

**THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**

**One City, Two Cities: Paris from the Second Empire to the  
Third Republic**

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## Introduction

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of great social change in France, but nowhere was this more evident than in the national capital. Paris, no stranger to the turbulence of history, witnessed the passage of three kingdoms, one republic and one empire (Sédillot 226); however, these would not be the only changes that the city would experience. The renovations to Paris during this time were far-reaching and powerful. Not only was the physical appearance of the city changed radically, but the concepts of class identity and place in the national capital was also re-engineered. Whereas the poor were previously scattered relatively evenly across the city, they now found themselves located in specific districts, little touched by the modern renovations of the Second Empire. The wealthy, on the other hand, benefited from the wide boulevards and airy plazas upon which Paris prides itself today. Transportation in the capital also changed greatly, moving from horse-drawn tramways to the private automobile and the underground (and overground) railways. Finally, the political landscape of the city would change drastically as well; after the fall of the Second Empire, the combination of a power vacuum, newfound class consciousness and a large working-class population would provide the conditions necessary for the revolutionary Paris Commune of 1871.

## History

By the end of the Second Republic, though Paris had become virtually synonymous with the words “revolution” and “upheaval,” its physical form had changed little from the days of the *ancien régime*. The only general exceptions to this were the construction of new bridges spanning the Seine and the revitalization of the rue de Rivoli, a major east-west thoroughfare leading from the *place de la Concorde* in the west, past the Louvre and the Royal Palace to the Marais, an aristocratic residential district in the east-centre. Nevertheless, Paris remained a largely medieval city, with warrens of twisting, maze-like streets, open sewers running in trenches and rampant overpopulation and poverty (Weeks 17-18).

With the rise of Napoléon III as Emperor, however, things began to change drastically. In accordance with his desire to place France at centre of European culture and power, he demanded nothing less than large-scale change to his capital city. The imperial dream could not be realized without Paris changing from a place looking backwards at its history to a place looking forward to the future; it would not suffice until Napoléon III would recreate Paris as *la ville lumineuse* (the City of Light).

## Public Space and Health

The vision held by Napoléon III for the capital of France would likely not have come to fruition without the supervision of one of his chief deputies, Georges-Eugène Haussmann, *préfet* for the Seine *département*. Legend would have it that Haussmann was presented with a map of Paris by the Emperor immediately after being sworn in; it would present a plan of which sections of the capital were to be designated for immediate reconstruction (Gregory 16). As a child, Haussmann suffered from severe difficulties in breathing; his parents would send him to the countryside in order to escape the city, which was seen as polluted and unhealthy (Weeks 16, Jones 301-304). Later on, as Haussmann studied law at the Sorbonne, he became frustrated with the crowded, cramped conditions of Paris (over 34,000 per square kilometre), seeing it as inefficient and backwards (Weeks 20, Couperie XIV). This would later influence the style in which he would change Paris: with a drafter's pencil in one hand and a sledgehammer in the other.

Haussmann had a plan to bring the countryside to the city. While the French capital had several public gardens and parks, they could hardly be considered natural spaces; the *jardin des Tuileries* and the *jardin du Luxembourg* were all tightly-regulated and manicured, displaying the dominion of mankind over the earth. Napoléon III, on visits to London, admired the casual elegance of Hyde, Saint James and Regent Parks; he was determined to bring this to Paris (Dill 235). Thus, work started in 1852 on creating the *bois de Boulogne* to the west of the city and, later, to appease the demands of the working class, the *bois de Vincennes* to the east (Couperie XIV). Haussmann saw these two parks as “the

lungs of Paris”, allowing people a local escape from city life (Weeks 31-32).

Hausmann didn't stop with these two, however. He also ordered countless patches of green space to be installed across the city; by the fall of the Second Empire, Paris would have added over 18 square kilometres of green space to its area, nearly a hundredfold increase (Dill 237).

One of the less visible (but no less important) evolutions of Paris in this time was Hausmann's expansion of the city's sewer system. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cholera was an ever-present threat to the health of virtually any large city; Paris witnessed a particularly strong wave of it between 1848 and 1849, resulting in 19,000 deaths (Couperie XIV), particularly those in the lower classes. This would prompt an 1832 billboard to proclaim that “cholera is an invention of the bourgeoisie and the government to starve the people” (Jones 294). As technological innovation increased the quality of life of the Parisian middle class. Between 1870 and 1890, municipal officials had managed to quadruple the extent of the sewers (Gandy 29-30). However, while public health was the primary concern, this was also due to the formation of a distinction between the upper and lower classes. Whereas personal hygiene and bathing with water was once seen as reckless and sensual, hygiene was now a commodity (Gandy 31, 33-34). Developers ensured that the wealthier areas in the western districts were connected with water and gas, but the eastern districts lagged far behind (Jones 316-317). Because of this commodification of water, the price of lodging without water was much more palatable to the working class, particularly those displaced by Hausmann's demolitions. Paris had changed from a regime of vertical spatial separation – with people of different social rank living on separate floors in the

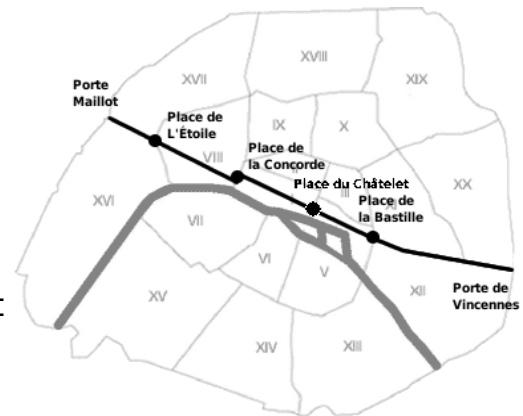
same building (Gregory 31-32) – to a regime of horizontal spatial separation, with specific parts of the city economically-designated for the poor.

## Transportation

One of the biggest changes to Paris during the Second Empire was the introduction of city-wide, state-operated public transit. Most poor citizens would not venture too far from their homes, due to the lack of transportation options. A large number of horse-drawn tramways plowed the streets of Paris, providing transportation to those along their routes, but the independent tramway companies, with an eye on the bottom line, were reluctant to add service to poor or less-dense neighbourhoods. Haussmann nationalized the tramway operators in 1854, in the goal of having more control over transit planning (Couperie XIV). He then created a web of routes, spanning all districts in the city, both dense and sparse, both wealthy and humble, to allow for the regular citizen to circulate. For the first time, Parisians were able to venture far from their homes in search of work or recreation (Weeks 55). This network would eventually lead to the development of the *chemin de fer métropolitain*, the underground railway, one of the Third Republic's greatest achievements in Paris.

As part of his efforts to improve mobility, Haussmann selected two “hubs” for Parisian roads, both on the Right Bank, being careful to locate them in well-established communities. The *Place de l'Étoile*, (now the *place Charles-de-Gaulle*) near the western edge of the city, was expanded from being the meeting point of five roads to having twelve boulevards radiate outward from it, while on the eastern side of Paris, the *place du Château-d'Eau* (later renamed *place de la République*) underwent a less-ambitious but ideologically-similar transformation (Jones 311), being the intersection of nine roadways.

Since Paris was no stranger to social movements with violent tendencies, the needs of the military were taken into consideration, although not to the degree that many might think (Couperie XIV). The rue de Rivoli was once again the site of construction, this time in the guise of an eastern modernization on the *rue Saint-Antoine* (Weeks 52). It linked the *place de la Bastille* (an important rallying place for agitated Parisians ever since the storming of the eponymous prison-fortress) to the



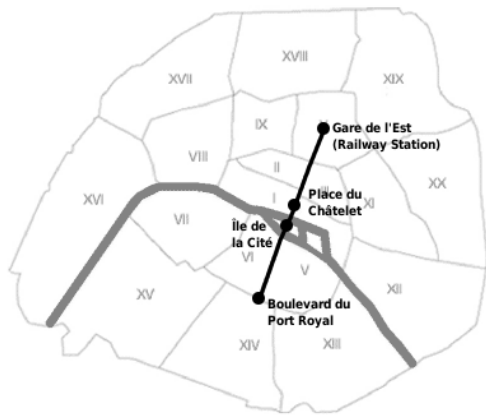
East-West Thoroughfare in Paris  
(Champs-Élysées, Rivoli, Saint-Antoine, Faubourg Saint-Antoine)

renovated *rue de Rivoli*, providing an uninterrupted east-west thoroughfare across the city between the *porte Maillot* and the *porte de Vincennes*, which would allow quick deployment of troops from the barracks at Versailles across the Right Bank. Ironically, this would not be used as planned; the first army to march down the *avenue des Champs-Élysées* would be Prussian, not French (Jones 324), and the Republican troops dispatched to deal with the Communards would decide to hug the Seine and not use the *porte Maillot* (Couperie XV). Nevertheless, this allowed general traffic to circulate much more freely than before.

In addition, Napoléon III wanted a brand new north-south boulevard to pass through Paris. Haussmann would accomplish this with much the same fervour as the rue de Rivoli extensions. This project was not as grand as opening up the east-west thoroughfare, but it had three important goals. First, Haussmann had the poverty-stricken settlements on the *île de la Cité* in his sights: he wanted the twisting streets and 15,000 residents replaced with an administrative centre for the new city. The new thoroughfare and the related renovations would blast a

column across the tiny island, and displace two-thirds of its population, razing nearly everything but the *cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris* and the *Palais de justice* and installing the *Hôtel-Dieu* hospital and the *Préfecture de police* in place of the slum. In doing so, Napoléon III created an undeniable seat of civic power (Jones 310, Wilms 267).

Second, there was a desire to link the two thoroughfares at the *place du Châtelet*. This area was also run down and, being adjacent to the city hall, was targeted for revitalization. The official idea was that the increased circulation



North-South Thoroughfare  
(Strasbourg, Sebastopol, du Palais, Saint-Michel)

would stimulate the economy of the neighbourhood (Jones 308); in all likelihood, the reality was that in 1855, Haussmann was embarrassed to have had to carefully re-routed Queen Victoria's stage-coach through the mazes of alleys in order to avoid some of the worst squalor of the city. He was determined never to have to

hide parts of his Paris from foreign dignitaries on state visits (Weeks 20).

Finally, in accordance with its status as the imperial capital (as well as, in a sense, the capital of Europe), Paris needed a grand boulevard greeting visitors as they would first set foot in the city. This would no longer take place at the gates of Paris, however; travellers were now arriving by train at the new *gare de l'Est*, right at the end of the *rue de Strasbourg*. The new thoroughfare was more than a transportation corridor; indeed, it was representative of the new Paris, the gateway of modern France to the world.

These were not the only renovations that Haussmann would impose on the

city. The *boulevard Saint-Germain* would bisect the Latin Quarter on the Left Bank, the *avenue de l'Opéra* would link the *Palais-Royal* with Charles Garnier's new opera hall and the two hubs at *place de l'Étoile* and *place de la République* would be linked by the *boulevard Haussmann* (although this would not be completed until well into the Third Republic). However, the effects of these renovations would shake the social geography of Paris to its core.

## Politics

Hausmann's re-engineering of the central districts seemed to follow a pattern: the streets would be rebuilt, slum housing would be replaced by middle-class apartments and displaced people would need to find new accommodation (Willms 270). Interestingly, it seemed to be that the neighbourhoods that were slated for immediate reconstruction tended to be the same neighbourhoods which were more heavily barricaded during the uprisings of 1848 (Willms 268). This early form of gentrification was particularly hard on the working class. Nevertheless, Napoléon III was not keen to attack the poor head-on. There was a need to provide new housing for the working classes. But where to find the land? Paris' twelve *arrondissements* were already straining from Hausmann's *grands projets*.

Paris was encircled by two walls. The outer wall was a defensive wall, meant to protect the city from foreign attack. The inner wall was a tax wall, meant to control the flow of people and goods and apply duties as necessary (Willms 275). Between these two walls was a buffer zone between the city and the countryside. In 1859, Napoléon III ordered that the tax wall was to come down and that the *petite banlieue* would be incorporated into the city, bringing the total number of *arrondissements* to twenty; Paris keeps this form today (Weeks 53).

France had also been undergoing a large degree of centralization. Paris was no longer just the seat of power, it was the economic engine of the country. The railways had spread through the land, connecting the industries of the core to the resources of the periphery (Sédillot 234). Having been granted access to the

farms of the distant countryside, Paris no longer needed local agriculture to survive. Land that had been farmed for centuries was now occupied by industry, soon to be followed by the workers displaced from the centre. John Merriman goes so far as to write that “the capital has been turned into two cities, one rich and one poor, [with] the latter encircling the other.” (Merriman 294).

Later, as Napoléon III conceded defeat to Moltke and the Prussian Army in 1871, the Second Empire came to an end. In its stead, a provisional republican government was formed by Adolphe Thiers, accepting the terms of surrender from distant Bordeaux (Willms 313, 315). The bourgeois, being fearful of revolution, promptly vacated Paris for the countryside (Willms 309). This angered the remaining citizens of Paris, who had experienced so much suffering from the German bombardment of Paris, that when the National Assembly virtually left Paris to its own devices, it became semi-autonomous under the Commune (Jones 324). The political philosophies of the left, born and nurtured in the working-class east-side districts, were now in control of the city. In a sense, the working class were taking revenge on Haussmann's legacy for displacing them to the fringes of society; this was largely made possible by the concentration of the poor and working classes in specific, outer districts. Indeed, during the *semaine sanglante*, the week of the fiercest fighting, the Communards would stage their last stand in their newfound home, the hills of Belleville and Montmartre, annexed into the urban form just a few years prior (Couperie XV).

## Conclusion

By the time of the Third Republic, the old slums had become well-to-do areas while, benefiting from cheaper rents, the outer arrondissements had quickly become the settlements of industry and the working class (Couperie XVI). The bourgeoisie had solidified their political base in the older sections of Paris, whereas the left could now count on the outer arrondissements for support. This re-arrangement was largely due to the changes to the urban form initiated by Haussmann and Napoléon, changing the vertical separation of class to a horizontal separation of class. Nonetheless, Paris was “opened up” during the Second Empire to allow for ease of transportation, alleviate the plight of the poor (with mixed results) and centralize power in an attempt to create a modern world-class city. In fact, the legacy of the Second Empire lives on today; though France may not hold the world influence that it once held, Paris remains a glistening jewel in the eye of much of the world.

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