Word count: 2,953, Character count: 18,199

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Introduction to Urban History

November 12, 2018

For the Love of Trains:

Incremental Change at Gare Bourg-la-Reine

Bourg-la-Reine — La Gare

Sunday 23rd September, 16:00: First Bike Ride along the RER B

Resolute that we were going to set aside a whole day to not study, we set out from Cité Universitaire to cycle to Saint-Rémy-lès-Chevreuse at the end of the RER B. Our cycle route approximately followed the train line, passing through various small towns and their stations. At one point, our curiosity was sparked by a raised railway embankment. We paused to explore it. As we took photos of the autumn trees, we mused whether there was a railway before the RER line was built. We thought some of the infrastructure looked older. 30km and quite a lot of snacks later, we arrived at Saint-Rémy-lès-Chevreuse and took the train back to Paris.

Thursday 1st November, 4:00: Choosing the Source

After our bike ride, an internet search showed us we were correct; before becoming the RER B, the Ligne de Sceaux had run through the same locations. We were interested in the history of the line and the neighbourhoods surrounding it, as transportation development closely plays into processes of urbanization. Thus, we decided the Ligne de Sceaux could make a good subject for our itinerary note.

Searching Google for information on the "Ligne Sceaux," and various individual train stations, we discovered a comprehensive selection of postcards portraying images the line, dating from the 1800s to early 1900s. From this array, we selected a card of Bourg-La-Reine, as the station is relatively close to Paris but still in the suburbs. The postcard image shows a broad, clear view over the tracks with interesting period features. From this first view, we could tell there will have been significant changes to the scene.

We found our card on the site *Transport Paris* in an article "RER B: la ligne de Sceaux époque chemin de fer," a blog with many photos tracking the development of the line. Although the information in the blog cannot be taken as reliable, the postcard itself appears to be unedited. Indeed, we found many similar postcards using Google image search. One such variation had the inscription "B.F. Paris" (Cartes postales anciennes). Researching further, we were able to determine that this referred to Bertrand Frères, brothers who took, edited and printed photographs as postcards from 1889 to 1908. Many of these other cards have the same inscription and style, being highly detailed, having the same text font and addressing a similar subject matter (Rousseau). Additionally, this date range of printing match the time when the Ligne de Sceaux was operational. Though the sources were not fully reliable, including Wikibooks, blogs and websites, we concluded with confidence that these brothers printed the postcard (Rousseau; "Photographie"; "Série B.F. Paris).

As a historical source, the postcard seems relatively reliable. Although postcards tend to produce an idealised view of the subject matter, the scene is unassuming and seemingly unedited, its nature as a

photograph implying its adherence to reality. Although Bertrand Frères printed postcards of more prominent sites, such as Notre Dame, many of their cards depict everyday scenes with a focus on train stations and tracks. The cards existence, along with others from the same printers, implies the importance of the station and train transportation at the time as they were thought to be important enough to photograph, publish, and literally 'worth writing home about' ('RER B: la ligne de Sceaux époque chemin de fer'). While we were not able to determine who had bought this postcard or how many were printed, the number of references to this photo and the supposed prestige of the Bertrand Frères implies that the postcard had some circulation at the time.

By revisiting the Bourg-La-Reine station, we hoped to investigate the changes and continuities in place since the production of the card. Most of all, we hoped that we might be able to replicate the photograph exactly.

Saturday 3rd November, 12:00: Revisiting the Station

Using Google Maps Street View, we virtually strolled around Bourg-la-Reine station, trying to work out the exact position from which the photo was taken. Although we were unable to find the exact spot, getting lost in the web of roads and limited scope of Street View, we were able to see the split in the railway lines visible on the card. Significantly, the location and orientation of the lines has remained the same. Both then and now, these lines served passenger trains to and from Paris, as can be seen by the passenger carriages in both photographs. Born as an experiment of its patron Jean Claude Républicain Arnoux, in 1846 (Transilien) the line Sceaux ran from Sceaux to Denfert Rochereau. Successive renovations, including the 1890s connection to Luxembourg, the modernization and interconnection with the metro system in the 1930s, built the connection to the Paris metropolis (Caron 2008). Today, the RER B remains the primary public transportation in the town, bringing commuters to and from Paris. 23,000 travellers, more than the population of the town, pass through the RER station daily ('Des origines à aujourd'hui'). The line's directionality into the city and its domination of transport shows Paris' historic persistence as the economic centre, with the line's integration into the modern system through progressive expansions maintaining the trend.

As a counter-example, La Petite Ceinture, another historic railway, no longer functions. Built in the 1850s as a freight line to support commerce, military fortification and economic recovery (La petite Ceinture), after the 1870s the line evolved as freight traffic decreased and passenger traffic increased. However, in the early 1900s even passenger traffic started to decline as the metro came into service. From 39 million in 1900, 14 million in 1913 to finally 7 million in 1927, the decline of usage resulted from its lack of integration into the metro. The need to transport commuters along the periphery and to provide connections into the metro system, however, still exists; the T3a and b

lines now fill this role. Through comparison we can see that the the Ligne de Sceaux' integration into the metro and its role of transporting commuters to/from Paris contributed to its continuity. After reflecting on the continued existence of these lines and gaining an understanding of the station, we were ready to experience the neighbourhood, curious about what we would observe.

Although included in the Paris Metropolitan Area, Bourg-La-Reine feels like an independent town, demonstrating the centralisation of the Parisian metropolis. On a Saturday morning, we set out again by bike, following the same route as we had previously under the roaring périphérique. We biked fast, the way being mostly downhill, along a series of narrow cobbled streets and big, modern roads with cycle lanes. We passed through old town centres, each with a bank and a boulangerie, frequently represented by stations on the RER line. It had struck us when leaving the city how quickly the built environment changes from Paris to the suburbs, the tall Hausmann blocks giving way to a jumble of older, newer, bigger and smaller buildings. We reached Bourg-la-Reine in about twenty minutes, its proximity to Paris surprising us in comparison to how far out it had felt on our first adventure. We compared this to our personal experiences of living in New York and London, where a 20-minute cycle from the centre will leave you in an area looking much like your point of departure. Although the station is no longer situated in open countryside, as it is in the postcard, the location of the station is still notably different to the Parisian centre.

This separation of the town from the city centre is likely caused in by the aforementioned dualistic city-suburbs connection. The wealthy urban centre is surrounded by economically and infrastructurally isolated *banlieues*, such as Bourg-la-Reine. The RER B line, built when the suburbs of Paris were fields as in the postcard, may not remain the best solution for a now heavily urbanised area. The lack of connection between suburbs is today the very problem the *Grand Paris* plan attempts to address (Le Grand Paris Express en résumé). Although continuity in this case might be gratifying for the urban historian, it has reinforced the separation of town and city center.

Adrienne EVANS 11/12/2018 1:57 PM
Comment [3]: distinct town and urbanization

Katherine FINDLAY 11/12/2018 12:23 PM
Comment [4]: Alongside this integration, what would presumably have been a manned ticket office in the postcard has been replaced by automated ticket machines, and electric barriers replacing the manual checking of tickets by a conductor. The experience of being a passenger has changed with the introduction of new technology, a trend that can be related to automation and impersonalisation of the urban experience more generally.

Adrienne EVANS 11/12/2018 1:37 PM
Comment [5]: The economic centralization of Paris persists due to the absence of transport into other banlieues. -not sure if this is true

Adrienne EVANS 11/12/2018 1:37 PM
Comment [6]: i think this argument could be strengthened

Arriving at Bourg-la-Reine and comparing with the postcard, incremental change is evident. New infrastructure layers on the past. As we arrived at the station, we noticed instantly that the original, cottage-like station was still standing, appearing much as it does in the postcard, although the main entrance was now a low, modern building in metal and glass to the left side. We found our way and approached a bridge, from which we assumed the postcard was taken. The road we walked upon seemed older, a world away from the buzz of the main station plaza. On our left-hand side, traditional detached houses stood walled and slightly back from the road. One was dilapidated, but the majority seemed inhabited. The railway passed underneath alongside the road and into a tunnel. On our right, a fence lead up to the bridge, standing between us and the railway. The fence, white, decorative and about waist-high, stood in contrast to the other, sleek RATP infrastructure. This fence was old. This bridge was old. These houses were old. Old enough to be built in a time when decoration took precedence over security. Although not visible in the postcard, one might muse that the houses and fence were present not long after the 1890s. We could see the layers of the past: the bridge, station and line from the postcard, then the houses and fence, then the new modern platforms and entrance. Traces of the past persisted alongside modernizations, seeming a little out of place alongside the new. These incremental changes have been driven by increased population in the Île-de-France region, technological advances and new conceptions of security.

Katherine FINDLAY 11/12/2018 12:23 PM

Comment [7]: The original 'Bourg-la-Reine' sign remained painted on the side of the old station, but it was supplemented by a modern, RATP-branded sign on the new building. While we saw continuity in the old station, this modern entrance showed incremental change that built upon what was already there, much like the development of the line itself. Similarly, this new building contained a ticket and transport information office, and ticket machines and barriers, representing the integration of the line with the Parisian metro ticketing system, and the inclusion of Bourg-la-Reine into the Metropole.

Adrienne EVANS 11/12/2018 2:06 PM

Comment [8]: houses built due to the railway connection

Paris' urban sprawl has tumbled into the countryside and clustered around stations that provide access to the city centre, evident in increased population and infrastructure. From the bridge, we could see the physical number of people on the station platform had increased from the postcard to today. In the early 19th century, 100 trains entered the station daily ("Des origines à aujourd'hui"). Today, trains in each direction run approximately every 6 minutes, implying that the traffic is higher. Indeed, Bourg-La Reine has grown; from 4,000 inhabitants in the beginning of the 20th century, the town now has over 20,000 today. In terms of diversity, however, we could only limitedly reflect on the demographic changes. The postcard shows only suit-clad (presumably male) figures, and no women or children. Since we cannot place the day of the week or time of the photo, we cannot be sure that this was representative of the daily situation. In the present, visiting on a Saturday morning, the crowd seems to be significantly more diverse, with different ages, genders and ethnicities represented. This assumed increase in diversity again reflects the urban sprawl, where minorities are pushed out of the city center, in the Île-de-France region.

Alongside this population increase and assumed diversification of population, infrastructure has intensified, the area becoming much more built-up, served by more roads and requiring a larger station. From the bridge we saw new houses, roads, and a general intensification of infrastructure. A road turns and passes under the railway, enclosed in a high-walled tunnel of rough orange stone. This road is not present in the postcard, which shows the scene on level ground. Where in the postcard is a grassy field and trees, is now the station car park and some offices. The change from a largely rural to a more built-up environment is perhaps the most striking change between the postcard and the station today.

Additionally, the infrastructure associated with modern railway technology significantly changed the scene from that of the postcard. As we looked back to the station, our view was significantly obscured by the now-covered station platforms, as well as the tangle of electricity wires that run over the tracks. The line was electrified in 1935, so unsurprisingly the infrastructure associated with steam trains, such as the water tower visible in the postcard, has disappeared, replaced by wires, pylons and electricity boxes. This change is a reflection of broader technological developments; the 'age of steam' ended with the introduction of quicker, cheaper and more efficient electrical systems in Paris, but also globally. The electrification of the line also represents its integration with the Parisian metro, when it was bought by the Compagnie du métropolitain de Paris, later to become the RATP. In this case, new rail technology and the line's integration with the Parisian system has resulted in visible infrastructure changes.

Alongside new technologies, new safety measures have been put in place. Stopping to take a photo from the same angle as the postcard, we noticed a metal platform splayed out from the bridge and over the tracks. A warning sign 'danger de MORT' stood up in front of us. We decided to continue over the bridge and walk down the other side of the tracks, in the hopes of getting a better view of the split in the line clearly visible in the postcard. Ascertaining that the branch line was indeed where it had been, we took photos of the convergence as best we could, although our view was blocked by high wire fences, dense bushes and railings. Safety concerns were most likely the reason for the enclosure, as implied by the 'danger' sign. It is interesting to reflect on the persistence of the low, white fence we had passed earlier, its existence implying a historically similar concern for safety. However, this concern has since been exacerbated to require two-meter high fence on the other side, which can be related to the obsession with risk and risk-reduction in the late-modern city (Hier, 2003).

Changes in infrastructure can also be related to changes in planning and the restriction of agency in the modern city, as fences which blocked our view also prevented our free movement across the tracks. Walking around, we struggled to get a clear view of the convergence of the lines. When we decided to view the platforms, we found we had to head through the modern station entrance and tap our Navigo passes on the ticket machines. Questions of restriction also entail questions of social control, as freedom of movement and individual agency are restricted by fences, barriers and pavements which define the 'correct' ways to go (Lees, 2004). The scruffy path in the bottom left of the postcard, a 'desire path', hails from a time when movement was decided by the pedestrian, rather than by the authorities (Bramley, 2018).

When on the platform, we found security to be paramount. Strolling around we spotted police officers and security cameras monitoring the platforms, our movements constantly being watched and monitored. Such measures are notably absent from the postcard, and testament again to the importance of 'risk' and also of social control present in the modern city.

Conclusions

Looking back on our experience, our expectations were largely in line with what we saw. We knew the line still existed, and expected a typical RER B platform rather than a steam train. We knew that the area had become increasingly urbanised, and expected it to look like the Parisian suburbs we had seen on our first bike ride.

Rather than dramatic change, what we experienced was incremental. New infrastructure layered upon the past, rather than replacing it. We deepened our understanding by analyzing the reasons for this continuity and change. The continuity of the line and the existence of the station show how the centrality of Paris has continued for Bourg-la-Reine, as the trains persist in carrying many passengers, rather than merchandise, into the centre. Echoes of the past are evident in the urban infrastructure; the station building, the houses and the small white fence, for example. Although it has urbanised since the time of the postcard, and despite the connection to Paris, Bourg-la-Reine remains is distinct from the center, the environment feeling more peaceful and old infrastructure unreplaced. In some ways, this continuity is efficient, as existing infrastructure is ameliorated and standardized by successive renovations. On the other hand, continuity presents a problem as a lack of connection between the banlieues must be addressed by the *Grand Paris* plan today.

With its integration into the transport system of modern Paris, new technologies have been introduced on the line, presenting significant changes in the urban environment. Alongside changes related to technology, new conceptions of safety and security has led to a more restricted infrastructure, reducing freedom of movement around the station and literally blocking our view.

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Adrienne EVANS 11/12/2018 1:27 PM

Comment [9]: Summarize your thoughts on this itinerary
Get back at your earlier expectations and the gap with the observations and analysis you made: what did you expect to discover that you actually didn't? Did you discover something unexpected?
Discuss differences of interpretations and debates (if any) in the team
Draw conclusions on the relationship of the place and its past

Finally, we might reflect on our experience of taking the photograph and how this compares to the photographer of our postcard. The figures on the card are blurred, their movement captured by the long shutter-speed required by a plate camera. A bulky camera and long capture would have entailed the set-up of tripod and its careful positioning and adjustment to capture a good image on a limited number of plates. This can be compared to our experience, quickly snapping multiple images on smartphones, the technology now automated. What's more, any photographs we took were unlikely to be printed and certainly unlikely to be sent by post. However, as urbanists and thus closet transport enthusiasts, it is not unlikely that we would share the images on social media, presenting an interesting continuity between our interests and the interests of the postcard's market. We remain, it seems, fascinated by transport and technology.

> Adrienne EVANS 11/12/2018 1:44 PM
> **Comment [10]:** interesting but POINT

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