



**HAL**  
open science

# The image of Paris in France since two centuries : from good to bad to worst

Bernard Marchand

► **To cite this version:**

Bernard Marchand. The image of Paris in France since two centuries : from good to bad to worst. 2010. halshs-00527779

**HAL Id: halshs-00527779**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00527779>**

Preprint submitted on 20 Oct 2010

**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.

# The image of Paris in France since two centuries : from good to bad to worst

---

Bernard Marchand,  
Professeur émérite des Universités  
Ecole Nationale des Travaux Publics de l'Etat  
[marchand@mail.enpc.fr](mailto:marchand@mail.enpc.fr)

October 2010

**This text is a very short introduction to a much more detailed study on *The enemies of Paris*<sup>1</sup>. The theme has been extensively discussed in an international [colloquium](#) in Normandy in 2007.**

Paris is one the biggest, oldest and most famous cities in the world. The commune itself has 2.2 millions inhabitants today but the agglomeration counts some 11 millions dwellers. Obviously, the image of such a city in the mind of people plays a most important role. The concept itself, however, is not easy to define. We mean here by “image” not the inner structure or the visual environment of the city like Kevin Lynch<sup>2</sup> did in such brilliant manner, but the way people in France think about their capital-city. Such a concept has three important effects : on regional planning, which is considered in France as extremely important, on politics in a country where, since several centuries, the big city is currently opposed to “la province”<sup>3</sup> (a French expression representing anything outside of the Paris agglomeration), and economically because this big agglomeration is subsidizing the rest of France although most citizens believe the contrary.

Such a definition implies following a *corpus* of documentary sources over time : literature (fiction and essays), press, political speeches, films, TV shows<sup>4</sup>. Here is a main difficulty : first because such *corpus* is enormous and beyond the capability of one man ; second for the difficulty to compare over time media which have changed so much. Even considering only the press, a newspaper in 1830 did cater to social groups which are difficult to compare with actual parts of French society. We will not pretend to present a complete and well-balanced description of the evolution of Paris’ image since the end of the XVIII<sup>e</sup> century, but only some glimpses in a topic which has not much interested French historians and has been almost completely neglected by geographers.

By our present standards, there were no big cities in Europe and in the world at the end of XVIII<sup>e</sup> century : London, the biggest one, had some 600 000 dwellers, Paris some 550 000. The Roman Empire had known cities with more than a million inhabitants, like Rome or Alexandria, which were better equipped and better managed than European capitals in 1750, but big cities disappeared in the fourth and fifth centuries with German invasions, the

---

<sup>1</sup> B Marchand (2009) *Les ennemis de Paris*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 397 p.

<sup>2</sup> K Lynch (1960) *The Image of the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Ma.

<sup>3</sup> “*Province* : singular, anything in France, which lays outside the capital, often which the idea of what is backward as far as fashion, manners, tastes are concerned”, Dictionnary Littré.

<sup>4</sup> We translate all following quotations

development of Christianity and the birth of feudalism. During the French Revolution and Napoleon's Empire, the capital exploded thanks to huge migratory flows : Paris population doubled from 500 000 to one million in only 30 years (1800-1830).

This study starts with this growth movement, as the assets of Paris seem to educated people far superior to its liabilities or, for the worst critics, quite equally balanced. At the end of the XIX<sup>e</sup>, France discovers with dismay it is losing its power, its economic domination and even the war. In a second period (1871-1940), Paris is increasingly presented as the scape-goat responsible for such decline : assets are increasingly forgotten and liabilities are underlined. From the Second World War on, after another military disaster, Paris is decidedly considered as the enemy of France : even the few advantages it could have, are now turned into defects. Since a decade, some lucid persons begin to think the movement has gone too far and that, for a country, to try and weaken effectively its most productive region is a form of suicide, but the change of mind is just beginning.

### **1)- A favorable or well balanced image : 1750-1870**

Fortunately, we can rely on strong literary figures during this period, who have not only drawn significant images of the city but have also had very powerful effects on a wide range of the population : J-J Rousseau<sup>5</sup> around 1765, Balzac around 1832, with also some excellent witnesses describing the big city like Mercier<sup>6</sup>, during the Revolution. We will use widely Citron's analysis of the different images of Paris in French poetry<sup>7</sup>.

Denunciations of the big city are found in the Bible (myths of Cain and of Babel). Denouncing Paris begins with the Middle-Age and reappears at each century, particularly when religious faith is excited and moral condemnations fashionable, like during the XVI<sup>e</sup> century, with the bloody Wars of Religion between Catholics and Protestants : *“O Paris which is not Paris any more, but a cave of wild beasts, a citadel of Spaniards, Walloons and Neapolitans, an asylum and sure retreat for thieves, murderers and assassins”*<sup>8</sup>. Interestingly enough, a Jesuit, in 1659, publishes a violent condemnation of Paris and calls on the city of sin the wrath of God<sup>9</sup> :

*“ But when the day shall come, that this immense city  
Burning from the sky's fire, will form with its vast ruins  
An aflame mountains.. ”*

Le Moyne blames Paris not only for its immorality, but also for absorbing France resources, goods and migrants : “Paris is fed by the provinces”, an argument repeated without any change until now.

---

<sup>5</sup> J-J Rousseau : (1761), *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, (1761 ) *Emile ou l'éducation*, (1770) *Les Confessions*, etc...

<sup>6</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1788) *Tableau de Paris*, nouv. éd. corrigée et augmentée, Amsterdam,

<sup>7</sup> P Citron (1961) *La poésie de Paris dans la littérature française, de Rousseau à Baudelaire*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2 volumes.

<sup>8</sup> *La Satyre Ménippée*, ( 1594)

<sup>9</sup> Père Le Moyne (1659) *La veüe de Paris*.

During the XVII<sup>o</sup> and the beginning of the XVIII<sup>o</sup>, denunciations are not so frequent any more : partly because the royal power in France reaches a peak with Louis XIV's "absolutism", partly because the center of political and cultural life switches to Versailles. The Enlightenment, however, brings very new concepts, new beliefs and new tastes after the middle of the XVIII<sup>o</sup> century. The powerful figure of Rousseau begins, after the 1760's, to affect and then to mould intellectual life in France.

Rousseau is inflexible in his hate of the French capital. After trying to find a wife in Paris for his pupil Emile, he leaves the city deeply disappointed :

*"Farewell then, Paris, famous city of noise, smoke and dirt, where women do not believe any more in honour nor men in virtue. Farewell, Paris, we look for love, happiness, innocence ; we will never be far enough from you....  
We leave Paris sad and lost in our dreams. This place of chatter is not our goal. Emile looks down with contempt on this big city and says, deeply deceived : 'How many days lost in fruitless search ! Well, this is not where lives the spouse to my heart'"<sup>10</sup>*

Rousseau is shocked by Paris alleged immoral influence :

*"Take a young man wisely educated in his father's house in the country side and observe him as he arrives in Paris.. you will find him with a good understanding of honest things and with a will as healthy as his reason; you will find in him contempt for vice, horror for debauchery ; at the name of prostitute, you will observe in his eyes the scandal of innocence. I pretend that not one will accept to enter alone in the sad abodes of this miserable women, even if he knew their trade and felt the need of them"* (p. 353).

And he condemns all women living in big cities :

*"Women of Paris and London, please, excuse me. No place is void of miracles, but for me, I do not know any. And if only one of you has a truly honest soul, then I do not understand anything at your institutions"*(p 425).

Even Parisian cultural life is condemned : *"There might not be, today, a modern place on earth where general taste is so bad as in Paris"* (p 368)

He accuses urban sterility (*"Cities are the abyss of human species. After a few generations, races perish or degenerate, and it is always the countryside which replaces new migrants.."*(p 30)) and population accumulation :

*"Men are not made to be crowded in ant-hills, but dispersed over the earth they must cultivate. The more they get together and the more they get corrupt. Body's defects as well as soul's vices are the necessary results of such crowding. Of all animals, man is the less suited to live in herds. Crowded men piled up like sheep would all die in a very short time. Man's breath is deadly to other men : this is as true in the physical as in the moral sense of the word."* (p 30).

---

<sup>10</sup> J-J Rousseau (1761) *Emile*, p. 383 and p. 451.

Citron sees the originality of Rousseau's condemnations in a deep, almost physical mixture of disgust and depression : his hero Saint-Preux, arriving in Paris, writes

*“I enter with a secret horror in this vast desert of the world. This chaos offers me only a horrible loneliness within a sad silence. My soul, crushed from all sides, tries to expand but finds itself limited from everywhere.” (Nouvelle Héloïse).*

Romantic writers will use often the term “*desert*” to designate Paris. Rousseau's accusations are many, very strongly worded but never justified. They aim rather at court cities like Versailles than at an industrial and business center like Paris. They express the misunderstanding of city life by a Swiss citizen as well as the personal bitterness and rancour of a deep mind despised by a brilliant and superficial society.

The most surprising aspect is the continuity of such grudges which have been repeated against Paris until the present days although most of the demographical, social, economic and political conditions have changed completely several times. Hate against Paris is basically mythical and part of a deep-seated anti-urban ideology. But such hate was then balanced by many expressions of enthusiasm and love for the city, as demonstrated by the very strong migratory flows at the beginning of XIX<sup>e</sup> century.

La Bruyère writes « *[Paris] gives a distaste for the province* »<sup>11</sup>. Another important writer, Retif de la Bretonne, calls Paris in 1789 « *my darling city* » and insists on the feeling of freedom he enjoys there :

*“Paris is, in the moral world, what our mountains are in the physical one ; one breathes here more freely ; one enjoys here a freedom and quietness of mind which I feel but could not express. Ah, my friend, life is so mediocre in the provinces, one lives only completely in Paris”*<sup>12</sup>.

And he has his father claiming in his pseudo-biography : “*Paris, the refuge of all oppressed people and the consolation of the human race.*”<sup>13</sup>

Partaking in this enthusiasm, Cloutz, a German baron and fervent admirer of the Revolution, who became a French citizen and was elected at the Convention in 1792, proposes to declare “*the United States of the world with Paris as capital city*”, Paris being “*the Mecca of the Truth*”, the “*laboratory of the human mind*” and “*the Vatican of Reason*”. Even if we take into account the lyricism and the exalted style of the time, passion for Paris is evident during the Revolution, the city appearing as the very epitome of the fight for freedom in Europe and in the world. Some of the greatest French statesmen of the time (Robespierre, Danton, Marat,..) sign a common reply when Brunswick, the Prussian general, threatens to burn Paris down to earth: “*To destroy Paris, citizens, is the goal of all enemies of equality. All despots want to bury under Paris' ruins the rights of mankind and the liberty of the world.*”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> La Bruyère (1688) *Les caractères*, VIII.

<sup>12</sup> Retif de la Bretonne (1776) *Le paysan perversi*, t II, p 236

<sup>13</sup> Idem, *La vie de mon père*, livre 4, p 170

<sup>14</sup> Taken, like other quotations, from Citron's book.

Then, the immense military efforts of France under the Revolution and under Napoleon turn the minds away from the city. Paris appears only as a beautiful object where the emperor plans magnificent constructions.

Among the extraordinary events happening during the troubled period between 1789 and 1815, one is often forgotten in spite of its importance : huge flows of migrants flock to cities and particularly to Paris. The city explodes : its population doubles in just 30 years, and its image changes. It appears now as a city besieged by a frightening invasion : “*the Barbarians are in the city*” repeat the newspapers.

Writers like Balzac develop, after 1825, images of slums in the oldest parts of Paris, swarming with miserable and sometimes dangerous immigrants from the French countryside<sup>15</sup>. Among so many descriptions of the city in Balzac’s works, let us consider one of the most famous, at the beginning of *La fille aux yeux d’or*, a surprising (in 1833) and moving story of lesbian love :

“*the Parisian is “movement turned into a man”... He is an epitome of everything : history, politics, literature, religion, military art. Is he not a living encyclopaedia, a grotesque atlas, always moving like Paris itself and never resting ?*”<sup>16</sup>.

And further away, after<sup>17</sup> describing in an epic style the successive social structures living in Paris, Balzac opposes the two sides of the coin :

“*Paris is the head of the globe, a brain overflowing with genius and leading human civilisation, a great man, an artist in perpetual creation, a deep politician who has necessarily wrinkles in his brain, all the vices of great men, who is capricious like an artist and pale like him. His physiognomy signifies the blossom of good and evil, the fight and the victory... Is not Paris a sublime boat loaded with intelligence ? This boat may pitch and roll but cutting his way through the world, firing with the hundred mouths of his tribunes, ploughing the scientific seas and with swelled sails, screaming from the top of his masts through the voices of his scientists and its artists : “Forward, go-ahead, follow me”... Paris is basically a land of contrasts..*” (p 373-375).

The 1830 Revolution, toppling the old monarchy in three days, sending the old aristocracy back to his landed properties and setting in power the upper bourgeoisie (bankers, businessmen, engineers,..), changed deeply the image of the city. Citron notes that while Paris was treated before as a woman, with poetic and literary descriptions insisting on his feminine charm and languor, Paris image became after 1830 that of a “man”, a “lion”. The city changed sex ; it imposed on France a new regime, showing his power : “*Once the revolution made, we sent it in the departments through the stage-coaches ; they only had to acknowledge the receipt*” writes proudly A Bazin in 1833 (quoted in Citron, vol. 1, p. 32). Writers underline the contradictory image of the capital city :

---

<sup>15</sup> Important developments in L Chevalier (1978) *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris dans la première moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Librairie Gle Française, Paris, 729 p.

<sup>16</sup> *La fille aux yeux d’or*, Livre de Poche, p 363.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p 371-372.

*“Paris, flame of the mind, is good and evil ; will it create a good or a bad world ? Anyway, it is unique. The world, for its salvation, has only the choice between Paris and nothing.. Paris is the only possible hope for mankind : the hope of progress for the thought. Paris is a danger which must be dared.”*<sup>18</sup>

The Revolution of 1848 will have very deep effects on the status of Paris : first, because it is not so much a political movement like the preceding ones, but the first social upheaval of the poor against the rich, discussing private property and demanding some limitations to the right of property, which terrified landlords and farmers in the rest of the country ; second, because if Paris had the intelligence, the talent and the wealth, it lost its political power : the new Assembly voted universal right of vote for all adult men and put power into the hands of farmers and landlords. As a result, this new revolution was not widely accepted and “la province” began to view the capital with a mixture of fear and hate. Paris, during the second half of the XIX<sup>e</sup>, was looked increasingly as a hotbed of dangerous ideas : republicans with tendencies to atheism, feminism and socialism while the rest of the nation was royalist, catholic, macho and deeply conservative.

Free, audacious and wealthy, the capital city could not help becoming the target of many attacks, mainly from the religious side. Comparing Paris to Sodom, Gomorrah, Nineveh and other cities doomed by the Bible God is frequent during the romantic period. For instance, a mediocre poet, Henri Lauvergne, thunders : “*Shame on this whore-house of men ravenous for orgies*”. According to Citron, the adjectives more often used in poetry to describe Paris at the time are “infamous” and “foul”. Conservative minds become anxious of the decline of religious faith in the city and announce God’s wrath : Michel Chevalier in a letter written in 1833, speaks of “*This Babel, this Babylon, this Nineveh, this huge beast of Apocalypse, this whore with make-up, ...this big drab,...*”. Inspired by religious faith, some find the mean to be still more violent :

*“In this temple where God is absent and which is called Paris, ...  
Farewell, Paris, farewell, city of inequity,  
Mad in your lechery and your ungodliness,  
Where rises, red from blood and wine,  
Night and day, the vapour of an orgy of hell..*

.....  
*Where triumphing everywhere, vice has banished God away,  
Abyss of lechery, terrifying cesspool*

.....  
*From where corruption, through hundred ways,  
Spread over France, even over the world !  
Antique Babylon was a virgin in comparison !”*<sup>19</sup>

The various pleasures offered actually by Paris at the time might have seemed disappointing in front of such vehement descriptions. They were, however, famous and became more so during the Second Empire (1852-1870). Paris got the reputation of having more brothels with very qualified manpower, more restaurants of good quality and more

---

<sup>18</sup> A Vigny (1831) *Paris*

<sup>19</sup> These verses, inspired by religion and provincialism, are quoted by Citron from : Bathild Bouniol (1847) *Paris*

theatres than any other city in the world : its image was definitely that of a center of *pleasure and gold*.

Paris assets and liabilities remain quite well balanced until 1871. Indeed, some writers and newsmen deplore “the thick air”, “the foul air” :

*“You would think we live in a subterranean city, for its heavy atmosphere and its dark obscurity. Yes, you breath more at ease in the Pausilippe cave ! Ah, let us get out quickly from this cave, let us walk toward the day : some air, some air !”<sup>20</sup>.*

But Balzac celebrates “*Paris atmosphere, where whirls around a simoom which raises fortunes and breaks hearts.*”. The German poet Heinrich Heine expresses happiness when he breathes again “*the delicious and civilized air of Paris*”. Esquiros, another writer, keeps expressing his passionate love for the city. A. Bazin describes the image people from the “province” have of Paris : “*For fathers and mothers, a place of perdition, a cesspool of all vices, a true Gomorrah. But also, the cornucopia of the world, a place of delight, a theatre of thousands enchantments.*” And Emma Bovary wonders :

*“How was this Paris ? What enormous name ! She repeated it in an under tone, to please herself, it sounded at her ears like the bells of a cathedral ! It sparkled even on the labels of her pomade jars.. Paris, wider as the ocean, glistened to her eyes in a ruby light.”<sup>21</sup>*

## **2)- When liabilities prevail upon assets :**

France lost the 1870 war against an alliance of German countries led by Prussia. The Second Empire fell, the government ran away to the south of the country, to Bordeaux, while Paris was besieged. The split between the capital and the country became then dramatic and bloody. In spite of the hopeless situation, Paris decided to continue the war and elected an improvisatory municipality (“Commune”) while a newly elected Parliament, in Bordeaux, began peace negotiations. Everything opposed the two powers. In front of a Bordeaux Assembly which wanted to restore monarchy, to defend religion, to protect farmers and to make peace as soon as possible, the Paris “Commune” appeared as a revolutionary body, pledging to continue the war, to establish some socialist measures, to fight the church and to establish a Republic. Finally, Bismarck released enough French officers and artillery guns to build a new army which re-conquered Paris in may 1871 : 35 000 dead in one week.

The fear of Paris as a hotbed of revolutions was extreme and kept terrifying the bourgeois for half a century. The Bordeaux Assembly decided Paris would not be the capital of France any more. Simultaneously, the Paris Commune discussed its secession from France although its members were jailed or murdered before having time to decide.

---

<sup>20</sup> Madame de Girardin in Citron, vol 1, p 52.

<sup>21</sup> G Flaubert (1856) *Madame Bovary*.



Count of Galembert, a deputy to the Assembly, stated in a pamphlet<sup>22</sup> in 1871, that moving the future government to Versailles would not be far enough from Paris ; he wanted to move it more than 200 km from the dreadful city :

*“To reduce more or less Paris preponderance is today not only a question of life and death for the whole country ; it is the key-stone of the institutions we want to rebuild, the abode of the mental decease which is killing us, the citadel of tyranny which is continually rejecting us from despotism into anarchy and from anarchy to despotism,... The battle field [chosen by socialists] is Paris, political capital of France, a monstrous head on a weakened body. Wasted child of kings as well as of republics, disproportionate member [of the national body] whose ailing growth it is urgent to stop if we do not want, after a complete breakdown of the equilibrium of our social body, to accelerate the decadency of our nation and to perpetuate such unfortunate instability... We believe that moving the capital out of Paris is a wish of the whole French people, the people who prays and works, not the one who makes revolutions but the one who suffers from them and partakes only in them to pay their price...*

*Besides important assets for the development of progress, big cities conceal continuous causes of temptation enticing men into evil. And not only morality declines and wears away in such corruptive environment, but the more serious faculties of the mind are also attacked and destroyed. While imagination and a kind of nervous sensitivity develop excessively, more significant qualities like reflection and judgement weaken and tend to disappear.”*

And Count de Galembert adds, in order to convince the Assembly, a comparison which might interest American readers : *“You will not hesitate to prefer Washington’s boredom, with the certainty you will better fulfil there your duties, to New-York’s temptations, whose pleasures would lead necessarily to painful remorse.”*

The Assembly chose finally to settle back in Versailles, a decision which frightened Galembert : *“Indeed, Versailles is still “la province”, but in a very limited manner and endangered by its proximity to the pernicious influence of Paris. This is not yet the precipice, but its extreme border.”* The second Assembly, the Senate, constituted of older and still more conservative representatives, was so terrified by the capital that they refused to come back for eight more years and moved back to Paris only in 1879.

The 1871 defeat pushed a part of the French population into revanchism while the rest, the majority, feared a new war with a German empire almost twice more populated. Both sides looked to a reinforcement of the army and counted particularly on rural population : farmers were supposed to be more obedient, more accustomed to difficult life conditions and had, at the time, a higher birth rate. Since more than 60 % of the population lived still in rural areas, even the left, i.e the Republicans, understood they must please the farmers if they wanted the new regime to survive. Gambetta, their leader, in a famous speech (1887), declared that the Republic must gain the favour of the country-side. Most politicians turned away from urban populations which were soon to elect some socialist representatives ; rural areas began to recover a favourable image.

---

<sup>22</sup> Comte de Galembert (mars 1871) *De la décentralisation et du transfert en province de la capitale politique de la France*, Mame, Tours, 68 p, (*Lettre à nos représentants à l'Assemblée Nationale*)

The trend was accelerated by a huge economic crisis between 1873 and 1893 : modern technologies (steamboats, refrigerators, etc..) allowed new countries like the USA, Canada, Australia, Argentina to send to Europe cereals, meat, wool, etc, as well as cheap industrial products. Competition was devastating, but typically enough, the French government adopted two different strategies : while abandoning industry and commerce, i.e urban activities, to the shock of imported goods, it decided to protect agricultural productions with high custom-duties (Méline laws, 1892) and subsidies which, under different forms, are still in vigour to-day. Since the 1870's, agriculture has become the cherished child of any government while industry and services were largely abandoned to themselves. France still pays the price to-day (in all meanings of the term) of this political choice based on patronage and conservatism. Big cities, and particularly Paris became more and more abandoned.

In 1905, a quite surprising book was published<sup>23</sup>. Its title : “*Back to the land*” ; its thesis was simple : industries, thanks to modern machines, are now producing far too many goods, which is causing an over-production crisis. The only solution is to send away from the cities industrial workers back to the country-side, to agriculture which had the immense advantage of a low and stagnant productivity :

*“We observe the great economic battle engaged all over the world by the biggest powers since less than fifteen years. Two new colossus are now face to face, the United States of America and Germany, uniting against England and trying, at the same time, to devour each other. They throw on consumers a deluge of cheap products to win markets. Other nations, far from limiting their production, try and increase it in the chimerical hope to crush, in turn, their competitors. They are all blind. The only question which is not asked is to know if there are enough consumers to absorb such productive orgy.... This is the third period of the history of the industry : the period of over-production and industrial market congestion (p. 27)...*

*We believe we are now entitled to conclude that the movement of increasing industrial production will soon come to a maximum and remain stable thereafter. (p 45).”*

Jules Méline quotes Rousseau and repeats all past arguments against the city and, of course, against Paris :

*“The policy ‘Back to land’ would have the great advantage to repulse this huge mass of foreign workers which grows since twenty years like an army invading our country-side where manpower is lacking... It is also narrowly related to the preservation of our military power and remains to-day the very pivot of our national defence...*

*Time is well chosen to start, for our country-side, a crusade which seems in increasing favour. There is no doubt that in this moment, quite instinctively, a deep mental change leads many Frenchmen in a completely new direction. The reaction against the city is increasing while the attraction of the country-side grows every day... Everything contributes to such deep movement : exhaustion of urban dwellers, weariness of a live always agitated and increasingly ailing, outburst of all political, social, religious passions which make people longing for a country-side seen as an oasis protected against external disturbances, finally, the ruin of so many health*

---

<sup>23</sup> Méline J ( 1905) *Le Retour à la Terre et la surproduction industrielle*, 3<sup>e</sup> édition, Hachette, Paris.

*endangered by a disorderly existence, cause of growing exhaustion... We cannot doubt it and all discoveries of modern science come to the same conclusion : the main cause of so many mysterious diseases unknown to our fathers.. is above all the foul and poisoned atmosphere in which our civilisation or rather its degeneracy has forced the human species to live since half a century. ”*

Indeed, Méline quotes nowhere the name of the capital, but in France, the big city is always Paris and there is no doubt that it was his main target. The man and the time of his book's publication are particularly interesting. In spite of the extraordinary incompetence in economics he is exhibiting, Méline was one of the leaders of the French center-right. He was minister of Agriculture and even Prime Minister. The date of 1905 also is important : the long crisis was over then, and the book was late. But Méline's anxiety was justified by a recent phenomenon : in 1893, for the first time in French history, a few socialist representatives were elected by industrial cities and by Paris to the Parliament. Méline's book had a very large influence in whole Europe : it was rapidly translated in English, in German. In Austria, Max Fuchs quotes it extensively to show the danger of city growth<sup>24</sup>

The image of Paris had changed. The city's radiance was still very strong. Actually, it had probably increased in the world, with the 1889 International Fair (Eiffel tower) and the 1900 Fair, where Paris got the name of "City of Lights". Its intellectual and artistic prestige was at a zenith, with so many writers and painters coming to live there : the Impressionists at the end of the XIX<sup>e</sup> century in Montmartre, the cubists in Montparnasse before and after World War I. Picasso starts in the capital the Cubist movement in 1907 (*Les demoiselles d'Avignon*). Even in the rest of France, Parisians were admired, looked for as fashion inspirers and imitated, but not without an increasing rancour. A play by a famous comic writer, Georges Feydeau, got a national and then a world success around 1900: *La Dame de chez Maxim*. Feydeau described the snobbery of provincial, puritanical and well-to-do women, ready to imitate in everything a charming and vulgar "cocotte" (prostitute). Since she came from Paris, with the local accent, they saw in her a lady and a master of elegances.

Foreigners appreciated still the sweetness of life in the capital : "*Nowhere than in Paris.. was it possible to feel more agreeably a naïve and yet very wise carelessness of life ; here ruled among the beauty of forms, the sweetness of climate, wealth and tradition..*"<sup>25</sup> And Hollywood movies used so often, between the two world wars, images of Parisian life that little bistros with red-squares table-clothes, charming girls of Paris, free love adventures and romantic affairs became real clichés.

But such assets were much better recognized abroad than in France. Most urban projects aiming at planning Paris suburbs, developing the transportation system or building the first "new towns" around the city were systematically turned down by successive national Assemblies where rural France had the majority. André Citroën, the flamboyant car-maker, proposed in 1920 to build, with his own money, a circular highway around Paris : authorisation refused. The municipality wanted to develop new towns (1919), a very audacious concept, to organize the suburbs : only a small example was built in Châtenay-Malabris because the Senate refused the necessary appropriations, saved for rural areas.

---

<sup>24</sup> M Fuchs (1914) *Die Landflucht*, Tyrolia, Brixen.

<sup>25</sup> S Zweig (1982) *Le monde d'hier*, Belfond, p 157.

Practically all urban planning laws proposed by different majorities after 1870 to organize big urban agglomerations were turned down until the 1920's.

After the end of World War I, the gap between the exciting Parisian life during the "roaring twenties" and the somnolent countryside widens increasingly. New literary trends are less interested in the city of Paris itself, and more with world currents like surrealism, influenced by the horrors of the war and also the Bolshevik revolution. Even conservative writers are not considering Paris, like during the XIX<sup>o</sup> century, as a center of sin and debauchery. Paris habits have probably not changed, but the decline of Christian faith in France has made considerable progresses : violent and crude images of "the new Babylon", "the cesspool of sins" have practically disappeared.

But French literature tends to turn its back on the big city and to praise increasingly the pleasures and the virtues of country life. Regional literature is developing fast between the wars, particularly after the Great Depression, during the 1930s and comes to occupy a large part of the scene. Of course, it always existed : George Sand, in the middle of XIX<sup>o</sup> century, although living in Paris a large part of her time and shocking the opinion with her masculine dresses, her sex affairs and by smoking a pipe, had written famous books<sup>26</sup> about rural life. But the current took more strength at the beginning of XIX<sup>o</sup> century. Barres<sup>27</sup> exalts the national meaning of old rural landscape, "*these hills where blows the Spirit*" and laments the sad conditions of rural migrants, forced to move to the big city and to lose their "roots"<sup>28</sup>.

A book, in particular, moved the opinion : in *La Terre qui meurt*<sup>29</sup> (The dying land), Bazin shows a young man leaving his family to go to Paris, trying to become rich and famous. Of course, after a long series of failures and disasters, he comes back, finally convinced that rural life is the true life and that letting his land dying is a crime. Méline was impressed :

*"Nothing more moral than this book which contains such a high lesson for everybody and which should be read and meditated everywhere.[,,] To the farmer tempted to lose courage and leave because he finds his life too hard and his work too unprofitable, it would show that life in the city is no better, that one pays often dearly the pleasures available there and that at each step, misery and hopelessness are constantly threatening the poor wretches who let themselves be fascinated by its beguiling mirages."*<sup>30</sup>

René Bazin published more than 50 books of this kind, where he exalted rural life, Christian morality and nationalism. He was elected at the Academy in 1903, which proves, if not his literary qualities, at least, his influence on public opinion.

After World War I, regional literature proliferates. The big city, usually, is not directly attacked, but it always appears in the background as a lurking threat, a degrading force and a dissolving danger for girls, family and nation. Many writers, famous at the time, wrote about death of small mountain villages, painful migrations of farmers to the city and moral decadence of farm girls who seemed to have a surprisingly strong predisposition to fall into

<sup>26</sup> G Sand (1846), *La Mare au Diable* ; (1847) *François le Champi*,..

<sup>27</sup> M Barres (1897) *Les Déracinés*, Fasquelle ; (1913) *La colline inspirée*, Emile-Paul.

<sup>28</sup> A term still very much used today by enemies of Paris, but never precisely defined.

<sup>29</sup> R Bazin (1898) *La terre qui meurt* ; (1901) *Les Oberlé* ; (1907) *Le blé qui lève*, ...

<sup>30</sup> Méline, *Ibidem*, p. 2

prostitution as they arrived in big cities. Jean Giono became famous ; even Henri Pourrat, a particularly conservative writer who became a vociferate advocate of the Pétain regime and defended collaboration with the Nazis :

*“Farmers represent a ‘natural order’, a social and moral order, an order of the household, by opposition with urban society which develops individualism, disorder, license, divorces, social unrest,..<sup>31</sup>”*

Let us consider the most famous example, the plays written and the films directed by Marcel Pagnol<sup>32</sup> between 1929 and the war. Pagnol’s films have been extremely successful in France and abroad, multiplying its influence and spreading the message. None of them contained direct attacks against Paris or other big cities, but all of them presented the city as a dangerous, destructive and degrading background. In *Angele* (1938), a young girl lives poorly in a small hamlet lost in the mountain, where electricity is still ignored and where farming is hard and produces very little. She falls in love with a young man from the city, leaves with him against her parent’s will and disappears. Later, a member of the rural community finds her in the big city (Avignon ...) strangely dressed and outrageously made up. He understand she has lost her maiden purity and human dignity and is working in a brothel. A poor peasant from the village who loved her secretly but never dared to oppose the man from the city, goes then to the brothel, saves her and takes her back to freedom and dignity, in the small village where she will live happy, toiling the land to get some potatoes.

Most other films go along the same lines. The enemy of young farm girls is the city, actually a middle-size town like Avignon. Big metropolises do not appear often, but always in a dark light. Films of the famous trilogy *Marius*, *Fanny* and *Cesar* are located on the old harbor, in the center of Marseille, a huge city of more than 3 millions inhabitants at the time. Surprisingly enough, the big city appears nowhere. All the scenes happen on a very short stretch of land : a few shops along the harbor. The spectator might believe he is in a village. True, the works were written as plays for the theatre, but Pagnol, when he produced them as films, some time later, did not change anything to the narrow stage decoration. The city of Marseille appears only once in the three films : Fanny just learned from her physician that she is pregnant and comes back in the tramway, thinking of suicide. Then, we can see the dreary streets of the big city behind the tram windows...

Paris, still bigger and further away, is depicted as a dark force wresting away children from their family and making them strangers in their own land. The son of Fanny, Cesarion, succeeds at school and is finally accepted in the most prestigious engineering school in France, Polytechnique. His mother is very proud but also disappointed when he comes back on holidays : he has lost his local accent, his morality has changed, he is much more open-minded, he has become quite pretentious ; she sees him a bit like a stranger.

It would be boring and useless to analyse further regionalist films and books of the time. All spread the same message : turn your back on big cities and particularly on Paris, forget about them and come back to the small village where are your true roots. There you, and particularly farm girls, will find traditions, true morality and peace,. Disgust with Paris was certainly amplified by the violent social movements during the 1930’s. France was then

---

<sup>31</sup> Pourrat H (1940) *L'homme à la bêche*, Flammarion, Paris.

<sup>32</sup> M Pagnol (1931) *Marius* ; (1932) *Fanny* ; (1936) *Angèle* ; (1938) *La femme du boulanger* ,...

divided between two dangerous attractions : the example of the Bolshevik revolution on the left, of the fascist movements of Mussolini and then Hitler on the right. If Paris itself was rich and divided between bourgeois and worker neighborhoods, the huge suburban ring voted overwhelmingly for the left. Hence an image which became famous between the two world wars : the *red belt*, menacing traditional order and family properties. It was not only, like in 1830, the fear of political upheaval but of social revolution, a spectre which terrified the bourgeoisie. This fear became frenzy when, in 1936, left parties united in *Le Front Populaire* and won the elections. Everywhere in France, filmed actualities showed Paris workers occupying, in the industrial suburbs, their enterprise and dictating their conditions to terrified businessmen.

Between the two wars, as modern industry exploded, as cities increased considerably their population, as Paris was becoming one of the most fashionable cities in the world, French geographers neglected urban studies but dedicated most of their time to the description of rural housing, so admirably fitted to the natural environment. The image of Paris was not any more, like in the XIX<sup>e</sup> century, at the same time attractive and frightening, fascinating and disgusting. It had become a sort of bleak danger, lurking in the back-ground, dissolving, destructive, corrupting and without any qualities.

In may 1940, as the French armies crumbled down under the shock of German panzer divisions, one of the first measures taken by the new commander in chief, general Weygand, was to move to Paris two infantry divisions in order to crush an eventual rebellion from the leftist suburbs. This trend culminated, after the military disaster, in the new regime of Maréchal Pétain. All unions were dissolved except farmers unions, city mayors were not elected any more but nominated by the Préfet, representing the government. Paris was deemed so dangerous that his mayor was nominated by the Council of Minister and furthermore controlled, like in the past, by two préfets, also nominated by the government, without neglecting the German occupation authorities.... Everybody had forgotten about the magnificent assets of Paris and saw only its liabilities. Like in Germany<sup>33</sup>, social fear among the upper classes had become the main factor shaping Paris image in France.

### **3)- Even Paris advantages are turned into defects : from 1947 on.**

A curious text<sup>34</sup>, published first in 1947, reprinted in 1953, then in 1972, but written during the war, initiated a movement against Paris which, beyond weak geographical arguments, took the form of a hateful and violent crusade :

*“ In all domains, Paris agglomeration has behaved since 1850, not as a metropolis giving life to its hinterland, but as a monopolist group devouring national substance. Its action has multiplied the effects of the first industrial revolution and sterilized most provincial economies by depriving them from their dynamic elements. Decision centers, conception centers, rare services : Paris has confiscated leading activities*

---

<sup>33</sup> B Marchand (199) „Nationalsozialismus und Grossstadtfeindschaft“, in *Die Alte Stadt*, 1/99, pp 39-50. See also the excellent study : K Bergmann (1970) *Agrarromantik und Grossstadtfeindschaft*, Vlg Hain, Meisenheim am Glan. 405 p.

<sup>34</sup> J-F Gravier (1948-53) *Paris et le désert français*, Magellan ; reprinted in 1972 by Flammarion.

*and let to the rest of France the subordinate ones. Such absolute dependence is the very characteristic of colonial rule.” (p. 60)*

and further away, with a malignant joy :

*“Parisians, however, live in increasingly bad conditions in this megalopolis, crumbling under its gigantism ; other Frenchmen have gone from fascination to hostility, even to anger ; the rest of the world feels less and less the attraction of the “City of Lights”. The decrease of Paris image in the world is a phenomenon everybody can observe since 1960.” (p 121)*

Gravier’s book is not serious, not even honest<sup>35</sup>. The author does not hesitate to falsify quotations to make his point<sup>36</sup>. For instance, he quotes a few lines from Tocqueville where the great sociologist criticizes concentration of powers in Paris, but then cuts the text and omits the end of the phrase which is contrary to his own purpose. He uses figures but never indicates their origin ; they are often opposed to data given by serious authors like Sauvy<sup>37</sup>. Actually, Gravier<sup>38</sup>, a geographer, has written a political pamphlet representing most extreme-right ideas of Charles Maurras and of the Pétain government. It is the direct outgrowth of the regionalist tendencies and of the social fear we analysed before. There are, however, some differences.

Between the wars, regionalist movements turned their back on Paris and drew negative images of the city but rarely attacked it directly. As so many books and films exalted rural life, other works of a much higher quality, from Proust, Cocteau, Gide and Gireaudoux until Sartre and Aragon, underlined the advantages and the qualities of the big city. If negative images dominated the positive ones in France, they remained images and artistic productions. After 1948, everything changes : the capital image becomes still much darker ; successive governments chose policies designed to weaken and impoverish the hated city, forbidding new investment and slamming exceptional taxes on Paris activities. It seems the capital has no quality any more and that its only existence is a danger for the whole French nation.

Gravier’s book has enjoyed an extraordinary and surprising fame<sup>39</sup>. It has influenced French inner policy during fifty years and has become the Bible of French planning. Still in 2001, the Senate, publishing an important report on regional planning, quotes Gravier at length and with admiration. The journal *Le Monde* relies also, in 2002, on Gravier’s viewpoint. Since fifty years, in most courses of geography in French universities and often enough in colleges, Gravier’s book has been quoted and with praise. Experience shows, however, that practically nobody has read it seriously. It has succeeded mainly because it fitted so well deep anxieties and secret fears in French minds, which means the reason of his

---

<sup>35</sup> B Marchand (2001) « La haine de la ville : « Paris et le désert français » de J-F Gravier », *L’Information Géographique*, vol 65, pp 234-253.

<sup>36</sup> B Marchand (2001) "La haine de la ville : "Paris et le désert français de Jean-François Gravier", *L’Information Géographique*, vol 65, pp 234-253.

<sup>37</sup> Sauvy A (1965) *Histoire économique de la France entre les deux guerres*, 3 vol, Fayard.

<sup>38</sup> Gravier worked during the war in Alexis Carrel’s racist foundation for eugenics policies. Cf A Drouard (1992) *Une inconnue des sciences sociales : la fondation Alexis Carrel, 1941-45*, Ed MSH, Paris.

<sup>39</sup> Marchand B & J Salomon Cavin (2007) "Anti-urban ideologies and planning in France and Switzerland : Jean-François Gravier and Armin Meili", *Planning Perspectives*, vol 22, 1, pp 29-54.

success does not really go back to the author, but to the French way of conceiving and refusing modern evolution<sup>40</sup>.

Paris, from now on, had only defects. Even the few advantages the city could be proud of were turned into liabilities : it had become a cliché in French medias to deplore the loneliness one feels in the big city, but nobody seemed to understand that it was only the counterpart of individual freedom, the other side of the coin.

Let us take one example in Gravier, where they abound :

*“In order to attract the hundreds of thousands of immigrants necessary to its expansion, the capital has paid continuously quite high salaries...”* (p 57).

Gravier's figures are indeed questionable, but let us accept them and look at the gist of his argument : Parisian employers keep offering higher salaries. There can be only three explanations : either, they are philanthropists running to their doom, which is hard to believe ; or they have the same rate of profit as other French entrepreneurs but pay better salaries because employees, in the big city, form powerful unions and are able to obtain better conditions, which is likely but should rather be considered as an advantage of manpower concentration ; or finally, because Paris productivity is much higher, which is actually the case. It has been shown<sup>41</sup> that it is 35% higher than the French average, which allows Paris entrepreneurs to pay better salaries while making better profits. But instead of considering this fact as a strong asset, Gravier turns it into a liability. Beyond a typical ignorance of economic mechanisms, there is an obvious desire to view every aspect of Paris as a defect and to draw a very bleak image.

Another example in the press : in a article “Where to live better in France ?”<sup>42</sup>, Paris comes at the last position (100<sup>th</sup>) mainly because housing there is so expansive. Nowhere does the magazine indicate that salaries are much higher in Paris and that high prices on a free market mean a very strong demand and indicate a high attractive power : asset is again turned into liability.

This trend is now widespread, particularly so among French geographers. In a recent textbook on big cities, professor Wackermannn, already in his introduction, writes “.. *we must keep wondering about the increasingly negative aspects of big cities balance-sheets. Urban development, in particular, has considerably increased public debt in the whole world.*”<sup>43</sup> But the author does not justify this very strange relationship. Another textbook<sup>44</sup> exhibits a short title : *The big metropolises of the world*. Most chapters describe them as pure hell : “Deepening social segregation”, “Misery, delinquency, drugs and violence”, “A worsening housing crisis”, “Crisis in transportation”, “Environmental crisis”,.. Then, the reader discovers that on the third page, the title has been completed : “*The big metropolises of the world and their crises*” as if crises were constituting the essence of a metropolis.

---

<sup>40</sup> Provost I (1999) *Paris et le désert français : histoire d'un mythe*, Thèse de sociologie, Université d'Evry, 216 p

<sup>41</sup> M-P Rousseau (1998) *La productivité des grandes villes*, Economica, Paris, 206 p.

<sup>42</sup> *Le Point*, 10-01-2003, n° 1582, pp 64-65.

<sup>43</sup> G Wackermann (1999) *Très grandes villes et métropolisation*, Ellipse.

<sup>44</sup> R Guglielmo (1996) *Les grandes métropoles du monde*, A Colin.



Bleak images of Paris are now so common and so dark that even publicity is using them. A few months ago, a firm trying to rent cars, displayed in Paris buses a poster saying : “Rent our cars to run away from the city”. A recent TV publicity shows a man driving through the countryside and taking different hitch-hiking girls, although they are quite plain, one after the other : they show posters saying “To the mountains”, “To the sea-shore”, “To the country-side” ; but he does not stop when a very pretty one exhibits a poster “To Paris”. Such messages are important : the job of publicists is to identify clichés, to exaggerate them into caricatures which, in turn, model public opinion.

In 2001, the city of Amiens, some 100 km north of Paris, was flooded by the Somme river. Quickly, a rumour spread : Paris authorities, in order to avoid a flood from the Seine, were pumping the water into the Somme. The idea itself was absurd : such pumping was impossible and unnecessary, but thousands of people believed it and are probably still convinced, since the big city can only be evil.

Let us present a final example. In December 2000, the Parliament voted a law on urban planning (*Loi SRU : Solidarité et Rénovation Urbaine*), one of the most important in the last 80 years. The Minister of Public Works (*Équipement et Logement*), Jean-Claude Gayssot, was a member of the Communist party, since the left was then in power. Following the rules, he made a speech at the Assembly to present and defend his law. Laurette Wittner<sup>45</sup> has made a most interesting analysis, unfortunately unpublished yet, of the speech’s semantics. Of course, the law is not going to be applied only in Paris, but the capital agglomeration is in every mind. Mr Gayssot quotes 76 times the big city :

- 9 times in a quite favorable way (“City centers are loved by inhabitants, which is often forgotten”, “Centers have been embellished”, “Cities are centers of mobility, of exchanges”, etc..),
- 5 times, he underlines the interest of urban dwellers for the country-side (“urban dwellers love to wander through the country-side”...)
- 62 times, he shows the big cities in the darkest ways : “Incoherent development, tentacle cities, unsafe, polluted, anonymous, unfair, inequitable, ugly, with feelings of despair, of waste, extreme hypertrophy, places where life will become always harder”, etc..)

### **Conclusion :**

Decrying big cities and particularly Paris, has become a very common activity now-a-days. There are political explanations : the right, terrified by the rebellious trends of Paris since a century and half, is defending farmers, particularly the rich ones. If the myth of the *red belt* voting communist and socialist has practically disappeared, it has been conveniently replaced by the equally terrifying myth of the *green belt*, the suburbs inhabited by Muslim migrants, who might be a hotbed of terrorists. The left, abandoning Marxism twenty years ago, has adopted the social doctrine of the church and loves poor farmers. French agricultural associations have made use, of course, of the anti-urban feelings to demand always more help. As a result, indirect and direct subsidies to French agriculture can be estimated to some 30 billions euros a year for 650000 farms, i.e some 4000 euros a month per farm.

---

<sup>45</sup> Laurette Wittner, researcher at the *Ecole Nationale des Travaux Publics de l’Etat*.

But these are rational reasons. Obviously, the phenomenon is too constant since 200 years and too general to be explained only by the play of some political and private interests. Much deeper currents, forming a real anti-urban ideology, are at work. They remain still largely unknown in France in spite, or because, of their importance.

There is some suicidal trend in disparaging Paris : the big agglomeration subsidizes all France. Let us consider in 1995, the annual flows of public money : each from the continental regions of France sends moneys to the State (taxes, duties, ..) and receives funds (salaries, investments, subsidies). Everything is redistributed. From the 22 regions, 19 received more than they paid, in other words, they were more or less subsidized. Who paid ? three regions : Alsace, for 2 billions francs ; Rhône-Alpes (i.e Lyon) for 4 billions ; and Ile-de-France (Paris) for 118 billions Francs, i.e some 18 billions euros. There is in French a saying reminding how dangerous it is to cut the branch one is sitting upon...

---