

**Representations of the Paris *Zone* in Catholic and Communist Culture of the Interwar Years: Grégoire Leclos's *Notre-Dame de la Mouise* (1930-31) and Louis Aragon's *Les beaux quartiers* (1936)**

*James Cannon*

During the interwar period, the Catholic Church and the Communist Party struggled for control of the historic *zone* of Paris, a narrow strip of semi-rural land surrounding the city and inhabited by a mixed population of small tradespeople, impoverished factory workers and increasing numbers of Central and Eastern European refugees. This essay explores the cultural dimensions of that struggle through a brief comparative analysis of Grégoire Leclos's morality play *Notre-Dame de la Mouise* (1930-31) and Louis Aragon's socialist-realist novel *Les beaux quartiers* (1936).<sup>1</sup> While Leclos used the *zone* to promote the ideal of a harmonious society redeemed by faith, Aragon used it to promote a potent mix of antimilitarism and class war. Both writers were influenced respectively by the official policies of the Church and the Communist Party but also departed from these policies in significant ways.

The *zone* was originally part of a military defense system built around Paris in the early 1840s. The main feature of that system was a continuous ring of fortifications with more than sixty points of entry—mostly referred to as *portes*—which still mark the limits of the city today. The *zone*, short for *zone non aedificandi* (non-building zone) or *zone de servitudes militaires* (military easement zone), was located just outside the fortifications, from which it was separated by a large, mostly dry moat and a gently sloping glacis. Approximately 34 kilometers in length, 250 meters in width and covering a surface area of 777 hectares, its primary function was to allow optimal visibility of approaching enemies. It was therefore subject to a *non*

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James Cannon is currently writing a PhD thesis on cultural representations of the Paris *zone* from 1845 to 1945, under the supervision of Professor David Garrioch, at Monash University. His research interests include French cultural history, literature, art and popular song of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

<sup>1</sup> Grégoire Leclos, *Notre-Dame de la Mouise*, reconstitution dramatique en trois actes et un tableau, introduction du R. Lhande (Paris, 1931); Louis Aragon, *Les beaux quartiers* (Paris, 1936).

*aedificandi* easement prohibiting any type of construction or plantation. The defensive capabilities of the fortifications and the *zone* were called into question immediately after the Prussian siege of 1870-71 and continued to provoke heated debate for many years. In 1912, the state agreed to sell the fortifications and to transfer control of the *zone* to the rapidly expanding city of Paris, an agreement which became law in 1919. The Hôtel de Ville maintained the *non aedificandi* easement with a view to redeveloping the *zone* as a *ceinture verte* (green belt) and officially annexed the area in three stages during the period 1925-30. Previously, the *zone* had been attached administratively to the twenty-one suburban municipalities in whose territory it was located.<sup>2</sup>

While the land occupied by the fortifications had been expropriated by the State and its owners duly compensated, most of the land in the *zone* remained in private hands until the 1930s and early 1940s. The owners of the *zone* vigorously contested the legality of the *non aedificandi* easement, which was enforced only sporadically by military and urban authorities. The *zone* was razed twice (although not in its entirety): the first time in preparation for the Prussian siege; and the second time by Vichy and German authorities during the Occupation of 1940-44. Before these demolitions, it hosted an unusual variety of buildings and occupants. During the Third Republic, however, it was best known for its sprawling shantytowns and their more conspicuous minorities of ragpickers, gypsies and carnival performers. From the mid-1890s, the landowners, tenants and squatters of the *zone* were collectively known as *zoniers*.

Today, the *zone* appears to occupy only a minor place in collective memory. By contrast, it impressed itself deeply on the imagination of contemporary observers. The Hôtel de Ville wrestled with military authorities for control of the fortifications and the *zone*. Both the state and the Hôtel de Ville became embroiled in endless disputes with *zonier* landowners. Hygienists, parliamentarians, city councilors and town planners argued over whether to redevelop the *zone* as parks, gardens and sporting facilities or as a residential belt. Meanwhile, industrialists and various social groups colonized the area, bringing in their wake curious journalists, writers, artists, photographers and filmmakers. By the interwar years, the *zone* occupied a central place in Parisian mythology. It also became a recruiting ground for competing organizations including the Church and the Communist Party. Both were seeking to shore up their position: the former after the official separation of Church and State in 1905; the latter after the schism in the SFIO in 1920 and the adoption by the Third International of the “class against class” policy in 1928. According to the 1926 census, there were 42,400 people living in the *zone*; unofficial figures were much higher.<sup>3</sup> Neither the Church nor the Communist Party could afford to overlook this potential constituency. As I shall suggest, Leclos’s play was both a celebration of Catholic proselytism in the *zone* and an extension of the Church’s mission among Parisian audiences. Aragon’s novel gave Communist claims on the *zone* an aura of historical ineluctability.

The presence of the French clergy in the *zone* dated from at least the early 1880s and was strengthened by the renewal of social Catholicism during the 1890s.

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<sup>2</sup> Neuilly-sur-Seine, Levallois-Perret, Clichy, Saint-Ouen, Saint-Denis, Aubervilliers, Pantin, Le Pré-Saint-Gervais, Les Lilas, Bagnolet, Montreuil-sous-Bois, Saint-Mandé, Charenton-le-Pont, Ivry-sur-Seine, Le Kremlin-Bicêtre, Gentilly, Montrouge, Malakoff, Vanves, Issy-les-Moulineaux and Boulogne-Billancourt.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Muller, *Habitants et anciens habitants de la zone de Paris* (Mémoire de maîtrise, Département de Sociologie, Université Paris-VIII, 1983), 13-14.

However, it was not until the interwar period, under the auspices of Cardinal Jean Verdier (Archbishop of Paris from 1929 to 1940) that the Church decided to make the *zone*—along with the rest of the Parisian suburbs—one of its most important missions. The purpose of this mission was to halt the spread of atheistic communism among the working classes, to bring them back into the Catholic fold and to prepare them for a salutary return to the land. Its driving force was the Jesuit priest, Pierre Lhande, who compiled three vast field reports under the umbrella title of *Le Christ dans la banlieue* (1927-31).<sup>4</sup> The first of these reports, subtitled *Enquête sur la vie religieuse dans les milieux ouvriers de la banlieue de Paris* became a bestseller.<sup>5</sup> Lhande's aim was to detail the struggle between Catholicism and communism in suburban Paris while attracting financial support from potential benefactors. The Church's strategy as he outlined it involved the conquest of land and souls by *défricheurs*: priests who had the physical capacity to appropriate abandoned lots and build modest chapels and the spiritual capacity to live modestly among their parishioners while leading by example rather than sermonizing from a lofty distance. The agricultural image of the *défricheur*—a person who clears or prepares land for new crops—was not accidental. According to Lhande, the first inhabitants of the *zone* came almost exclusively from the rural west of France and had brought with them a basic knowledge of Christian precepts which their descendants gradually lost after prolonged exposure to the corrupt city.<sup>6</sup>

Lhande also urged the Church to advertise its mission through every available medium. *Notre-Dame de la Mouise* was precisely the kind of advertisement he had in mind. Written by a young woman under the *nom de plume* of Grégoire Leclos, the play was directly inspired by Lhande's reports. Leclos claimed to have been uninterested in God until reading *Le Christ dans la banlieue*, an experience which she compared to love at first sight.<sup>7</sup> *Notre-Dame de la Mouise* was set during the period 1918-30 and told the story of an anonymous priest who arrives in a pro-Communist sector of the *zone* to build a chapel and a religious community. According to Leclos's stage directions, the Sacré-Cœur basilica appears on the horizon "shimmering like a distant dream."<sup>8</sup> The priest's courage, kindness and perseverance gradually win over the hostile locals with the exception of Julot, a militant *bistrot* owner. His most significant victory is the conversion of Julot's friend, an eighteen-year-old ragpicker and charismatic anarchist known as "Bibi-Mal-Loti." In act one, Bibi throws a rock at the priest which becomes the foundation stone of the new chapel. In act two, Bibi's childhood sweetheart rejects his advances; overcome with grief, he accepts the priest's offer of refuge in the half-finished chapel to avoid public embarrassment. However, this act of generosity merely reinforces Bibi's hatred of his benefactor. In act three, Bibi and his friends witness the priest bringing comfort to a dying neighbor, a cynical, *déclassé* aristocrat known as "le père Didier." Bibi's contempt gives way to intense curiosity when the repentant Didier asks the priest to tell him the story of the Passion of Christ. By the final act, the chapel is complete and Bibi has decided to enter the priesthood, a vocation which seems compatible with his revolutionary fervor, professional skills and gift of the gab. As the church fills up with new

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Lhande, *Le Christ dans la banlieue* I: *Enquête sur la vie religieuse dans les milieux ouvriers de la banlieue de Paris*; II: *Le Dieu qui bouge*; III: *La Croix sur les fortifs* (Paris, 1927; 1930; 1931).

<sup>5</sup> Annie Fourcaut, Emmanuel Bellanger and Mathieu Flonneau, eds., *Paris/Banlieues: Conflits et solidarités* (Grâne, 2007), 194.

<sup>6</sup> Lhande, *Le Christ dans la banlieue*, 1:28.

<sup>7</sup> Interview in *L'Intransigeant*, Mar. 20, 1931.

<sup>8</sup> Leclos, *Notre-Dame de la Mouise*, 3.

parishioners attending Bibi's baptism, he attempts to convince Julot of the similarities between communism and Christianity while rejecting the doctrine of class war:

Bourgeois, revolutionary, they're just labels like the ones we put on our garbage sacks. There are only men crushed by the hard-heartedness of others, men made desperate just by their selfishness, men who are jealous and others who have lost trust. We have to make it so people can reach out to each other.<sup>9</sup>

Bibi also explains to Julot that "priests are the ragpickers of Heaven: they pick souls out of the mire just like we pick rags out of people's garbage."<sup>10</sup>

*Notre-Dame de la Mouise* began as a simple sketch which Leclos developed into a full-length play in early 1930. She founded her own amateur theatre troupe, Les Tréteaux de Grégoire, and the play—starring Leclos herself in the role of Bibi—was first performed on November 16, 1930 in Meulan. A successful tour of the working-class suburbs was followed by a performance at Les Bouffes-Parisiennes on March 21, 1931 to attract influential supporters and to raise money for the construction of a church at the porte Dorée. Another performance was given at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on May 28, the proceeds of which were donated to Les Chapelles des Fortifs. Both performances elicited positive reviews in the Parisian press; further performances—including a season in Lyon—were planned for the following year.<sup>11</sup>

The most striking aspect of Leclos's play was its portrayal of the *zone* as a melting-pot in which ragpickers and ordinary workers lived side by side with fallen aristocrats or bourgeois. Social and political differences, brought together within the same space, could thus be transcended through faith with the help of a *défricheur*. Bibi none the less clashes with a gangster who attempts to seduce his girlfriend and there are no characters of non-French origin in the play. In other respects, however, it presented a vision of social harmony which was replicated both within Leclos's theatre troupe and in the latter's rapport with Parisian audiences. According to Lhande, the troupe included Communists as well as Catholics. This new "union sacrée," he argued, constituted a potent symbol of national recovery.<sup>12</sup> He also noted that theatre staff at Les Bouffes-Parisiennes, while initially disgusted by the authentic props, were ultimately moved by the play's message.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the performance at the opulent Théâtre des Champs-Élysées was an occasion for edifying interaction between well-heeled theatre-lovers and working-class actors.<sup>14</sup>

Lhande further highlighted the essential appeal of Leclos's gritty language. The positive response of Parisian audiences and critics, he argued, could be partly attributed to "this strange marriage of slang and devotion."<sup>15</sup> One possibility that Lhande did not entertain was that audiences may have been titillated by Leclos's

<sup>9</sup> "Bourgeois, révolutionnaires, tout ça c'est des étiquettes, comme celles qu'on met sur les sacs à chiffons. Il n'y a qu' des hommes écrasés par la dureté des autres, il n'y a qu' des hommes désespérés par leur seul égoïsme, il n'y a qu' des hommes qui jalouent et d'autres qui s' méfient. Faut arriver à c' que ces gens-là s' tendent la main." *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Lhande, introduction to Leclos, *Notre-Dame de la Mouise*, v-xvi and 1; Roger Valbelle, "Une pièce réaliste au service de la morale," *Excelsior*, Mar. 21, 1931; and "Une seconde représentation à Paris de 'Notre-Dame de la Mouise'," *Excelsior*, May 23, 1931 (see "Recueil factice de programmes et d'articles de presse sur *Notre-Dame de la Mouise*, de Grégoire Leclos, Tréteaux de Grégoire, 7 décembre 1930," at BnF, Arts du Spectacle, 8-RF-64032).

<sup>12</sup> Lhande, introduction to Leclos, *Notre-Dame de la Mouise*, xv-xvi.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, vii and xiv.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

slang and by the prospect of temporarily rubbing shoulders with the poor. Slumming was an endemic feature of cultural life during the Third Republic, much to the chagrin of working-class activists. Many Communist and proletarian writers of the interwar period eschewed the use of working-class slang for that very reason. However, it also seems possible that if there were slummers among Leclos's audience, their attraction to "lowlife" masked a deeper need for reassurance that social classes could still mix without rancor.

The utopian aspect of Leclos's play mirrored Lhande's field reports. Lhande cited, for example, the case of a feisty, streetwise nun in the *zone* of Clichy who looked after the area's dwindling ragpicker population with the help of her large dog and an "authentic Mahometan"; the Communist Party had even invited her to the funeral of a gangster killed at point-blank range by the police.<sup>16</sup> Lhande also applauded the attitude of a priest working in the "zone" of Buenos Aires, who had encouraged a local anarchist to formalize his marriage with the reassurance that "provided you're a good Christian, you can still be an anarchist; I can't see any problem there."<sup>17</sup> In other passages, paradoxically, Lhande condemned communism as a barbarous ideology imported by "men to whom France means nothing."<sup>18</sup> The Vatican, for its part, strenuously avoided any such ambiguity. Pius XI's encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), acknowledged a link between socialism and Christianity but excoriated Communist regimes as "incredible and portentlike" in their "cruelty and inhumanity."<sup>19</sup> Another encyclical prompted by the Spanish Civil War and by Communist overtures to Catholic workers in France, *Divini Redemptoris* (1937), argued that "communism is intrinsically wrong, and no one who would save Christian civilization may collaborate with it in any undertaking whatsoever."<sup>20</sup> The insistence of Lhande and Leclos that Christianity and communism were not antithetical systems was no doubt intended to undermine the latter rather than to create a meaningful synthesis of both. Yet their willingness to work with Communist actors—whom Lhande described as "Christian outsiders"<sup>21</sup>—would surely have raised eyebrows in the Vatican. Julian Jackson notes that Lhande's superior, Cardinal Verdier, had a reputation for being "mildly 'red'."<sup>22</sup>

Another striking feature of Leclos's play was her decision to make the central character, Bibi, a ragpicker. Once again, this reflected Lhande's assertion that of all the *zone*'s inhabitants, ragpickers were the friendliest and the most promising candidates for salvation. Yet ragpickers embodied none of the agrarian values so central to the Church's mission. They were a quintessentially urban phenomenon and, as Lhande himself explained, the only true Parisians living in the *zone*.<sup>23</sup> Ragpickers were effectively small tradespeople who collected and recycled the city's waste, although their trade had been under threat since the early 1880s. They tended to work in family units and were notoriously apolitical. They also tended to ferociously oppose outside intervention in their affairs. This contradicts both Lhande's and

<sup>16</sup> Lhande, *Le Christ dans la banlieue*, 1:45-49.

<sup>17</sup> Lhande, *Le Christ dans la banlieue*, 3:229.

<sup>18</sup> Lhande, *Le Christ dans la banlieue*, 1:12-13.

<sup>19</sup> Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, May 15, 1931, section 112, at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xi/encyclicals](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals).

<sup>20</sup> Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, Mar. 19, 1937, section 58, at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xi/encyclicals](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals).

<sup>21</sup> Lhande, introduction to Leclos, *Notre-Dame de la Mouise*, xv-xvi.

<sup>22</sup> Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-1938* (Cambridge, 1988), 260.

<sup>23</sup> Lhande, *Le Christ dans la banlieue*, 2:130.

Leclos's portrayal of ragpickers as highly sociable and open to change. It also makes Bibi's political militancy seem highly implausible. By the same token, the very reclusiveness of real-life ragpickers meant that they could be made to embody just about anything. Indeed the myth of ragpickers as revolutionaries had numerous precedents in nineteenth-century Romantic and anarchist thought. This myth re-emerged not only in Leclos's play but also in Aragon's novel.

The revolutionary vocation of the *zone* first emerged in 1912-13, when working-class activists organized four pacifist demonstrations on the butte du Chapeau-Rouge, a large hill located in the *zone* of Le Pré-Saint-Gervais. The three demonstrations of 1913 were provoked by a government proposal to extend military service from two to three years in preparation for a new war with Germany. The largest of these demonstrations, held on Sunday May 25, 1913, coincided with the annual commemoration of the Commune and attracted 150,000 participants. The socialist leader Jean Jaurès was one of fifteen speakers invited to address the crowd. Two days earlier, the Minister of the Interior, Lucien Klotz, had banned the traditional commemoration at the Mur des Fédérés precisely because he feared that it would unleash riots in Paris against the proposed law. The Fédération Socialiste de la Seine hurried to secure the butte du Chapeau-Rouge as an alternative venue, which subsequently became, as Madeleine Rebérioux notes, an emblematic site of French socialism second only to the Mur des Fédérés.<sup>24</sup>

Louis Aragon's *Les beaux quartiers*, the second in a sequence of five novels entitled *Le monde réel*, included a dramatic re-telling of the May 1913 demonstration. Aragon, a founding member of the surrealist movement who had reinvented himself as a Communist militant and leading exponent of socialist realism, described *Les beaux quartiers* as an attempt to expose the dynamics of industrial capital in France.<sup>25</sup> Set for the most part in 1912-13, it revolves around two brothers, Edmond and Armand Barbentane, who leave their bourgeois home in Provence to pursue radically different careers in Paris. Edmond studies medicine and is seduced by the sordid high life of the city's central and inner-western *beaux quartiers*. Armand starts his new existence as a penniless vagabond before joining the ranks of the militant proletariat. On May 25, 1913, he is swept along by protesters flocking through the north-eastern porte du Pré-Saint-Gervais and into the *zone*. The area's poverty and squalor, combined with its fanciful dwellings, seem to herald some deep, essential knowledge. It is here that Armand effectively begins to "know" the working classes. This is less a cognitive process than a rapturous fusion with the landscape and crowd. The semi-rural aspect of the *zone* suggests an emerging link in Armand's mind between provincial and urban poverty. However, the *zone* also represents the true city of light, a place where Armand enters into communion with the proletariat and where the idea of working-class agency inherited from the Commune is renewed. Its symbolic opposite is the Sacré-Cœur basilica—clearly visible from Le Pré-Saint-Gervais—which had provided such a reassuring backdrop in Leclos's play. Aragon also described the new military barracks overlooking the *zone* while emphatically reminding the reader that pacifist convictions did not preclude the idea of class war. The demonstration culminates with a charismatic, bellicose speech by Jaurès announcing "the great red army of peoples who will join hands and shoot their masters."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Madeleine Rebérioux, "Le Pré-Saint-Gervais et Jaurès," in *Le Pré: entre Paris et sa banlieue, histoire(s) du Pré-Saint-Gervais*, eds. Valérie Perlès and Christine Misselyn (Grâne, 2004), 10.

<sup>25</sup> Aragon *parle avec Dominique Arban* (Paris, 1968), 114.

<sup>26</sup> Aragon, *Les beaux quartiers*, 344.

Armand subsequently procures a factory job at Levallois-Perret. Excited by the prospect of hard, honest labor, but initially unaware that other workers are on strike, he unintentionally becomes a “scab.” Two days after his initiation into factory work, he reads in the evening newspaper that the Prime Minister, Louis Barthou, has succeeded in having the “Three-Year Law” adopted in the National Assembly by 358 votes to 204. Barthou’s attempt to fend off criticism by declaring that he “merely wished to find out who was French” provoked the wrath of Jaurès, who drew an imaginary line between the opposing camps in the Assembly while proclaiming “Then that’s where France ends!”<sup>27</sup> Jaurès’s intervention confirms Armand’s growing doubts about the morality of his own position. As the sun sets, he repeats Jaurès’s gesture and words in the direction of the porte de Champerret, thereby separating the city’s working-class neighborhoods and suburbs from its *beaux quartiers*. The ideals expressed by protesters a month earlier in the *zone* are defeated at a political level but enacted by Armand when he takes the patriotic if quixotic step of joining and thereby bringing new hope to the decimated strike committee.

Aragon wrote most of *Les beaux quartiers* during his frequent visits to the Soviet Union and completed the manuscript at sea on June 10, 1936 while on his way to pay his last respects to Maxim Gorky. The novel exemplified the doctrine of socialist realism elaborated by Gorky two years earlier in Moscow, which demanded the “truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development.”<sup>28</sup> It was awarded the Prix Renaudot at the end of the year and received glowing praise from Jean Cassou in *L’Humanité* for its revolutionary ardor, intellectual rigor and literary finesse.<sup>29</sup> Magdeleine Paz, writing in the socialist newspaper *Le Populaire de Paris*, was less impressed, accusing Aragon of stultifying conformity and sectarianism, and reminding readers of his poem, *Front rouge*, which contained the line “Feu sur Léon Blum!” (“Shoot Léon Blum!”)<sup>30</sup> Yet *Les beaux quartiers* was clearly meant to suggest a link between the revolutionary ambitions of the pre-war French proletariat and their apparent fruition with the advent of the Popular Front. In particular, by revisiting a pre-war demonstration which had brought together disparate factions of the Left, the novel reflected the “grand tournant” of 1934 whereby the Third International abandoned its policy of “class against class” and encouraged Communists to collaborate with other Left-wing parties in the fight against fascism.

Unlike Leclos, however, Aragon refused to indulge the fantasy of social harmony. His entire novel was predicated instead on the reality of class segregation and the ideal of class solidarity. He explicitly distinguished those areas of Paris where a well-off minority defined itself in military, aesthetic or erotic terms (Grenelle, the residential neighborhoods of the inner west and the entertainment districts of the centre) from the rest of the city, the *zone* and the suburbs whose exhausted inhabitants lived and worked in appalling conditions. The demonstration on the butte du Chapeau-Rouge may have occasioned a broad Left-wing consensus but remained resolutely working-class. The site was located in a sympathetic Socialist municipality (Communist from 1920) and was certainly off-limits to Klotz’s police. As mentioned earlier, Aragon also contrasted the proletarian space of the butte du Chapeau-Rouge with the Sacré-Cœur basilica, a hated emblem of reactionary Catholicism which he

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 500.

<sup>28</sup> The socialist-realist program was presented at the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers held in Moscow in 1934. Quoted by Lucille F. Becker, *Louis Aragon* (New York, 1971), 56.

<sup>29</sup> *L’Humanité*, Dec. 5, 1936.

<sup>30</sup> *Le Populaire de Paris*, Dec. 13, 1936.

described as an “enormous provocation” and a “nauseating piece of cheese.”<sup>31</sup> Thus while the setting of Aragon’s novel pre-dated the Catholic-Communist clash of the interwar period, he partly defined the *zone* in terms of opposition to organized religion. In a broader sense, Armand’s discovery of his working-class affinities in the *zone* marks the completion of a trajectory which began with his decision to reject the religious vocation which his mother had planned for him.

However, if Aragon used the May 1913 demonstration to attack the Church, his description of the event also had a biblical dimension. This was reflected partly in the messianic tone of his prose but also in his portrayal of the *zone*’s ragpickers as Christ-like figures. For Aragon, they embodied the pacifist message of the demonstration in a different but equally powerful way to Jaurès. In a highly symbolic passage, he marveled at their refusal—despite their extreme poverty and hunger—to eat the white doves which they kept as pets above their shanties. He also emphasized their solidarity with the protesters:

Idyllic dovecots, above windowless dumps in which distraught families with semi-naked kids languished, looked out over the filth and starvation and shone in the sun, incomprehensible like the shadows of the heart. Why did these poor, hungry wretches, who rifle through rubbish bins at the break of day, not cut the throats of the white birds flying above their stomachs? They wouldn’t eat their own children and, for the same reason, preferred to watch their winged guests flying overhead. These creatures of the sky were more important to them than their own suffering. The inhabitants of this nightmarish world emerged from their bizarre dwellings, which recalled the art of madmen and children, their eyes full of laughter, because on this particular Sunday, the huge extended family from Paris had come to visit.<sup>32</sup>

It is worth noting that a contemporary report of the demonstration in *L’Humanité*, while making no mention of the *zone*’s ragpickers, referred to the presence of a priest “hostile to the Three-Year Law” and even compared Jaurès’s speech to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount.<sup>33</sup> Something of this association filtered through into Aragon’s story. It also seems likely that he wished to reflect the French Communist Party’s recent decision to reach out to working-class Catholics in what was known as the policy of “la main tendue” (“the outstretched hand”).<sup>34</sup>

Like Leclos then, Aragon allowed for the possibility of common ground between Christian and revolutionary traditions, but without going so far as to claim that Christianity and communism were one and the same. He also shared Leclos’s view of the *zone*’s ragpickers as part of the revolutionary proletariat. In this respect, Aragon broke with decades of both socialist and communist thought. Marx himself

<sup>31</sup> Aragon, *Les beaux quartiers*, 338-39 and 341.

<sup>32</sup> “Pigeonniers au sommet d’une tanière sans fenêtre, où croupit une famille hagarde aux gosses deminus, l’idylle des oiseaux blancs surplombant la crotte et la disette resplendit, incompréhensible, comme les ténèbres du cœur. Pourquoi ces miséreux qui crèvent la faim, fouillant à l’aurore les poubelles, n’égorgent-ils pas ces oiseaux qui volent au-dessus de leurs estomacs? Comme ils ne mangent pas leurs enfants, ils regardent voler sur leurs têtes ces hôtes ailés, ces bestioles du ciel, plus précieuses pour eux que leurs propres douleurs. Ils sortent, en attendant, ces habitants du cauchemar, de leurs fantastiques architectures, qui rappellent l’art des fous et les dessins d’enfants. Ils en sortent avec des yeux pleins de rires, parce que l’immense famille de Paris est venue leur rendre visite ce dimanche-là.” *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>33</sup> *L’Humanité*, May 26, 1913.

<sup>34</sup> This policy, initiated on April 17, 1936 by the Communist Party’s General Secretary, Maurice Thorez, was perceived by most Catholics as hypocritical and opportunistic.



had famously included ragpickers in his vitriolic description of the lumpenproletariat as “the scum of the depraved elements of all classes.”<sup>35</sup> When the socialist veteran Jules Vallès ventured into the *zone* in the early 1880s in search of a revolutionary spark, he found nothing but venal ragpickers and carnival performers imbued with the zeitgeist of modern capitalism.<sup>36</sup> Closer in time to Aragon, Leon Trotsky argued in a series of pamphlets entitled *Fascism: What it is and how to fight it* (1930-32) that the lumpenproletariat was particularly vulnerable to reactionary and fascist influences.<sup>37</sup> More generally, Aragon’s focus on the ragpickers of the *zone* was at odds with the image of the area promoted by his comrades in the pages of *L’Humanité*. Since 1913, the newspaper had thrown its weight behind small property holders in the *zone* threatened with expropriation. Part of its strategy was to present the *zone*’s inhabitants as ordinary, house-proud workers. According to one journalist writing in 1928, most *zoniers* were “ordinary workers [...] contrary to what most people believe, the zone is not just a shantytown. At least half the area is covered with charming houses arranged in neat, working-class villages [...]”<sup>38</sup> One can only speculate on the reasons behind Aragon’s affection for ragpickers, beyond his explicit emphasis on their peaceful ways. Perhaps they appealed to the former surrealist’s sense that the city’s waste was full of hidden meanings.<sup>39</sup> There is also some evidence that ragpickers were in fact becoming more politicized with the increasing precariousness of their trade.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Aragon’s insistence on the *air de famille* shared by ragpickers and ordinary workers had a significant precedent in Eugène Atget’s photographs of the pre-war period.<sup>41</sup> Finally, it seems possible that during the Depression, significant numbers of unemployed workers would have turned to ragpicking to make ends meet.

*Les beaux quartiers* was also out of step with other, more recent developments in the French Communist Party. Danielle Tartakowsky points out that while the butte du Chapeau-Rouge hosted further demonstrations during the 1920s, its symbolic significance was diminished by the annexation of the *zone* of Le Pré-Saint-Gervais to Paris in 1930, by a Communist push to reclaim the streets of the *intramuros* city and by the redevelopment of the butte du Chapeau-Rouge as a public park.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Aragon’s ardent pacifism—borne of his experience as a medical aide during the First World War—contrasted with the Communist Party’s recent decision to support the principle of national defense following the signing of a military assistance pact between France and the Soviet Union in May 1935. However, none of the anomalies in Aragon’s novel appear to have attracted criticism from within the Party itself.

Many writers and artists of the interwar period represented the *zone* either as a site of physical and moral squalor or as an idyllic refuge from the corrupt city. In

<sup>35</sup> Quoted by Lydia Morris, *Dangerous classes: the underclass and social citizenship* (London, 1994), 15.

<sup>36</sup> See for example Jules Vallès, “L’Assommoir des chiffonniers,” and “Les Foires,” in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 3: *Le Cri du Peuple—Les Blouses—La Rue à Londres—Le Tableau de Paris*, édition revue, annotée et préfacée par Lucien Scheler et Marie-Claire Bancquart (Paris, 1969), 768-93.

<sup>37</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Fascism: what it is and how to fight it*, 1930-1932, at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1944/1944-fas.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> “Où l’on voit que les zoniers spoliés par la Ville devront verser en 25 annuités plus qu’ils ne recevront lors de l’expropriation en 1953,” *L’Humanité*, Oct. 5, 1928.

<sup>39</sup> See André Breton’s descriptions of his outings to the Saint-Ouen fleamarket, in *Nadja* (Paris, 1928) and *L’amour fou* (Paris, 1937).

<sup>40</sup> See “Meeting des chiffonniers au Vel’ d’Hiv’,” *Actualités Gaumont*, June 1913, Forum des Images.

<sup>41</sup> Eugène Atget, *Zoniers. Vues et types de la zone militaire de Paris, 1899-1913*, BnF, Estampes et Photographies, Oa 173c.

<sup>42</sup> Danielle Tartakowsky, “Quand Paris tenait meeting sur la butte du Chapeau-Rouge,” in Perlès and Misselyn, *Le Pré*, 59-65.

contrast, Catholic writers such as Leclos and Lhande brought these contradictory images together in a deliberate dialectic of sin and salvation. The use of the *zone* as a metaphor for social harmony was nonetheless extremely widespread and appealed to writers as diverse as the fascist Robert Brasillach and the unanimist Jules Romains.<sup>43</sup> This use of the *zone* points to a pervasive, often unacknowledged nostalgia for the imagined social order of an idealized, pre-Revolutionary past.

Aragon's contrasting vision of the *zone* as the embodiment of proletarian consciousness was less common during the interwar period than the utopian melting-pot imagined by both Catholic and other writers. The other major Communist writer of the period, Paul Nizan, evoked the *zone* in his 1938 masterpiece *La conspiration*, but only in passing.<sup>44</sup> Various fellow travelers nonetheless shared something of Aragon's vision, especially the proletarian writer Tristan Rémy and the artist Jean Lugnier, whose thick, expressionistic brushstrokes endowed the *zone* with a powerful presence.<sup>45</sup> Popular songs like Marc Hély and J. Jekyll's *La zone*, recorded by Fréhel in 1933,<sup>46</sup> also portrayed the area as a bourgeois-free space, although such songs, as Adrian Rifkin observes, were often written by bourgeois songwriters and designed to titillate bourgeois audiences.<sup>47</sup>

The Catholic Church may have exaggerated the success of its mission in the *zone*, but it outstripped the Communist Party in the variety and sheer quantity of its cultural propaganda. Perhaps the political victories of the Communist Party in the *banlieue rouge* obviated the necessity for more extensive literary or artistic representation. Unlike Aragon's novel, Leclos's play was set entirely in the *zone* and sought to engage audiences in the most direct possible way. As mentioned earlier, Lhande emphasized the need for the Church to appropriate every conceivable form of media in the service of its mission. Leclos's play was a good start. *Le Christ dans la banlieue* also spawned a religious town planning journal of the same name, which included sections such as "The Cardinal's building sites" and numerous photographs illustrating the Church's work in the *zone*.<sup>48</sup> Cinema was a particularly important medium for spreading the word. In 1935, the Church created its own production company, Fiatfilm, and built a studio in the north-western suburb of La Garenne-Colombes. Fiatfilm inaugurated its first cinema in Vichy in 1936 and opened others in Paris at the end of the year. Its first real blockbuster was none other than Robert Péguy's adaptation of *Notre-Dame de la Mouise*, completed in 1939 but not screened until 1941.<sup>49</sup> Péguy's film, while more melodramatic and sentimental than Leclos's play, also received glowing reviews.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>43</sup> See Robert Brasillach, *Le marchand d'oiseaux* [1936] (Paris, 1996); Jules Romains, *Les hommes de bonne volonté* [1932-1946] (Paris, 1958), in particular volume VI, *Les humbles* and volume VII, *Recherche d'une église*.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Nizan, *La Conspiration* (Paris, 1938), 96.

<sup>45</sup> See Tristan Rémy, "A l'ancien tonnelier" (Paris, 1931); Jean Lugnier produced numerous paintings of the *zone* during the interwar period, some of which are now held by the Mairie de Saint-Ouen.

<sup>46</sup> Marc Hély and J. Jekyll, *La zone* (Paris, 1933). Fréhel's recording features on the CD compilation *La banlieue 1931-1953*, Vincennes: Frémeaux et Associés, 2004.

<sup>47</sup> Adrian Rifkin, "Musical moments," *Yale French Studies*, 73: *Everyday Life* (1987): 131-42.

<sup>48</sup> See for example Touzé, "La Zone: Encore un mot," *Le Christ dans la banlieue. Revue de l'urbanisme religieux du diocèse de Paris*, 14 (Apr. 1935): 3-10; "Notre Dame de la Zone" and "A travers la Zone," *Le Christ dans la banlieue*, 19 (July 1936): 13-14 and 27-31.

<sup>49</sup> Claude Delpeuch, "'Notre-Dame de la Mouise' est réalisé avec des moyens de fortune," *Le Petit Journal*, July 23, 1939. This article retraces the recent history of Catholic cinema.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*; Yves Le Monastier, "Les films nouveaux: 'Notre-Dame de la Mouise'," *Paris-Soir*, April 23, 1941 (for both articles, see "Document concernant le film *Notre-Dame de la Mouise*, d'après un ouvrage du Lhande et la pièce de Grégoire Leclos, 1939," at BnF, Arts du Spectacle, 8-RK-6808).

The question remains whether Catholic and Communist representations of the *zone* helped to pave the way for the peremptory, wholesale destruction of the area which took place during the Occupation. Lhande and Leclos had genuine affection for the *zone* and especially its ragpickers. One might also argue that the Church stood to benefit from the survival of the *zone*, where it could be seen to be doing good works. Its stated mission was nonetheless to redeem the area's inhabitants and complemented Vichy's call for a return to the land. Furthermore, Péguy's cinematic adaptation of *Notre-Dame de la Mouise* was one of the few films of the Occupation to show harsh social conditions while meeting with the approval of German censors, no doubt because it proposed a partial solution to the problem.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, the grittiness of *Notre-Dame de la Mouise* was at odds with fascist as well as Communist aesthetics. A more eloquent example of the potential link between the Catholic mission in the *zone* and fascism was Pierre Gourdon's 1932 novel *Une idylle dans la zone rouge*, a kind of Disney-like account of the scouts' work in the *zone* at Gentilly, characterized by its purity of tone, abundant martial imagery and unconscious homoeroticism.<sup>52</sup>

Aragon's vision, like Leclos's, surely contributed to the ultimate fate of the *zone*. His celebration of angry yet intelligent workers milling at the city gates must have strengthened the resolve of urban elites, Republican and fascist alike, to impose some order on this turbulent space. Although Communist militants had retired from the butte du Chapeau-Rouge well before 1936, its symbolic importance as a buffer between the city and the *banlieue rouge* seemed to be at least one of the reasons for its redevelopment as a graceful park only a year after the publication of *Les beaux quartiers*. Today, faded signs at the park's entrances damn its revolutionary heritage with faint praise.

As I have demonstrated, the opposing visions of Leclos and Aragon had other significant points of convergence. Both used the *zone* as the setting for an epiphany, projected their respective ideologies onto the area's ragpickers and conceded some overlap between Christian and Communist ideals. However, the distinction between Leclos's vision of class reconciliation and Aragon's vision of class war remains an important one. That both visions were articulated through the *zone* underlines the metaphorical openness of a space which, by virtue of its location at the threshold and on the circumference of the French capital, came to embody different hopes for the nation's future.

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<sup>51</sup> German propaganda newsreels from the same period showed priests baptizing gypsy children in the *zone*. See for example *Actualités mondiales 1940 novembre et décembre*, Forum des Images, VDP 4686.

<sup>52</sup> Pierre Gourdon, *Une idylle dans la zone rouge* (Paris, 1932). Gourdon's novel was the basis for Fiatfilm's *Promesses* (1935), of which no print has survived.