



The Flea Market of Marseille

Michèle Jolé and William Kornblum

Marseille's flea market ("marché aux puces") lies at the heart of a vast urban renewal project that could end up wiping the market off the map for good. Michèle Jolé and William Kornblum, who have both adopted Marseille as their hometown, explore the loss that the transformation of this veritable institution would represent for the city's residents and, more generally, for the northern neighborhoods ("les Quartiers Nord") of Marseille.

"The more we gain distance from the center, the more the ambiance becomes political. It's the turn of the docks, the ship's basins, the warehouses, the stations of the poor, the scattered refuges of misery: the suburbs... The long Rue de Lyon is the mine that Marseille digs into the countryside, at Saint-Lazare, Saint-Antoine, Arenc, Septème, shattering it with grenade blasts of all the languages of its peoples and its commercial firms. Alimentation Moderne, Rue de la Jamaïque, Comptoir de la Limite, Savon Abat-Jour, Minoterie de la Campagne, Bar du Gaz, Bar Facultatif..."

— Walter Benjamin, "Faubourgs", *Sens unique [précédé de] Enfance berlinoise [et suivi de] Paysages urbains*, Paris: Éditions Maurice Nadeau, "Les Lettres nouvelles" series, 1978 [authors' translation].

Christiane's flea market: a guided tour

Christiane has lived in La Visitation since 1988. It's a Marseille public housing project (*cit *) that surprises the visitor by its verdant aspect, especially the stately trees surrounding the low-rise apartment buildings. At its center there is only one store, lost in an industrial zone in relative decline and bordered by a heavily trafficked avenue. But it is her *cit *, which she loves and where she feels a sense of well-being. She speaks of "solidarity" and likens it to a "village." But she also avoids shutting herself in and seeks to be involved in life outside the *cit *. For example, she participated in the H tel du Nord project (Jol  2012) from the outset, welcoming guests to the *cit * and organizing interpretive walks in the area... To the question of why she threw herself into this adventure, she responds:

"I've had enough of people being afraid of Marseille's northern neighborhoods. I want to fight to change all that. As soon as someone asks me to get involved in this kind of cause, I get stuck in. We have to change this image."

It was from her *cit * that we and Christiane started out, on a Sunday morning. Since the market is only 15 minutes on foot from her apartment, she wanted us to understand it as part of her local territory. For us, as urban ethnographers, it was almost a classic opportunity for the observation, however brief, of a market insider, with all the accompanying gestures, opinions, phrases, and joys: a moment of awakened humanity.

All along our route, Christine offered comments as if she herself were doing a survey, all the time looking, discussing, proffering her opinions:

“It’s a real institution, the Bougainville flea market. Whether you’re from La Busserine or La Visitation, everyone goes to the flea market on Sundays. At the flea market, you find everything: things to eat, things to wear, things to fix the car with or to decorate the house with. For the people of the northern neighborhoods, it’s a place of encounters and meetings... I come here to see people I know, and people recognize me here. If they were to get rid of it, there would be a lot of sad people, and I would be saddest of all. This market is a source of life.”

For her, the flea market begins under the pillars of the freeway and continues along Boulevard du Capitaine Gèze. As she puts it, there is the “market below,” along the avenue, and the “market above,” within the official market site. She almost never goes to the one “above,” “inside.”

“For me, where I like to go is this part of the market [on the streets and not the official market]. The best deals are here. These vendors don’t pay for their space; the others, inside, have to pay 10 or 20 euros [per day]. It’s not affordable for those who sell just a few things. At best, they earn 20 or 30 euros a day. I prefer to boost the profits of those with the least resources... I find so much happiness here sometimes; it’s a real pleasure, a passion, to find inexpensive things, because I’m happier with things I’ve bought at the market rather than in a department store; you get real bargains. Also, once I’ve parted with 10 or 15 euros [in a store], that’s it, I can’t go anywhere else!”

Michele Jolé quickly discovered Christine’s passion for the flea market the first time she visited her flat as a guest of the Hôtel du Nord cooperative. The interior of her home, with all its seemingly disparate objects, was difficult to describe: animal skins on the floors, good-luck charms, feathered ornaments, tools, little statues, and leopard-print designs on all the cushions, armchairs, and covers. “I love anything that’s handmade, anything with a panther motif, as you’ll have noticed,” she laughs. The top of the main buffet is almost transformed into an altar dedicated to American Indians, with a careful placement of cherished objects and family photos.

“I adore this whole [American] Indian universe. I find they are people very close to nature, very respectful of their environment. There is also their attachment to spirituality... I began my collection by going to the flea market. I see something I like, I buy it. Everything in this home was bargained for at the flea market.”

Christiane’s unique taste and imagination for mixing and matching comes across in her personal style of dress as well.

“I dress myself for 50 cents or a euro. Sometimes I find fancy brands, I’m not ashamed to admit it... These boots, I paid a euro for them—real cowboy boots—they normally cost a hell of a lot, these boots... One time, I found a Dior swimsuit, two euros, not brand-new, but in great condition; I wore it this summer and looked so good in it!”

Indeed, Christiane is coquettish, wearing makeup and charmingly dressed, but what catches the eye is the surprising diversity of her outfits: one day, she adopts a rocker style in a short “Perfecto”-style leather jacket, black pants and leopard-print cowboy boots; the next time we see her, she’s in an American Indian mood, playing with different leathers and jewelry. Whatever her style of dress, and there are many, they all reflect her taste for invention. In fact, the pleasure she takes from recycling so many objects and articles of clothing reflects a taste for both creativity and making do (“*la débrouille*”). As she says, “We are here, we exist, and in us there is potential and skills that we must develop.” These are assertions we hear voiced by many others in the *cités* of Marseille.

The Euromed juggernaut

The first phase of the Euroméditerranée project (“Euromed 1”), completed in time for the Marseille’s 2013 European Capital of Culture program, began the transformation of the city’s

sprawling commercial port district. From the ancient entrance to the Old Port—where the MuCEM¹ now stands—northward, all along the Joliette docklands, to Zaha Hadid’s CMA-CGM Tower at Arenc, old warehouses and factories have become upscale condos, shopping centers, and music venues. Now, Euromed 2² is under way. Its first phase of work within the 80-hectare (200-acre) zone concerns two old working-class neighborhoods, Les Crottes and La Cabucelle, through which run Rue de Lyon, Chemin de la Madrague-Ville, and a section of Boulevard du Capitaine Gèze. The city’s famous flea market lies in the center of this zone, at the gateway to the northern neighborhoods—*les Quartiers Nord*—“the city’s savage *banlieue*,” perched on the nearby hills and gullies. This zone will be also transformed by the extension of metro line 2 northward from its current terminus, Bougainville station, toward a new station—a massive restructuring of the transportation network in the form of a new multimodal transit node called “Capitaine Gèze”³—at the start of Boulevard du Capitaine Gèze, at the junction of these neighborhoods and the Marseille flea market. The announcement in November 2015 of a new “eco-neighborhood” to be built at Bouygues-Cirmad, on the edge of the existing market, is a new phase in the project’s development.⁴ Residents and merchants worry, of course, about its consequences. And if this were not enough, another source of uncertainty about the flea market is its poor reputation, which some consider a “thieves’ market” or an “ethnic”—read North African—market.

Is it possible that a flea market could block Euromed’s transformation of the city’s northern port? No, is the most likely answer. But in that case, what exactly is at stake here? Who cares about the flea market? Why should anyone else?

What does it endanger and what is the market?

When *les Marseillais* speak of the flea market, they often have very different ideas and opinions based on what parts of the market they know, or whether, in fact, they know the market at all. The term “flea market” itself leads to some confusion. The official site of the market is named “Centre Commercial des Puces” (“Flea Market Shopping Center”) or “Marché de la Madrague-Ville” (“La Madrague Market”), yet at the entrance one sees as many signs for the adjacent Slimani meat market as for the official market. The confusion is well clarified by Michel Peraldi and Véronique Manry’s (2002) distinction between the “in” market and the “off” market. The official, or “in,” market (4 hectares, 1,000 jobs) serves a population of about 100,000 visitors a week, two thirds of whom come from the northern neighborhoods. They are drawn by a rich offering of goods from 300 indoor shops, 300 outdoor booths, and another 100 indoor stalls offering used items and antiques.⁵

¹ Musée des Civilisations de l’Europe et de la Méditerranée (Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations).

² Phase 2 of the Euroméditerranée project tackles an unattractive 170-hectare (420-acre) industrial area, cut up by railroad tracks and freeways, bounded by Cap Pinède and Les Arnaveaux to the north, Le Canet to the east, and the CMA-CGM Tower to the south. Here, by 2030, the Euromed transformation promises 14,000 new apartments, 20,000 jobs, 30,000 residents, offices, amenities, a 14-hectare (35-acre) park, and a scenic cliff area, among other features.

³ This multimodal transportation interchange will include a metro station, a bus and interurban coach station, and parking facilities for bicycles and motorcycles.

⁴ “The news broke last week: the winner of the request for proposals issued in March by Euroméditerranée, the Bouygues–CIRMAD consortium, will be in charge of developing the 14 hectares (35 acres) of the Îlot XXL parcel by 2021 as an eco-neighborhood of 200,000 m² (2,150,000 sq. ft) with thousands of new ‘apartments, businesses and services...’ All of this will be a stone’s throw from the future terminus of metro line 2 and will surround a ‘modernized’ flea market.” Laurent d’Ancona, “Marseille : grand saut pour le marché aux puces ?” *La Provence*, December 3, 2015. Available online (in French) at the following URL: www.laprovence.com/article/edition-marseille/3698128/grand-saut-pour-le-marche-aux-puces.html.

⁵ In the 1980s, as the city’s authorities sought to clear port-related lands that had fallen into disuse, the market was located in an even less favorable area of Marseille’s 15th *arrondissement* on the industrial edge of the port, in a congested node of trucking and freeways. In 1988, the city seized the opportunity to relocate the market to its present location. The abandoned factory buildings of the Alsthom corporation were sold to a private consortium in a

The variety of products on sale in this part of the market includes foods especially, but also furniture, appliances, fabrics and sewing supplies, clothes, shoes, cosmetics, and, especially on Sundays, antiques and collectibles. Added to this commercial arrangement is a mosque, some meeting spaces for associations, and a number of cafes and inexpensive restaurants. Many of these commercial outlets cater to a cultural public that requires Middle Eastern goods (halal meat, couscous, spices, furniture, clothing, books and videos, etc.), but the greatest number of sales are of low-price products sold to a diverse but low-income public. In this sense, to adopt the vocabulary of Michel Peraldi, the official market resembles more of a discount center than an oriental bazaar, with a singular trait of its own: “the passion of exchange in all its duality of gain and attachment; it is a space where the values of speech and touch reign above all.”

The “off” market

While the expensive second-hand and antiques market languishes⁶, a flea market of an older, more desperate type, “*le marché off*,” springs up at the weekend on the perimeter of the official market. It spreads out all along the sidewalks of Boulevard du Capitaine Gèze, above all, as well as Rue de Lyon and Avenue Cap Pinède, in a completely illegal manner that leaves its status forever ambiguous. This flea market—it might better be called a ragpickers’ market—has been little studied and its importance is difficult to evaluate. Surely it is an outgrowth of extreme poverty, often on both sides of the sale—sellers and buyers.

This “off” market is widely stigmatized. A typical description of the street-vendor scene is this excerpt from an article in the February 2, 2015, edition of regional newspaper *La Provence* titled “The Overflowing Market”:⁷

“The flea market commands more space each Sunday. The street hawker is king—especially when the police are not around [...] [U]nder the Capitaine Gèze overpass (15th *arrondissement*)⁸ [is] where the market swells to its fullest extent: 40,000 to 50,000 people are crammed in here each Sunday, creating unmanageable traffic jams [...] In effect, Marseille has a lawless zone from La Maison Blanche [a neighborhood of public housing] to Le Canet railway station. Along the sidewalks, Roma and North Africans, for the most part, compete in a poor people’s street market. Four euros for a pack of Marlboros, one euro for a bag of spices, seven euros instead of 25 for kids’ jeans, five euros for a cell-phone case, two euros for a tablecloth, four euros for a pair of women’s boots...”

Since spring of 1999, at the insistence of local residents and shop owners in the official market, and with the support of the mayor of the 15th and 16th *arrondissements*, a variety of law-enforcement officers have attempted crackdowns on the illegal peddlers in the “off” market. Since then, the constant police pressure has restrained the growth of the street market, but the majority of vendors continue to play cat-and-mouse games with the authorities. They set up at dawn and are prepared to run at around 10 in the morning when the police arrive. When they see the authorities approach, they have a few minutes to grab their merchandise to prevent it from being seized and thrown in the trash vehicles that follow the police cars. But once the authorities have left the scene, the majority

sort of coup by the mayor and other Marseille notables. The city agreed to provide sanitation services in return for which the market would devote a portion of its space to second-hand and antique merchandise. Quickly, the official site changed its nature and scale to become a working-class commercial mall. In this regard, the operation succeeded to some degree. By contrast, the initial objective of controlling the undesirable, marginal elements was a failure. (Source: Manry and Peraldi 2002.)

⁶ The flea market proper, selling second-hand goods, especially antiques, is located in a hall of its own in the official market. It has never managed to achieve the same (coveted) status as Paris’s Saint-Ouen flea market.

⁷ Denis Trossero, “Marseille : le marché aux puces déborde”, *La Provence*, February 2, 2015. Available online (in French) at the following URL: www.laprovence.com/article/actualites/3247951/le-marche-aux-puces-deborde.html.

⁸ The city of Marseille is split into 16 districts called *arrondissements*. For administrative and electoral purposes, these are in turn grouped into 8 *secteurs*, each of which has its own mayor and council. The 8th *secteur* covers the 15th and 16th *arrondissements*.

simply set up their wares again. How long can this situation continue in the face of Euromed “progress”?

The market’s uncertain future

Thinking about its future in the face of development, the current manager of the official market, Mr Coudert, says: “The market has social utility that it must retain [...]. It’s a place of peace and contributes to tranquility.” On one point, however, the authorities are in agreement: order and cleanliness must be restored in the official market. Samia Ghali, the socialist mayor of the 15th and 16th *arrondissements*, confirmed that “the market cannot remain as it is; it’s total anarchy, there’s a lack of cleanliness, thefts... The market must be reorganized”.⁹ At the outset, in 2009, the authorities even envisioned—yet again (see footnote 5)—transferring the market, this time to the outlying district of L’Estaque. But in 2012, those responsible for the project returned to simpler goals: reorganizing the market to enhance its cleanliness, accessibility and security.

In our 2015 Paris interview with Paul Leclerc, the chief architect of Euromed 2, he asserted that the market was an important social service that needed to be somehow incorporated into what will become a dense and thriving node of the new Marseille. Renovation would be light, he offered: “It’s a matter of enhancing the system.” The demolition of the hall devoted to second-hand goods and antiques would provide more open space to accommodate stalls and parking, while the antiques could be relocated to the alley where birds are now sold. What about the informal market out in the streets? Yes, they had thought about this question. His team had proposed to the authorities that a route be allocated for it where there could be small, inexpensive spaces for the small peddlers. But this proposal had not been accepted by those above. There, according to Leclerc, the philosophy seems to be that “life will go on.”

Christiane Martinez, our friend and flea-market champion, and other regular patrons of the market are not so sure. Surely, they argue, “enhancement” will drive up the cost of the stalls for peddlers and eventually drive away the poorer shoppers who depend on its current low prices. They especially fear the loss of the “off” market’s informality, which makes it a mecca for bargain-hunters and a source of income for Marseille’s least advantaged entrepreneurs.

“Modernizing” and “rehabilitating” the flea market are objectives with a familiar resonance, but they mask other realities: the flea market is at the center of what the authorities conceive as the “new gateway” to Marseille. It is understood that a new residential population in the area will replace the current working-class and poor population of about 5,000 with 30,000 newcomers of higher social status spread over the entire project area. Thus from a consideration of the flea market’s fate emerges the larger question of what will become of those displaced and, more broadly, what will become of the northern neighborhoods beyond the project area.

⁹ Source: public meeting, March 9, 2012.

Figure 1. The “in” market on a Sunday



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Figure 2. The entrance to the “in” market



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Figure 3. The pleasure of local food



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Figure 4. The pleasure of color



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Figure 5. The entrance to the mosque



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Figure 6. The “off” market



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Figure 7. A spot like many others on the “off” market



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Figure 8. A form of improvised stall



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Figure 9. The *cité* of La Visitation



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Figure 10. From the window of Christiane’s apartment



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Figure 11. Inside Christiane’s apartment



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Figure 12. Another view of Christiane’s apartment



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Figure 13. Location of the flea market within Marseille



Source: Centre commercial des Puces de Marseille. Website: www.centrecommerciallespuces.com.

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