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Left Bank

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Left Bank.

François Mancebo

Paris is divided by the river *Seine* into two parts of unequal size : Left bank and Right bank. In the past, annual floods covered the Right Bank and made it rather inhospitable. Thus the Left Bank —which was higher and protected from floodwaters— was inhabited first. Nowadays, one can still find remains of a vast Roman amphitheater : the *Arènes de Lutèce*. Moreover, the famous abbey *Saint-Germain-des-Prés* was founded on the site of an old pagan temple. It is only after the Middle-Age that the urban process reversed : today the Right bank is much more extended than the Left.

The *Montagne Sainte-Geneviève* —one of seven hills surrounding Paris— is the core of *Quartier Latin* (Latin Quarter) an essential part of Left Bank. It includes the *Sorbonne* — first French university— founded in 1253, the *Collège de France* founded in 1530, and the *Panthéon* where are buried French figures since the Revolution. Westward, *Saint-Germain-des-Près'* district is associated with writers and artists.

This old university area, in the very center of Paris, is rather difficult to demarcate physically even if it enjoys a strong image. Originally, this students district that appeared officially under the reign of *Philippe-Auguste* was well defined, both spatially and functionally. But the urban sprawling of Paris beyond the 15-th century fortifications and the dispersal of educational establishments after the 19-th century, make present limits very vague. All in all, it can be said that nowadays *Quartier Latin* is represented by the 5-th district and the northeastern part —between *Saint-André-des-Arts* street, *Monsieur-le-Prince* and *Mazarine* street— of the 6-th district of Paris.

All the way through the 20-th century, *Quartier Latin* underwent huge transformation, even more than other Parisian districts. Admittedly it remains both a cultural and student district, but property developers, travel agents and medias convert it too into a rather

fashionable area : tourists flock there, thus altering drastically the appearance and the activities in this district. Nowadays *Quartier Latin* also becomes a highly sought-after residence area, subjected to more and more strong land pressure everyday. Today local residents are mainly yuppies with high incomes and big purchasing power but going scarcely out in the streets due to lack of time.

In the wake of the *Quartier Latin*, the whole of the Left Bank experiences the same situation although less sharply : Tower *Tour Maine-Montparnasse* built in 1972 in the place of an old railway station, and the *Grande Bibliothèque* (Great Library) built in 1996 nearby *Austerlitz's* station which raises its four towers shaped like opened books, are two symbols of this evolution.

Therefore the identity of Left Bank is getting difficult to specify : even if numerous, no administrative, business, cultural, educational or historical center imposes itself upon the whole district. No social, ethnic or cultural community can characterize this place any more. Its present identity seems to lie on a rather negative territorial ideology, based on the rejection of tourism and of all the clothes stores that invade the *Boulevard Saint-Michel*. Older inhabitants, newcomers, students, passers-by and tourists confront one another in their perception of this area.

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