

**“WAS ONE FRANC ENOUGH TO ‘BUY YOUR WAY IN’ TO THE
BELLE EPOQUE?”**



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La Belle Epoque — translated as the good times or the beautiful era — was a phenomenon that took place throughout pre-war Western Europe, but is no better preserved than in metropolitan Paris, where the feeling and conceptualisation of Belle Epoque existed in a highly concentrated form. La Belle Epoque, encompassing the period between 1870 until the dawn of the First World War, saw Paris transform into the destination for pleasure and leisure, within a modern, healthful, and aesthetic metropolis. Paris was, by the *fin de siècle* [turn of the century], perceived as the most cosmopolitan city in Europe.¹ Belle Epoque, a terminological creation of the post-war world, sought to reminisce in the nostalgia of these times, as above all, Belle Epoque was an experience, a feeling enjoyed by all who encountered it: “during the Belle Epoque, life in France was wonderfully, unmistakably good.”² But to what extent is such nostalgia reflective of historical truth? Was this Belle Epoque the experience of all Parisian citizens? Historian Stephen Gundle, amongst other scholars, wholeheartedly disagrees with this assessment, under the pretext that this image of Belle Epoque has fully ignored the predominantly working-class composition of Paris at the time. For the working classes and the poor of Paris, the Belle Epoque was widely inaccessible, reserved almost exclusively for more “desirable” classes.

Metropolitan Paris during la Belle Epoque sought to prescribe right to space and place within the urban landscape according to class distinctions. Public works and

¹ Stephen Gundle, “Mapping the origins of glamour: Giovanni Boldini, Paris and the Belle Epoque,” *Journal of European Studies* 29, no. 1 (1999): 271.

² Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 291.

beautification projects — begun by Georges-Eugene Haussmann and continuing throughout the Third Republic — re-oriented Parisian streets and widened boulevards, created more green spaces, and improved sewerage networks and the city’s water supply,³ under the precedents of beautification, healthfulness, and modernisation: the physical hallmarks of la Belle Epoque. Haussmann’s urban renewal was equally responsible for geographically displacing approximately 350,000 people — all of whom were overwhelmingly poor⁴ — making huge swaths of central urban housing comparable to wealthy western arrondissements,⁵ and thus out of economic reach of the working-class population. For the working classes, barring an elite ten percent of highly skilled workers such as jewellers and mapmakers, the upper limit of annual rents was established by contemporary economist Arthur Raffalovich at 300 francs.⁶ This made, by 1900, only 47.6 percent of central housing affordable to the working classes.⁷ The result pushed the working classes to the periphery of Paris, an exodus reflected most prominently between 1872 and 1896, when the population of outlying areas inflated 62.3 percent.⁸ Here, the urban centre was, for the period of la Belle Epoque, “permanently reclaimed ... for the affluent,”⁹ whilst the working classes were, if not

³ Harold Platt, “Exploding Cities: Housing the Masses in Paris, Chicago and Mexico City, 1850-2000,” *Journal of Urban History* 36, no. 5 (2010): 578.

⁴ Tyler Stovall, *Transnational France: the Modern History of a Universal Nation* (Boulder: Wallflower Press, 2015), 131.

⁵ Ann-Louise Shapiro, *Housing the Poor of Paris, 1850-1902* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 59.

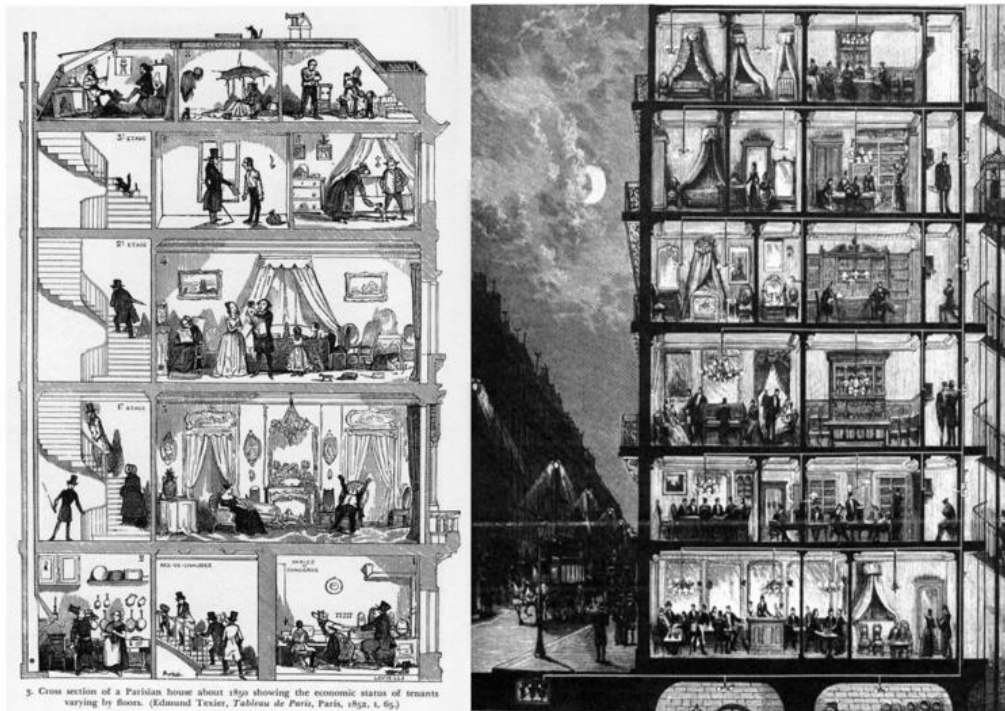
⁶ Shapiro, *Housing the Poor of Paris*, 62.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹ Stovall, *Transnational France*, 131.

completely spatially excluded, far less visible from their isolated position on the periphery.



Figures 1¹⁰ and 2¹¹ - These illustrations demonstrate the effect of Haussmannisation on the social composition of central housing. Figure 1, reflecting 1852, contains residences that accommodate a variety of social classes, with the working classes and the poor situated in the top rooms. Figure 2, from 1891, differs markedly, with all levels virtually identical, rendering them economically inaccessible to the working classes. Note the artistic inclusion of the outside, including a wide boulevard, sewerage pipes, and streetlight illumination.

Conditions on the metropolitan periphery were characterised by a complete lack of urban services,¹² most notably roads and sanitation.¹³ In direct comparison to the urban centre, an investigation by Du Mesnil observed that “rarely was there any water

¹⁰ Bertall, “Coupe d’une maison Parisienne: five floors of the Parisian world,” Illustration, 11 January 1845.

¹¹ Artist unknown, “Electricité chez soi,” *Le Magasin Pittoresque*, May 1891.

¹² Platt, “Exploding Cities: Housing the Masses in Paris,” 576-7

¹³ Michael Adcock, “Remaking Urban Space: Baron Haussmann and the Rebuilding of Paris, 1851-1870,” in *University of Melbourne Journal* 2, no. 2 (1996): 26-7.

at all,” and that up to sixty inhabitants would share a single toilet.¹⁴ In the first ten arrondissements of central Paris, however, 85 percent of buildings were directly serviced with spring water in 1900, with a low 11 percent not yet provided for.¹⁵ Similarly, by 1900 the majority of buildings in central arrondissements benefited from a direct sewer, compared with only 10-30 percent of buildings in outlying areas.¹⁶ This evidence led Shapiro to conclude that over half of citizens on the periphery lived in “less than sufficient conditions,”¹⁷ which, according to contemporary observers, had “surround[ed] Paris with a formidable belt of suffering humanity.”¹⁸ Paris had, effectively, “been turned into two cities, one rich and one poor, and with the latter encircling the other.”¹⁹ The result situated central Paris – the space aligning to the representation of Belle Epoque – for exclusive use of more desirable social classes, and to the almost complete exclusion of the working classes. In line with Shapiro’s determination, the development of the centre — the physical manifestation of the Belle Epoque — was only “achieved at the expense of the periphery.”²⁰ Yet, the working-class presence didn’t entirely disappear to the periphery. Those that remained were forced into central side-streets and back-streets, resulting in massive — although almost invisible from the Haussmanised boulevards — overcrowding and increasing squalor.

¹⁴ Shapiro, *Housing the Poor of Paris*, 72.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 74.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 76.

¹⁸ Ann-Louise Shapiro “Housing Reform in Paris: Social Space and Social Control,” *French Historical Studies* 12, no. 4 (1982): 488.

¹⁹ Platt, “Exploding Cities: Housing the Masses in Paris,” 576.

²⁰ Shapiro, *Housing the Poor of Paris*, 54.

As Shapiro observes, the “working class population was obliged to withdraw to the small, sordid lanes and dark alleys flanking the new boulevards.”²¹ Both here and on the periphery, working-class citizens reaped practically zero benefits from the public works that had secured the beautiful, healthful and modern era of Belle Epoque.²²



Living conditions of the working classes in the urban centre and at the periphery. Figure 3 (left) shows an illustration of the Hôtel Brémant, a working-class residence, Eleventh Arrondissement, 1886.²³ Figure 4 (top right) depicts the inside of a working-class dwelling in 1900, with all occupants sharing one bed lacking a mattress.²⁴ Figure 5 (bottom left) reflects typical working-class accommodation in the Thirteenth Arrondissement in 1910.²⁵

²¹ Ibid, 60.

²² Platt, “Exploding Cities: Housing the Masses in Paris,” 577.

²³ Norma Evenson, *Paris: A Century of Change, 1878-1978* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 205.

²⁴ Shapiro, *Housing the Poor of Paris*, 86.

²⁵ Ibid, 49.

Scholarly literature reporting on the condition of the Parisian working classes during the Belle Epoque is deeply divided. For some, the working classes are situated as strong beneficiaries of the Belle Epoque era. Richard Wires points to evidence of “higher real wages” and “shorter working hours”²⁶ to suggest that the working classes, alongside other social groups, experienced increased standards of living and greater opportunities for leisure.²⁷ Paris was, for Wires, “not yet a city where life was too costly,”²⁸ whereby even classes of limited income could experience the pleasures of Belle Epoque Paris, citing the picturesque boulevards of central Paris, with carousels and entertainment on every corner, and the plethora of “affordable” cafes and guinguettes found throughout.²⁹ Stovall suggests that workers “began to have enough disposable income to take part in the burgeoning consumer culture”³⁰ so characteristic of Belle Epoque, “especially in Paris.”³¹ There is some evidence to support this picture. As Gundle observes, “workers visited the stores and the great exhibition of 1900 ... [and] people of all classes spent leisure time in public parks.”³² Alistair Horne points to an emergence of classist “levelling,” whereby throughout the Belle Epoque period, a plethora of affordable pleasures and forms of entertainment became accessible to the working-classes: café-concerts, bale musettes, guinguettes, and cabarets artistiques.³³

²⁶ Richard Wires, “Paris: La Belle Epoque,” *Conspectus of History: Cities in History* 1, no. 4 (1977): 60.

²⁷ Wires, “Paris: La Belle Epoque,” 60.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 64.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 64.

³⁰ Stovall, *Transnational France*, 185.

³¹ *Ibid*, 185.

³² Gundle, “Mapping the origins of glamour,” 273.

³³ Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris*, 290.

Granted, from the early 1880s, café establishments developed over much of the metropolis, and by 1907, cinemas numbered over ten thousand.³⁴ However, Jeremy Popkin’s considerably more thorough assessment demonstrates that while this vision does reflect a minority, the condition of the working classes “did not always rise in the years of expansion,”³⁵ and with respect to the cost of living — which increased faster than wages post-1902³⁶ — definitively worsened.

Successive legislation in 1892 and 1900 reduced male working hours from eleven to ten,³⁷ and similarly for women in 1904.³⁸ Whether this constituted a substantial improvement for workers is debatable: the campaign in 1906 for the eight-hour workday had been defeated,³⁹ and new shorter hours were poorly enforced,⁴⁰ making the workday still arduously long. The *Journal du Dimanche* reflected this aptly in 1893, reporting that “in most working households in Paris, the husband works, and so does the wife; they leave home at dawn, each one in a different direction, go to the shop [and] the factory ... and they see each other again only in the late evening.”⁴¹ Stovall’s analysis led him to conclude that for 1900, the standard working week for the “lowest” classes “remained twelve hours per day, Monday through Saturday.”⁴² Further, a

³⁴ Jeremy Popkin, *A History of Modern France*, 4th edition (New York: Routledge, 2016), 184-185.

³⁵ Popkin, *A History of Modern France*, 192.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

³⁸ Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris*, 294.

³⁹ Keith Mann, *Forging political identity: Silk and metal workers in Lyon, France, 1900-1939* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 90.

⁴⁰ Popkin, *A History of Modern France*, 192.

⁴¹ Martin Bruegel, “Workers’ Lunch Away from Home in the Paris of the Belle Epoque: The French Model of Meals as Norm and Practice,” *French Historical Studies* 38, no. 2 (2015): 260.

⁴² Stovall, *Transnational France*, 185.

comparative analysis of conditions between British and French workers found that, despite the heavily historicised poor conditions associated with British industrial workers, in 1907 the French worked 17 percent longer hours, for one quarter of the wage of their British counterparts.⁴³ Additionally, Berlanstein evidences the tendency of workers to forego time off: “many laboured without a rest all week ... or took days off out of sheer exhaustion ... breaks in the work week were irregular and often non-existent.”⁴⁴ Thus, arguments cemented in the legislative improvement of working conditions should be not be taken exclusively at face value.

Here, as Berlanstein aptly points out, “shorter hours” “did not ... translate directly into increased leisure time”⁴⁵ — an observation most scholars overlook — with increasing travel time between home and work continuing to exacerbate, to the point where any given factory “could expect to draw workers from several communes.”⁴⁶ Travel accessibility had, to some degree, been improved through a variety of new transportation systems: the unified city bus network, tramway, and omnibus system had “facilitate[d] commuting between peripheral neighbourhoods and the city centre”⁴⁷ since as early as 1854. Yet, the extent to which these benefited the working classes was limited. In response to an 1883 recommendation to establish coordinated urban transportation services with “a uniform rate for all distances within the city and

⁴³ Michael Dintenfuss and Jean-Pierre Dormois, *The British Industrial Decline* (London: Routledge, 1999), 224.

⁴⁴ Lenard Berlanstein, *The Working People of Paris, 1871-1914* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 123.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 123.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 123.

⁴⁷ Stovall, *Transnational France*, 132.

... special trains for workers early in the morning and late in the evening,” no measures eventuated.⁴⁸ Supporting this theory, an investigation by Turot and Bellamy into conditions on the periphery noted the time and expense of traveling to and from the periphery would continue to limit lower-class accessibility to the central metropolitan space.⁴⁹ For some, however, the changes invoked during the Belle Epoque era greatly transformed their work-leisure experience. In Jeanne Bouvier’s personal recollection of her work as a seamstress, the reduction in working hours was welcomed: before their implementation, she had been forced to work “until two in the morning nearly every day, and without ... having eaten...”⁵⁰ By the fin-de-siecle, however, Bouvier’s condition had improved markedly: earning five francs daily, she occasionally indulged in a visit to the Opera-Comique.⁵¹ On the whole, however, it is difficult — within this conceptualisation of long working hours, low wages, and cumbersome travel journeys to the centrality — to integrate the working classes with the typical image of la Belle Epoque. Exactly when and how — apart from rare opportunities — were the working classes expected to participate?

⁴⁸ Shapiro “Housing Reform in Paris: Social Space and Social Control,” 492.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 498.

⁵⁰ Popkin, *A History of Modern France*, 182.

⁵¹ Berlanstein, *The Working People of Paris, 1871-1914*, 136.



Figure 6. This illustration appeared on the cover of prominent newspaper *Courrier Francais* in 1888. It was accompanied by the quote, “Yes, papa, all day long, it’s against the rule for us to sit down.” Note how the landscape surrounding these figures suggests they reside on the periphery, away from the urban centre.⁵²

Another useful way of assessing the extent of working-class participation is through comparison of working-class earnings compared to entry prices. Du Mesnil’s investigation into the working classes suggested that one franc was the minimum daily income required per household to meet life’s most basic necessities; however, over half of the households captured in his investigation failed to earn one franc per day.⁵³ Similarly, a 1907 study encompassing over eight-hundred working-class budgets concluded that 80 percent of income was spent on food and rent.⁵⁴ The Expositions

⁵² Jean-Louis Forain, “Do as we do-ditch them!” *Le Courrier Francais*, 5 August 1888, 1.

⁵³ Berlanstein, *The Working People of Paris, 1871-1914*, 40.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 40.

Universales are often hailed as, fittingly, universally accessible, even for classes of most limited income. This had been largely deliberate — the State kept admission prices at an “affordable” one franc in both 1889 and 1900⁵⁵ with subsidised train tickets providing further incentive for working classes to take part.⁵⁶ The vast number of attendees provides some evidence that the expositions were largely accessible: welcoming 32 million in 1889 and 50 million in 1900.⁵⁷ Importantly, however, one franc was equal to, if not more than, the daily earning power of at least half of Paris’ working class.⁵⁸ Therefore, it seems ahistorical to interpret the Universal Expositions as a wonderland “anyone could enter.”⁵⁹ Evidence of such sentiment existing at the time is expressed by the illustrator Widhopff in a 1900 edition of the *Courrier Francois*, which depicted “an old man in ragged clothes turning out his empty pocket and gesturing toward the Universal Exposition while remarking, ‘fortunately, there’s the fair.’”⁶⁰ Similarly, a proposal to waive the 1889 Exposition fee on a particular day was not only shot down, but was justified under the pretence that “the saving of admission was not enough ...f or a worker to pass up a day’s pay.”⁶¹ Here, the “one franc

⁵⁵ Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque: entertainment and festivity in turn-of-the-century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 89.

⁵⁶ Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque*, 89.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 89.

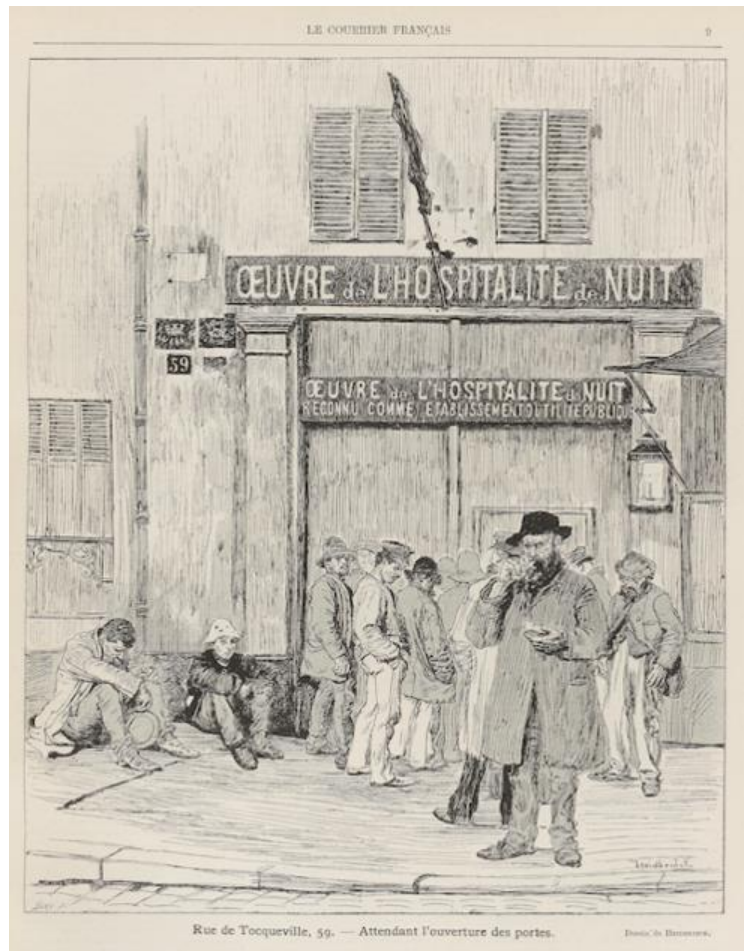
⁵⁸ Berlanstein, *The Working People of Paris, 1871-1914*, 20

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 83.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 34-5.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 114.

benchmark” for the working classes is revealed as insufficient to “buy one’s way” into Belle Epoque.



Figures 7⁶² (above) and 8⁶³ (on next page): The establishments frequented by the working class, above, often differed markedly from those, such as the Café de la Paix, below, which reflect the typical vision of la Belle Epoque.

⁶² Heidbrinck, “Rue de Tocqueville, 59 - Attendant L’Ouverture des portes,” *Le Courrier Francais*, May 27, 1888, p9.

⁶³ Raymond Rudorff, *The Belle Epoque: Paris in the ‘nineties* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973), 68.



Café-concerts — the *Folies Bergere* and the *Moulin Rouge* in particular — reflect a similar phenomenon. Compared to other forms of entertainment, café-concerts were among the cheapest and therefore most accessible to the working classes.⁶⁴ In the lead up to the fin-de-siecle, the majority of seats at the *Folies Bergere* were priced at two francs,⁶⁵ whilst the *Moulin Rouge* in 1900 would charge two to three.⁶⁶ Entrance was, in relation to working-class income, not easily affordable, but an occasional decadence. However this “democratisation of leisure” was short-lived, and would exclude more swaths of the working classes by 1903, when the *Folies Bergere*’s pricing increased to three francs for standing room, and four to six for a seat,⁶⁷ with the *Moulin Rouge* following suit, but charging four to nine.⁶⁸ It becomes clear, in line with Rearick’s characterization of the era, even a few francs were often

⁶⁴ Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque*, 83.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 84.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 91.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 95.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 95.

“beyond the means of the poor,”⁶⁹ making the case that, with respect to pleasure and leisure — two central tenets of the Belle Epoque — the working classes, by and large, were *not* great beneficiaries.

From this analysis, it is clear that this Parisian image does not evoke Belle Epoque. Gundle appears completely correct in his assertion that, “this [Belle Epoque] atmosphere, which ... was associated with the image of Paris *tout court*, was in reality largely confined to the West and centre, the parts that Haussmann had made over.”⁷⁰ What was for the middle classes and the bourgeois Belle Epoque, was, for the working classes, to borrow Edward Udovics’ terminology, *la misere*: reflecting the “collective experiences of marginalisation ... [and] poverty”⁷¹ — a relationship that was evidently inversely proportional to one another. Such nostalgia for the pre-war era — encapsulated through Belle Epoque — reveals itself to be, for large stratifications of society, mere construction of a memory, an unsurprising creation of the post-war world yearning to return to the irretrievable past. Belle Epoque was “only for the wealthy, and only in retrospect after the war.”⁷² To accept Belle Epoque — for the working classes — as more than deliberate myth would be a poor practice of history, that does not stop to look to the periphery, or scrutinize those who passed by under the illumination of the city of light.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 11.

⁷⁰ Gundle, “Mapping the origins of glamour,” 273.

⁷¹ Edward Udovic, “What About the Poor? Nineteenth-Century Paris and the Revival of Vincentian Charity,” *Vincetian Heritage Journal* 14, no. 1 (1993): 71.

⁷² Charles Sowerine, *France since 1870: Culture, Politics and Society* (New York: Palgrave Publishing, 2001), 94.

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