

Sordid Class, Dangerous Class? Observations on Parisian Ragpickers and Their *Cités* During the Nineteenth Century

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Everybody knows that refuse is a ragpicker's *raison d'être*. Continuous collection of the waste from big city consumption, along with the rubbish and the refuse, led to collection efforts that gradually brought about a wholesale trade and an industry for recycling these wastes back into production. Until the famous prefectorial decree of 24 November 1883, garbage was left on the public thoroughfares and collected by the dust carts of the licensed garbage collectors at daybreak. During the night, the bins were searched by the ragpickers, who constituted a unique category of workers known as *ramasseurs* (gatherers). They seemed to work with standard equipment from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards. Each carried a hook, a basket suspended from the back (a "dummy"), and a lantern. They sought and garnered a wide variety of products, from fabric to cork, ranging through metals, bones and skins, each item serving a specific purpose, from the most commonplace (old papers and rags for paper production) to the most extraordinary (crusts of bread for the crumbs used by butchers for frying). Around 1900, the ragpicker's take consisted of all kinds of old papers, twine, rags for manufacturing paper (50 to 60 per cent), all types of bones (20 to 25 per cent), and an infinite variety of objects (15 to 30 per cent).¹ At this time, however, the rag industry changed dramatically as a result of technological advances (especially the new manufacture of paper from wood pulp). The subsequent collapse of most of the markets exacerbated the recent differentiation between ragpickers. Nevertheless, ragmen still siphoned off 13 per cent of the tonnage of garbage in Paris. Annual exports of this capital resource by the rag trade totalled 27 million francs.

Given this turnover and the categories of entrepreneurs (the master ragpicker, who purchased directly from the ragpicker, and the merchant, who sometimes headed large operations), the size of the rag industry in Paris was considerable. Moreover, the forces supplying this market were far from trivial. The history of ragpickers is in part characterized by their encounters with the police. In the eighteenth century, a series of ordinances by the general lieutenancy represented a futile effort to

¹ Office du Travail, *L'industrie du chiffon à Paris* (Paris, 1903), p. 40. For an extensive list of classifications, with price lists for merchandise gathered, see e.g. J. Barberet, *Monographies professionnelles*, Vol. 4, *Les chiffonniers* (Paris, 1887), pp. 103–104.

restrict their activities to a section of the night. As night-time wanderers on the streets, ragpickers had ambiguous interactions with prowlers. The 1828 ordinance transformed their industry into a regulated trade requiring badges.² Never rigidly enforced (the number of badges and the actual numbers practising the trade always differed considerably; moreover, people sold and transferred their badges), the ordinance fell into abeyance after 1872, the year the last badges were made. Numerous projects for reforming garbage collection effectively augured the disappearance of the ragpickers: based on a principle that reflected Haussmann's ideology, a decree from the government's "Défense nationale" in September 1870 ordered *concierges* to place boxes on public thoroughfares immediately before the dust carts rode by in the morning. As the old habits persisted, a new decree from Prefect Poubelle was necessary to impose the boxes in 1883. The corporation's vehement protests drew only a single concession from the administration: placement of the receptacle on the public thoroughfare one hour before the dust carts rode by, with authorized accessibility to the ragpicker during the interval. The occupational adjustment to this tremendous upheaval gave rise to two main categories of ragpickers during the 1880s. One category comprised the people who obtained permission from the *concierges* to enter the buildings and search the boxes (known as *placiers*). The other type consisted of the *coureurs*, who made do with the hour of grace and the boxes already explored by the first group.

Under the new regulations for rubbish collection, the *coureurs* perpetuated the old-style ragpickers, wandering collectors in the field of unlimited foraging. The *placiers*, on the other hand, introduced a stationary element to the trade. A remote disciple of Le Play viewed this process as the transition from collective property to individual property in the workplace.³ The same formulation might be applied to the territorial system: the ragpicker with a claim to the rubbish from a given house came every morning at daybreak to collect the boxes and to transport them to the courtyard and subsequently (after rummaging through them) to the road. This individual also performed small services for the occupants, who paid him in "little packages". These sites were passed on as inheritances or sold at a price commensurate to the revenue from the dwellings included. *Coureurs* equipped with spiked sticks or bags (they had stopped using the baskets by then) often made extremely long

² Considering that "the offenders fool the police surveillance by arming themselves like the ragpickers with a hook that they use to steal and to kill, a basket in which they can easily conceal stolen objects, and a lantern that enables them to recognize their surroundings [. . .]." (excerpts from the text of the ordinance by de Belleyme of 1 September 1828). Regarding the regulations until the modern era, see File DB 194 at the Archives de la préfecture de Police.

³ Joseph Durieu, *Les Parisiens d'aujourd'hui*, Vol. I, *Les types sociaux de simple récolte et d'extraction* (Paris, 1910), p. 168.

rounds to search the bins already placed outside. They represented the lower ranks of the trade and had to settle for an inferior and chancier take: most *placiers* owned a cart or a horse-drawn wagon, equipment that was beyond the means of the *coureurs*. Moreover, the old-style collector had enough time to return home to drop off his take at various points throughout the day.⁴ The new regulation eliminated this convenient option and placed the individuals without designated sites at a greater disadvantage. It also gave rise to other categories of ragpickers, especially the *gadouilleurs*, ragpickers authorized to work on the wharfs for loading the town refuse into the pulverizing plants.⁵ Thus, the trade featured a hierarchy: given this typically urban activity that resulted from the city waste, the rags were necessarily very sensitive to developments in public hygiene, of which the 1883 decree was a milestone.

The exact number of ragpickers was a subject of serious debate around the time the new regulations became effective. Throughout the nineteenth century, all estimates were very high: a police notice reporting 5,937 badges registered with the prefecture estimated the actual numbers of regular ragpickers at around thirty or even forty thousand men and women.⁶ This last figure was also submitted by the representative of the trade committee to the Parliamentary Commission, known as the *Quarante-Quatre* (Forty-Four), which convened at that time to investigate the industrial crisis. Including the families, the representative counted up to 200,000 persons. Adding the workers employed by the master ragpickers and the merchants, as well as their families, the total was 500,000.⁷ In 1886 the Paris Board of Health released its own assessment of 41,000 individuals (*placiers* + *coureurs*).⁸ Once again in 1903, at the time of the survey by the Labour Department on the ragpicking industry, the figures quoted by the employers' organizations fluctuated between 20,000 and 22,000 ragpickers, while the numbers reported by the workers' organizations varied between 19,200 and 27,000.⁹ According to these figures, which merit closer evaluation, the ragpickers trade was among the most numerous of all occupations in Paris. Overestimating the figures for these individuals was customary: even though ragpickers were not very well known, their operations were certainly very widespread. They

⁴ The ragpicker studied by Le Play in 1849–1851 left home at six o'clock in the morning (seven in the winter) and returned at nine o'clock to eat; he then went on a new round from half past ten until five o'clock in the afternoon and from seven o'clock in the evening until midnight: *Les Ouvriers européens* (Paris, 1860), p. 272.

⁵ Another category consisted of the dust cart ragpickers (454 in 1903), who helped manage the bins for low wages (known as the "21 sous") and the right to rummage through them along their route.

⁶ Report from the chief of police for security of 8 May 1883. DB 194.

⁷ *Commission d'enquête parlementaire*, p. 246.

⁸ Conseil d'hygiène publique, De Luynes, *Rapport sur les dépôts de chiffons* (Paris, 1886), p. 4.

⁹ Office du Travail, *L'industrie du chiffon*, p. 17.

were true journalistic resources as well as romantic or dramatic figures. In addition, their marginal reputation – bordering on the disconcerting – as innumerable soldiers of a nightly street brigade provides an inkling of the motivations underlying these over-evaluations. Moreover, the individuals in question tended to inflate their numbers to convince the authorities that restrictive regulations would harm a larger group than was actually the case.

An administrative reaction followed the backlash of the words of the ragpicker delegates before the *Quarante-Quatre*. An investigation ordered by Alphand, the Paris director of public works, based on the tonnage obtained and a count of the ragpickers entering the gates of the capital every day, yielded the figure of 7,050 ragpickers from all categories.¹⁰ The most serious study was by Barrat, the Department's investigator, who divided the 4,950 people active in the trade into 2,000 *placiers*, 1,600 *coureurs* and 1,350 *gadouilleurs*. These distinct evaluations, which were conducted fifteen years apart, conveyed only the numbers involved, but were nevertheless nowhere near the conventional figures. As for the relative difference between the two estimates (2,100), it is difficult to determine whether this discrepancy arises from counting error or from the long-term effect of the regulation of 1883.

While these last two evaluations might seem very convincing because of the low figures mentioned, they actually reflect minimum numbers. They overlooked certain specific features of the trade: who were the ragpickers? How did they enter the business?

After all, rags were merely one of the wide range of possible street trades in an astonishing variety in Paris as in all large cities: one of several trades, but undoubtedly the most important. These non-wage activities served a well-known purpose: the unemployed, meaning any individual without savings and lacking a regular source of income for any reason, could occasionally rely on such work. Barrat wrote that the distribution of the different categories of ragpickers varied over the course of a year (Table 1).¹¹ The inflated proportion of *coureurs* in the winter is attributable to the lull in various occupations, especially in construction. The only equipment required for becoming a *coureur* was a bag and a strong pair of legs. Of course, the number of *placiers* was fairly stable. Around 1909, Durieu, who wrote a book about ragpickers, encountered a number of these moonlighting ragmen, such as the former captain of a passenger steamer who lost his job because of a strike and divided his year between a position as a stock clerk at the bonded warehouses and ragpicking in the suburbs, or even the young plumber without work, the son of a trade union activist and a trade unionist

¹⁰ Including 4,000 *placiers*, 2,000 wandering *coureurs* or *rouleurs*, 1,050 ragpickers and second-hand dealers. Quoted by Barberet, *Monographies professionnelles*, 4, p. 83.

¹¹ Office du Travail, *L'industrie du chiffon*, p. 14.

Table 1. Distribution of the different categories of ragpickers

	Winter	Summer
Placiers	30%	40%
Coueurs	60%	30%
Gadouilleurs	10%	30%

himself.¹² This observer was also struck by the sense of shame among the *coueurs* he approached: "They feel as if they are pariahs. They voluntarily remain in seclusion and dislike being treated as ragpickers." A carpenter, a one-time home-worker who had failed, described his first experience with the trade: "Many people, who, like myself, were unemployed during the winter of 1860 to 1861, started working as ragpickers. I began at night because I feared encountering acquaintances. To avoid being recognized, I covered my head with a wide-brimmed hat that I carefully pulled down over my eyes."¹³ If this individual acquired a taste for his new occupation, imagine how many others must have found the rag trade providential! The considerable numbers of people in this line of business that are conventionally presented and quoted above may provide a rough indication.¹⁴

As a sign of survival difficulties among workers in the big city, ragpicking served an additional function that was often unmentioned but nevertheless essential: the trade was the last resort for old workers, not as a temporary refuge, but for retirement purposes. The ragpickers described in various sources were often quite old and even ancient. Had things changed so much since the enactment of the regulations? Of the 1,841 individuals who obtained a badge from the prefecture between 1 September 1828 and 31 December 1829, 50.2 per cent were over 40 (63 per cent among the women).¹⁵ The situation probably had changed a

¹² Durieu, *Les Parisiens d'aujourd'hui*, pp. 126–132.

¹³ Quoted by Barberet, *Monographies professionnelles*, 4, p. 102. These "Notes d'un chiffonnier" were imparted to Barberet by Desmarquet, one of the witnesses in 1884.

¹⁴ In the nineteenth century, the rag trade was a choice refuge both for aristocrats and for foremen from failed industries. The origins undoubtedly date back to the melodrama of Felix Pyat, *Le chiffonnier de Paris* (1847) and his character the Comte Crion-Carousse, who took up a basket on his back by sheer coincidence. The work has a moralizing theme and is rife with expected turns of events: punishment for wealth acquired improperly, vanity of earthly goods, etc. Nevertheless, an element of truth prevails: Georges Mény (in the *Chiffonnier de Paris* (Paris, 1905)) refers to the case of a descendent of du Mâconnais (an old family of aristocrats) who used his protection to claim the rubbish bins of Palais-Royal and the minister of the colonies. Before him, Privat d'Anglemont had described this special class of ragpickers as "philosophical bohemians, who had once been important and who had, through various misfortunes – almost always involving misconduct – become trapped in a downward spiral culminating in the dregs of society": Privat d'Anglemont, *Paris inconnu* (Paris, 1861), p. 53.

¹⁵ DB 194. This file comprises ten registration forms dated between 1849 and 1863: the average age was 45.5. Two applicants listed a previous occupation.

lot, as the badges were originally intended especially for old people with no means, although this particular aspect of recruitment undoubtedly persisted.

By this point, the ragpicking trade included true professionals: only these people figure in the calculations by Alphand and de Barrat. In summary, about 5,000 persons subsisted permanently from ragpicking (throughout the city area) around 1900. The effect of the conjuncture and of structural variations in employment in wage-earning occupations attracted waves of irregular workers who disproportionately inflated these figures.

In addition to being a trade with traditions, rules, and a history, the rag occupation was characterized by an original social environment. The authentic ragpicker was the son of a ragpicker: "Ragpickers raked through dustbins from father to son and from generation to generation. Children took up the basket at eight or ten years of age; they never learned a trade. How could people escape from this circle? They were born, lived, and died as ragpickers."¹⁶ In 1861 Privat d'Anglemont wrote about the true ragpicker: "By the time he stood one metre high, dressed in rags, with a foraging cap over his ears, a pipe in his mouth, and a basket on his back, he would take a hook in his hand and delve into all the refuse to which people of authority allowed him access."¹⁷ The most frequently mentioned traits of such individuals included their tendency to enter precocious relationships: "We see conjugal cohabitation between young girls of fourteen or fifteen and boys of sixteen."¹⁸ Such love matches arose between adolescents from neighbouring families as soon as they were old enough to manage without their elders. Nevertheless, family values remained essential to one and all: "If a son leaves for the army, all the relatives, including distant cousins and their friends, gather to see the young soldier off; they take up a collection [. . .], every month, they regularly send him a bit of money."¹⁹ The following description summarizes the sight of the departure of *placiers* at daybreak: "A procession of carts drawn by a poor lame donkey or an emaciated old horse [. . .] The ragpicker, his wife, his children – the youngest only four or five years old – and his '*nègres*'²⁰ perched on top with great difficulty."²¹ The occasional *coureurs* mostly worked alone, although the regulars raked through dustbins in small family teams and gradually filled a large bag they left at a crossing.²²

¹⁶ Barberet, *Monographies professionnelles*, 4, p. 92. Further on, Desmarquet describes recruitment to the trade: "First, there are ragpickers by birth, who are the children of ragpickers and who have never practised any other trade" (p. 102).

¹⁷ Privat d'Anglemont, *Paris inconnu*, p. 52.

¹⁸ Barberet, *Monographies professionnelles*, 4, p. 94.

¹⁹ Privat d'Anglemont, *Paris anecdote* (Paris, 1860), p. 320.

²⁰ The *nègres* were children hired by the ragpickers.

²¹ G. Mény, *Le chiffonnier de Paris* (Paris, n.d.), pp. 8–9.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 11. Four persons could thus gather an average of 200 kg. a day.

In addition to its role in perpetuating the trade, the tribal link indisputably had a cohesive effect on the ragpicking population; another aspect was the value attached to the trade: "Frequently," wrote Privat d'Anglemont, "these bizarre individuals say proudly: 'In our family, the basket goes from father to son, we have never been [wage] labourers.' They always felt very strongly that they had chosen a free occupation devoid of the constraints of wage labour: 'Some who might engage in different occupations rake through dustbins because they love their freedom. They prefer to live in poverty and to be their own masters.'"²³ Ragpickers took offence at any comparison to beggars – and abhorred submission to the discipline of regular work in equal measure. In 1884, for example, 294 ragpickers from the 13th *arrondissement* requested employment from the municipal cleaning service; they were offered jobs as sweepers. Only eight accepted the conditions of employment. The others responded as follows: "We work freely and do not wish to be enslaved, plenty of old people can do this work [. . .]. We demand to live from our independent occupation."²⁴ The *coureurs* that Durieu met expressed disdain for the *placiers*: working at fixed stations, they were obliged to show up daily or risk replacement and to be polite to the *concierge* and the tenants of the building. In short, they were no longer true ragpickers.

According to the traditional public image: "The ragpicker is a free agent *par excellence*, the philosopher of the macadam. He feels immense pity for the slaves of Paris, locked from morning to night in a workshop or behind a workbench!"²⁵ Free to plan his route, the sole master of his time, eating straight from containers and wearing the garb he happens to find, with neither extravagant needs nor ambition, the ragpicker has all the traits of a modern savage, reincarnating the instincts and lifestyle of our predator ancestors in the midst of urban civilization: "They represent primitive mankind in the big city, blissfully ignorant of laws, happy with nonentities, imbued with their vegetative way of life, retiring from society like a troglodyte of the caves." From another world, from another city [. . .] While most topical literature was sympathetic towards these people, as is easy with friendly savages who have simple and childlike dispositions, disconcerting references appeared as well: their ignorance of hygiene made contact with these individuals repugnant and dangerous. Moreover, they were never entirely disassociated from night prowlers. This ambiguous image was both alluring and repulsive and accounted for the marginal status of ragmen.

This representation, however, was far from realistic. Indeed, ragpickers had a taste for and a tradition of independence, but the impression that

²³ Barberet, *Monographies professionnelles*, 4, pp. 102–103.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 85–88; Mény, *Le chiffonnier de Paris*, p. 24.

²⁵ *L'Histoire*, 3 April 1870.

they were happy saprophytes of the big city is based on a myth. Their low profits forced them to work regularly. Perhaps savings did not figure within their system of values because they disdained this virtue among more settled circles. Nevertheless, practical circumstances undoubtedly precluded this activity as well. Family cohesion and general mutual aid in surroundings rife with trials and tribulations could entail myriad compromises in the struggle for daily bread, although certain limits existed. Especially during the 1880s, occupational upheaval curtailed the freedom of those involved: the *placiers*, as aptly stated by the *coureurs*, tended to serve as deputy *concierges* in apartment buildings. Such was the price of their privilege, with respect to both the *coureurs* and the former type of gatherers. On the other hand, this article will show that many ragpickers – *coureurs* and *placiers* alike – became directly dependent upon the master ragpickers and effectively turned into wage labourers.

The new regulations also instigated practices that conflicted with the idealistic vision of an unfettered life. The territorial system, which was strictly observed, depended on forceful encounters between licensed and unlicensed workers. Trespassing by a *coureur* in buildings on the turf of a *placier* would inevitably lead to a brawl. If necessary, nearby *placiers* would rush to assist their injured colleague, as they were equally interested in maintaining the hierarchies. In 1905 such an altercation brought three ragpickers before the court: the council for the defence argued that “according to the rules of the ragpickers corporation [. . .] the rights of ‘ragpickers’ were exclusive, reserved for certain persons and individuals entitled to sell and dispose of these rights.” Durieu asked a *secondeur* (a ragpicker who replaced a *placier* when he was inconvenienced from performing his rounds) whether he had ever tried to appropriate the place for himself. Indignantly, the deputy *secondeur* responded: “Do you really think I would take the place of this man who has paid me 80 F!”²⁶ This system generalized pre-existing tendencies: well before 1883, some ragpickers had thought of reserving the rubbish of a house through an understanding with the *concierge* and, in return for small services, got the tenants to set aside discarded linen or leftovers from meals that thus escaped the baskets of competitors.²⁷ On the other hand, the *cités* (blocks of dwellings surrounding a courtyard and generally secluded from the street) of ragpickers had always negotiated a distribution of the neighbourhoods: “Once the territories had been assigned, the confines had to be observed. In the event of trespassing, repressive measures awaited the delinquents upon returning to their *cité* . Punish-

²⁶ Durieu, *Les Parisiens d'aujourd'hui*, p. 147.

²⁷ See Barberet, *Monographies professionnelles*, 4, p. 100; Privat d'Anglemont, *Paris inconnu*, p. 54. In 1872 the police commissioner for the Combat district noted that many of the 500 badges from his jurisdiction were linked to a site in Paris (Enquête parlementaire sur les ouvriers, Archives de la préfecture de Police, BA 400).

ment ordinarily consisted of a fine and, if necessary, a conscientious chastising, to use the standard formulation."²⁸ Little is known about this subject [. . .]

The picturesque descriptions of the savage creature in the literature thus concealed a complex being, deeply rooted in his surroundings. To what extent was he truly marginal? All the evidence gathered describes the ragpicking population as a special group that remained aloof from the other citizens: "They keep to themselves and discuss only their trade."²⁹ Fed and clothed largely through their proceeds, they kept their interactions with vendors – an essential activity among the proletariat – to an absolute minimum (with the sole exception of wine merchants, as alcoholism was their most prevalent behavioural characteristic). The offspring of ragpickers had a reputation for truancy, and the literature states that "uniting the progeny of ragpickers with the children of workers was virtually impossible". Durieu had some difficulty establishing contact with the subjects of his study, as borne out by this reflection shared by a couple of ragpickers whom he approached a bit too closely: "Surely, if he had had photographic equipment, he would have taken a picture for his mantlepiece."³⁰ The independence that the ragpickers associated with their work inevitably made them feel they were entirely different from the workers. Moreover, they obviously found poor neighbourhoods less lucrative. The very nature of their work discouraged any sense of solidarity among the ragpickers with respect to the people whose dustbins attested to poverty. "This is worker [territory]", declared a *coureur* to Durieu, with a note of arrogance, as they crossed a destitute quarter. Finally, beneath this marginal individual lurked an *aficionado* of order: the anarchists during the occupational upheaval instigated by regulations unsuccessfully tried to reach their audience. With tremendous respect and confidence in the justice of the delegates, they made lengthy statements before the *Quarante-Quatre*.

In this respect, the honesty of ragpickers was a subject of tremendous controversy. According to many authors of the picturesque literature, no citizen was more righteous: they scrupulously returned any item of value that wound up in a dustbin. The low figures for police arrests of these people are quoted extensively. In short, "the ragpickers of Paris were not victims of degradation as felt by haughty individuals".³¹ More astute observers, however, believed otherwise. According to Durieu, the ragpickers deliberately kept unexpected discoveries, except if the gratuity was likely to exceed the value of the item in question. Surely the territorial system, where tenants of buildings knew the licensed operators

²⁸ Barberet, *Monographies professionnelles*, 4, p. 91.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³⁰ Durieu, *Les Parisiens d'aujourd'hui*, p. 127.

³¹ *La Paix*, 8 January 1892. As stated by Louis de Paulian, the author of an important work on ragpickers, *La hotte du chiffonnier* (Paris, 1885).

well, encouraged a more scrupulous approach. Among the *placiers*, however, especially with the children and the “*nègres*”, petty theft was thought to be common.³²

What do these contradictory statements suggest? Excerpts for 1907 and 1908 from the registers for the commissionership of the Gare (13th *arrondissement*), a quarter where ragpickers abounded, offer a clue: ragpickers are mentioned very rarely in connection with the types of crimes or offences considered. They appear twice among the thefts perpetrated by adults and only once in cases of rebellion and insults against officers. The significance of these cases pales amid the considerable total numbers of such incidents.³³

This information totally disproves any comparison of the ragpickers to the contemporary “dangerous classes” and elucidates descriptions elsewhere: the population of ragpickers led an introverted existence, satisfied its very limited needs from its meagre profits, and maintained little contact with other social groups. The group’s cohesive nature ensured both strong individual integration and resolution of conflicts of interest between persons and families, whereas among outsiders they were often hauled on to the public square and were rarely successful with the commissioner. Regarding the distribution of neighbourhoods among the *cités* and their authority, the source added: “The police has no involvement or interest in these harsh disciplinary tactics.” In 1883, a ragpicker submitting a written complaint to the prefecture about the infiltration of “criminals” in the trade demanded that henceforth the practice be restricted to licensed operators: in other words, the badge, which denoted legitimacy in the ragpicking business, ensured the absence of police intervention in the trade. Another ragpicker expressed the same sentiment even more specifically to a clergyman venturing into a *cit  *: “We do not meddle with the bourgeois; they should resolve their issues themselves and leave us alone.”³⁴ Territorial segregation, however, was among the most striking features of the occupation.

The nature of the work was of universal importance: after completing his gathering rounds, the ragpicker returned home and began the *tramage* process, which involved sorting and decomposing the proceeds (e.g. separating leather from the clasp of a wallet). The regulations of the decree of 1883 authorized this operation between 11 o’clock in the morning (the time of their return) and 4 o’clock in the afternoon and

³² See Barberet, *Monographies professionnelles*, 4, pp. 94–95.

³³ The first case of theft (15 November 1906) involves a ragpicker of the rue Nationale who had kept a package he found in a dustbin on the rue d’Aboukir containing certificates and securities; the second, rather interesting case concerns a ragman who traded second-hand goods accused of stealing a pair of trousers and a vest (valued at 5.5 F) from an individual. The insult to officers (23 March 1907) occurred in the Jeanne-d’Arc *cit  *, a very specific area of the *arrondissement*.

³⁴ M  ny, *Le chiffonnier de Paris*, p. 23.

assigned the rest of the afternoon to sales to the master ragpicker. Ragmen thus did a lot of their work at home. Every abode occupied by a tradesmen was therefore a small warehouse for rag scrap: the choice of residence among ragpickers thus depended upon advances in hygiene.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the ragmen lived in the city's central districts and the working-class areas, especially in the old 12th *arrondissement* and the neighbourhoods of Montagne-Sainte-Geneviève and Saint-Marceau: "Nearly all menial trades could be found there; the low rents and the numerous local wholesale rag merchants attracted most of the ragpickers in Paris", noted the Commission for unsanitary dwellings in 1851.³⁵ Their lives were generally closely connected with the rest of the population, despite a pronounced tendency to concentrate on certain abodes. The large construction projects marked the start of a progressive ragpickers' exodus from the centre (the first ten *arrondissements*, which constituted the bourgeois neighbourhoods of Paris) in the late 1840s. The complex movement proceeded in different directions and entailed various forms of district planning. From the Second Empire onward, the *cités* spread outside the city limits into the suburbs. A simultaneous trend, which prevailed during this era, involved the relocation of ragpickers from the centre to the neighbourhoods on the periphery (the ten higher *arrondissements*, which constituted the working-class neighbourhoods of Paris). Even in Paris, residential developments emerged in *cités* comparable to the suburbs or as subordinate, smaller concentrations fairly close to the *cité*, but on sites or territories owned by master ragpickers. Nevertheless, a general tendency began in the second half of the century: settlement by families formerly dispersed throughout the city in compact and highly individualized arrangements, thus leading to largely voluntary enclosure inside these local ghettos.

In addition to the contrast between the centre and the periphery, the spatial implantation of this population affected the urban-suburban context. In 1902 the figures gathered by the Labour Department on occupational organizations reflected the distribution of ragpickers' households shown in Table 2.

By the turn of the century, the share of ragpickers in the centre was of marginal significance. Along the periphery, they operated predominantly on the Left Bank. They apparently benefited from shifting their centre of occupational gravity (from the old 12th *arrondissement* to newer quarters), especially towards the 13th *arrondissement*: the considerable contrast between the assessments of the workers and the employers clearly shows that this *arrondissement* heralded the occupational resettlement in Paris.³⁶

³⁵ *Rapport général sur les travaux de la Commission pendant l'année 1851*, p. 11.

³⁶ *Office du Travail, L'industrie du chiffon à Paris*, pp. 22–23. The absolute figures are of little interest: only the proportional distribution is significant.

Table 2. *Distribution of ragpickers' households, 1902*

	1	2
	%	%
5th <i>arrondissement</i> (Saint-Victor)	3	4
13th (Gare, Salpêtrière, Maison Blanche)	25	33
14th–15th (Santé, Javel)	30	22
18th (Montmartre)	15	14
19th (La Villette)	9	8
20th (Belleville, Saint-Fargeau, Charonne)	18	19
Paris	100	100
Paris	47.8	50
Suburbs	52.2	50
Total settlement	100	100

1 = according to the employers unions

2 = according to the workers unions

At this early date, the suburbs provided a counterweight to the original urban hub. This evaluation falls squarely within the proportions previously introduced: in 1886 the Board of Health accounted for two-thirds of the ragpickers in suburban communities. In 1894 it was written that “Ragpickers have moved to the countryside, if Saint-Ouen, Pantin, or Clichy could possibly suggest an open prairie.”³⁷ Recall that this situation had its distant origins in the beginning of the expulsion from the centre. Clichy in particular quickly became the residence of major settlements of ragpickers, such as the Germain *cité* (which was nicknamed Little Mazas³⁸) and especially the Foucault *cité* (known as “woman in culottes”). Around 1850, Doré’s rival purchased a vast area in the community and sublet portions to about fifty households.³⁹ In 1888, an actual ragpicker said that “Clichy is the place for studying the ragmen’s customs”.⁴⁰ The suburbs to the north of the capital accommodated the main concentration of this development outside the city limits, probably because of the significant urbanization of the zones adjacent to the Right Bank; on the other bank, the free spaces that were less important long restricted the ragpickers within the confines of the city.

Even though the encampments of the suburbs and the periphery both originated from the movement emanating from the centre, many signs indicated that the suburbs eventually became an outlet for the settlements along the periphery threatened by constraints. Statistics on warehouses containing rag scrap that belonged to the master ragpickers exemplify this rate by virtue of the function of the masters in ragpicker accommodations

³⁷ *Le Monde illustré*, 4 August 1894.

³⁸ “Given this name because its forty or fifty rooms are the size of a cell [at the Mazas prison]”: Barberet, *Monographies professionnelles*, 4, p. 96.

³⁹ De Paulian, *La hotte du chiffonnier*, p. 55. This individual bequeathed the site to the community.

⁴⁰ Barberet, *Monographies professionnelles*, 4, p. 95.

(dwellings that they sometimes supplied, *cités* that were always close to the warehouses). In 1884 138 such warehouses existed within the city limits of Paris; by 1901, 135 remained. Simultaneously, the suburban establishments increased from 35 to 97: all growth in the profession thus took place outside the city between these dates.⁴¹ On the Left Bank, the number of warehouses decreased from seven to four in the 14th *arrondissement* and from sixteen to eleven in the 15th *arrondissement*. Along with the 10th *arrondissement* in Paris (where merchant warehouses were located), only the 13th *arrondissement* experienced any increase (of the 12th through to the 20th *arrondissements*). By 1912, while the 14th *arrondissement* gained three additional units (rising from four to seven), the 15th and the 13th *arrondissements* experienced a considerable drop (from twenty to fourteen in the 15th and from eleven to six in the 13th). After 1900, this disappearance of industrial establishments probably coincided with the departure of ragpickers for the suburbs. Certain important districts had already vanished or had been dismantled. The regulations reflected the same trend: when Durieu conducted his survey, he noted that the *placiers* had practically monopolized the capital, thereby relegating the *coureurs* to the routes in the suburbs. The benefits that the *placiers* reaped from the territorial system thus gradually brought about the distribution of the general areas of settlement for the two major categories. Admittedly, many *coureurs* resided inside Paris (and many *placiers* lived outside). *Coureurs* wishing to avoid excessively long routes, however, eventually had to move to the suburbs, especially people engaged in the trade sporadically.

The ragpickers were a group of the populace that retreated to the suburbs even before 1914. While the numbers were relatively modest, the trend signified their rejection of both the bourgeois and the proletariat elements of city life. This case, which was probably unique, undoubtedly reflected the original characteristics of the occupation and resembled a veritable flight from the advancing urban sanitation drive: "Sanitation issues are totally alien to this segment of the population; the very word scares them. They regard the operation as a malevolent goddess dedicated to persecuting the poor ragpickers; in the interest of sanitation, the police betrays them with a view to improving the cleanliness of their dwellings and to restricting the number of pigs they are entitled to raise. I have often [. . .] heard the exclamation: 'You see, sanitation is our worst enemy'."⁴² According to the investigator from the Board of Health, "when measures affect occupational practice in certain settlements, ragpickers prefer to move elsewhere (occasionally very far away from their place of residence), rather than to submit". Ragpickers consider sanitation experts their enemies: "Sadly, the arro-

⁴¹ Office du Travail, *L'industrie du chiffon à Paris*, pp. 21–22.

⁴² Durieu, *Les Parisiens d'aujourd'hui*, pp. 92–93.

gance of these poor souls leads to their abasement; they seem happy with the life they have built for themselves and immune to all laws of society; if we were to install them in a palace, they would soon turn the residence into an equally atrocious and pestilential abode as the one where they were born and where they hope to die.”⁴³ A sordid class, a dangerous class [. . .]

Precautionary isolation then became the only solution, as advocated by the Board of Health: “Great interest existed in moving them away from the population centres and resettling them just inside or outside the Paris city limits [. . .] This emigration may be furthered by erecting well-built *cités* for workers outside Paris providing sanitary and low-cost accommodations to large numbers of these ragpickers.”⁴⁴ The sanitation authorities had chosen to focus on their marginal nature and their tendency to live in groups. Recall that the desire to wipe out the occupation underlay the regulation of 1883: perpetuation and survival of these town savages was tolerable only in the event of a sanitary cordon.

What type of abodes existed in these *cités*? From the middle of the nineteenth century the centrifugal exodus essentially led to *cités*: the search for a vast open area, settlement through makeshift construction of hovels, and a progressively increasing population density that gave rise to an integrated arrangement. Privat d’Anglemont wrote: “As soon as one discovered a home or a site available for rent, all the others came to visit and quickly formed a settlement, a clan, a family, a type of mutual assistance society where they afforded one another generous support during hard times.”⁴⁵ The ragpickers’ *cités* were merely a specific type of improvised abode that arose along the periphery at the end of the nineteenth century: especially in this respect, the original population of these settlements consisted almost exclusively of ragmen’s households. While the origins of these cities are quite obscure, the system of improvised dwellings already seemed very common: owners of vacant sites would divide the area into lots on which the tenants constructed their own homes. The case of the Foucault *cit * has been described above; the Dor  *cit * in the 13th *arrondissement* was the most widely known. In 1886, the reporter from the Board of Health listed in addition to the Dor  *cit * neighbourhood the Maufry, Fournier, Malbert (at Montmartre), and Hivert (Combat, 19th *arrondissement*) *cit s* inside Paris: using proper names to designate the settlements indicates their origins beyond any doubt. This category comprised the Ile-aux-Singes, the *cit  des Mousquetaires*, and the Cour des Miracles in the 15th

⁴³ Commission des logements insalubres, *Rapport pour l’ann e 1851*, p. 12.

⁴⁴ De Luynes, *Rapports sur les d p ts de chiffons*, p. 12.

⁴⁵ Privat d’Anglemont, *Paris anecdote*, pp. 307–308.

arrondissement.⁴⁶ In the 13th *arrondissement*, most of the inhabitants in the dwellings in the Butte-aux-Cailles development were probably ragpickers.

These concentrations of ragmen were the largest ever in Paris. The few available descriptions are striking. Regarding the Foucault *cit  * at Clichy:

Picture a long rectangle or rather a wide alley lined with two-storey buildings on the right and on the left containing thirty rooms on each floor. Some rooms lack any windows and have a single door serving both as the entrance and as the window. The area is slightly larger than a prison cell. It contains neither a wooden floor, nor tiles, nor a stone surface. The furnishings vary according to the financial situation of the tenants. Nearly all own a stove made of pieces of scrap metal and bricks easily found in public dumps; the wealthiest have a bed, a table, and a chair, or rather objects that resemble a bed, a table, and a chair. Inhabitants with more modest means have only a bed. Many own nothing at all. In a corner of such rooms lies a heap of straw the inhabitants have gathered on the street on the day of their move. On this bed of straw, the ragpicker sleeps with his wife, his children, his dog [. . .] and his refuse.⁴⁷

The improvised dwellings, which resulted from makeshift fabrication, where the initiative of materials, arrangement of the shanties, and interior decoration were left entirely to the users, gave rise to unusual urban landscapes that featured stark geometric constructions assembled from disparate elements forming curious combinations – especially in the *cit  s* of the ragpickers, who relied on the recovery of items for their livelihood. Photographs from the late nineteenth century reveal shanties with overlapping roofs and paths overflowing with the proceeds of the *tricage* and even extending into the living quarters. At 85 rue Ch  teau-des-Rentiers, where a night shelter eventually arose, a confused shanty town existed around 1890; the small gardens adjacent to the dwellings, “helter skelter with the inhabitants, contained heaps of rags, all kinds of rubbish”.⁴⁸ The description of the Maufray *cit  * on the rue Marcadet was as follows: “While the general countenance of this development is indeed impoverished, it is not dull; myriad small details are apparent [. . .] Here, a stuffed crow is perched above the door of an abode; there, rocks are arranged in a curious window decoration; further on, a wall is covered with small glittering shards of mirrors.”⁴⁹

These *cit  s* offered the ragpickers far more spacious accommodations than their previous quarters in the centre. The facilities for *tricage* and storage of the proceeds in the courtyards of the cottages may have

⁴⁶ An article in *Le Matin* (22 August 1908) estimated the number of ragpickers in this *arrondissement* at 2,000.

⁴⁷ De Paulian, *La hotte du chiffonnier*, p. 55.

⁴⁸ Octave du Mesnil, *L'habitation du pauvre    Paris* (Paris, 1890), p. 39.

⁴⁹ A. Colignon, *Le pav   parisien* (Paris, n.d.), pp. 41–42.

motivated the exodus. Father Cordet's clan was an isolated but exemplary case.⁵⁰ Like his family, he was an old "patriarch" hailing from the Mouffetard neighbourhood near the Patriarches market. As "the indentations in these neighbourhoods inconvenienced the clientele", he proposed a dispersed *smala*-style household: "What if we join forces? We could live and work together; the able men and women would search out the goods, while the young and the old did the sorting." For 500 F (the amount of compensation for eviction), Father Cordet purchased a vacant site on Vaugirard. The united households (married youths and girls) constructed six ramshackle huts (of which two served for storing merchandise). Twenty-two people set up co-operative living arrangements in these huts, where each household had two or three rooms at its disposal. Father Cordet did not long for the days "before we were patriarchs", when, for lack of space, the proceeds had to be sold to the master ragpicker daily. As a group effort, the *tricage* operations improved, and the people could live from their reserves while waiting for the monthly sale, which was now directly to a merchant. While this small *cité* had a strong, virtually tribal link, the lifestyle emphasized characteristics common to other large *cités*: concentration of households, greater harmony between the activity and its fixed base of operation, collective life, and so on.

The collective lifestyle characterized the ragpicker communities. In the *cités* the homogeneous occupation and the links between families, along with the relatively similar incomes among the ragmen before the upheaval in the trade caused by the regulation of 1883,⁵¹ arose from the very existence of these isolated environments. Mutual aid was an accepted practice: "When he grows aged and infirm, a ragpicker does not go to the hospital. His neighbours will not allow him to suffer. Rather, they help him and take up collections to satisfy his needs, enduring deprivation to offer him small comforts."⁵² The willingness of the ragmen to take in stray children or the progeny of their neighbours (their "*nègres*") reflected both an interest in additional hands for gathering and a common practice of living and working together, as well as a form of public assistance for children. According to Durieu, the

⁵⁰ P. Bory, *Les métamorphoses d'un chiffon* (Abbeville, 1897).

⁵¹ This equality was relative. Even before the distinction between *placiers* and *coureurs*, a hierarchy existed among the population of ragpickers. The arrangement was sometimes institutionalized, as in the Pot d'Étain entertainment facility on the border of Fontainebleau, which was divided into three halls: "la Chambre des Pairs" (reserved for people who owned baskets and hooks in good condition), "la Chambre des Députés" (for the common people), and the "cercle des vrais prolétaires" (for everyone whose equipment consisted merely of a bag). "Disciplinary penalties" were issued to anyone entering a hall restricted to people with greater means (*Le Monde*, 7 June 1872). In 1857, upon the establishment of a mutual benefit society, this hierarchy was replaced with a common banqueting hall, although it quickly reappeared (*Moniteur universel*, 5 November 1857).

⁵² Privat d'Anglemont, *Paris anecdote*, p. 321.

ragpickers' offspring, despite their irregular school attendance, were gifted with a keen sense of observation and certainly did not scorn study: "They often seem to form a class of their own. The *conciierge* at a *cit * of ragpickers showed me doors and walls covered with letters, figures, additions, and subtractions attesting to this system of mutual instruction and told me that upon learning something new at school, a young ragpicker would immediately share this knowledge with his chums."⁵³ Some observers marvelled at the fairly frequent religious practices in the *cit s*, although these cases were restricted to ceremonial occasions (baptisms, first communions, burials) concerning the family and attended by the people in the neighbourhood.

The daily schedule reflected a common pattern in each *cit *; after *tricage*, the men left the courtyards and the cottages to gather at the shops of local or neighbouring wine merchants. A journalist who visited the Ile-aux-Singes one evening in 1869, when the area had reached its maximum, provided the following description: "Children clad in rags sought the warmth of the sunlight; women sat on the ground mending their husbands' tattered garments, while an inebriated refrain resounded from the gloomy taverns that inevitably abounded in such areas."⁵⁴ Alcoholism was more characteristic of the ragpickers than of any other group in the nineteenth century.

Inside Paris, the decline of these developments is difficult to date and probably began before the 1880s. Although details are lacking, sanitary grounds seem to have been the main reason, as mentioned previously. Large construction projects or demolition measures affected or eliminated several *cit s*. New roads that were opened, which entailed the urbanization of zones where *cit s* had arisen unhindered, were also decisive and certainly occurred in conjunction with the construction projects (as on the Ile-aux-Singes). Such settlements continued to be built in the suburbs (*cit s* at Gennevilliers and Asni res, for instance). Within the city limits, however, new types of ragpickers' dwellings emerged, preceding total exclusion of the ragmen from the city.

Dismantling the *cit s* led several ragpickers to stake out new sites for building. Initially, the construction gave rise to individual buildings without forming new settlements. Around 1905, the rent per square metre near the city limits varied from 1.50 F to 2 F per year.⁵⁵ The construction cost 100 F,⁵⁶ more if a coach house, a stable, and perhaps even a basement for the merchandise were added to the simple hovel. Only the *placiers* had the means to set up house in such fashion. In fact, many new settlements arose, although most were smaller than the

⁵³ Durieu, *Les Parisiens d'aujourd'hui*, p. 97.

⁵⁴ *Ville de Paris*, 5 October 1883.

⁵⁵ In Gentilly: 0.25 to 0.50 F; in Saint-Ouen: from 0.60 to 0.90 F: Office du travail, *L'industrie du chiffon   Paris*, p. 12.

⁵⁶ M ny, *Le chiffonnier de Paris*, p. 12.

cités, and the master ragpickers usually built and let the accommodations. The *pointe d'Ivry* neighbourhood in the 13th *arrondissement* typified such habitats. On the *rue des Hospices*, at a site belonging to the Ouest railway, the subtenant (who was a master ragpicker) appointed another ragpicker as a caretaker to collect the rents for the lots on which three ragmen's households had built shanties:⁵⁷ this case also involved make-shift constructions. At 48 *avenue de Choisy*, a large building in a courtyard contained the warehouses of the master ragpicker – who was also the owner – and single-room accommodations rented to ragmen by the week (from 2.50 F to 2 F). This *cité* provided shelter for 51 people. On the *rue Baudricourt* three sides of a huge quadrilateral structure contained 77 dwellings. The master's residence occupied the fourth side; a large shed in the centre served as a warehouse for rags: 64 people lived there. While this arrangement was not the first effort by the master ragpickers to concentrate their suppliers in their midst, they succeeded only as a result of the dislocation of the large *cités*.

In the preceding cases, as with all situations of the same type, the ragpickers or tenants processed their proceeds daily at the site on their master's scales. Dependence on such an intermediary had always characterized this occupation where the vast majority lived from day to day; the master ensured continuity, being indebted to him is frequently mentioned among the evils of the ragpicking trade.⁵⁸ By providing accommodation, the masters tightened their control considerably: the ragmen were on the verge of losing their independence; in some small *cités*, they were merely wage-earners for the masters, who became their bosses. An individual testifying before the *Commission des Quarante-Quatre* described the situation as follows: "The masters rent the sites to us at very high rates, higher than on the *rue de Rivoli*: we are allocated filthy premises; we are sweltering in the summer and freezing in the winter [. . .] Most mobile ragpickers are forced to board with their masters, who are usually wine merchants. They have to purchase necessities from him. Otherwise, the master ragpicker may refuse to take their wares or may give them notice."⁵⁹ In this respect, an existing practice became widespread at the expense of ragmen who did not own their accommodation and did not pay promptly: first their door would be removed, next the roofing in the case of shanties, "this was the equivalent of dismissal;

⁵⁷ Rents: 7 F weekly, 6 F monthly, 5 F monthly. Du Mesnil, *L'habitation du pauvre à Paris*, p. 264.

⁵⁸ Ragpickers often sold their take on the basis of "gross weight": the product that dominated the lot determined the price. The ragmen had always objected to this unfair system. The masters attributed its need to the heavy losses after processing. On the other hand, ignorance of the wholesale prices (if only because of the considerable range of products) always made the ragmen believe that these natives of Auvergne (who had a reputation for swindling their subordinates in business) were taking advantage of them.

⁵⁹ *Commission d'enquête parlementaire* (1884), p. 246.

it was the only way to get ragpickers to leave, as the police never ventured into the *cités*".⁶⁰ This particular procedure soon came into general use in the small *cités* run by the masters.

Whether they were *placiers* or *coureurs* (the inexorable decline in the number of *coureurs* practising their trade in the capital is noted above), ragmen in Paris had increasing difficulty earning a living. The disappearance of the large *cités* eliminated a major share of the freedom of these people who roamed the city. Preserving their independence required crossing the city limits, building their shanties on some obscure site,⁶¹ or joining the major *cités* of the northern suburbs. By the end of the nineteenth century, the circumstances of the trade had begun to change. Entirely new institutions arose: selling co-operatives (intended to circumvent the intermediary role of the masters) and trade organizations.⁶² The dismembered tribe sought to regain the lost element of cohesion. Manumission from the masters for the ragpickers residing in Paris added a new dimension to the process initiated by the division according to *coureurs* and *placiers*: the solidarity within the community of *cités* and the economic homogeneity were no more. Nearly all these consolidation efforts failed.⁶³ A journalist shared the following observation concerning an effort to establish a co-operative in Grenelle in 1908: "In our trade, the strongest will always have the upper hand."⁶⁴

The ragpickers undoubtedly resented these forms of organization that were characteristic of wage-earners; their accepted marginality coincided with a sense of satisfaction with their fate that was too deeply rooted for the concerned individuals to approve of these tokens of goodwill. Moreover, the dispersion of ragmen in small units in the *cités* of the masters was a considerable obstacle. Even the large *cités* in the suburbs lacked the cohesion of the former Parisian *cités*, as illustrated by Durieu's visit to Gennevilliers. Neighbourly relations were more restrained: "every man for himself", stated a *placier*, emphasizing that nobody had helped him and his family when he suffered an extended illness.⁶⁵ Was the "well-being" of these households of *placiers*, with their settled way of life, as this author writes, indicative of true entrepreneurs who owned

⁶⁰ Mény, *Le chiffonnier de Paris*, p. 13.

⁶¹ Such was the case among certain *coureurs* studied by Durieu, *Les Parisiens d'aujourd'hui*, pp. 126–137.

⁶² See Office du Travail, *L'industrie du chiffon à Paris*, pp. 79–83.

⁶³ Exceptions occurred in certain very specific sectors of the occupation: nearly all dustbin ragpickers were unionized (they were semi-wage-earners), as were their counterparts in pulverization plants. According to Durieu, the union succeeded in regulating the work at the Issy plant (only for the choice positions). This solidarity is attributable to the exceptional conditions: "At the Saint-Ouen plant, the ragpickers were there to stay and set up extremely inconvenient warehouses for rags": *Rapport sur les opérations du service d'inspection des établissements classés* (1907), p. 31.

⁶⁴ *Le Matin*, 22 August 1908.

⁶⁵ Durieu, *Les Parisiens d'aujourd'hui*, pp. 156–169.

subterranean warehouses, horses and carts, and were liable for real estate taxes? At any rate, as certain ragpickers loved to repeat on the eve of the war: "Jealousy entered the occupation."

It should be remembered that the emergence of these small units preceded the exclusion of ragpickers from the city. By 1914, the ragpicking diaspora, from the centre to the periphery, and then to the large *cités* in the suburbs, was almost complete. Progressive detachment and gradual repression characterized the ragmen in Paris during the second half of the nineteenth century. This historical process involved an exceptional degree of marginality for the actors. Among the paradoxes, this occupation, which had been decidedly urban, was gradually driven out of the city. To the extent that the freedom to practise entailed a certain state of public hygiene and urban facilities, changes in these domains inevitably affected the ragmen. The two phenomena that overwhelmed their world – the emergence of hierarchies in the economic situation and the liquidation of the large *cités* – resulted directly from the new sanitation trends: the regulation of 1883 signified a struggle against unsanitary rental dwellings and improvised habitats. The same urban environment grew increasingly intolerant of eccentric groups among the population: this striking logic applied in still greater measure to the working-class population overall, both at the time and in the long run.

Translated from the French by Lee Mitzman