

Paris Dansant? Improvising across urban, racial and international geographies in the early cancan

Clare Parfitt-Brown
University of Chichester, UK

Abstract

This paper addresses the cancan - not the familiar choreographed performance, but the improvised social dance that emerged among working-class dancers in 1820s Paris. Sources from the period reveal working men and women traversing not only a complex Parisian landscape of popular dance spectatorship and performance, but also taking advantage of Paris's status as an international metropole to consume non-French movement. After observing performances of 'national' dance forms (such as the Spanish cachucha and the Haitian chica) at the popular theatres of the Boulevard du Temple in north-east Paris, working-class dancers incorporated these movements into their dancing at the suburban guinguettes (dance venues) outside the city walls. These variations became known as the cancan or chahut. In the early 1830s, the cancan became popular at the mixed-class masked carnival balls that took place in central Parisian theatres, such as the Paris Opéra. By the 1840s, the dance had come to embody the pleasures and dangers of a Parisian nightlife based on class and gender confusion, subversion and deception, documented in books such as Physiologie des bals de Paris (1841) and Paris au bal (1848). As the cancan was increasingly incorporated into the mythology of July Monarchy Paris, the class and gender subversions of the dance obscured the international and racial ambiguities that haunted its inception. This paper therefore focuses on the tensions between the cancan's status as 'Parisian', and as an embodiment of a popular culture based on fascination with France's European and colonial others in the 1820s.

The cancan has been intimately associated with the city of its birth since its first emergence in the 1820s. From the 1840s onwards, this association was reinforced further by a raft of popular literature about Paris and its nightlife which both celebrated and critiqued the cancan as a unique feature of the Parisian urban landscape. These books, including several titled *Paris Dansant*, reconfigured the geography of Paris around its public balls where dances such as the cancan were performed. However, I will argue in this paper that the cancan's Parisian status was complicated by a number of other geographical and cultural associations, including racial, national and international identities. Furthermore, as the geography of Paris was physically altered over the course of the nineteenth century, its relationships to notions of race and nation also shifted, changing the identity of the cancan significantly. Ultimately, I will argue that the cancan's early racial connotations were gradually overwritten by an increasingly dominant discourse of national identity. Gender is clearly another factor that intersects with those I will be analysing here, but there will not be time to draw out these connections in this paper. Rather, I hope to uncover aspects of the cancan that have become less visible in twentieth and twenty-first century manifestations of the dance.

Before I commence the main part of the paper, a short description of the early cancan will be helpful. The cancan emerged in the late 1820s as an improvised variation on the set figures of the quadrille, a dance performed in four couples. Many of the earliest dancers of the cancan were male, although a few female dancers are also documented in the late 1820s. Working-class men and women were early performers of the dance, as well as bourgeois male students, who sought dancing partners amongst the working class women, or *grisettes*. The dance consisted not only of kicks, but of various improvised leg, arm, head and torso movements that deviated from the quadrille's graceful deportment. A variety of terms were used for these improvisations other than cancan, including the word '*chahut*', meaning uproar, which was applied to particularly wild variations. In this paper the terms cancan and *chahut* will be used interchangeably, as their boundaries were somewhat fluid at this time.

In the late 1820s and early 1830s the cancan was sometimes found at public balls in the centre of Paris, such as the Salon de Mars. But it was more often danced in this early period at the working class *guinguettes* – dance halls established beyond the city walls, or *barrière*, to avoid the tax on goods coming into the city. These areas beyond the *barrière*, called the *faubourgs* or *banlieue*, had an ambiguous status, not quite urban and not quite rural. They are described by historian John Merriman (1991) as countercultural, associated with working class revelry and carnival, but also crime and subversive politics. Ordinances issued by the Prefecture de Police sought to control the establishment and running of these public balls. This included the prohibition of indecent dancing, and the posting of police officers at the balls to arrest those found performing it. But the prefects of police also thought that the entertainments at the *barrières* diverted revolutionary energies away from the centre of Paris. Therefore, the cancan had an ambiguous relationship to Paris from the start – it existed on Paris's boundaries, both geographically and legally, and was considered to both threaten and stabilise centre of the city.

The balls and social types of the *barrière* were a popular topic for the literary *flâneurs* who documented Parisian life in the 1830s and 1840s. One such writer was Auguste Luchet, a republican journalist. Luchet identified the centre of Paris with spectacular pleasures, conspicuous consumption and capitalist excess – the shop window of modernity (Green, 1990). He contrasted this with the working-class areas on the margins of the city. For Luchet, the *faubourgs* and their inhabitants were raw and honest, but crude and uncivilized. If the attraction of the centre of Paris was its glossy modernity, the attraction of the *barrière* was its exotic primitivism. This is evident in Luchet's description of a performance of the *chahut* he witnessed on Mardi Gras night, at the Grand Saint-Martin, the most famous ball in the Courtille area of Belleville.

Well, the forty masked dancers of the Grand Saint-Martin were all dancing the *chahut*: not that corrupted *chahut*, that approximate '*rose-water*' *chahut*, little coxcomb of students – but the real one, the primitive one, born of the Spanish fandango and the Negro *chica*. What I say to you about the mothers and fathers of this so libertine a daughter will not teach you much if you know but the fandango of the Opéra, or the *chica* from the *Bug le Javanais*. Rather, ask those who have

travelled in Spain and Africa, and you will see! As for myself – I declare it quite frankly – before visiting la Courtille on Ash Wednesday, I had only a very imperfect knowledge of this incredible dance; up till that moment I had only seen the *chahut* diluted, modified, stifled by the presence of the police men, troubled by the menacing guards; but there she was at home, in her boudoir, in her bedchamber. Only there was I able to admire her – bold, undressed, naked...! (Luchet, 1833: 30-31, translated by Anna Davies)

Luchet draws a number of distinctions here. He contrasts the *chahut* he witnessed with the *chahut* performed by the male students who visited balls such as the Grande Chaumière to dance with the working-class women. The cross-class spectre of the student dancing with the *grisette* was intimately associated with the cancan and the *chahut* in the 1830s and early 1840s, and this is depicted in many of the earliest images of the cancan. La Grande Chaumière, a ball located beyond the *barrière* at Montparnasse, to the south of Paris, was famed for hosting these encounters. But for Luchet, the student was a fake in this environment, indulging in a performance of liberal politics, before retreating back to the luxuries of the city. Instead, the *chahut* that Luchet witnessed at La Courtille was danced by what he considers to be more ‘authentic’ inhabitants of the *faubourgs*: a man of about twenty dressed as Pierrot, the clown associated with working-class values in melodramas of the time, and a tall Cauchoise girl from Normandy, who “affect[ed] ravishingly the naïve ignorance of a village girl” (Luchet, 1833: 31, translated by Anna Davies). For Luchet, the ‘true’ *chahut* is danced by the working class and the peasant. The *chahut* that *they* perform is, he says, “born of the Spanish fandango and the Negro *chica*” (Luchet, 1833: 30-31, translated by Anna Davies). These were dances regularly performed on the stages of the Parisian popular theatres in the 1820s and 1830s.

Dances from Europe and France’s colonies or former colonies, were regularly used in popular melodramas, and ballet-pantomimes, as spectacular representations of national types. Choreographers such Frédéric-Auguste Blache and Louis Milon blended exotic movements from these dances with romantic ballet choreography to create a palatable spectacle of national otherness. Numerous accounts in this period, including Luchet’s, state that the cancan and *chahut* are *versions of or related to* these dances. Elsewhere I have argued that this may indicate that *barrière* dancers drew on their observations of national dances at the popular theatres when creating cancan improvisations in the *guinguettes* (Parfitt-Brown, 2011). Luchet alludes to this influence, but he also distances the *chahut* he witnessed from what he regards as the balletified versions of the fandango and the *chica* presented on the Parisian stage. Instead, he aligns the *chahut* with the unrefined versions of the fandango and *chica* that he imagines would be found in Spain or Africa. For Luchet, the *chahut* is an unmediated embodiment of the characteristics of its local performers – an ‘authentic’ performance of ‘primitive’ identity.

But what is the identity that Luchet claims is performed in the *chahut*? On one level it is class identity, as suggested by his dismissal of bourgeois student performers and his adulation of working-class and peasant performers. But it also has two other distinct characteristics. His comparison of the *chahut* with the ‘Negro *chica*’ suggests a racial component to the identity these dancers perform. This is congruent with the widespread

racialisation of the French working class in early nineteenth-century literature, although it normally had a more negative connotation of barbarism and criminality conveyed by the phrase ‘the dangerous classes’. In the nineteenth century, the notion of race was often used to explain perceived similarities between members of groups that today would no longer be regarded as racially homogeneous or distinct, in this case the French working class. Elisa Camiscioli (2009: 12) argues that in the mid-nineteenth century race shifted in French discourse from being primarily a marker of class, to being a marker of nationality, evident in the emergent notion of a ‘French race’. Luchet’s account seems to connect with both of these conceptions of race as class and race as nationality. As well as comparing the *chahut* with the Negro *chica*, he also aligns it with the fandango, considered at the time in France to be one of the Spanish national dances. The latter comment lays the foundations for an argument that would increasingly be made about the cancan in the nineteenth century – that it was becoming the national dance of France. The following year, in 1834, an anonymous journalist in *La Revue de Paris* would euphemistically refer to the cancan as the “cachucha Française” (Anon., 1834: 297) – the French version of Spain’s other characteristic dance, the cachucha. Theophile Gautier stated it more explicitly five years later in his Review of 1839 when he noted that the Spanish cachucha “is danced at Musard’s ball under the prohibited and Frenchified name of the chahut” and that the latter, “in spite of the municipal police, will end up as the national dance” (Gautier, 1858: 350). A similar prediction was made thirty years later by the famous Second Empire cancan dancer, Rigolboche. However, in this case, the national character of the cancan is seen as *replacing* its previous racial character. Rigolboche, wrote in her memoirs of 1860, “Scholars specialising in etymology have claimed that the cancan derived from negro dancing. This is a mistake. Negroes make hand movements, but they do not cancan. The cancan is an essentially French step and it will end up as the national dance of the country” (Blum, Huart and Rigolboche, 1860: 68-69).

The shift in Rigolboche’s writing from a racial identification of the cancan to a national one, can be interpreted in relation to her historical context. Rigolboche was writing in the middle of Baron Haussmann’s complete restructuring of the Parisian landscape, which changed Paris’s relationship to its *faubourgs*, and to the working classes who occupied them. Between 1853 and 1870, the process of Haussmannisation, commissioned by Napoleon III, destroyed the network of *barrières* separating central Paris from the *faubourgs*. Paris expanded beyond its city walls and working-class communities were redistributed to the areas that had been less developed. According to W. Scott Haine, this brought an end to the carnivalesque atmosphere that had existed in the *faubourgs*, and the cafes and *guinguettes* previously outside the *barrière* became less effective as centres of political agitation and cultural subversion. Indeed, one of the purposes of Haussmannization had been to bring the margins under the political control of the centre. However, a by-product of this shift was a changed conception of the Parisian working classes. The notion of ‘the dangerous classes’ was replaced by both a more paternalistic attitude and a nostalgia for and glorification of working-class culture which became central to artistic and literary avant-gardes, as well as the entertainment industry in Montmartre. While the working class was still sometimes racialised in late nineteenth-century literature, their ‘savagery’ was perceived more as a source of

fascination than of threat. In line with these changes, the racial connotations of the cancan and *chahut*, so evident in Luchet's account, became submerged beneath a developing discourse of nationalism as the century progressed. The cancan's European and colonial influences were forgotten as the dance became increasingly associated with Frenchness.

The Republican French governments of the late nineteenth century sought to unite the workers and the bourgeoisie through the nationalistic concept of the French 'people' (Magraw, 1983: 285). With the establishment of France as a Republic in 1880, the nation gained a national emblem, a national anthem, a national holiday and a national motto (Nora, 1998). Maurice Agulhon (1989) has argued that national identity solidified around previously marginalized republican symbols, such as Marianne and, I would argue, the cancan. Six days after the opening of the Paris Exposition of 1889, a sketch by Ferdinand Lunel published on the cover of *Le Courrier Français* visualised the Eiffel Tower, the new icon of central Paris, and the cancan, performed nightly at cabarets by paid dancers, as parallel participants in a new French national identity. Luchet's personal exploration of the working class world beyond the *barrière* had, by the 1880s, become an essential Parisian cultural experience for artists, Parisians and tourists, one that could be packaged and sold by establishments such as the Moulin Rouge, which opened later that year. The geographical focus for these staged cross-class encounters was Montmartre, once outside the city walls like Belleville, but by the late nineteenth century, merely a more northerly part of Paris itself. Although the cancan dancers at the Moulin Rouge often came from working-class backgrounds, and were sometimes referred to as 'savages', their performances were now inseparable from the cross-class milieu in which they performed, a milieu which was increasingly framed by its promoters as distinctly French.

Between the 1820s and the 1890s, the geographical landscape of Paris had radically changed, and with it the relationships between categories of class, race and nation. In the 1820s and 1830s, the physical and social barriers between the centre and the *faubourgs* had contributed to the racialisation of the working classes, and of the cancan and *chahut*. But comparisons between the cancan and other European and colonial national dances in literary descriptions of the time, already pointed towards the eventual nationalisation of the cancan. But this was not fully realised until Haussmannisation demolished previous racial distinctions between the centre and periphery of Paris, and republicanism built a new national identity between workers and bourgeoisie. The cancan re-emerged from these changes as a performance that played on both the nostalgic spectacle of class difference, and the possibility of class transgression through national unity. Throughout this time, the cancan remained a form through which urban, racial, national and international identities could be continually improvised in relation to the rapidly changing geographic, political and economic landscapes of Paris.

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Address for correspondence:

Clare Parfitt-Brown
Dance Department
University of Chichester
College Lane
Chichester
West Sussex
PO19 6PE
UK
c.parfitt-brown@chi.ac.uk