



Fragmentation and solidarity in the artistic milieu of contemporary Paris: A perspective from Emile Durkheim



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ABSTRACT

Early 20th century Paris is considered to be one of the first art capitals in the world. However, there is, to date, no research on contemporary Paris that looks into the conditions and structure of its urban art scene. The aims of this paper are twofold: 1) to obtain an understanding of the conditions that prevent or separate the current artistic landscape from its former heydays, and 2) to embed the empirical data into a theoretical framework that can potentially be used to compare this situation with those of other cities. The main concept of Durkheim's that will inform this framework is the term milieu. This term has been tested by the author regarding a number of other cities that have been studied, including New York City, Mexico City, London, Beijing, Zürich, and Tokyo. The main findings of this study will show that the Parisian artistic milieu can be described as in a state of 'social sclerosis', as an anaemic detachment from other artistic micro-segments—the solidarity organs not being sufficiently in contact, which constrains freedom of expression, fosters the lack of independence, and promotes low tolerance, which is a partial explanation why Paris is unable to revamp its status as former capital of bohemia.

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1. Introduction

Early 20th century Paris is considered to be one of the first art capitals in the world. The Parisian culture of the time, based in the Quartier Latin and Rive Gauche, the bohemianism surrounding the arts, the flâneur, the growth of an early art market, and the extension of the artistic activities to Montmartre and from there to Montparnasse, have all inspired not only nostalgic visions of the city, but have also informed a number of important urban and sociological studies (Casanova, 2004; Franck, 2001; Grana & Grana 1990, White & White 1965). The influential status of Paris has slowly disappeared since the 1970s, and is being replaced by cities such as New York, London, and Berlin (Currid, 2006; Guilbaut, 1983; While, 2003). There is, to date, no research on contemporary Paris that looks into the conditions and structure of its urban art scene. The aims of this paper are twofold: 1) to obtain an understanding of the conditions that prevent or separate the current artistic landscape from its former heydays, and 2) to go beyond a mere description, and to embed the empirical data into a theoretical framework that can potentially be used to compare this situation with those of other cities, and to provide a framework that can

clarify the conditions and factors that give rise to an art capital of sorts, or to explain the constraints that prevent this. The main concept of Durkheim's that will inform this framework is the term *milieu*. Although it is known that Durkheim used this term in his theory, it has not been extensively discussed in the literature. However, this term has been tested by the author regarding a number of other cities that have been studied, including New York City, Mexico City, London, Beijing, Zürich, and Tokyo (Morgner, 2014, 2015). The framework has proven to be useful for making comparisons between these cities, particularly for gauging artistic innovativeness, which is largely defined as a production and reproduction of artistic diversity, and based on a number of empirical findings: 1) the frequency of artistic encounters as a source of stimulation, motivations, and information, 2) the number of artistic interactions as influences on cooperation opportunities, and as a ground for competition and criticism, and 3) the urban density of interactions as a mode for mutual observation, learning, and identity formation.

In the first part of this paper, the term milieu and its possible application to the study of urban art milieus will be discussed. This is followed by a brief methodological discussion on data collection. The latter part of the paper demonstrates how this frame of reference can be applied to the study of artistic milieus by using empirical data from contemporary 21st century Paris.

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The main findings of this study are that the Parisian artistic milieu is in a state of 'social sclerosis,' and that this is the result of the fragmented nature of the artistic community. Symptoms of this state of affairs include a constrained freedom of expression, a lack of independence, and a low tolerance for new ideas among Parisian artists, all of which help to explain why Paris has been unable to re-establish its status as a capital of bohemia.

2. The term 'milieu' in the writings of Emile Durkheim and the idea of the 'artistic milieu'

Large agglomerations¹ of artists can be found in many cities, such as Bushwick in New York City, East London (Shoreditch, Victoria Park), or District 798 in Beijing. Several studies have been conducted on the clusters of artists living and working in large urban centres (Currid, 2006; Florida, 2002; Heilbrun, 1989). These studies focused mainly on demographics, and overlooked the importance of analysing the actual connections between the artists living in a given city. Quantitative comparisons and rankings do not take into account the qualitative arrangement of the urban setting (Menger, 2006). The artists are not dispersed throughout the city; the majority gather in a specific area, and it is here that quantity seems to matter because a large number are brought *together*, in the spatial sense of the word. Although a smaller city might have the same proportion of artists as New York City, the actual number would be only a few hundred (if that many), in contrast to several thousand clustered together in the art districts of large urban centres. Ethnographic studies are often inspired by the methodological orientation of the Chicago School (see Bain, 2003; Currid & Williams, 2010; Grazian, 2004; Ley, 2003; Lloyd, 2002), and although they focus on the question of social integration and interaction, they remain, in terms of their conceptual orientation, quite narrow because the models that they develop are abstract enough so that they can account for the conditions of art districts in other cities, or because they have not tried to address art scenes that are constrained by social disintegration, and a lack of diversity and innovativeness.

The following conceptual formulation of a city's artistic milieu was inspired by Durkheim's version of milieu. The term is often translated as 'environment' (Durkheim, 1965, 1982, p. 113, p. 116). Durkheim did not use *l'environnement*, and while the translation might appear to be a minor issue, the notion of milieu is much closer to Durkheim's concept and to the semantic tradition (Spitzer, 1942). The term 'milieu' also refers to 'in the middle' (*au milieu* in French), which implies that one element is related to two others and that is both defined through this position and receives direction from it. This notion of milieu shares similarities with the network theory of Harrison C. White (1992, p. 65): 'Identities come to perceive the likelihood of impacts to other identities in some string of ties and stories. The social result is called a network.' A network or milieu is in this sense not simply defined through linkages or interconnections, but as originating from 'interacting control struggles' (2008, p. 150) or a 'triggering of identities' (2008, p. 6). In other words, in contrast to classical notions of networks, this is not just a form of observing or being linked to other parts of a network, but rather of co-production. The idea is that the formation of identities (an identity is like a stabilised profile, configuration, or role) activates control searches by other identities, which have their own impetus towards controlling other parts. The linking is then not like the linking of pearls on a chain, but occurs because '[e]ach control effort presupposes and works in terms of other identities'

(White 2008, p. 6).

An artistic milieu is therefore not simply to be seen as artists who know each other or have common linkages, because these forms of an association can also be described as an agglomeration. Instead, the linkages between the artists define each other, and thereby shape social order. The term 'milieu' or 'network' reflects this notion of a reflexive co-production. The word 'environment' refers to what is outside, perhaps the outside of a system or how something is located in a specific setting and influenced by the setting, which is a one-way relationship. Because this study considers art districts, it is concerned with how they are shaped internally, and how the artists relate to and thus define each other. Therefore, Durkheim's term—milieu—is more appropriate.

The milieu is therefore marked by an interactive approach in which its nature is characterized by the construction and interpretation of meaning.² Furthermore, these interactions have a spatial dimension, as they require a space in which these interactions can occur. When many artists live and work together or near each other, frequent interactions are inevitable. In these settings, running into other artists becomes a daily occurrence, and interactions can evolve easily. These encounters become so normal that the mere perception of other artists triggers them. Referring to the countryside, one artist noted that 'there aren't any artists around ... you have to call people up ... in New York, you just step out on the street' (Rosenberg & Fliegel, 1979, p. 18). As a consequence of this intensity, the interactions become orientated towards *each other*, occurring in the middle of or with reference to other interactions with artists.

This mutual interconnectedness of an artistic milieu is an important aspect that requires further differentiation. Two additional criteria (Durkheim, 1912, p. 139) are helpful: 1) the number of social units; and 2) the degree of concentration (or dynamic density). The second of these is not just a spatial setting; the proximity might be a given, but separation through social distance is also implied (Durkheim uses the word 'moral' instead of 'social'). Proximity thus refers to actual social (moral) relations that not only compete with each other but also share a common way of life (Wirth, 1938). A simple physical agglomeration is therefore insufficient because density does not refer to the number of inhabitants, but to the development of the lines of communication and transmission between them (Durkheim, 1912, p. 140).³ The latter phenomenon is further differentiated by network theory in the form of weak and strong ties (Granovetter, 1973). Furthermore, the role of these ties as a form of social capital needs to be considered (Bourdieu, 1983). Access or exclusion from networks is an important resource that can have serious effects upon the position of an artist in developing a career (Guiffre, 1999). Thus, while the first element (the number of social units) simply denotes the number or the frequency of artistic interactions, the second (density) refers to the awareness of the frequency of related communications in the presence of other artists (i.e., interactions evolve into milieu). A cross-tabling of these criteria suggests that different urban artistic settings are possible. Research by the author (Morgner, 2014, 2015) demonstrates that Williamsburg, New York and East London are marked by a high frequency of artistic interactions with dense spatial interlinks. These milieus are marked by strong mutual support, but also high competitiveness. The diverse and vibrant

² Zukin (2012) also refers to Durkheim but speaks of a cultural ecosystem.

³ This approach therefore differs from the 'critical mass' interpretation as developed by Fischer (1975). Fischer's interpretation of dynamic density focused on proximity and how it leads to further differentiation. Fischer therefore does not fully embrace Durkheim's conception of dynamic density that addresses how these differentiated social worlds interact.

¹ The word agglomeration is used deliberately because the word reflects a loose coupling of elements.

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