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What is there that cannot be said about the title of this volume - especially as a response to its rich and complex offerings? Indeed on account of this it is best to set off somewhere else. And, as a starting point, to suggest this: that the very notion of capitals of the nineteenth century begs too many questions of time and space concerning that century itself; and that the further we slide away from it, in the confusion of being seen by some angelic figure of history's unfolding, or of ourselves taking the position of this angel, the more questions fall into the begging ... so to speak.

What should we ask of London and Paris today, in our time, that will enable us to form an image, for these days, of a now long-gone century? How can the proposition that Paris and London might have been capitals of the nineteenth century be activated through the future that now awaits them, rather than that which was their prospect when Walter Benjamin gave a working title to his unfinished work, 'Paris, capital of the nineteenth century'? Put another way: are Paris and London up to it? What are they up for?

Régine Robin, in her recent book *Mégapolis. Les derniers pas du flâneur*, remarks of contemporary London that 'Aucun Dickens pourrait émerger de ce chaos.' Instead she sees it as a city that calls for a novelist by the quadrants of the compass, or even a locality as reduced as Clerkenwell, such is London's fragmentation; though strangely enough she makes no reference to Patrick Keillor's famous film *London* - that comforting epitaph to what we might think of as the *flâneur désemparé*, worn out after the lost decades of straying in a post-Baudelairean modernity.¹ Indeed in her travels to the end of each underground line in London, visiting shopping centres, going to a movie, noting social differences, Robin clings to the idea of *flânerie* as if an individual might still embody it, with a book contract in her files and paid time on her hands. Her implicit critique of this weary ideal is perhaps nothing more than that Paris is excluded from a volume that includes Los Angeles and Tokyo, and in this at least she begins to exorcise the hold of exhausted histories and their stereotypes.

Yet it is surely better to accept that as an idea the *flâneur* was generated in a limited time and space, as no more, and indeed no less, than a hermeneutic device regarding the capital in the nineteenth century, and it was endowed in Benjamin's thinking with an after life that has become one that we live when we think about the city. At the same time I am happy to think that there may never have been a man or a woman who really was such a creature, though Jules Romains in the 1930s clearly believed that it might well have been a dog.²

Indeed it is hardly contentious to argue that if Walter Benjamin was able to disclose the *flâneur* as a key figure in Paris's being the capital of an epoch, then it is not on account of that alone a sociological fact, nor the less important for not being one. Benjamin stepped out of the old Bibliothèque Nationale into the Passages that Louis Aragon had given him to see as the survival of an affect, a figure, a dialectical image of the unconsciously formed structures of his present. Today a reader stepping out of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France forays into a commercial wasteland that may not as yet even qualify to be a *non-lieu*, while the Passages, decrepit until the 1970s, have been brought back to commercial life. In a strange twist of fate, just as young scholars are removed from the bodily affect of the historical fabric as the framing of their attention to the archive, the Passages are probably closer to their atmospheres and frequentations of the 1830s than they have been at any time since the beginnings of the Third Republic.

That said, it is important to go further afield than Vivienne, Véro-Dodat or Caire to the Passage Brady or the Passage du Prado to see that Paris is able to host the climate of post-colonial migrations in all their complexity, with the uncannily Anglophone restaurants and food shops from the Indian sub-continent.

Once home to the sheet music sellers of Mistinguette or Chevalier, these new emporia are decorated with the stars of Indian soap operas and heroes and heroines of Bollywood; 'popular' taste persists. But this should warn us that, like the *flâneur*, the *menu peuple* of old Paris is or was the name for an imagined relation and not an object - or rather a relation of objectifications where a certain condensation of social forms takes place. And that new condensations must be the symptoms of how the interior of such words has changed, drained of the comforting provincialism of a worn-thin conception of national space, 'a deterritorialising of the refrain', to borrow the insight of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their *Milles plateaux*.³



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It is this nexus of differences inside the commercial and cultural circulations of the city now that alerted me to the possibility that we were walking away from an abyss. And yet to advance our comparisons of the two cities we needed rather to approach it, to cede the very notion of a particular territory in favour of inhabiting its loss. As I say this I admit that it irritates me. For at a rather literal level I am not sure that I want to put up with the way in which things are taken away, drained off into Euro Disneyland or the Millennium Dome, nor live with them when they are gone.

Take the corner of the Rue Julien-Lacroix and the Rue Ramponeau, for example, this dreamy shot of the intersection across which was built - perhaps there are other candidates - the last barricade to fall at the end of the Paris Commune, in the closing moments of the *semaine sanglante*. From prints of the mid-nineteenth century it looked like this, until it became part of the concrete annexes to the Parc de Belleville in the 1990s.



There was never a plaque here to indicate that this had been a site of the bloody endgame of one of the great urban massacres of any Western city in the last two centuries - that is reserved for the more dramatic *mise-en-scène* of the *Mur des Fédérés* in Père Lachaise. It is a lost site, altogether, though it might have warned us of Rwanda. And if there has been, since 2001, a plaque on the Pont St Michel to commemorate the massacre of Algerians at the demonstration of 17 October 1961 at the command of the Parisian Prefet, Maurice Papon, sometime collaborator and delivery boy of Jews to the German concentration camps, it is shy of giving numbers.

If this implied but intentionally unexplored comparison has a value, then it is to underline what I have been trying to bring into view. On the one hand, we can say that the question of what future a present might dream can be thought of as the model of a nightmare of forgetfulness and that this is a characteristic of being-a-capital - to become able to forget and to repeat with new materials. On the other hand, this has nothing to do with numbers or with the precise reality of an event, its sociological weight, its transmigration into literary trope. Rather it is to do with the capacity to generate a relation between a figure and an event that is unstable, potentially explosive and which it should be our task to trigger, or to seek to stumble upon the secret of its triggering. This is living in lost territory.

And, at the same time, the recent transformations of space in Paris, their mixtures of scale and usage, together with the addition of genuinely public parks and areas to a cluttered and redundant city fabric, seem to follow a promise that was never made in the cheapskate commercialism and Royal privilege that

hem in London's planning, the naked profiteering that William Blake had long ago turned over into a critical poetic figure. If we were to trace the promise of Chartism and the English cooperative movement to the point of its demise in the stock-market floating of the mutual societies and the sub prime crisis of our day, London would be the capital of a different form of deceit, neither better nor worse than Paris.

It is this that can give sense to the ongoing comparison of these two capitals, to modalities of their place in the deceit of capital itself in its contemporary reordering of the world. This is not a question of judgement, of one city being better than the other. Rather it is a question of how Paris and London can stage our times, and how this shows that what they were in the nineteenth century is ever waiting for disclosure. In our proceedings all the papers spoke only of the nineteenth century, albeit a fairly long one. And even if this were the brief, the title is already an anachronism that needs to be taken as such.

Ironically then, as we engaged in our discussions it was an old refrain, a *ritournelle*, that came floating back to me, from not so long ago. It was an unease, that something was missing, something from twenty or thirty years ago, six flowing syllables that resonate like this 'race and class and gender'. Of course this absence was the sign of something new as well, the reviewing of what we conceive of as the experience of a city plan in its broadest as well as its most intricate topographies; how we think through the fundamental modes of comparison between two cities, shifting the axes between Dickens and Balzac, for example, or sifting and reorganising the tropes that articulate our speech on the loop of London/Paris/London. So it is not enough to say that this refrain came back, the more so as its sounding is not just a reminder, a call to arms, but rather the marking of a shift in borders between the forms of knowledge that we develop in our changing conceptions of what, after all, history was, or might have been.

Yes, it is difficult to rethink the Paris Commune from the Passage Brady of today, or from the Goutte d'Or, just as it is a strange ellipse to think the docklands of East London from Brick Lane or Cable Street and Whitechapel to the sound of Muezzin. But it is just this re-thinking or un-thinking that can disclose in what ways Paris and London might still be adequate for their roles as having been capitals of the nineteenth century. For if the transformations that have swept over them are still shockwaves of that period, ones that did not register in Benjamin's present as they do now for us, then what we may still learn from him is a way of seeing what has befallen us today - and not how we can attribute a status to either of these cities.

And here one difference that strikes me immediately is that it is far easier to build a decent, new Mosque in London or to convert an old cinema, church or synagogue into one than it is in Paris, or anywhere else in France, and that in this way their capacity to bear or to acknowledge the symptoms of change is very different. Now the careless dilapidation of London's fabric, compared with the almost achieved if tacky modernity of Paris, looks a more likely receptor for the shocks of contemporary global movements and transformations.



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In London you can build a mosque or wear a veil without offending the homogenising force that has become the French Republic, but in this city capitalism's care for whom it exploits is all the more abandoned. In the world now these are little cities, with nothing more to show than a heritage of imperial power in gradual and even catastrophic collapse. Were they ever capitals of anything at all? Or were they nothing more than figures for the congealing of power, desire, whatever, at the moment they had to be thought as such?

Notes

- ¹ Régine Robin (2009) *Mégapolis. Les derniers pas du flâneur*. Paris: Stock: 323. Her omission of Paris and inclusion of London as a world city accords with my own view of the present rate of things, but in London we hardly see the same things. See Patrick Keillor (1994) *London*.
- ² Jules Romains (1929-1936) *Les hommes de bonne volonté*. Paris: Flammarion. Here a pet dog plays the role of the free roamer and repository of city knowledge.
- ³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980) *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2: Mille Plateaux*. Paris: Minit.