

11th International Conference of Historical Geographers

August 2001

CIEQ (Centre Interuniversitaire d'Etudes Québécoises)
Université Laval
Québec, Canada

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Oral paper

History and geography of ball (public dances) in France A process changing according to socio-political structures

Between 1880 and 1900, French public authorities tried to strengthen the new republican regime. The reinforcement of local councils was one of their means of achieving it. This brought country people's adherence to the new regime.

These aims were mainly pursued by taking over the significant spatial and community symbolics which had been in the Church hands until then. By instituting the 14th of July, the Bastille Day as a national commemoration day, a republican model of community and communal space sacralisation was established with some specific festive rituals. Among them, the most important is the dance, called the *public ball* but which I call the *republican ball*. My purpose is to study it.

In today's France, the ball is the most important type of public rejoicings (fig. 1). Indeed, socio-spatial imaginary was durably structured by the model of *republican* balls throughout the XXth century. Today, its fast decline is due to the diffusion of new local spatial practices by the generalisation of urban ways of life. But the model is still influent: it explains why some XIXth

century political quarrels are still alive; it's also the reason of the recurrent failing of local councils reunification laws.

Fig. 1: Dances are the most frequent forms of public festivities in France

The purpose of this paper is to define the spatial specificities of these festive ritual symbolics and to emphasize their political importance: the survey of one and a half century turns out to be rich in information; I will deal with the following points:

- the construction of the *republican ball* by means of the 14th of July ball.
- the permanence of political quarrels inherited from the XIXth century.
- the role of the *republican ball* in the structuration of local communities.

The construction of a *republican ball*

Troughout the XIXth century, the dispute about the date of the national commemoration day was a permanent issue: it was changed five times, by each political regime. The Second Empire (1852-1870) national holiday was on the 15th of August: it was Napoleon's day but also the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. Thus, Napoleon the third hoped the monarchist Church would rally to his cause as priests had been trying to develop the cult of the Virgin Mary since the beginning of the century. But he was unsuccessful: the Church kept aloof. His main heritage was the establishment of rituals by ministerial orders combining different former practices for the day: in the morning, a military parade and mass (*Te Deum*). In the afternoon, a popular fair and, at night, a bonfire then a ball.

The national holiday was still at political stake with the new republican regime. But local communities became more important. By 1880, cities such Nantes or Lyons imposed the symbolical 14th of July day on a cautious government. But, with the quick success of the ball, national authorities decided to use it as means of gaining people's support of the new regime. Its popular fair became a part of their policy of reinforcement the power of local councils. The *préfets* (administrators of French *départements*) kept it under close control by instigating and financing part of it.

Except for the *Te Deum*, the ritual forms remains and gained importance: spreading quickly from towns to rural areas, *le bal du 14-juillet* became the major event of the national holiday. Within thirty years, its popularity turned it into a common standard of all public dances: in French, *public* has a strong political meaning. But it also describes and structures a specific kind of society.

The permanence of old political quarrel about 14th of July and 15th of August

The XIXth century ended with the victory of political power over religious power in the long struggle to control acoustic, visual and festive space, as it's shown by Corbin about the ringing of the bells. A real battle was fought over communal band, whose name changed from *orphéon* to *harmonie*. In the dances (fig. 2), but also in other public festivities, it was the frequent use of

national flags, lights such as fairylights and fireworks and procession of community space with torchlight tattoos before the ball. Today, the 14th of July's fireworks remain of course the only ones or the most important of the year. So during the whole century, all the vehement anti-republican (mostly ultra-right wing) criticism of the ball focused on these formal rituals in always the same words.

Fig. 2 *Le bal du 14-juillet* by Steinlein (1890)

This politicization of public balls went through major stages: the emblematic image of the Front Populaire's big strikes (1936) is an accordion ball in the workshop. In July 1940, Petain abolished the Republic and at the same time prohibited all the dances: «they corrupt youth»... They became immediately clandestine and a symbol of patriotic resistance.

The end of the Second World War is the heyday of the *republican ball*: there are people dancing everywhere, even in goods stations or in deconsecrated chapels. Every local communist cell organizes several dances every month. Rural areas know the same politicization of balls: in many *départements*, organizing balls is forbidden on the eve of election days. Until the '60s, in villages, young right-wingers and left-wingers used to go in different bars and ballrooms.

The major opposition is on the dates: except in some important touristic centres, people choose either the 14th of July or the 15th of August to organize the fête, rarely both. Thus, in the traditionally conservative *département* of Vendée, 14th of July balls are uncommon (43 for a *départemental* average of 110). They distribute according to traditional political votes.

Fig. 3 Old political quarrels are still alive

In the *département* of Sarthe, 14th of July balls are more frequent (88); but we can still see the marks of the revolutionary civil war (1793-94): in the formerly republican and now leftist eastern part and in the industrial capital, Le Mans, they are more numerous; in the formerly royalist and now conservative western part, they are rare. But the link between political opinions and ball can be seen more precisely in some parts of *départements*, micro-regions with strong identities as in Béarn (Pyrénées Atlantiques *département*) and with practices politically oriented.

Fig. 4 The 14th of July and 15th of August balls in Béarn and Sioule

14th of July balls are more important in districts with a left wing tradition. Except in tourist places (in the southern mountains), we can find an opposing tradition of strong right wing opinions where 15th of August prevail.

Furthermore on a local scale, practices are politically oriented.

Structuring local community

I shall now give a quick definition of these rituals and show their meaning.

The main function of the republican ball is to sanctify the central and mythic space of the *commune*, the smallest territorial division. So, it symbolically take place on the main square, even if there is a more convenient place. Usually (in Toulouse as in small villages), it's the square where

the town hall stand: the town hall is another strong symbolical building erected at the same period, in the same opposition to the church. In great towns, balls often take place in front of fire stations.

The square is designed so as to represent the whole community, its territory and population; in the same way, the public is socially and demographically diversified. Most of the people don't need to dance: the festival's aim is to *re-create* the community by putting itself on show. This microcosmic square is structured by two main places: the bar and the circle of the elected members of the community.

Fig. 5: The ball's square

The bar (fig. 2) is the place where people meet and talk more than to drink (but that doesn't prevent overdrinking): until republican ball started declining all the criticism against bars and alcoholism were political, but exceptionally for medical reasons.

This permanent political stake explains why the mayor and some other elected members of the community have to attend the ball. Public dances are organized by a fete committee closely controlled by the local council. Losing control of the fete committee means losing the power at next elections. The mayor doesn't organize balls for people's leisure, or to give them entertainment: he does that because it's his duty; he has to grant the present cohesion and the perpetuation of the community.

This show of the community as a coherent group is also to be found in the composition of the public. Most of the people are locals. Public dances have a double function, a dialectic between *us (we)* and *them (they, the others)*. Both sides help the members of the group to build self-confidence:

- Insiders come to see the group and to be seen as belonging to it. It reinsure the group.
- Outsiders are reminded that the community is still alive. So, *others* are mostly false strangers, in fact neighbours from nearby communities (5 to 15 km around). Real strangers (*aliens*) (usually tourists) are extremely rare and don't really exist: out of this dialectic, nobody pays attention to them.

Fig. 6: Publics at the republican ball

Conclusion: the end of a model of society

Born from a formal construction to commemorate the Bastille Day, the French public ball is really a republican model: it first shows people attachment to the Republic. But, beyond individual adherence, it's rather the adherence of local communities that these dances help helping to construct and to put on show, i.e. to define. So, they can be called a republican ball: the exhibition of a republican model of society.

They try to achieve two goals: first, they're a model, a standardized and simplified representation related to national space. Then (and now including all public balls established on the same model) they're a tool to structure local society. They also assert the identity of prevailing

social groups (working class, miner or farmers...) but without the exclusion of non-members unlike more recent forms of festivities such as dinner-dances organized by local societies or rave parties. Local practices, and so identities, are changing from a spatial logic to a social one.

One century later, the so-called *republican* statesmen use this term to define that type of society and thus to define France. Abroad, this is an old cliché of France: remember *Jour de fête*, Jacques Tati's film in 1949. But, since the 80's, the term has become passé and even sounds conservative, like the republican ball itself in a process of becoming part of the country's heritage. Dying but not dead: today, although it's declining fast it still represents 50% of dances in France.

Fig. 7 The decline of public dances in France

Their decline is related to changes in spatial residential structures (urban sprawl), in ways of life (mobility, use of urban facilities), in political structures (as local communities lose power and prestige in favour of new larger types of local associations) and even in spatial symbolics with the building of many new public ballrooms on the outskirts of town in the 70's and 80's.