to their success, an increasing number of *chiffonniers* started to migrate to Saint-Ouen, trying to settle themselves and ride along such commercial boom. The first arrived, therefore, self-declared their property on some portions of land and taxed the new arrivants looking for where settlement solutions. A very locally embedded hierarchy thus formed itself, separating the enriching "*placier*" (earning 15 to 20 francs per day on average at the beginning of the XXth century thanks to their informal land tenures) and the "*biffins*" (1 to 2 francs per day on average, Bedel 2012) - the "*chiffonniers*" settled in the wooden and sardine-canned shacks built by the "*placières*", increasingly investing in better infrastructures and more lands towards Saint-Ouen. Thus, in Warnod's article we sense such hierarchy and its resulting spatial configuration with the biggest boutiques in the first streets of Saint-Ouen and the "*biffins*" near the glacis of the fortifications.

⁵ Renaud Gagneux et Denis Prouvost, *Sur les traces des enceintes de Paris*, Parigramme, 2004.



On the left, identification of the glaze of fortifications and the avenue and first streets of Saint-Ouen as described by André Warnod in 1912.

On the right, identification of the current location of the *Marché aux Puces* of Saint-Ouen as observed during our itinerary.

Source: Aerial photos from 1921 (Portail IGN) and 2018 (Google Earth).

A similar hierarchisation was observed during our itinerary, although under another spatial configuration (marker of a new historical arrangement of the *Puces*). The first stalls, selling counterfeited brands of clothes along the Avenue Michelet, and the several curbsiders, hiding their products under their coats and calling out pedestrians, could be perceived in historical continuation with the "*biffins*" near the glacis of Warnod's journalistic ethnography. If the curbsiders progressively disappear while entering in Saint-Ouen, the clothing flea market actually form a dorsal spine structuring our circulation towards the *Puces* until our arrival to its heart: the antiquarian markets. The spatial fragmentation is, there, striking as the antique dealers are concentrated within a very dense fortified enclave within which is staged the very planned reproduction of a XIXth century-styled market of antiquities reselling - in complete disconnection to the deindustrialised urban landscape of the surrounding city of Saint-Ouen. The differences in the nature of the commercial activities and in the profile and practices of the vendors are profound. Within the walls, aseptic and almost too-well organised boutiques have every of their expensive items disposed in what seems to be their thought-out place inside a coherent gallery of antiquities and at the back of which mostly White and elegantly dressed salesmen wait for customers to engage. Outside the walls, however, an atmosphere similar to the one depicted by Warnod in 1912 unfolds, with tons of pieces of clothes piled up on the stalls, inundating the narrow alley where a crowd can hardly circulate, and with the mostly Black and Arab salesmen shouting their economical prices and promotions over loudly playing foreign musics (mostly Arabic and Latin-American songs) and fishing their customers out of the crowd by directly

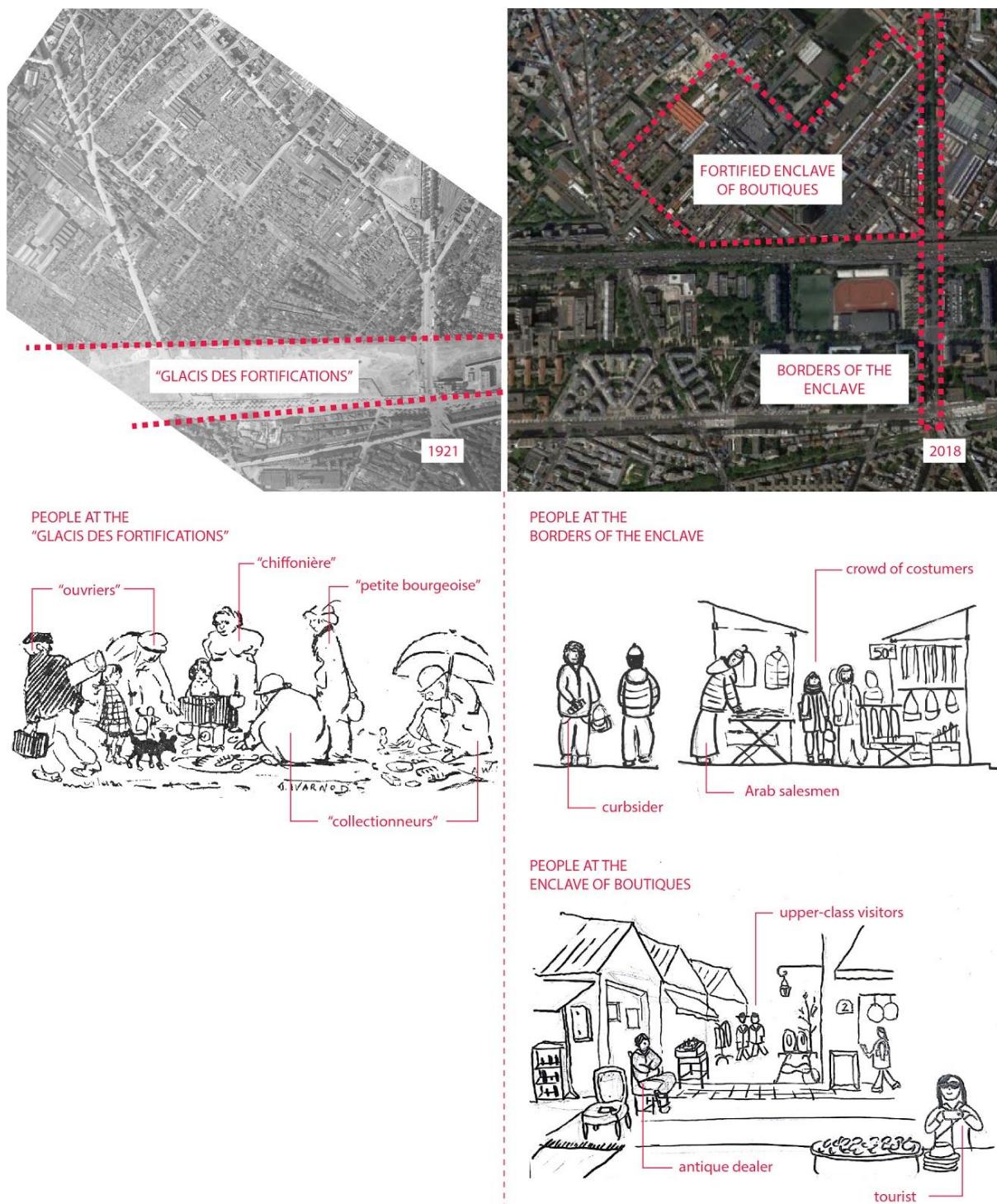
engaging to them in more or less subtle ways. Surprisingly, their commotion is quite inaudible from within the walls, where passants wander at a slower pace as well. The different demographics of clients - White upper-class or tourists inside; Black, Arab and Roma clients outside - are also relevant in understanding the spatial translation of what appears above all as a socioeconomic divide marked by racial characteristics.



On the left, the cloth selling along Avenue Michelet.
On the right, a luxury antiquity boutique inside Marché Biron.
Source: Basile & Da Cruz, 2018.



Map of the Marché Vernaison. In green, the clothing stalls; in blue, the antiquarians.
Source: Basile & Da Cruz, 2018.



On the left, illustration of the people on the flea market in 1912 according to André Warnod. On the right, our own illustrations of the people and their distinction inside and outside the enclave of antiquaries.

Source: Aerial photos from 1921 (Portail IGN) and 2018 (Google Earth),
Warnod (1912), Basile & Da Cruz (2018).

In sum, a paradox is palpable with regards to historical changes and continuities between the 1912 and 2018 internal organisation of the *Puces*. The fortified geography of the *Puces* has migrated to the inner part of Saint-Ouen but is now associated to the most financially valued activities, the

antiquarians which remained in inner Saint-Ouen and preserved both the historical urban landscape and commercial activities but in the benefits of new bourgeois practices of street-selling as a spectacle⁶ (as suggested by their theatrality, for instance the way clients kneel to better observe the artefacts just like in Warnod's illustration of the "collectionneur").



Objects exposed on the ground over rugs in a similar practice to the blankets described in the early 20ths.

Source: Basile & Da Cruz, 2018.

Whereas, the commercial practices developed by migrants and their descendants, located closer to the demolished Thiers Wall and its now leveled terrain, and immersed in the deindustrialised urban landscape of Saint-Ouen, are actually reproducing, thus preserving, the popular culture of the XIXth century flea market described by Warnod. In addition, if the sociocultural groups engaged in commercial activities in the 1912 and 2018 Puces, both as vendors and clients, have changed, mainly due to an overall valorisation of the flea market through time (we are far from the precarity drawn by Warnod, though still sporadically present), we still find a similar conflictual tension behind their spatial organisation and socioeconomic logics of distinction (a concern for social prestige illustrated by Warnod through his references to the *Halles*, Paris' commercial centre). Our fieldwork left us very surprised by the professionalisation of commercial activities linked to the *Puces* that seems to have occurred over time, in comparison to what we had first discovered in Warnod's article. Most of all, how come Warnod's "*petits bourgeois*", both intrigued and repulsed by rude and rugged "*chiffonniers*" in charge of the 1912 *Puces*, now seem to own an enclaved and lucrative antiquarian commerce? Because, if today's *Puces* display the same sociocultural mixity as 1912 at a

⁶ Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 1967

meso-level (like the second sketch of Warnod), grassroot micro-practices of segregation reveal the historical process of homogenization of the *Puces* between two rival social groups embedded in two fragmented territories.

In investigating the reasons for such gentrification⁷ of the *Marché aux Puces*, we ventured further than the territories of the *Puces* and searched for external factors of organisation in its urban surroundings, mainly the municipalities of Saint-Ouen and Paris. If both Warnod's article and our itinerary do not focus explicitly on such exogenous vectors of organisation, it would be reductive to think of the *Puces* as an isolated archipelago in an undefined urban sea. In fact, in both our itinerary and Warnod's article, such external forces were constantly at play in more or less visible ways.

2. *The historical rivalry between exogenous forces vying for control over the Puces of Saint-Ouen*

Concerning our archive, the most influential external force in action throughout the article appears to be André Warnod himself - one "*petit bourgeois*" writing for other "*petits bourgeois*" about the charm of a futile and vulgar emerging flea market at the periphery of Paris. Indeed, the constant use of irony by Warnod in order to dress an overall meliorative image of the *Puces* out of his extensive use of pejorative terms conveys his exteriority to the scene - though paradoxically making of his article one of the first positive historical representations of the *Puces*. The publishing source of his article is also interesting: the "*Arts décoratifs et Curiosités artistiques*" section of *Comoedia*. Warnod is by then a young artist, completely immersed in the artistic zeitgeist of the end of the XIXth century, with the emergence of an alternative, bohemian culture among a young artistic and bourgeois elite⁸. The illustrator thus makes of the popular culture of the *Puces* an "*artistic curiosity*", a spectacle for intrigued artists and gentlemen, in order to comply with his implicit objective: convincing the audience of *Comoedia* - other young alternative bourgeois artists like Warnod - to dare discover and wander in the *Puces* at the North of Paris and embrace the latest trend.

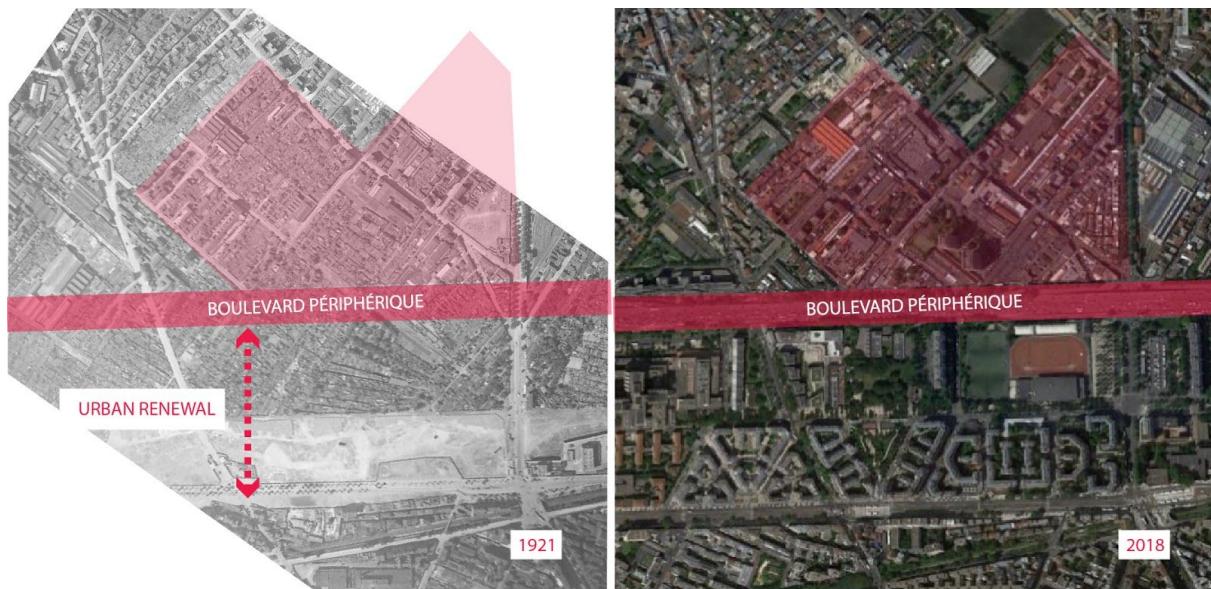
Indeed, Warnod's article falls within the 1910s craze for the popular flea market of Saint-Ouen⁹, where products were not charged with the tax imposed at the fortifications, and which started being valorised by Parisian urban plans. In 1908, the first stretch of line 4, between *Châtelet* and *Porte de Clignancourt*, was inaugurated, which meant direct access to the flea market from the bourgeois city-centre and the commercial heart of Paris - *Les Halles*.

⁷ We knowingly use the notion of "gentrification" which covers a very precise idea of a slow-paced process of population substitution alimenting and alimented by a parallel process of land valorisation. cf. Chris Hamnet, "The Blind Men and the Elephant: The Explanation of Gentrification", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1991), pp. 173-189

⁸ Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris. Culture, politics, and the boundaries of bourgeois life, 1830-1930*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999

⁹ From Emile Zola in 1978 with *L'Assommoir* to André Breton with *Nadja* in 1928, among other examples.

Beyond the transformations brought by the new public transportation connections, processes of intense urban renewal were progressively consolidated between Paris and Saint-Ouen, having great impacts for the *Puces*. Starting with the demolition of the fortifications in 1919 and moving to the construction of the *Boulevard Périphérique* in 1966, the area that nested most of the flea market in the early 20ths was completely redesigned with new parcs, sports equipments and housing.



Evolution of the urban landscape of the *Puces* through the current location of the *Boulevard Périphérique* and the *Marché aux Puces* in a renewed area after the fortifications' demolition.

Source: Aerial photos from 1921 (Portail IGN) and 2018 (Google Earth)

Overall, this historical *aménagement* of the urban milieu of the *Puces* are the long-term results of renewed relationships between the municipalities of Paris and Saint-Ouen since 1887, with the election of the first socialist mayor of Paris, Jean Perrin, resolved to appease historical tensions with suburban municipalities (Bedel, 2012). On 19th of April 1919, the Council of Paris eventually accepted the liberation of military land to Saint-Ouen and the end of commercial taxes along with the destruction of the fortifications. This marked a rupture in the historical dispute between Paris and Saint-Ouen over the control of the *Puces* towards a new governance arrangement of cooperative management of the market (in terms of *aménagement*, policing, valorisation, costs etc.). Thereby, during our itinerary, we did not feel any territorial disconnection between the two municipalities, mainly thanks to its accessibility by metro (the same line since 1908). Also, 80% of the *Puces*' visitors are in fact Parisian (Bedel, 2012), highlighting the connection between the two territories acted by the flea market.

Nevertheless, the history of the emergence of the *Puces* has been one of repression by exogenous forces until the 1910s, and Warnod's positive representation of a new bohemian trend is historically embedded in such u-turn by the authorities of Saint-Ouen and Paris, which has eventually resulted in the market that we discovered in 2018. Mainly, the precarity and insalubrity of the commercial activities of the "chiffonniers", based on the socioeconomic recycling of urban waste within a circular metabolic logic, were not aligned with Haussmannian hygienist plans for modernisation and

industrialisation of a capitalist Paris (Barles, 2015). The proliferating *Puces* of Paris (rue du Bac, des Mauvais-Garçons, des Francs-Bourgeois, rue Damiette etc.) were then constantly chased and policed by municipal authorities willing to stifle their activities¹⁰.

The turning-point was Saint-Ouen's loss of its main economic activity in the summer of 1900: a plague of phylloxera extinguishes its renowned white wine. The *Puces* then becomes its most promising alternative for economic survival. However, Paris' policing framework had not disappeared, and the progressive formalisation of informal commercial practices became a new strategy for social control. How do we not find in 2018 the same lists of "treasures" listed by Warnod in 1912? Land valorisation was the main vector for the integration of the *Puces* as a transitory commercial territory between Paris and Saint-Ouen. In 1919, real-estate entrepreneurs were given access to large portions of empty land to build "shopping-centres" of flea market activities (Marché Vernaison and Marché Malik). The resistance of the "*placiers*" is countered by the construction of social housings for the chiffonniers near the former fortifications - some of the wealthiest "*placiers*" succeed in surviving by building their own formal shopping-centre (Marché Rosiers in 1925). Informal villages like Biffin-Ville are destroyed and their stalls disappear with the multiplication of formal *Marchés* controlled within fortified enclaves. By 1945, the territory of the *Puces* is completely transfigured, becoming the touristically promoted and economically striving commerce that we know today.



Postcard at the beginning of the XXth century of the Biffin-Village.
Source: Bedel, 2012.

¹⁰ Notably, the 7th of March 1884, the mandatory installation of one dust-bin for each household by the Prefect Poubelle, himself commenting: « *Puisqu'on ne peut arracher le chiffonnier à son tas d'ordures, il faut arracher le tas d'ordures aux chiffonniers* » (Bedel, 2012).



Postcards at the beginning of the XXth century of the *Puces* of Saint-Ouen near the glacis.
Source: Bibliothèque Nationale de France



Aménagement of today's *Marché aux Puces* of Saint-Ouen.
Source: Basile and da Cruz (2018).

Such historical thinking in understanding the trajectory of the public framing of the commercial activities of the *Puces* sheds light on the discontinuities observed between Warnod's observations and ours. We were surprised by the professionalisation and formality we encountered in Saint-Ouen's "flea" market. Even in its most "informal" activities (still far more formal than the informality described by Warnod) outside the walls of the antiquarian zone, the counterfeited nature of the commodities sold reflects the now linear metabolic logic of the modern Paris inscribed in global capitalism of the XXIth century (Barles, 2015). It is then crucial to understand how sociocultural practices (those observed by Warnod and us) are embedded in their urban landscape, and thereby how the publicly promoted land valorisation of the *Marché aux Puces* served as an instrument for capitalist urban development and for socioeconomic upgrading through demographic substitution (explaining how the bourgeois have taken over the *Puces* since 1912).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we added to the widespread notion in urban studies of palimpsest the idea of territorial embeddedness, as illustrated by the spatial and historical inscription of conflicting dynamics and sociocultural practices in the territories of the *Marché aux Puces* of Saint-Ouen. Our itinerary throughout the flea market was definitely enriched by the juxtaposed study of André Warnod's article and illustrations, putting into historical perspective the processes of formalisation of commercial activities in Saint-Ouen since 1912 and of a certain commodification of the past through capitalist spectacularization. The material transfiguration of the market's urban landscape appeared to us as paradoxical, between the touristic preservation of cultural heritage and policed urban planning for land valorisation and gentrification. Overall, it reflects the municipalities' historical attitude towards a restrictive integration of the *Puces* against most informal practices from the most vulnerable populations. Interestingly, our archive revealed to be located at the dawn of such historical changes, illustrating the trajectory from the controversial emergence of the *Puces*, their increasing popularity and eventually towards their formal framing by local public authorities.

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ANNEX

Comoedia
17 septembre 1912
p. 3/6

Arts décoratifs et Curiosités artistiques

Le Marché aux Puces

Le Marché aux Puces se tient tous les dimanches matin sur le glacis des fortifications près de la porte Clignancourt. C'est un marché très animé, on y marchande, on y discute avec acharnement. On s'y dispute même quelquefois et cela n'a rien de bien surprenant puisque les chiffonniers qui sont ici chez eux partagent avec les poissardes des Halles le privilège d'être passés maîtres en l'art d'injurier son prochain.



Le collectionneur

Malgré le nom qu'on lui donne, n'allez pas croire qu'on vendre des puces à ce marché. Jamais on ne vit la dompteuse célèbre, gloire des fêtes foraines, y venir faire quelques acquisitions pour enrichir sa ménagerie d'insectes savants. Si quelques puces passent de chez le vendeur chez l'acheteur, c'est toujours par-dessus le marché et les prix ne s'en trouvent pas majorés.

On vend à ce marché le dessus du panier ou mieux de la hotte des chiffonniers après que le mi général en a été fait, qu'on a divisé le butin en différents lots: lots de papiers, de chiffons, d'os, de verre cassé, de ferraille ou autres denrées qui se vendent au poids. On met à part tout ce qui peut avoir une valeur propre si minime soit-elle et

c'est ainsi que se compose la brocante qu'on va vendre le dimanche matin sur les fortifications.

Chaque marchand étend par terre une grande couverture, il aligne tous les objets qui composent son fonds de commerce quelles que soient leur valeur, leur provenance ou leur qualité. C'est dire assez les voisinages étranges qu'on rencontre. On voit très bien côté à côté une paire de souliers, une pendule, une lampe, une casseroles toute rouillée, un peigne édenté, une brosse sans poils, une fourrure pelée, une montre sans aiguilles, des assiettes ébréchées, un coquillage souvenir de Dieppe, une médaille de la sainte Vierge, un vase à fleurs et puis aussi des débris de toutes sortes: morceaux de bois sculpté, débris de meubles, plaques de cuivre ayant orné quelque armoire ou quelque commode, fragments d'ivoire taillé ayant été jadis pommeaux de canne ou de parapluie, ou bien encore tuyaux de caoutchouc, rouleaux de fil de fer. Il y a de tout, jusqu'à des défroques militaires, de revolvers d'un autre âge et des rouleaux de phonographe.

Le marché se continue le long de l'avenue et des premiers rues de Saint-Ouen. mais les boutiques sont ici bien plus importantes, les objets en vente sont installés sur des tréteaux qui, parfois, comble de luxe, sont tendus d'andrino. Les effets qu'on y vend on plus de valeur. On peut très bien y trouver une paire de vases à fleurs, une scie ou tout autre outil presque entier. Il y a aussi, alternant avec les brocanteurs, des camelots et des marchands de pacotille, boucles et bagues en métal doré, enrichies de diamants en verre, ou bien encore de symboles d'amour: colombes becquetant un myosotis em bleu pâle. Mais ce commerce-là est loin de valoir celui des marchands des fortifications.

Une gaillarde familiarité unit acheteurs et vendeurs. On entend des dialogues comme ceux-ci:

- Eh! vieux, c'est-y des baas qu'tu veux? Prends-en une paire. J'te la laisse à trois sous!

L'amateur de bas, un vieil homme en casquette, examine les bas de coton jadis beiges ou noirs, que les lessives successives ont fait devenir jaune pâle ou gris; il n'a pas l'air de se décider.

- Laisse-les moi pour deux sous!

Le marchand ne veut rien entendre, et le vieil homme en casquette tend ses trois sous.

Ou bien:

- Combien c'te boîte?

C'est une boîte en bois verni, qui contenait jadis un jeu de cubes.

- Quatre sous.

L'autre hausse les épaules et fait mine de s'éloigner.

- Dis ton prix alors.

- Deux sous.

- Emporte-la, va!

Quelquefois de bonnes parties se mêlent aux marchandages, on se les rappelle longtemps après, et on en rit de nouveau. L'opinion gravement émise par un acheteur sentencieux qu'il "fallait vingt ans pour faire une homme instruit et cinq secondes, le temps de le dire, pour faire un imbécile" a le don de faire pâmer d'aise tout un groupe de chiffonniers.

Les gens passent et repassent autour des étalages. On s'accroupit sur les talons pour fouiller plus à son aise le tas de marchandises, ou bien on regarde, et puis on se baisse, en allongeant le bras et on pêche la merveille découverte par hasard pour l'examiner de plus près. Il y a parmi ces acheteurs des ouvriers qui viennent faire un tour au marché aux puces avec le vague espoir de trouver quelque chose à rapporter à la maison, il y a aussi les ménagères qui poursuivent le but bien précis d'y trouver tel ustensile de ménage ou tel objet dont elles ont besoin et qu'elles paieront bien moins cher qu'au bazar.

Parfois on rencontre aussi des petits bourgeois et quelques employés qui viennent faire un tour pour occuper cette matinée de dimanche. Leurs par-dessus et leurs chapeaux melon, comme aussi le chapeau à plume de leur femme ne sont pas toujours considérés avec beaucoup de sympathie; on est prêt à les accuser de

"vouloir crâner" et il n'est pas rare que quelque chose épithète malsonnante leur soit décochée au passage.



Le Marché aux Puces

Malgré le piteux état de tout ce qui est à vendre, les marchands n'en couvent pas moins des yeux leur trésor. Ne vous avisez pas de frôler de votre soulier une infime godasse éculée ou une vieille ferraille rouillée, le marchand aurait tôt fait de vous rappeler au sentiment des convenances, sous prétexte que vous abîmez sa marchandise.

Un couple de petits bourgeois passait le long d'un étalage où voisinaient des détritus de toutes sortes. La femme mit par hasard le pied sur un vieux pneu de bicyclette. Ce fut un beau scandale!

On leur dit sans ménagement que ce n'était pas une raison parce qu'on avait un "chapeau à plume qu'il fallait venir ennuyer le monde", que lorsqu'on allait aux Halles il n'était pas dans les habitudes de donner des coups de pied dans la marchandise; le mari répondit, des noms d'oiseaux voltigèrent. On est d'ailleurs dans un monde où les invectives violentes sont fort goûtables: les héros d'Homère, s'ils revenaient sur la terre, ne manqueraient pas d'apprécier comme il convient le langage fleuri des chiffonniers de Saint-Ouen.

Par-dessus un tas de vieux souliers, une chiffonnière couvre d'injures son homme, grand gaillard en pantalon de velours, casquette noire, et ivre comme quatre. Les injures tombent dru, l'homme s'éloigne, interrompant sa marche pour lancer quelque répartie bien choisie. Il est déjà très loin mais la mégère ne s'arrête pas. "Et puis, j'te promets, j'aurais un revolver, je t'enverrais une balle... comme une... !!!"

Et la chiffonnière qui vient d'imaginer cette balle de revolver cambronneque conclut en hochant la tête:

- Vieux c... ! Va

Mais toutes ces histoires n'empêchent pas la vente d'aller son petit bonhomme de chemin. Sous son parapluie, car il commence à pleuvoir, s'avance un petit homme qui va, vient, s'arrête, fouille des yeux les étalages, se baisse tout à coup, examine un morceau d'ivoire ou de bois taillés, ou bien un vieux bouton d'uniforme, le remet à sa place et s'en va plus loin, ou bien il examine à nouveau, se dînesse enfin et chète. C'est un collectionneur. En furent ainsi, il fait quelquefois des trouvailles...

Car il arrive qu'on trouve des choses assez curieuses au marché aux puces, bien rarement, hâtons-nous de le dire, et d'ailleurs ce ne sont jamais des curiosités bien sensationnelles, mais enfin, pour le prix qu'on les paie....!

Sou par sou, ces petits brocanteurs arrivent cependant à gagner ainsi dans une matinée des sommes assez rondelettes, quinze francs, vingt francs.

Nous avons entendu un marchand affirmer avoir gagné trente francs, il est vrai, ajoutait-il, "qu'il avait ce jour-là de la belle brocante!"

Car on est très fier d'avoir de la belle brocante. Un gosse, vers l'heure de la fermeture du marché avait terminé sa tâche qui consistait à mettre dans un grand sac toutes les marchandises non vendues; il triomphait d'avoir terminé si vite son ouvrage et il se mit à se moquer de son voisin qui, lui, n'en était pas à la moitié de son travail.

Celui-ci répondit fièrement:

- *C'est que nous on en avait bien plus...!*
- *Et le premier gosse fut tellement dépité qu'il ne trouva rien à répondre...*

ANDRÉ WARNOD.