

Cancan vs. the State: archival traces of the battle for Parisian bodies

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Abstract

The surveillance of the early cancan by the Parisian police in the 1820s and 1830s left a range of archival traces, including instructions, ordinances and memos, as well as journalistic accounts of the trials of arrested cancan dancers in legal newspapers. In such sources, the cancan and associated dances emerge as physical battlegrounds for negotiating the terms of liberalism and in/decency on which the new post-Revolutionary social order would rest. This paper argues that each of these sources preserves a different narrative of this danced dispute, all of which are necessary to understand its polysemic complexity.

Very few sources document the early history of the cancan, and related dances such as the *chahut*, during the first decade of their recorded history in 1820s Paris. Although the earliest discovered reference to the dance is in 1821, there is little further evidence until 1828. Over the next five years, however, a body of archival evidence emerges relating to the state surveillance and legal repression of these ‘indecent’ dances, which continued to be a concern of the police until at least 1870. In this paper, I intend to explore the different ways that such sources might be read, drawing on John Moreland’s (2006) archaeological reading of textual sources as material culture and Michel de Certeau’s (1984) concepts of strategies and tactics.

The archive of the Prefecture of Police in Paris holds a range of sources relating to the massive police effort to control the dancing at public balls in the 1820s and 1830s. Public balls were considered to pose a threat to monarchical authority through their improvised, unruly dance movements and disenfranchised, politically liberal clientele. The records concern, for example, the mandatory authorisation necessary for venues to establish balls, the policing of balls, and the ordinances issued by the Prefecture listing the regulations by which ball owners had to abide. The Ordinance of 31st May 1833 became the standard to which later regulations would defer. Its seventh article states that,

Each Organiser of Public Balls, should prohibit, in his Establishment, all indecent dances, and call upon Police Officers to evict these dancers, as well as all persons who indecently commit public outrages. (Préfecture de Police, 1833, p. 7, trans. CJ)

A reading of these bureaucratic sources based on the records in the Prefecture archive alone might conclude that a Foucauldian (1991) surveillance of popular dancing was taking place. One might imagine the docile bodies produced by such a panoptic regime. However, such a reading omits a crucial element: the uses to which these documents were put in their lifetimes and the practices surrounding their production and circulation. John Moreland (2006), an archaeologist working between history and archaeology, argues that both disciplines would benefit from thinking about texts and objects not just as evidence, but as having had efficacy in the past. He shows how texts can be put to a

range of uses beyond their intended or supposed purpose. The uses of a single text might range from repressive to liberatory, and these uses are not necessarily obvious from the content of the text itself. Following Moreland, I suggest a focus on the practices in which archival sources participated as a means to understand their contemporary efficacy, or indeed, inefficacy. In the remainder of this paper I will apply this methodology to the Prefecture Ordinances.

In order to flesh out the practices through which the ordinances were mobilised, a range of other contemporary sources can be brought into play. These include image sources, such as a caricature by Eustache of the interior of the Folies de Belleville café and dance hall, published in a satirical journal in 1842-3 and held in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Philipon, 1842-43). It shows how the Prefect's ordinance forbidding indecent dancing was conveyed from the ball owners to the dancers – via signs proclaiming that the cancan is forbidden. The image appears straightforward enough, but like many caricatures in the July Monarchy, it contained a double meaning. Although the orchestra above the sign looks calm and orderly, it is described in the text as playing “Resounding, diabolical music, ornamented with trumpet, bass drum, tom-tom and pistol shots” (Philipon, 1842-43, p. 305, trans. CJ). A conductor named Philippe Musard had risen to fame in the 1830s for exciting dancing crowds to a state of frenzy through his quadrille arrangements in which the musicians broke chairs and fired pistols. Musard's innovation spread, causing the Prefect of Police to issue a circular in 1844 banning all noisy instruments during the dancing of the quadrilles including bass drums, timbales, cymbals, tom-toms, bells, hunting horns, fire arms and artillery pieces. He justified this instruction by claiming that, “noisy instruments, overexcite and upset the persons who attend the dances” (Anonymous, 1844, p. 1, trans. CJ). To a Parisian in 1842-3, therefore, this image may have registered an implicit contradiction: the sign forbids the cancan, and yet the music of the orchestra is designed to encourage it. Indeed the rest of the illustrated story in which this image features underlines the inability of the sign to regulate musical and dance practices in the dance hall. In the subsequent caricature, the dancers jump the barrier between the seating area and the dance floor and begin to dance the cancan, at first with “irreproachable decency”, but,

soon their gestures become so gay, so expressive and so light that the distributeur de cachets (a kind of rural policeman for balls outside the city limits) feels it necessary to signal to the magistrate the men who are too friendly, the too lively [female] dancers. (Philipon, 1842-43, p. 307, trans. CJ)

This fictional account corresponds closely with the offences that led to numerous real trials of cancan dancers in the 1820s to 1840s.

In accounts of cancan trials, ordinances and prohibitive signs are repeatedly depicted not as regulations that discipline bodies, in the Foucauldian sense, but as what Michel de Certeau (1984) would call the ‘strategies’ of those in power, which challenge the dance hall's clientele to creatively invent antidisciplinary ‘tactics’ through which to evade authority. The ordinances participate in this game of ‘cat-and-mouse’, which continues in the courtroom where arrested dancers were put on trial. The court records of these trials were destroyed in a fire at the Hôtel de Ville during the Paris Commune in 1871. However, several newspapers in the 1820s-40s were dedicated to providing detailed

reports of court cases, and these are held in the Bibliothèque Nationale. In a trial of 1829, documented in the *Annales des Tribunaux* collection (Anonymous, 1829), prohibitive signage becomes part of the testimony. The trial at the Paris Magistrates Court is of a young man called Isidore who had been arrested for fighting with a military drummer at a ball. The owner of the ball, a Monsieur Rouyer is called as a witness and during his testimony the prosecution accuses him of allowing Isidore to dance the indecent *chahut*. Rouyer defends himself by saying:

“Certainly not, Sir; the *chahut* is strictly prohibited at my establishment, as well as all excessive and reckless gestures and remarks; it is even written in big lettering above the band” (the witness here makes an *avant-deux* and a *balancé* which were not without grace); “that,” he adds with great earnestness, “is the dance style of M. Isidore.” (Anonymous, 1829, p. 35, trans. AD)

Monsieur Rouyer supports his claim to be a responsible ball owner, in line with the Prefecture’s ordinances, by citing the public presence of a sign prohibiting the *chahut*. But he immediately augments this testimony with embodied evidence in the form of an imitative performance of Isidore’s dancing. The imitation of a defendant’s dancing style was a regular form of testimony at trials against cancan dancers, although it was normally performed by the prosecuting policeman. Cancan trials often engaged in a performative play with verbal and physical languages for giving evidence. Policemen were asked to dance rather than speak, and defendant dancers were required to speak but not move. Monsieur Rouyer’s testimony combined both verbal and physical evidence in quick succession, countering the official authority of the prohibitive sign with the physical authority of imitative dance movement. As in the illustrated story earlier, the police ordinance is invoked but immediately undermined by dance practice. Rouyer succeeded in his defence, but Isidore was condemned to a month in prison, evidencing the reassertion of legal authority, although perhaps in attenuated form, as one month was the minimum sentence.

The role played by the ordinances in these scenarios is that of articulating, communicating, and archiving strategies of power in written form. But as we have seen, in practice these documents participated in various physical and verbal performances in the dance hall and courtroom, through which the power of the written ordinance was continually evaded, challenged, negotiated, and reasserted. I argue, in conclusion, that when interpreting archival popular dance sources, particularly legal ones, the uses to which those sources were put, practically and discursively, in their lifetimes, can often tell us as much as the content of the documents themselves.

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