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Château Rouge: a “Little Africa” in Paris?

The users and usages of a migrant commercial centrality

Marie Chabrol

The Château Rouge area of Paris is regarded as an “African neighbourhood”. But what is the reality behind this image? Marie Chabrol shows that it has less to do with residents’ backgrounds than with the commercial uses of the area, which put this district at the heart of large-scale mobilities.

Paris, like any major metropolis, has different neighbourhoods whose images are built and rebuilt around business activities linked to immigration. The Château Rouge area – situated in the shadow of Sacré-Cœur at the foot of the eastern slopes of Montmartre, in the 18th *arrondissement* (city district)¹ of Paris – is often viewed as an “African neighbourhood”. Although there are many foreign citizens from Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa among its inhabitants (as in other areas of northern and eastern Paris²), their presence alone does not explain the extraordinary numbers of Africans that frequent this neighbourhood. Rather, it is the number of specialist shops that creates an “African centrality” at the metropolitan level: the specificity of the products sold polarises the consumption practices of people of African or Caribbean origin, the vast majority of whom do not live here but give the area its image. Who are these “Africans of Château Rouge”? And how does this “migrant” or “minority”³ commercial centrality, so typical of major world cities, function?

A detailed study combining observations and a questionnaire-based survey⁴ shows the diversity of users and practices in Château Rouge and reveals urban dynamics that are not immediately obvious. The extraordinary density of business activities in the neighbourhood masks large-scale daily mobility flows that connect it to other residential and commercial spaces, and which extend beyond the metropolitan area. Accordingly, a study of these mobilities is necessary in order to understand how neighbourhoods that are all too often apprehended only at local level actually function – especially when other phenomena, such as residential gentrification, come into play and create tensions with commercial activities.

¹ The 18th *arrondissement*, in the north of Paris, covers (from west to east) the areas of Montmartre (including the northern part of Pigalle), Clignancourt, La Goutte d’Or (including Château Rouge and Barbès) and La Chapelle.

² In all, 34.6% of the population of the Goutte d’Or neighbourhood are non-French, compared with 19.7% for the 18th *arrondissement* as a whole and 13.3% for the city of Paris. For purposes of comparison, 25.3% of the population of Belleville (a neighbourhood with a similar population profile in the east of Paris) are non-French (Insee 2006).

³ “Migrant centrality” is a fairly neutral term, used in France in the 1980s and 1990s with regard to areas such as La Goutte d’Or, Belleville or the 13th *arrondissement* of Paris (Toubron and Messamah 1990; Guillon and Taboada-Leonetti 1986). “Minority centrality”, an expression used by the anthropologist Anne Raulin, has a broader meaning, as it applies to all minority groups (ethnic or sexual) compared with a given majority. In this context, “ethnic minority” refers as much to specific geographical origins (North African, Sub-Saharan, Caribbean, etc.) as to specific religious practices (e.g. halal or kosher meat) (Raulin 1988).

⁴ As part of PhD fieldwork, repeated observations were made between 2006 and 2011, complemented in May 2009 by a questionnaire-based study among a sample of 600 individuals interviewed in the street (between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. on a Thursday and a Saturday) with the assistance of students from the Université Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. The results of this study were published in Chabrol (2011). This study was inspired by exploratory research into non-residential spatial practices (Lévy and Dureau 2005).

An African commercial centrality in Paris

Since the 1990s, Château Rouge has been known for the specificity of the products that are sold there by traders from France, North Africa, China, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent. The retail offer present (over a hundred shops) is both abundant and diverse, with products ranging from fresh and processed foods to textiles, clothing, cosmetics and cultural products (such as CDs, DVDs and religious items). The area is also home to numerous bars and restaurants, craftspeople (tailors, for example) and various service activities (telephony, freight agencies, hairdressers, etc.). The many posters plastered on walls and street furniture, advertising concerts, dances (“Senegalese night”, “Congolese night”) or evangelical preaching in the suburbs (very rarely in Paris and never in Château Rouge itself) testify to the centrality of the neighbourhood in terms of social networks.⁵

New shops are regularly opened by entrepreneurs who seek to set up their business in this particular locality and niche, despite the policy of diversification of business activities that has been implemented by the authorities for many years now: the city council has actively sought to reintroduce local, neighbourhood stores in order to make the area a true “living space” for its residents and not just a place frequented by users from outside the district.⁶ Nonetheless, Château Rouge retains its image as an “African” district, despite a growing disconnect between rapid gentrification of housing stock on the one hand and the continuity of these business activities, whose polarising effect extends well beyond the local neighbourhood, on the other.

Most users do not live in the neighbourhood

Of the respondents who participated in the questionnaire-based survey we conducted, 67% said they did not live in the neighbourhood. These non-residents share certain characteristics: over 70% of them were born outside mainland France, of which half in Sub-Saharan Africa;⁷ men outnumber women; the most populous age group is 30–50 years; and a high proportion of respondents are in employment (70%). Finally, most of them (68%) use public transport to get to Château Rouge. Another interesting finding is that 87% of them have never lived in the neighbourhood.

A study of respondents’ residential locations reveals five distinct geographical areas that illustrate the influence of the centrality of Château Rouge at different scales: first, other parts of the 18th *arrondissement* (21%); second, other *arrondissements* of Paris (18%); third, the rest of the Île-de-France (Greater Paris) region, excluding the city of Paris (47%); fourth, other regions of France (11%); and, lastly, outside France (3%). The most populous group is the rest of the Île-de-France region (excluding the city of Paris). The presence of numerous bus and metro lines and the area’s proximity to the Gare du Nord and the Gare de l’Est railway stations play a key role in these mobilities, as many users reside in inner-ring suburbs. However, the proportion of respondents that live in outer-ring suburbs or from outside the Paris region is not insignificant and adds a specific dimension to this centrality. Depending on one’s starting point – the neighbouring Barbès district, a village in the outer eastern suburbs or a *département* in western France – a journey to Château Rouge does not have the same significance, bearing in mind the distances and costs involved.

⁵ See sociologist Baptiste Coulmont’s blog for his work on the collection and analysis of these posters and flyers (in French): <http://coulmont.com/blog/2008/09/07/eglises-africaines>.

⁶ This objective guides different forms of public action that aim to regulate and diversify the retail offer of “single activity” areas in Paris. In Château Rouge, such retail-related action is one of the three key aspects of the urban renewal project under way in the neighbourhood since 2002 (the other two aspects being housing and public spaces).

⁷ In addition to French overseas territories and a number of Latin American, Asian and European countries, this included 24 African nations: Algeria, Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, Tunisia.

Food retail at the heart of a diverse range of usages

Although going to bars and restaurants, meeting friends or simply enjoying being in an African atmosphere contribute significantly the attractiveness of the area, it is above all the various food stores that explain the area's popularity. Despite this, 80% of respondents reported that they do a large proportion of their food shopping elsewhere (mainly in hypermarkets near their place of residence or on local markets) and come to Château Rouge to buy certain specific products only. Patronage of a commercial centrality such as Château Rouge is therefore not exclusive, but instead functions in connection with other retail spaces.

Food stores in Château Rouge: an attractiveness factor at different levels



© Marie Chabrol, 2011

In order of importance, the arguments given to justify food purchases in Château Rouge are the specificity of the products, the low prices, the variety of products on offer, the quality and freshness of the products, and finally geographical proximity. The specificity of products was the key reason cited above all by respondents from the outer suburbs and from outside the Paris region, in towns and villages where this kind of retail offer simply does not exist, as well as by respondents living abroad, who are often present in Paris for some other reason (e.g. family, holidays, work). These three groups of users, who travel the greatest distances, are also those whose visits are, unsurprisingly, the least frequent. They typically make the trip to Château Rouge a few times a month, once a month or once every two to three months in order to do a bulk shop of African or tropical products. The populations concerned are almost exclusively of Sub-Saharan or Caribbean origin; they come to buy products for a month's worth of meals or, alternatively, to prepare for a party or a special meal. Most of these people are in employment, with a significant proportion of executive and mid-level occupations.

Their profile contrasts with that of "local" users, that is to say users who live in the 18th *arrondissement*, elsewhere in Paris or in the inner suburbs. These users tend to come to the area every week, or even every day, to shop for smaller quantities of meat, fruit or vegetables. The reasons for their visits to Château Rouge are proximity and force of habit, the low prices and, lastly, the specificity of the products. Parisian respondents also come to meet friends, while low prices are the main reason cited by respondents from the suburbs. Of these very regular users, many are not in employment (retired, unemployed or housewives) and those who are in active employment tend to be manual or office workers.

One final user profile, independent of distance, also emerges: men aged 30 to 50, from Côte d'Ivoire, Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo, who come not so much for the shops as to meet friends and enjoy the bars, restaurants and general atmosphere of the area. They belong to

various socio-professional categories and come from each of the five geographical areas defined above.

A centrality at metropolitan level

The practices of these different user types have a major influence on the rhythm of daily life in Château Rouge. While on weekday mornings the area is relatively quiet and frequented by consumers wishing to shop with maximum efficiency, it is much more lively in the afternoons and even more so at weekends. On Saturday afternoon, crowds invade the busiest shopping streets; consumers, accompanied by children, friends and relatives, take their time in strolling along the streets, shopping and stopping to eat. The area is also a meeting place, and the practices that are deployed here resemble those that can be observed in other commercial centralities. These consumption practices play a role in maintaining the image of an “African neighbourhood”; however, beyond this clear-cut image and these practices of a shared space, there is little in common between, say, an embassy employee from Paris buying ingredients for a special dinner, a Haitian family from the outer suburbs doing a month’s worth of shopping, or a family of Congolese origin that lives and works in a village in the Loire Valley, but which comes to Château Rouge just a few weekends a year to meet up with compatriots.

Furthermore, Château Rouge works in conjunction with other retail areas: not just small businesses in residential areas, but also other working-class or migrant commercial centralities. For example, Château d’Eau, a little over a mile to the south in the 10th *arrondissement* of Paris, is another area of African centrality specialised in hairdressing activities, and so complements rather than competes with Château Rouge, with which it is well connected by public transport. Moreover, some retailers choose to invest in both areas. Even closer still, within very easy walking distance, the shops of Barbès (specialised in telephony, clothing, jewellery and accessories) are often points of call before or after food shopping in Château Rouge. At the metropolitan level, these retail dynamics reinforce one other, mainly because they are part of systems of places that are shared to a greater or lesser extent by a large number of users.

Château d’Eau in the 10th *arrondissement* of Paris: a commercial centrality specialised in hairdressing and cosmetics for black skin



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Observing Château Rouge in terms of retail practices and identifying the influence of its centrality and its complementarity with other areas also makes it easier to appreciate one of the current issues at play in this neighbourhood: the specialisation of its businesses and the considerable

customer flows that they generate come into conflict with a trend of rapid residential gentrification, partly encouraged by the city council, whereby households of French or European origin, generally relatively well off, have moved into the area, leading to a demand for a little less animation and a few more European-style local shops. Understanding and tackling this issue, common to other areas with migrant centralities, means taking account of the different scales of practices present, and not just focusing on the same old local-level problems expressed in terms of social mix or public order.

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