

DISCIPLINE AND INVENTION:

THE FETE IN FRANCE

XV-XVIII CENTURY

Any historical reflection of the fête (or feast) must depart from the observation of its actual conditions of subsistence, in order to understand the veritable “festive explosion” that has marked historical production this last decade.* Although it is not specifically historical, the emergence of the fête (and in particular of the ancient feast) as a preferential object of study, leads one in effect to wonder about the reasons that have brought about that, in a given moment, an entire scientific class, in this case the French historians, has felt attracted by a theme which until then was treated only in folklorist collections. Seemingly, three reasons, that pertain as much to the recognized function of the historical discipline as to its internal evolution, may be cited. It is clear, above all, that the increased research into the ancient feast constitutes a sort of compensation, as a means of under-

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standing, to the disappearing system of civilization in which the fête had, or rather, is considered as having had, a central role. The historical analysis is therefore charged to explain, in its idiom and with its technique, the nostalgia evoked by a present which has eliminated the fête defined as an act of community participation. On these grounds it then becomes possible to rediscover one of the major functions assigned—implicitly or explicitly—to history today: to restore to the sphere of knowledge a vanished world of which contemporary society feels the heritage, but as an unfaithful heir. That the operation of understanding is difficult to separate from the fabrication of an imaginary past collectively desired, is, in the end, insignificant, unless it is meant to underline those themes that, by being the most neglected by our present age, become the most symptomatic of a world we have lost. The fête, vidently, is one of these.

On the other hand, the fête, at least as an object of history, has benefited from the rehabilitation of specific happening. After having massively scrutinized time's long courses and its stable flow, the historians, and particularly those belonging to the tradition of the "*Annales*," have turned their attention towards the event. In its transitoriness and its tension it may in fact reveal, just as well as long term evolution or social and cultural inertia, the structures that constitute a collective mentality or a society. The battle has been among the first to benefit from this reevaluation. Extrapolating it from narrative history, it can set up a suitable observation point for capturing a social structure, a cultural system and the fabrication of a story or of a legend.¹ In the same manner the festival has abandoned the shores of the picturesque and of the anecdote to become a major detector of the cleavages, tensions and images which cross-cut a society. Such an attitude is without doubt evident when the fête engenders violence and the community is torn apart, as in Romans, in 1580: "The Carnival of Romans makes me think of the Grand Canyon in Colorado: a furrow of events, it sinks deeply into a structural stratigraphy. It demonstrates, with a saw-cut, the mental and social strata which form a very '*Ancien*

¹ G. Duby, *Le dimanche de Bouvines, 27 juillet 1214*, Paris, 1973, in particular pp. 13-14.

Régime’.”² The geological metaphor clearly illustrates a perspective where the festive event is a reference point at which the extraordinary is charged to speak for the ordinary. But even when the fête does not generate excesses or revolt, it reveals this kind of approach. Always it constitutes that particular although repeated moment when it is possible to seize (even though they are disguised or inverted) the rules of a social apparatus.

A final reason has contributed to focalize historians’ attention on the fête. It is, in effect, situated as the fulcrum of the debate which has dominated French historiography for the last ten years, that is to say the study of interestablished relations in the sphere of conflict or compromise, between a culture defined as popular or folkloric and the dominant cultures. The fête is an exemplary illustration of this antagonism. First of all it is clearly situated at the crossroads of two cultural dynamics: on the one hand it represents the invention and the expression of traditional culture shared by the majority of people, on the other hand, the disciplining will and the cultural project of the dominating class. One can then, and quite rightly, apply to the fête the critical survey that A. Dupront applied to the pilgrimage, which underlines the tensions between the vital impulse of collectivity and the discipline imposed by the institutions.³ However, the “popular” festival was shortly after looked upon by the dominant cultures as a major obstacle to the assertion of their religious, ethical or political hegemony. Thus it has been the target of a constant, reiterated action aimed at destroying it, curtailing it, disciplining it or recuperating it. It is therefore the stage of a conflict where the impact of contradictory cultural realities clashes; in such way it offers a taste of “popular” and elitist cultures in their intersections and not only through the inventory of the scopes which are supposedly related to their essence. The festival is one of the privileged scenes where one may observe the popular resistance to normative injunctions as well as the restructuring, through cultural

² E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Le Carnaval de Romans. De la Chandeleur au mercredi des Cendres, 1579-1580*, Paris, 1979, p. 408.

³ A. Dupront, “Formes de la culture des masses: de la doléance politique au pèlerinage panique (XVIII^e-XX^e siècle)” *Niveaux de culture et groupes sociaux*, Paris, 1967, pp. 149-167.

models, of the behaviour of the majority. From this derives its importance for a history of mental attitudes, susceptible to the analysis of specific and localized cultural mechanisms.

Having thus acknowledged the reasons which have given the fête a priority in historians' work, it is possible, considering a well defined period (France between the XV and XVIII century) to make a schedule of the achievements and problems posed by its retrospective reading. In order to do this, a good method has appeared to be that of considering a certain number of "case studies," both original and indirect. Finally, however, as a preliminary, the great ambiguity which accompanies the very meaning of the word "*fête*" must be kept in mind. Its apparent uniqueness pertains, in fact, to manifold differences, often reflected through a series of oppositions: popular/official, rural/urban, religious/secular, participation/entertainment, etc. Leaving out the deep conflicts, which do not allow a clear typology of the festive ceremonials, these contradictions are in themselves problematic, since nearly always the festival is a mixture which aims at neutralizing opposite poles.

On the other hand the word carries in itself the definition—theoretical or spontaneous—that each of us has forged upon the fête. By blending memory and Utopia, by affirming what the fête must be and what it is not, the definition will certainly result in being the most unacceptable. First of all it becomes impossible to reconstruct the fête as an historical object with well-defined contours. In an attempt to encapsulize this shifting, fleeting and contradictory reality, we will accept here as fêtes all those manifestations which are given as such in by-gone society even though it may be possible to find festiveness beyond the customary demarcation of the fête (and perhaps there in particular).⁴

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First and fundamental basis: the by-gone festival, far from being an established fact, offering a description within definite limits, has been, from the end of the Middle Ages until the Revolution, the object of many modifying inflections which must, before anything else, emerge again. Ecclesiastical censures are

⁴ M. de Certau, "Une culture très ordinaire," *Esprit*, October 1978, pp. 3-26.

without doubt the earliest. The bans effected by the Church on festivals and popular rejoicings have supplied material for a chain of texts from the XII to the XVIII century. The writings of the *exempla*, which form the undercurrent of the homily, is the first example of those admonitions relayed later by the massive corpus of conciliar decrees, synodal statutes or episcopal ordinances. From the end of the seventeenth century, the abundance of this material is such that it may serve as a basis for theological treatises responsible for the recapitulation of the Church's tradition and entrusted to inform the clergy—thus the two studies by J.B. Thiers.⁵ These ecclesiastical interdicts are all the more important in as much as they are often adopted by the civil authorities, parliaments and municipal councils. A topical example of this alliance in the spheres of power is demonstrated by the struggle against itinerant festivals in the XVII and XVIII centuries within the jurisdiction of the parliament of Paris.⁶ These festivals, held on Sundays and days of obligation, often associated with a fair, marked by traditional rejoicings (dances and games), were banned by a decree of the *Grands Jours d'Auvergne* in 1665 and two years later this pronouncement was extended to the entire jurisdiction of the parliament. Further, during the last decade of the *Ancien Régime*, one finds this general ban to be extended with approximately fifty particular sentences referring to specific areas. Everywhere the mechanism is identical: a complaint is deposited by the local parish priest with the general prosecutor of the parliament who asks the local judges to open an enquiry. This information often, if not always, terminates in a decree of interdiction. Such an offensive, organized and predetermined, testifies at the same time popular indocility towards the established authorities' injunctions and the convergencies existing between the Cristian-

⁵ J.-B. Thiers, *Traité des Jeux et des Divertissements*, Paris, 1696 and *Traité des Superstitions selon l'Écriture Sainte, les Décrets des Conciles et les sentiments des Saints Pères et des Théologiens*, Paris 1679, second edition in four volumes, Paris, 1697-1704. On the latter text, see J. Lebrun, "Le *Traité des Superstitions* de Jean-Baptiste Thiers, contribution à l'ethnographie de la France du XVII^e siècle," *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest*, 1976, pp. 443-465 and R. Chartier and J. Revel, "Le paysan, l'ours et saint Augustin," Proceedings of the Conference *La découverte de la France au XVII^e siècle*, to be published.

⁶ Y.M. Berce, *Fête et révolte. Des mentalités populaires du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, 1976, pp. 170-176.

izing will of the clergy and the project of applying more rigour to customs sustained by the magistrates.

The objective of the Church is twofold: to obtain mastery over time and to obtain mastery over the flesh. The control of festive time is a first confrontation point between folk culture and the Church institution. Very early, right after the XIII century, the literature of the *exempla* uncovers the deep conflict which entangles itself around the cycles of Easter and Pentecost.⁷ That particular time of the year, according to folkloric culture, is above all the time for those festivities which initiate the integration of youngsters into society. The occasion may as well be the aristocratic tournament or the “*chevaux-jupons*” dances in a popular environment. For the ecclesiastical institution, on the contrary, the days of the Holy Spirit must be the days to solemnize processions, pilgrimages, crusades. This conflict for the possession of time occurs on a daily scale as well. The Church is unceasingly operating to avoid nocturnal rejoicings and the concepts which back them, that is to say, the partition established between daytime, which belongs to the Church, and night time, preferential dominion of the people.

Aiming to discipline the flesh, the Church codifies festive behaviour according to the same categories which are conceived through the designation and description of superstitious conduct. Thus a triple condemnation of the traditional fête: first of all it becomes illicit, or even “*populaire*” in the sense that J.B. Thiers gives to the word by suggesting it as the opposite of catholic. Festive behaviour, in reality, varies infinitely; it is not at all dependent upon ecclesiastical authority, but rather is rooted in specific community customs. It is therefore opposed, point by point, to the catholic spirit which is universal, well founded and shared by all. This theological condemnation is strengthened by a second psychological one. The Church in fact identifies the popular fête with excess and intemperance, with the irrational expenditure of body and wealth. It situates it, therefore, at the exact opposite of authorized practices, which are at the same

⁷ J.C. Schmitt, “Jeunes et danse des chevaux de bois. Le folklore méridional dans la littérature des *exempla* (XIII^e-XIV^e siècle),” *Cahiers de Fanjeaux*, N. 11, Toulouse, 1976, pp. 127-158.

time necessary and justly restricted. Finally, from a moral standpoint, it signifies indecency and licence. Within its boundaries the rules which form the basis of Christian society are forgotten: affection is bestowed without control, modesty loses its standards, the flesh lets itself go without reverence for the Creator. Considered as the setting of spontaneity, disorder and dishonesty, the fête becomes, in the eyes of Christian moralists, the epitome of anti-civilization. It combines in itself, in fact, the different traits which discredit illicit practices, contrary to the real Faith, to the due restriction and to Christian modesty. From all this it is not at all surprising that festivals have been among the major targets of the Church's endeavour to Christianize the population.⁸

The strategies to censure the fête are diverse. The most radical tend to prohibit them—as, for example, in the case of the *Fête de Fous*, generally celebrated on the Feast of the Holy Innocents and characterized by reversing the position of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the parody of religious ritual and manifold rejoicings (theatrical games, dances, feasts, etc.). A fête with strong religious connotations, unravelling essentially in the interior of a consecrated space, the *Fête des Fous* has been the object of an ancient condemnation, often reiterated and seemingly effective. In his *Traité des jeux et des divertissements*, J.B. Thiers recapitulates the texts which banned the *Fête des Fous* or of the Holy Innocents. His series begins in 1198 with the decree of the Bishop of Paris and comprises three texts of the XIII century, seven of the XV and ten of the XVI.⁹ Such persistence seems to have obtained the necessary results since the *Fête des Fous* disappeared at the end of the XVI century and by the mid-eighteenth century it is already the object of history; of a history so far removed and strange that it is almost undecipherable: “The fêtes of which I undertake to recount the history are so extravagant that one would have difficulty in giving them faith were he not instructed

⁸ J. Delumeau (under the direction of), *La mort des Pays de Cocagne. Comportements collectifs de la Renaissance à l'âge classique*, Paris, 1976, pp. 14-29.

⁹ J.-B. Thiers, *Traité des Jeux, op. cit.*, pp. 440-451.

upon the ignorance and barbarism that preceded the Renaissance of the *'belles-lettres'*.”¹⁰

Often this strategy of eradication is not possible and must make place for compromises which pass through the religious control of the festive apparatus. As in the case of the pilgrimage, the Church institution aims at imposing its order on that which is spontaneous, at organizing popular liberty, at extirpating its intolerable manifestations. It is through all this, therefore, that one must understand the tenacious battle fought by the Church, the Reformed as well as the Catholic one, against dance—essential element, symbolical and jocose—of the ancient fête, seen as a practice possibly present in ceremonies of a very different nature. There again, Thiers cites various authorities to condemn dance, school of impurity and weapon of the devil: “How many are those who, dancing or seeing others dance, will not bear within themselves some dishonest thought, will not cast an immodest glance, or show an indecent posture, pronounce a libertine phrase and, finally, will not induce certain desire of the flesh, as the Holy Apostle admonishes,”¹¹ By deforming the body, dance distorts the soul and inclines it to sin. Thus it must not contaminate the authorized festivities.

¹⁰ J.-B. du Tilliot, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la fête des fous qui se faisait autrefois dans plusieurs églises*, cited by Y.M. Berce, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

¹¹ J.-B. Thiers, *Traité des Jeux*, *op. cit.*, pp. 331-341. Like the dance, carnival masks are doubly to be condemned: they disguise the body of man, and consequently blaspheme against his Creator. They tolerate ribaldry of the most dangerous kind both for the good order of society and for its morals. Two texts, as proof: first the synodal constitutions of the Diocese of Annecy (1773 edition): “We finally exhort Their Lordships the Archpriests, Curés and Vicars, especially in the boroughs and the cities, to eradicate the abuse of the masquerades which are nothing but a shameful left-over of Paganism. To succeed they must rise against it in their sermons and teaching, especially after Epiphany until Lent; they must demonstrate its ridicule and danger, showing the people that such disorder is injurious to God whose image is disfigured; that it dishonours the members of J.C. by lending to them burlesque and out-of-place characters; and that it encourages licentiousness by facilitating that which impairs modesty” (cited in R. Devos and C. Joisten, *Moeurs et coutumes de la Savoie du Nord au XIX^e siècle. L'enquête de Mgr. Rendu*, Annecy and Grenoble, 1978, p. 120); secondly the preamble of a decree of the Magistrat de Lille in 1681: “Considering that each year some time before Lent such disorder and inconveniences occur, detrimental to the welfare of souls and the public good, caused by the licentiousness which many people of one or the other sex employ in going through cities masked or otherwise disguised...” (cited from A. Lottin, *Chavatte, ouvrier lillois. Un contemporain de Louis XIV*, Paris, 1979, p. 322).

A third clerical strategy is that of classification. The aim of Christianization is to separate the licit core of the fête from the superstitious practices sedimented around it. A topical example in this perspective may be found in the religious address concerning the fires of Saint John.¹² The fête and its fires, which are meant to celebrate the birth anniversary of the saint, are considered as legitimate, but only on the condition that they will be strictly confined and controlled: the ceremony is to be brief, the pile of faggots must be small in order to avoid any unnecessary surplus or excess; dancing and feasting which accompany the fires must be forbidden, the superstitious attitudes which they engender prohibited. The fires of Saint John instigate, in effect, a great number of beliefs in which superstition is visible to the naked eye, since all of them are based upon the illusive relation which may occur between a gesture (throwing grass on top of the fire, keeping the firebrand or the fire coal, going around the fire in certain turns or circles, etc.) and its supposed effects (to guess the hair colour of one's future bride, to guarantee for oneself the absence of headache or kidney pain for a whole year, etc.).¹³ Between the licit festival and its superstitious and immoral perversion the dividing line is uncertain. This is clearly witnessed by the difficult relationship established between the communities and their curates.¹⁴ Tolerance and condemnation live together to avoid on one side open conflict, often instrumentalized, on the other intolerable violation. Two cultures face each other across the fêtes: the first one, clerical, which aims at organizing behaviour in order to obtain from the fête a homage to God, the other, pertaining to the majority, which absorbs the religious ceremonial in an act of collective jubilation.

Although unquestionably the most constant and the most

¹² J. Delumeau, *Le catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire*, Paris, 1971, p. 259-261.

¹³ These superstitions are reported in J.-B. Thiers, *Traité des Superstitions*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, ed. 1712, p. 298 and vol. IV, ed. 1727, p. 404.

¹⁴ T. Tackett, *Priest and Parish in Eighteenth-Century France. A Social and Political Study of the Curés in a Diocese of Dauphiné, 1750-1791*, Princeton, 1977, pp. 210-215 and D. Julia, "La réforme post-tridentine en France d'après les procès-verbaux des visites pastorales: ordre et résistances," *La Società religiosa nell'età moderna*, Naples, 1973, pp. 311-415, in particular pp. 384-388.

powerful, the ecclesiastical pressure on the fête is not the only one. Between 1400 and 1600, in fact, the urban festival, and especially the Carnival, had to face other interferences in relation to the increasing municipal violation. Everywhere municipalities and consulates try to curb the town fête and to achieve this try to get control of its financing, its itineraries, its programme.¹⁵ More and more, drawing towards modern times, the fête is supported by municipal finance and is not the exclusive kingdom of the head of the confraternity who was its traditional organizer. Progressively, private initiative gives place to public financing. Thus a tighter control of ceremonial itineraries ensues which grant a privileged priority to certain locations which are the emblem of public identity and power (for example the Town Hall or the market place, occasionally even the municipal magistrate's residence). Thus also, a more and more determined intervention by the municipal corpus follows in elaborating the festive programme, which until then had been exclusive competence of the organizing confraternity, kingdom of youth or of the *abbayes folles*.

This municipal monopoly seeks an evident objective: to express, with the idiom of the fête, an ideology at the same time urban and secular. The composition of a procession is a foremost example of this scope. In fact it assembles symbolically all the principal corporations of which the town is composed, as in Metz, in 1510 and 1511.¹⁶ Arranging all in a hierarchy, the festival will have expressed the unity of the urban community. It will also have fabricated an urban epic, responsible for establishing the town's past in a prestigious history, ancient or biblical. In Metz in 1511, on the day of Brandons, the citizens of eminence disguise themselves to personify David, Hector, Julius Ceasar, Alexander the Great, Charlemagne and Godefroy de Bouillon who legitimate the power of the city and the authority of its oligarchy. The urban festival thus becomes a public implement which allows the town to affirm itself against the prince, the aristocracy or neighbouring towns. Through its expenditure and its ostentation it must demonstrate the town's wealth, and in such

¹⁵ M. Grinberg, "Carnaval et société urbaine, XIV^e-XVI^e siècle. le royaume dans la ville," *Ethnologie française*, 1974, N. 3, pp. 215-243.

¹⁶ M. Grinberg, *ibid.*, pp. 229-230.

a way find its role in a diplomacy of competition which is not without influence on the festive calendar. In order to authorize mutual assistance to the town representatives for the carnivals, the towns of Flanders and Artois alter, in fact, the rite of the fête, reaching the point of celebrating it out of its normal calendar position. One can observe here how a political ideology is capable of inflecting, undermining or transforming ancient rituals to subvert their meaning.

Censured by ecclesiastical authorities, diverted by municipal oligarchies, the ancient fête does not manifest itself therefore but through the deviations progressively imposed on it by the authorities. A classification encharged to rediscover, beneath these deformations and mutilations, an original base, appropriately "popular" or "folkloristic" would seem impossible. The festive material, between the XVI and the XVIII century, as can be understood, is a constant cultural compound whose components cannot be easily isolated, whether they will be annotated following the popular/official conflict, or according to a constant sedimentation showing a dependence which progressively replaces a primordial spontaneity. That is why it has appeared legitimate to us to classify, in the first place, the modifications effected on the festivals by the authorities, rather than to try giving an illusory description of a festival supposedly virgin of doctrinal contamination. But this composite material is in itself object of a history which may be elucidated by beginning with a case study which will take us across the system of the Lyonnaise fêtes between the end of the Middle Ages and the Revolution.¹⁷

The scheme of this evolution is clear: it shows the succession of fêtes based upon communal participation, with patronized fêtes. During the Renaissance the system of Lyonnaise fêtes is composed of two major elements: fêtes pertaining to all the citizenry, and gregarious, spontaneous fêtes. The former presuppose the participation of the entire population of the town in the same rejoicing, even though this participation is hierarchical and occasionally conflictual. It is the case obviously, of religious festivals born of the earlier Merveilles festival, which died

¹⁷ The fundamental materials for one such study are collected in the catalogue *Entrées royales et fêtes populaires à Lyon du XV^e au XVIII^e siècle*, Municipal Library of Lyon, Lyon, 1970.

out at the beginning of the XV century, and the fact that we may be discussing the Pardon of Saint John, the Procession of the Rogations or the feasts of patron saints is insignificant. It is also the case of royal entries, such as the rich Lyonnaise series between the end of the XV and the beginning of the XVII century: 1490, 1494, 1495, 1507, 1515, 1522, 1548, 1564, 1574, 1594, 1600, 1622—exactly 12 entries in one hundred and twenty-five years, to which should be added all those which are not royal. Each triumphal entry proposes a reciprocal spectacle: the citizenry becomes spectator of the royal procession, the king and his court spectators of the urban procession in which participate all the estates of the town, including the artisans, assembled in corporations until 1564 and then into quarters. The entry is a variegated festival *par excellence*, in which multifold elements overlap: processions, tournaments, theatrical games *tableaux vivants*, fireworks, etc. The iconographic and scenographic material thus shown offers a large amount of literature, certainly very diverse, according to the different social and cultural groups, but at least it is unified within a ceremony which assembles the town all together.

The other essential component of the Lyonnaise fête of the XVI century underlines those fêtes which can be defined “popular,” on condition that the definition of people is not enclosed within too narrow limits.¹⁸ Some of these fêtes, taken in hand by the *confréries joyeuses*, in this case the twenty abbeys of Maugouvert, founded their activity upon neighbourhood relationship within the district. An example is the hubbub which ridicules beaten husbands under the guise of a donkey cavalcade. These rejoicings, organized by the world of artisans and merchants, are, on the other hand, also spectacles that may be offered to aristocratic patrons; this is the case with the cavalcade of 1550 and also with the one of 1566 which must have constituted one of the elements of the triumphal entry of the Duchesse de Nemours.¹⁹ On other occasions the leading role

¹⁸ N.Z. Davis, “The Reasons of Misrule,” *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Stanford, 1975, pp. 97-123.

¹⁹ *Entrées royales et fêtes...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50. Two pieces cited, one by N.Z. Davis, *art. cit.*, n. 70, the other in the catalogue *Entrées royales et fêtes...*, No. 22, permit one to see into one of these *confréries joyeuses*, reunited in 1517 rue Mercière.

belongs to the *confréries joyeuses* emanating from the corporations, particularly from the one of the printers. The confraternity of *la Coquille*, which may also have been the organizer of the donkey cavalcades (as in 1578) was responsible for the parodic processions which mark the *Dimanche Gras*. Between 1580 and 1601, a half-dozen pamphlets “printed in Lyon by the *Seigneur de la Coquille*” testify the festive vitality and criticism of the group of printing guildsmen.²⁰

The beginning of the XVII century sees, at Lyon, the breakdown of this system of festivals founded upon popular participation or initiative. Two dates are symbolic historical turning points: in 1610, for the first time, the pamphlet printed on the occasion of the *Fête du Dimanche Gras* does not mention either the *abbayes joyeuses* or the confraternity of *La Coquille*; in 1622 Louis XIII is the last to receive a triumphal entry in the old manner, the following ones, (such as that of Louis XIV in 1658) not being anything but a simple reception by the municipal authorities, nor implying the participation of the local population. The change brought about is therefore threefold. First of all, popular organizations (*abbayes*, confraternities), traditionally the organizers of the festivals, die out. Secondly also the fêtes of the urban population, the triumphal entries or religious ceremonies lose their force. A good indication of this situation is given by a comparison of three Church jubilees in Lyon in 1564, 1666 and 1734: from the XVI to the XVIII centuries the profusion and ornamental ostentation seem to grow in inverse relation to popular participation. Finally, the patronized fête, reduced to a display, becomes the rule. Thus, while in the XVI century the artisanry offers to the eminent members of society the spectacle of the donkey cavalcades, in the XVIII century it is the authorities who offer fireworks to the populace. In the passage of time popular initiative vanishes and the fête becomes standardized. Whatever the occasion, whatever the animators, aldermen or lords-canon of Saint John, the ceremony is the same, the primordial fire of joy having been totally reduced to a firecracker. The fête interprets and institutes an urban order of separation, which loses its consciousness of a

²⁰ N.Z. Davis, “Printing and the People,” *op. cit.*, p. 218.

unified citizenry, in which each member, at his own level, participates.²¹

This evolution, taken from the case of Lyon, is without doubt a general aspect not only for the town fête but also for the country one. For example, the multiplying number of rose festivals in the years around 1770, following the Parisian discovery of the customary festivities in Salency, institutes in the village a form of patronized fête, which aims at supplanting traditional rejoicings.²² Exterior to the community, organized by the aristocratic, ecclesiastical or parliamentary notables, these fêtes, in search of a Christian Arcady, have nothing to do with popular tradition, even in those cases in which the élite recognizes, after having staged them, the image of an ideal people, chaste and vigorous, simple and frugal, industrious and Christian. The anaemia and confiscation of the traditional fête causes, in the XVIII century, a double reaction. On one hand the popular affectivity retires within its appropriate social allocations, but the fête becomes uniform and trite in its daily reiteration. Provence, in the town as well as in the country, offers a good example of that evolution which identifies the festival more and more with a simple dance.²³

The other reaction is philosophical and invites thought on the fête to be invented. Many, in fact, are those who criticize the artificial and dissociated fête which inevitably turns out to be the patronized fête. Whatever may be its terms “the XVIII century is no longer capable of seeing in fireworks anything but the work of fire.”²⁴ The new fête will have to be radically different; patriotic, transparent and unanimous. In the *Lettres à d’Alambers*, Rousseau outlines the model of this ideal fête and at the same time he constructs its political theory: “Drive a stake

²¹ R. Chartier, “Une académie avant les lettres patentes. Une approche de la sociabilité des notables lyonnais à la fin du règne de Louis XIV,” *Marseille*, No. 101, 1975, pp. 115-120.

²² On the rose festivals, W.F. Everdell, “The *Rosière* Movement, 1766-1789. A Clerical Precursor of the Revolutionary Cults,” *French Historical Studies* vol. IX, No. 1, 1975, pp. 23-36, and M. De Certeau, D. Julia and J. Revel, “La beauté du mort: le concept de ‘culture populaire,’” *Politique aujourd’hui*, December 1970, pp. 3-23.

²³ M. Vovelle, *Les métamorphoses de la fête en Provence de 1750 à 1820*, Paris, 1976, pp. 94-90.

²⁴ M. Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire 1789-1799*, Paris, 1976, p. 9.

crowned with flowers into the centre of a square, assemble the citizenry there and you will have a fête. Do even better: have the participants become the spectacle, make them actors, obtain that each one will see and love himself in the others so that all will be better united.” Of this fête which negates the performance and abolishes all differences, Boullée draws the architectural environment in his project of a circus inspired by the Coliseum. “Imagine 300,000 persons gathered into an amphitheatrical pattern where none could escape the eyes of the multitude. From this order will result a unique effect: that the beauty of such an astonishing spectacle derives directly from the spectators who are its unique components.”²⁵ The Utopian subject in its variegated hues becomes a privileged laboratory in which it is possible to outline the minutest details, circumstances and regulations of those fêtes of which Rousseau and Boullée give us the blue print. From the *Code de la Nature* to *Incas* of Marmontel, from *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* to *L’An deux mille quatre cent quarante* these texts build up a regenerated festival, pictured as a microcosm where the rules of a new social apparatus are pedagogically recognized.²⁶ But before trying to discover the way in which the revolutionary festival tries to realize its Utopia, we must make one final stop on the traditional fête in order to capture the possibility of deciphering it.

Working with historical material but also following those fêtes which are still alive today, ethnologists of traditional France have proposed a study of the fête which accentuates its symbolical function. This approach is characterized by a preliminary trait: the particular importance given to the carnival feast is considered as being the keystone of the whole festive system, and this for two reasons.²⁷ On one hand the carnival attracts to itself other joyous celebrations, not necessarily situated within the same calendar period, for example the charivaris which in

²⁵ These two texts are cited and commented upon by B. Baczko, *Lumières de l’utopie*, Paris, 1978, pp. 244-249.

²⁶ B. Baczko, *op. cit.*, chap. V, and J. Ehrard, “Les Lumières et la fête,” *Les fêtes de la Révolution*, Conference of Clermont-Ferrand (June 1974), Proceedings collected by J. Ehrard and P. Viallaneix, Paris, 1977, pp. 27-44.

²⁷ D. Fabre and C. Camberoque, *La fête en Languedoc. Regards sur le carnaval aujourd’hui*, Toulouse, 1977.

many ways (the food redistribution, the mask games, the festive justice) are reminiscent of the carnival rituals.²⁸ On the other hand, the carnival rituals can be traced in those festivals occurring outside carnival time, and could just as easily be those situated around the Ascension or Pentecost, or also those votive fêtes of the summer. From an ethnological point of view it is a primordial motive which generates the totality of actions and language. By staging the conflicts between opposites (night versus day, winter versus spring, death versus life) the fête gives to all the possibility of a new beginning: to the calendar, to nature and to man. "The fête pictures, mimes, and arouses a regeneration of time, of the world, of nature and of society."²⁹ The carnival translates into its own multifold language the confrontation between opposite poles and its efficacious ritual reestablishes every year the order of the world.

Such an interpretation has, as its corollary, the dealing of all localized forms of carnival rituals as corresponding signs responsible for showing the primordial motivations which lie beneath them. Thus the diverse elements which form a fête must be assembled in a general understanding: the rambling, the welcome, the judgement and death of King Carnival, the intrusion and immolation of the wild man, the circulation of food and breath within the human body. Thus also must be drawn together the living images, infinitely varied, which, in relation to the time and location, specifically play the part of the giant king and of the wild man. Two very different remarks may possibly ensue. The historical instrument stresses the universality of the element in action in the carnival festival. The carnival constitutes therefore the focal point of a veritable "popular or folklorist religion," peasant and prehistorical: the mythical foundation of which, with its ritual expressions, may be identified through diverse cultural systems.³⁰ Another point of view, which denies this transcultural interpretation of the fête, attracts the attention

²⁸ D. Fabre and B. Traimond, "Contrôles sociaux et dynamique des rituels. Les charivaris de Gascogne occidentale (XIX^e and XX^e siècles)" communication to the conference *Le charivari* (April 1977), Paris, Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, to be published.

²⁹ D. Fabre and C. Camberoque, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

³⁰ C. Gaignebet, *Le Carnaval*, Paris, 1974.

primarily on the rootings of the carnivalesque elements.³¹ It is only within the bounds of limited and homogeneous cultural space that the symbolic interpretation makes sense, that is legitimates the confrontation between ancient texts and contemporary observations, that with good reason may succeed in disentangling the diverse levels (historical, commemorative, liturgical) of interpreting a ritual. The regional or local difference in interpreting the central meaning of the carnivalesque practices counts more to us than its supposed universality.

With this last interpretation many connections emerge between ethnologists and historians. However the latter treat the fête in a specific way. With its rituals, its actions, its objects, it becomes a grammar of symbols which enables us to articulate in a clear or implied manner a political project (giving the term the widest acceptance). It has been seen that between 1400 and 1600, the urban fête, remodelled by municipal oligarchies, becomes the expression of the community's unified ideology which aims at manifesting its identity over against rival authorities and for this reason must cancel its internal strifes. The project is held in check to the extent to which the fête, notwithstanding the will of the leading citizens, leaves open a space for possible criticisms. A prime reason for this is that, regardless of municipal infringements and ecclesiastical censures, the fêtes essentially remain in the hands of youth and its own institutions. It is, for example, the very evident case of those in Provence in the XVIII century.³² In fact, according to all religious and administrative texts of the XVII and XVIII centuries, youth is (together with women) one of the most prominent images of illegality. In other respects the fête, and in particular the carnival fête, stages (thus at one time expresses and displaces) the cleavages which traverse the community. Their distribution is manifold as this goes along with the opposition of sexes, the difference in age, the contrast between married and single, the social differences. Thus through the fête, under its mask and parodic idiom, the distances and tensions may be considered, according to the case, as to be turning on a

³¹ D. Fabre, "Le Monde du Carnaval," *Annales E.S.C.*, 1976, pp. 389-406 (about C. Gainebet's book).

³² M. Agulhon, *Pénitents et Francs-Maçons de l'ancienne Provence*, Paris, 1968, pp. 43-64.

downtrend or exacerbating themselves. Incarnating the idiom of the most turbulent age group, “stage of diversities” (D. Fabre), the fête remains averse to the unanimous project of the authorities.

It may also, occasionally, become the preferential setting of confrontation for two socio-political strategies. Thus in Romans, in 1580, where the plebeian party and the leading citizens manipulate, each in its own way, the services, formulas and codes of the fête to render decipherable to the widest range of population their conflicting scopes. On the one side and on the other a veritable operation occurs on the carnivalesque material which aims to denounce both the intolerable patrician privileges (tributary and political) and the ridiculous claims of the Romanais people. Each one keeping control of its own festive institutions (*abbayes* and *reynages*) the opposite factions may engage in a battle of symbols. In the case of the artisanry their resources are manifold: the rural rites of Saint Blaise, the donkey parade, rituals of sorrow, sword dances; in the case of the eminent elite the handling of the festive elements is more limited, based on the use of parody and on the manipulation of transpositions. With two *mises en scène* (*mises en fête*) a social and political conflict will ensue beyond measure, until it leads to the manslaughter of one of the parties (the artisans) by the other (the notables). Even when its outcome is not at all as tragic, the fête may well become the occasion where, through different scenographies, it expresses a fundamental conflict in the shape of a simulacrum. This is, for example, the case of the Segovia fête of September 1613, where nobles and clothiers demonstrate, with the characters and the economy of rival processions, their social and religious differences.³⁴

Both as a symbol of unanimity and as the translation of dissensions, the fête could not but hold a prominent position in the revolutionary code. Two fundamental studies—those of M. Ozouf and of M. Vovelle—may perhaps enable us to conclude

³³ E. Le Roy Ladurie, *op. cit.*; L.S. Van Doren, “Revolt and reaction in the city of Romans, Dauphiné, 1579-1580,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 1974, pp. 71-100.

³⁴ Cf. E. Cros, *L'aristocrate et le Carnaval des Gueux. Etude sur le “Buscón de Quevedo,”* Montpellier, Etudes Sociocritiques, 1975.

this outline of the French fêtes between the XV and the XVIII centuries by displaying some of the major problems of the revolutionary festival. But first of all, is it legitimate to make use of the same definition? For a long time the historiographic tradition has not taken into consideration anything but the revolutionary fêtes, in opposition to one another, just as the political trends that they were responsible for expressing... Always linked to a particular intention, always sustained by a definite faction, the fête of the Revolution could not be anything but political and partisan, reduced to the circumstantial specification of its ideological framework. M. Ozouf has opposed to this point of view another one which stresses the fundamental coherence of the revolutionary fête. The comparative study of the fêtes more ideologically opposed (in '92 the one in honour of the Swiss of Chateaufvieux and the one in memory of Simonneau, the *Fête de la Raison* and that of the *Être Suprême*, the fêtes which precede and those which follow the Thermidor) clearly shows a uniformity of intentions, of formalities, of symbolisms. An ideal model of the fête has been established with the *Fête de la Fédération*; it is at the same time based upon the ideal of a parade (although exclusions are very specific) and on the desire to dissolve the violence of real battle in a memorial oration. This festive model will cut across all the Revolution, and not only the political intentions but also the groundwork of processions and collective gestures will change. It will mean no less that it is such a model that regulates, in an unknown way, the functions and procedures of the revolutionary fête. The unity of this original matrix shadows that which is too abrupt in the conflicts often occurring between the fête of the people and the official fête, between spontaneity and institution. In other respects, it brings understanding of the reasons why the same festive material (for example that which derives from the carnival tradition) may have been exploited for completely opposite ideological purposes.³⁵

In the long history of the fête, what has been the effect of the revolutionary fête, thus reconfirmed in its unity? Two diagnoses here are perhaps complementary. It is evident above

³⁵ M. Ozouf, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-114.

all that the revolutionary fête has irreversibly transformed the system of festivals of the *Ancien Régime*. In the regions of Provence a double change is easily identifiable.³⁶ After the Revolution the fête has lost much of its vigour. The rule is now a fête per year (against two or more), almost always held in August whilst previously it had ranged from May to September. At the same time the fête becomes mutilated: the profuse and complex system of the traditional fête, at once pious, professional and municipal, has given place to a simpler one, which is almost always transplanted in a fair. Around 1820-30 therefore the bygone fête has only but partially regained its playful elements (races, contests, dances) and not at all replenished its multifold significance. The Revolution, by trying to establish a new system of fêtes, being itself transitory, manages to bring to an end those evolutions that since the XVIII century (and possibly before) had begun to dislocate the fêtes of the earlier societies.

It is certainly appropriate to add to the interpretation which depicts the revolutionary fête as destructive of an ancient harmony, another one which stresses its founding value.³⁷ The revolutionary fête is in fact creative, not because it has been capable of surviving the Revolution but because it has been a major instrument in consecrating new values. More than dissertations, better than dissertations, it has incarnated and socialized a system of new values, centred around the family, the motherland and humanity. From this point of view the fête has been the agent of a successful transfer of sacrality, doubtlessly because, through its heavily symbolical idiom, a persuasive and sensitive pedagogy, reiterated and common to all the population, could be harboured.³⁸ The political manifestations of the fête may be nothing but passing, but not the new values, domestic, civil and social, which are to be rooted in the hearts and in the spirits: "Let us attach morals to eternal and sacred formations; let us inspire man towards that religious respect for mankind, that deep sentiment of duty which alone can guarantee social happiness. Let us nourish him through all our institutions; may

³⁶ M. Vovelle, *op. cit.*, pp. 269-294.

³⁷ M. Ozouf, *op. cit.*, pp. 317-340.

³⁸ B. Baczkó, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-282.

public education be directed above all towards that goal (...). It is a sort of institution which must be considered as an essential part of public education (...). I wish to talk about national feasts. Gather men together, you will make them better; because assembled men will try to please each other; they will not prove likeable but through that which will make them estimable. Give their assembly a great moral and political motive and love for honest things will penetrate with pleasure in every heart, as it pleases men to see themselves.”³⁹

* * *

This overall view of four centuries of fêtes in France places them as one of those occasions in which contradictory propositions get entangled. First of all, it is one of those territories in which the powerful may encounter the people, and from the collection of superstitious practices to the travel journals, a complete literature flourishes which multiplies the “ethnological” essays on the festive customs of the population. But at the same time we see the authorities of every order ceaselessly operating to prune or subvert those ceremonies in which popular ignorance or extravagance are more manifest. The fêtes are commented because they are popular, they are censured because they are popular; the bygone fête is always the object of a twofold desire of the élite, who would like to preserve it as a point of observation and recollection, and destroy it as a crucible of absurdity. A second incertitude is added to this one. At all times, in fact, the fête has been considered, contradictorily, as a pedagogical instrument but also as a potential danger. From the reformed Church to Robespierre and Saint-Just, from the medieval oligarchies to the *Philosophes*, the fête, as a condition of being moulded and classified through a device which will render it demonstrative, is pictured, is depicted, as something which may manifest, thus socialize, a project which may just as well pertain to the religious as to the political sphere. Thus its role as pastoral weapon and civic institution. Domestication is, how-

³⁹ Robespierre, “Sur les rapports des idées religieuses et morales avec les principes républicains et sur les fêtes nationales, 7 mai 1794,” *Textes choisis*, vol. III, Paris, 1958, pp. 175-176.

ever, never certain or fully achieved and the fête may, any day, turn to violence against the established or to-be-established order. Because the leading part belongs to those who are less integrated, because it can display, in its idiom, the tensions which lacerate it, the fête is a threat to the community of which it can shatter the apparent and longed for unity. Thus its uneasy control, its forever renewed censure. To say how the population has lived through it, wheter for compensation or for deceit, would require a different approach, difficult to effect because anonymous witnesses are rare. But possibly it is not vain to define the intentions and the commentaries which the dominating class has sedimented on the fête before being able to discover how the people handled their part of autonomous existence in that area of constant change.