

On May Day do you as you please:  
contemporary reinterpretations of  
folkloric elements in a small working  
class town of Auxois, France

**Florence Weber**

Professor at Ecole normale supérieure,  
Center Maurice Halbwachs, Paris

Translated by **Punam Puri**

**University of Delhi**

Working Paper Series  
**2011/IX**

**Working Paper Series 2011/IX**

© Florence Weber

Florence Weber  
Professor at Ecole normale supérieure,  
Center Maurice Halbwachs, Paris

E-Mail : [florence.weber@ens.fr](mailto:florence.weber@ens.fr)

# On May Day do you as you please: contemporary reinterpretations of folkloric elements in a small working class town of Auxois, France

Florence Weber

(This article was published in 1988 under the title “Premier Mai fais ce qu’il te plaît: réinterprétations contemporaines d’éléments folkloriques dans une petite ville ouvrière de l’Auxois », *Terrain*, 11, Novembre, p. 7–28.)

I will suggest here a range of interpretations articulated on the basis of the observation of a seemingly insignificant ritual, which some may see as a picturesque relic, in the north of Auxois (in Burgundy). At the outset, I will provide in a few lines a brief description of the ritual. Before the morning of May 1, groups of young boys working together carry out three operations in secrecy:

- On the eve or a day before, they go to the woods to cut young trees which take on the name of “Maypoles”;<sup>1</sup>
- On 30 April at nightfall, they carry these trees and place them on houses of the neighbourhood where young girls reside (the second operation is called “erecting the Maypole”);
- At night, they systematically displace all the objects “lying about” in the neighbourhood.

On 30 April 1985, I, along with four young people of the region and a photographer,<sup>2</sup> followed one of these groups operating in a new locality of the town of Montbard; in the

---

<sup>1</sup> These are thin tall trunks cut down to the ground, with hardly any leaves; when erected, they are often taller than the houses.

<sup>2</sup> This survey was financed by the Ethnological Heritage Unit of the Ministry of Culture, through the intermediary of the Association des Forges de Buffon. It was Isac Chiva who drew my attention to the persistence of this old custom in Auxois. I will quote at times the accounts written by my two co-investigators, René (auxiliary nurse) and Joëlle (worker), who wrote afterwards long and detailed texts in which they related the events observed interspersed with their comments, often very interesting; brother and sister, both aged under thirty in 1985, they are from a working class family that came to Montbard in 1969; they lived in Fays from 1969 to 1978. Two of their sisters (27 years, hospital worker, and 22 years,

course of the night, we met two other groups and spent the following morning touring the city and a dozen surrounding villages to take photographs of the visible results of such nocturnal activities. I also carried out some interviews focused on this custom. Additionally, I will make use of some of the results of a one and a half year field study in the region.

For the interpretation of this ritual, I will refer not only to its social context, but also to other practices which, though seeming to fall within the province of varied traditions, shed light on one or the other of its fields of significance. I will attempt in fact to understand how varied elements of folklore when taken out of their “traditionally” accepted context are used and by the same token reinterpreted today, as can be noticed in at least some texts on folklore (in particular in Van Gennep, 1949). I will not speculate on their origins or permanence, but restrict myself to the meaning of their simultaneous presence today.

To put it briefly, such collective practices repeated each year may be described as ritual or folk; they have three points in common:

- Their participants do not develop any other justificatory discourse with respect to them except for referring to tradition and their antiquity – more or less illusory;
- They collectively derive obvious pleasure and joy from them, though not always shared by the “spectators” drawn in unwillingly at times; such joyous practices are accompanied by laughter and fun;
- They are sufficiently far removed from the dominant culture to be considered as picturesque incomprehensible oddities and described as popular.

On the basis of my attempt to analyse the “Maypole” ritual, I will study the significance of these folklore elements in the understanding of the social groups they bring to the fore. To what extent do they reveal, or at least indicate, the frontiers between groups? To what extent can they shed light on the social order in which they take place? We will see first and foremost that the setting up of Maypoles allows one to approach the question of the social definition of social groups; such an analysis will shed light in particular on the territoriality of practices, gender relations and the social definition of youth. Next, we will see how the last operation carried out on the night of 30 April, i.e. the systematic displacement of objects, provides us some elements to reflect on the symbolic modalities of the appropriation of objects and places as well as the symbolic organisation of inhabited space. Finally, the analysis of the set of Maypole related rituals should shed light, with the help of a few specific examples, on the forms – often paradoxical – of the encounter between a working class culture and a peasant culture as well as open new perspectives on the role of fun and humour in popular culture.

## Erecting Maypoles and the operation of traditional cleavages (age, gender and territory)

Van Gennep (1949) makes a distinction between “individual Maypoles” or “Maypoles to girls”, which at first glance are part of the custom I observed in Auxois, and “Maypoles of honour” (raised in honour of a professional representative) and “commemorative Maypoles” (birth, revolution, election), but also “collective Maypoles erected by youngsters around which people danced” (1949: 1520). He gives the following description of the “Maypole to girls”: “The tree, the branch or the bouquet placed on the night of 30 April–1 May in front of or on the house of the girl one loves or wishes to honour; or else, the girl one hates and wants to insult” (1949: 1518). He is interested above all in the significance of the various species of trees placed but acknowledges his inability to understand why this custom is spread unevenly in France. His final interpretation of placing the Maypole is this: “The male youth show their feelings (of friendship, scorn or hatred) to the female youth of the locality and this publicly” (1949: 1570). This is a plausible starting point, even though strictly limited to the first two operations observed in the Montbard region, to examine successively the three principles on the basis of which groups are formed:

- An opposition between boys (actors) and girls (recipients);
- A territorial principle which delimits which boys and girls will participate;
- The determination of a group based on age (“youth”) and, more specifically, unmarried youth.

### Boys and girls

The ritual, as I have observed it,<sup>3</sup> is based on a strict gender division. The girls are not part of the group and are not even supposed to know what is in the offing. In reality, an interview

---

student in Aix) participated in the survey, as well as a professional photographer (28 years, residing in Paris). I would like to thank them all for their invaluable help. While writing this article, I benefitted from the remarks of Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Nicole Belmont which I have tried to incorporate, as well as the very attentive reading by Sylvain Maresca and Denis Vidal-Naquet.

<sup>3</sup> Three Montbard localities recur frequently in my description: *Les Bordes*, “new village” built in 1978 where detached houses and low cost houses coexist in which reside a thousand people (the families of workers, employees and lower level executives); *Saint-Pierre*, a low cost housing complex which goes back to 1975 (with an almost exclusively working class population); finally, *Fays*, the oldest working class townships built by the metallurgical factory in 1904 which are in the process of being demolished. I will also mention an agricultural hamlet of the Montbard commune, *La Mairie*, a glade in the Grand-Jailly forest; two mainly working class villages (*Saint-Rémy* and *Crépond*) and two mainly agricultural villages (*Senailly* and *Viserney*).

with the sister of a boy from Bordes who set up a Maypole (and on whose house one is set up every year) reveals that she knew everything save the place where the Maypoles are cut in the forest; she even acted as an intermediary to negotiate our nocturnal presence with her brother's group. "Secrecy", essential for the full enjoyment of the ritual, is thus merely a convention: one must say and let on that one doesn't know anything, no more, no less. However, the three operations which constitute the heart of the ritual (cutting and setting up the trees, displacing objects) are carried out in the absence of the girls even though the latter may be directly aware of most of the preparations. For example, in Bordes (where three groups operated during the night), in the early evening (about 8.30 p.m.), in spite of the gloomy weather, there was mixed group on the square listening to music. The boys of the group feared having their photographs taken and refused to speak about the Maypoles, whereas a fourteen year old girl accepted to take us to the garage where the already cut trees had been stored. She was ready to reveal a part of the secret, but we couldn't get anything out of the boys who claimed the garage was empty. So the girls know but they have no say and will be in bed (or at least back home) by the time the second operation begins at differing times, depending on the age and the locality, but which will take place in any case after night has fallen.

On the other hand, here is a detail that corroborates Van Gennep's Maypole interpretation as the expression of what the boys feel about the girls. In Bordes, the group we followed (six sixteen year old boys who were among the last to operate from 1.30 a.m. onwards) prepared six Maypoles for six girls and after having set them up, found they were one short. They decided to go and cut one there and then identified a young pine tree on the roadside (whereas the previous Maypoles had been cut the evening before in the woods). A discussion began among the boys full of derisive jokes: "For that girl, we'll cut a pine tree"; another piped in: "No, wait. I've found just what we need"; the first boy: "Let it be, that'll be just fine for her". And yet another boy said: "If she doesn't like it, she can cut it herself". This detail confirms the idea that the species of the tree has a meaning, even though its codification (described for some places by Van Gennep) is not very rigid and does not exclude improvisation.

However, the effect of the declaration of a boy to a girl, central to Van Gennep's interpretation, seems invalidated in Montbard on account of two factors: on the one hand, the girls for whom the Maypoles are intended will not know the identity of the group which set it up, even less, the identity of the boy who set it up; on the other hand, the group we followed took its decisions collectively and did not act taking into account the individual

feelings of its members; furthermore, they would not go individually on the next day “to get money for a drink” from the house of the girl for whom it was supposedly intended (contrary to the complete custom as described by Van Gennepe). The relative anonymity of those who placed the Maypole is perhaps specific to the Montbard region: in a neighbouring village, in point of fact, we saw on the morning of 1 May, a young girl on the steps of her house next to a Maypole in friendly conversation with the person who set it up. Thus, there is a certain amount of diversity in the relationship between those who set up the Maypoles and those for whom they are intended; we will come back to this later. Finally, the interviews with the adults who set up Maypoles fifteen to twenty years ago, and even in Montbard, emphasised the declarative aspect (positive or negative): “We put a tree, they were hornbeams; for the girls who were not well viewed, we put a bit of thorny bush; we put a bouquet of lilies tied to the hornbeam” (Gérard, 35 years, a former inhabitant of Fays). Or further: “For the girl we didn’t like, we would put thorns and thistles; we’d go to the community woods to look for hornbeams, a hornbeam pole; the following Sunday, we got someone to pay for the drinks; we all knew each other, we did it all together, we went to school together, we were ten boys, ten girls in the entire village” (policeman, 34 years, inhabitant of a village in Châtillonnais).

In any case, if the Maypole had been, in the past or elsewhere, a public declaration or a form of courtship, this is not the case in Montbard today. This not just because of the highly collective and almost anonymous nature of the practice, but also because of the extreme youth of the boys who set up the Maypoles.

Thus, the group that sets up Maypoles in Saint-Pierre is made up of young boys, ages twelve to fourteen, who have only a vague idea about the recipients of the Maypoles. Eric, 13 years, recounts the setting up of the Maypoles of the previous year: “They placed tulips at the doors of the people they liked.” And this year, though his team wanted very much to respect “tradition”, they did so making some changes they didn’t even realise. I was to note on the very evening: “Eric’s team set up branches a little like a Christmas tree”; and Joëlle said: “They were small branches hung on pipes of the low cost houses as well as on the windshield wipers of cars (...) Eric told us that it was he and his friends who had placed them. They took the branches from the tree that was on the lawn.” While the Maypole is always intended for a “family” in the social sense (a household and its inhabitants) in the most visible signs of its collective existence (house or apartment, car, letter box), it seems to be intended for the residential group as a whole rather than solely for “the girl of the house”.

The necessary corrections in the gender significance of erecting Maypoles are perhaps the result of the lower age of the participants.<sup>4</sup> Indeed at present, boys start erecting Maypoles at 12 and stop at 17. “My kid did it, he no longer does, he is seventeen years old,” says an inhabitant of Bordes, José, adding that boys “do it” when they are in school in the seventh or eighth class. However, Gérard (a former inhabitant of Fays) remembers the sixties: “Oh yes! Maypoles, yes I set them up, I did it when I was a child; what, I must have been 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 years, till 16 years, 16, 17 years, even before I got engaged, 17 years, yes...” The lowering of age goes back in time and is perhaps a characteristic of Montbard. However the “matrimonial” intention implied in Van Gennep’s description is absent in the forms of the ritual observed in Montbard. Erecting a Maypole does not, to my mind, indicate a personal relationship between a boy and a girl; rather it is a marker, of collective origin, of “reputation” – whether positive or negative. Moreover, as the reputation of an individual rebounds systematically on the close family (parents, brothers and sisters), I will willingly consider it a marker of family reputation attached more to a house than a person. We are thus in the presence of a group of actors who “give” or “signify” something to a recipient group: a group which “speaks” to (or about) a family. This interpretation will be reinforced in the analysis of the third operation of the ritual (absent in Van Gennep), namely the displacement of objects.

## **A territorial practice**

Maypoles are erected in an identifiable territory: a village or locality. In truth, the three operations of the ritual induce different relationships to space and bring into play the territory under three different aspects.

## **Cutting Maypoles in the woods**

This is the manifestation of a “right of use”; though now illegal, people often close their eyes to it. This is what Gérard (35 years, worker and former inhabitant of Fays) has to say: “We used to cut Maypoles, I don’t know, a week or a fortnight before, in the evening, on Thursdays when we didn’t work. We would go to the woods over there; we would take scythes and then off you go! We would cut down the Maypoles. We used to go to la Lâche, the woods of la Lâche, on the right, it’s called the Factory woods, we would cut them... We went there all the time, looking for small pine trees for heating as well, no one said

---

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Claude Chamboredon pointed out that the process of getting younger is part of a larger process of the shift of folkloric practices to younger age groups, also witnessed in their shift to children’s games.

anything...” A boy from Bordes who was asked: “Where do you go to cut Maypoles?” answered laughingly: “Oh! There are lots of woods all over. We go over there at the back...” We can thus accumulate pointers to show that the felling of Maypoles is only the expression, among other practices (gathering, in particular), of an appropriation of nature near the place of residence – whether in the villages or working class localities of Montbard built on the outskirts of the city, all of which have direct access to the woods.

### **Setting up Maypoles on houses**

Certainly, this is an expression of neighbourly relations. Yet, it may be observed that these are not exclusively neighbourly relations; they are reinforced, in the city at least, by family ties and the fact that the children go to the same school (they know their classmates’ sisters and brothers): it is chiefly in school that young boys decide to erect Maypoles together. Thus, it is no accident that the Bordes locality of Montbard, where the city’s secondary school is located, has the largest stock of Maypoles. Indeed, three groups operated there in 1985 and the inhabitants have been seeing Maypoles ever since the new village was built, even though their neighbourly relations are of recent date: the locality was set up by virtue of a municipal decision in 1978 at the site of three farms and their fields. The ritual is thus, in this case, quite obviously the expression of relationships forged in school among those who erect Maypoles, even if the Bordes population is constituted, as the statistics in Montbard tend to confirm, along the lines of kinship and professional interknowledge.

As for the Saint-Pierre locality, older and where ties of kinship are more frequent among the household residents, the only group which operated there in 1985 was very young, as we have seen. This can be attributed to the presence of primary schools in the area: even if they have already reached secondary school (in Bordes), the boys who formed the group had just left the primary school of the commune a year or two earlier.

There was almost nothing happening in the other areas of Montbard we visited on the night of 30 April. At Fays, the investigators (people from the locality) were struck by the immobility and inactivity of the area in contrast with their memories of an “animated”, “joyous” and “noisy” May 1 in the seventies. The contrast is all the more striking because of the gradual demolition of the locality over the last few years and the fact that the inhabitants who still live there are seeing the disappearance of all that which gave the area its charm. I will come back later to the central role of the Fays locality in the constitution of collective working class practices in Montbard.

Finally, on May Day, there were only two Maypoles in the city centre. This is hardly surprising, as it is a locality of shop keepers and old people. “The city centre, God, how sad

it is! On Sundays and holidays, you hardly see anyone... No one on the streets... The city centre was not topsy-turvy. It was calm,” observes René.

Thus in Montbard, Maypoles are set up by groups who remain in their residential locality and the neighbouring woods (in part because of transport problems; as the boys are too young to drive, they do not have vehicles); but these groups are strengthened in the school context. I have fewer elements to go by for the villages where on the following day, I had observed the results of the nocturnal doings. But I am inclined to think that the young people’s interknowledge in the villages is based on a “multifunctional” set of kinship, neighbourhood and school relations without any hiatus.

### **Displacement of objects and appropriation of a public space**

The third operation presents a specific characteristic with respect to the relationship with space: it is no longer the natural space of which one appropriates certain products; it is no longer the social space of the houses that is marked with help of Maypoles in reference to their occupants; it is the space of the street or the square, that is to say public space par excellence, that the boys take over (as while transporting the Maypoles) and that they scatter with private objects whose places have been changed. That night, the public space is reserved for the young people, as illustrated by the remark of an inhabitant of a La Mairie hamlet: “I heard them clearly that night, but I didn’t dare get up, for fear of disturbing them, I didn’t want to bother them... The street has to be completely theirs for the night, otherwise they wouldn’t do anything.” We realised this fully while criss-crossing the village streets and Montbard: except in Bordes, we felt our presence was a hindrance in the preparations (the boys hid when they heard us); whereas our nocturnal visits to several places had led us to believe that nothing was happening, in the morning, we discovered Maypoles and pranks. The appropriation of the street by groups of young boys brings us to two conditions necessary for the ritual to take place: night (i.e. both the darkness which hides and the time when people are all in bed)<sup>5</sup> and secrecy.

The young people thus mark their territory four times over: first, through the material act of taking from the forest (cutting Maypoles); then by a collective signature on the houses of the area (erecting Maypoles) and by the exclusiveness (claimed) of their presence in the streets at night; last, through the displacement of private objects to public spaces.

---

<sup>5</sup> The factory workers work mainly in two shifts; the morning shift begins at 5 a.m. (but 1<sup>st</sup> May is a holiday, thus no one is there in the early morning), and the evening shift ends at 9 p.m.: none of the groups will begin till all the workers have reached home.

## From youthful enjoyment to juvenile delinquency

Let us now come to the determination of the main groups involved on the night of 30 April-1 May: the youth. The ritual in point of fact pits young people (boys the actors, and to a lesser degree, girls the supposed recipients) against the rest of the population which becomes both the “public” and the “victim”. After the secret nocturnal action, the next morning comes the visible phase – one may even call it “visual” – when one sees the results: Maypoles erected and objects displaced. This morning phase involves only the spectators: the young people are not visible at this moment, neither boys nor girls. Once again, the anonymity or at least the highly collective character of the ritual is noticeable: the spectators are fully aware that the young people are the authors of what is on display; however, they do not know exactly who these young participants were.

Two very different types of reactions can be observed: on the one hand, amused surprise on the morning of 1 May, and on the other, discontent (in the morning or at night itself) which could lead to the lodging of a complaint. I will examine these one after the other, arguing that both the reactions illustrate two attitudes of the public towards the “young people”, linked in turn to the different social relations within the residential groups. “Youthful enjoyment”: keeping up the surprise and valorising activity

The immediate interpretation of the adults questioned on the Maypole was often: “Young people must have fun.” They used the same words to say that they themselves erected Maypoles in their youth: “We did it to have fun” (policeman, 34 years). This interpretation (along with the implicit reference to the playful “essence” of youth) leads to indulgence: “We were all young once. We’ve all done good things and stupid things,” said the forty year old trader mayor of a small commune. After analysis, it emerges that the positive appreciations of the ritual are based on the pleasure derived from the element of surprise and the valorisation of courage.

### *Surprise*

In reality, the element of surprise is manufactured or, at the very least, maintained by good natured spectators. Indeed, the “objective” surprise (the “unexpected”) is relative, because everyone knows what to expect on May Day. The “bourgeois” who, like my grandmother,<sup>6</sup> did not want to be exposed to the ritual knew full well how to “keep away” all that could

---

<sup>6</sup> Some of my information on the ritual in Montbard as it was in the past comes from my own family which belongs to Montbard; my grandmother was the daughter of a metallurgical worker, but her marriage to a Parisian civil servant had made her, when she returned to Montbard after retirement, a “bourgeoise” who only associated with the upper echelons of the local working class.

be moved during the night (pots, mats, garbage bins, tools, etc.); one is inclined to think that people whose objects are displaced have given their consent to this; the only other explanation is forgetfulness, highly improbable because May 1 is Labour Day, a date unlikely to be forgotten. Besides, it is rare that the nocturnal activities take place in total silence. So there are two reasons to expect “something”: the date and the noises heard. The exaggerated surprise expressed by the public refers in reality only to the annual variations in the show lauded as an original “creation”. The exclamations of surprise at the sight of the disorder of the following morning and the recovery of objects thus form part of ritual, along with the customary verbal exchanges among the neighbours, as they look pell-mell to find the owners of the various objects. Taking due note of the ritualistic surprise (and the accompanying pleasure), the local journalist<sup>7</sup> comes armed with his camera and the people play along, making a big show of their surprise. For instance, *Les Dépêches* of 3 May 1984 ran the following article under the heading Précy-sous-Thil: “the traditions of 1 May have not been forgotten in Précy... Indeed, early in the morning, the inhabitants discovered an original bric-a-brac of objects (...) Since 9 o’clock, we have been watching people recover their objects in good humour. Maypoles have blossomed<sup>8</sup> all over, erected on the houses of young girls in keeping with tradition. Thank you, all you young people for perpetuating this joyous tradition of May Day with so much good humour!”

### *Courage*

The public appreciates and approves of the energy expended by the young people during the night: “One shouldn’t be lazy.” Very often, people are ironical about their relative nocturnal wisdom: “Oh! This year, they haven’t horsed around too much. I think they were tired this year, and the weather wasn’t on their side.” Approval and criticism are clearly part of a system of traditional values in which “courage” is opposed to laziness and fatigue. The young people, by cutting and erecting Maypoles, and transporting heavy unwieldy objects display not only imagination and inventiveness (qualities appreciated in the surprise element), but also courage. The public (and later, the journalist) highlight the activities carried out during the night, if only to regret that they could have done more. Here is another extract

---

<sup>7</sup> I will quote the formulations of the local correspondents of the local newspaper in so far as they are often members of “the intellectual middle classes”, living in the village of which they speak and which they have the task of representing (i.e. to give it an image acceptable to the villagers themselves). We may thus consider, in respect to Maypoles, that they are spokespeople of the community and that their opinions are shared by the majority.

<sup>8</sup> This formulation is purely a journalist’s metaphor in so far as one does not hang flowers on the Maypole, which resemble immense leafless branches.

from *Les Dépêches* of 3 May 1984 on Mirebeau-sur-Bèze: “The young people may not have not gone overboard, nonetheless the May Day tradition has been respected in the canton.” This activity is a manifestation of courage purely playful and wanton, and can be placed as such in the category I have constructed elsewhere of active disinterested leisure – the odd activity or festival – lauded in opposition to all the devalued forms of passive leisure (Weber 1986, 1989).

Thus, in some villages, the May Day ritual brings together courageous inventive youngsters and an obliging public, i.e. two groups which share the same values. However in other neighbourhoods, it appears as an intolerable practice and sometimes even the cause of an offence. Is there thus something in its very form to provoke this ill-tempered reaction? Apart from the disorder (here traditional and permissible, elsewhere badly tolerated), what causes the transformation is secrecy – an essential element of nocturnal action everywhere. The very elements that sustain the pleasure of surprise in a friendly environment can, in case of conflict, become the sign or even the cause of an offence.

### **Offence and fear**

Thus, the reticence of the young people of the Bordes locality to talk about their plans for the night can be interpreted either as the desire to maintain ritual secrecy, or as the fear of the police. In reality, it was a bit of both, which explains the ambiguity of our first contact with them. It is 8.30 p.m. and we catch sight of a group of boys and girls listening to music: “White flag raised, totally peaceful,” writes René, “we begin to question the oldest boy in the group (...). They didn’t answer. They were laughing, saying they knew nothing about this activity; that no one in this group had any part in it.” (And then, the tone changes). ‘What the hell are you doing with your camera?’, they ask our photographer aggressively. We explain to them that taking photographs will not have any repercussions because we are only working for ourselves. They are not satisfied with this answer, because they reply immediately: “It’s for sure, these are photos to show to the cops; they couldn’t hope for better, they don’t have to look for the hoodlum who did this or that...” To understand this account, one needs to know that René and his sisters (who accompanied us) perceived our intrusion in the group as a potential source of aggression even before the young people spoke about the police, as ten years earlier, they had experienced the relative criminalisation of the ritual in the Fays Townships. One of their brothers had had “problems” in 1977 on the occasion of the Maypole: “They had broken everything,” says Joëlle; “someone complained about a broken letterbox; Pierrot had to pay, even though he was not involved.”

“Hoodlums” who “break everything”: this is in sharp contrast with the “not lazy” full of “humour” young people who are thanked in the villages for carrying on tradition. Is this contrast due to a genuine transformation of the practice, or is it simply because of differences in public reaction? The interview of a young 34 year old policeman (already quoted) highlights the dynamics of the relations between the groups of young people and the public: “There are always some who are irascible; they are the people who take it badly, who get irritated. It must also be said that among the young people, there are some who respect tradition, and others who put on a big act (...). So, we go on two patrols at night in Montbard, we make ourselves visible, this calms down some, those who break things rather than have fun. And then there are the people who excite them.” The tone of the interview shows greater indulgence to the young people than the complainants. He had in any case started by telling us that he himself used to erect Maypoles “to have fun” in his village twenty years earlier. Then he goes on to tell us how negative the reactions can get: “We receive complaints which are sent to the office of the public prosecutor. On that night, we get a phone call every ten minutes. It’s a sleepless night for anyone on duty.”

This mild discourse (heard in March 1985) had not prepared us for the fear that prevailed in Bordes in the early evening when a minor incident occurred (a bowl broken). Three distinct groups are operating in the area that night. The group that has “officially” accepted our presence is made up of five 16 year old boys who start at around 1 a.m. With them, there is no question of police or offence. But around 10.30 p.m., an altercation takes place between a very young group (12-14 years) which we have already met at 8.30 p.m. and a member of a second older group (15-16 years) which is far more discreet. In the heat of the moment, the young people broke a bowl. They were taken aside by a 16 year old boy who was very angry and who called us to witness: he didn’t want to have any problems with the police through the fault of those who “did stupid things”; “It is us 15-16 year olds who erect Maypoles and it is the others (the younger ones) who make trouble. And if you want to know the full truth, we are the ones the cops point at and trouble; they are always on the lookout for young delinquents, they don’t understand the May Day custom.” He even mentioned juvenile courts and the rotten society.

More and more people got involved in the dispute, pitting the members of our team against them. This dispute, in which both our team and the boy scared of the cops got caught,<sup>9</sup> must be viewed in the context of petty delinquency. What is in question however is the Maypole

---

<sup>9</sup> My team mates were all from a “damned” locality (as they themselves said); some of their former neighbours have been to prison, and one member of the Maypole group of which their brother was a part in 1977 even stood trial for murder. Crime is thus not a distant abstraction.

interpretation, as the 16 year old boy tells us: “It’s only a custom, we’re here to have fun,” thus using the same terms as those in villages where there are no conflicts. His tormented reaction can be contrasted with the insouciance of the younger ones and the smiling indulgence of the women spectators. Though it is the police which polarises the fear of being accused of “breaking everything”, we have seen that they act with moderation. In reality, it is the accusations and complaints of the inhabitants that turn the ritual into an offence or, more precisely, the traditional joyful groups into young hoodlums; the youngsters have merely internalised the accusation or the fear of being accused and start treating each other as hoodlums.

However, even this analysis is simplistic. Indeed, if in the course of an altercation, a more reasonable older boy seems to be warning the younger ones (“don’t do stupid things”) against the sweeping accusations their insouciance could trigger, conflicts among competing groups on the same turf are part and parcel of the traditional ritual well before the process of criminalisation sets in. This is what Van Gennep (who persists in his personal “matrimonial” interpretation) reports: “For young girls who are still not engaged (...) each suitor does his best to replace his competitor’s gift with his own; as a result, sometimes in a single night, there are several replacements and fights without any noise or shouting, as at this time, it is the law of silence that prevails” (page 1538). I will not go back to the fact that the Maypoles are erected not by an individual but by a group; I am only interested here in the replacement of one Maypole by another. The groups constituted fight among themselves to mark their territory. Accordingly, around 1 a.m. the traces left by one or several groups are already very visible (Maypoles, displaced objects). The last group discovers resentfully a Maypole already erected at the spot they wanted to put up their own. After a long discussion, they decide to leave it in place next to their own, satisfied that their Maypole is more beautiful and bigger than the first. In this new perspective, the altercation we witnessed may well be interpreted as turf war: the younger group (all of whose members stayed back for the discussion) had already erected Maypoles and displaced their objects, whereas the competing group (of which only one member remained when we arrived) hid in the vicinity in the (impatient?) expectation of being able to carry out his work in turn.

In reality, the competition among groups is all the more intense when it is based on age difference: the elder ones see themselves dispossessed by the younger ones of their statutory position as the actors of the ritual. They riposte by accusing the younger ones of not respecting the forms of the customs as well as of acting “in their place”: the elder ones are accused instead of the younger ones precisely because in the eyes of everyone (neighbours and police), it is they who erect Maypoles and are active on that night. Group

membership and the coexistence (peaceful or not) of several groups in an area are not questions of chance. The groups are made up of friends, classmates for the most part, which explains the significance of an age difference of even one or two years (i.e. the difference between the senior and junior “classes” in school). Each one knows the boys of the other groups and dislikes them; otherwise there would have been only one group.

Turf wars among groups, conflictual relations arising from the lowering of age of those performing the ritual, accusations of delinquency – several interpretations are thus possible. The two opposing reactions of the public (amused surprise or complaints) are not directly linked to a rural/urban opposition: some areas of Montbard (like Saint-Pierre) have a friendly atmosphere; some villages (like Saint-Rémy) are the arena for accusations against hoodlums. This is not a recent phenomenon either. It just depends on whether the public tolerates or does not tolerate “stupid things” and on which element of the ritual it focuses its attention. We will see why.

### **The order of things or the world upside down**

Wherever we have observed it (and whatever the public reaction may have been), the ritual accords an important place to the displacement of objects, leading to disorder, which may then be considered amusing or intolerable, unusual or grotesque.<sup>10</sup> First, I will examine the modalities of the systematic disturbance of the order of things in the Maypole ritual. Next, I will replace this specific ritual in a set (which may be considered as specifically local “Maypole cycle”) where it acquires a new meaning thanks to the juxtaposition of very diverse rituals. Perhaps such contemporary reinterpretations explain the permanence of these “traditions” in the working class population of Montbard.

### **The upside down world of the Maypole ritual**

Let us first look at the spectacle of the displaced objects on the morning of May 1 before analysing what they reveal about ownership and the social definition of the family, on the one hand, and the social organisation of space, on the other. The sight that meets our eye is as odd and absurd as the famous surrealist encounter between a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table. Four principles govern (simultaneously or not) its constitution: displacement, juxtaposition, “pain” and reversal.

---

<sup>10</sup> A short article in *Les Dépêches* (4 May 1980) illustrates an imperceptible change in reaction. Under a photograph of the Buffon statue, the caption reads: “Poor Buffon! Victim each year of the Maypole tradition, it presents for a day a silhouette which, to say the least, is unusual and grotesque.” Is tradition here being deplored or boasted about? A case of neither fish nor fowl.

## *Displacement*

The objects taken are located close to the house (letter boxes, garbage bins) or from the garden and the handyman's shed (for example, ladders and wheelbarrows, used very frequently in the "compositions"); fewer objects (tractor wheels) are taken from near farms, fields (trailers, rollers) or school courtyards (benches); they are then carried and placed (more or less far away from their original location) on the streets or in the squares; the very fact of their being taken out of their habitual context creates a feeling of absurdity.

## *Juxtaposition*

They are then jumbled up with other objects, similar (row of letter boxes) or very different (ladder/chair, hammer/crown), sometimes assuming the form of an ironical bric-a-brac (like the parasol on the watering can; the rabbit climbing a ladder; or the hammer - the communist symbol - on the War Memorial). Furthermore, objects belonging to different owners are mixed up in a savant jumble.

## *Pain*

The objects are placed at a height or in spots difficult to reach; thus, the garden table, which could have been simply moved and turned upside down, is hung high up on an electric pole. The "pain" taken by the young people while placing the object is inflicted on the owner as well, obliged as he is to recover his goods in the morning. The joke is then "on" the owner who per force has to display as much "courage" to take down the object as was needed to raise it.<sup>11</sup>

## *Reversal*

It is not enough to displace and jumble up the objects; they have to be systematically turned upside down. Chairs, tables, ladders, wheelbarrows, all these are "orientated" and have a natural direction. Besides, they can be turned upside down without causing any damage. I first noticed this inversion because of the ladders; it is rather strange that they are turned upside down, for this does not give any charming effect. The ladders are placed the wrong way round against a wall and laid down horizontally. The upturned wheelbarrows along

---

<sup>11</sup> This is one of the elements which may be able to explain the shift towards discontent: "(...) large display on the square, attracting a crowd of curious onlookers from the early hours. Everything has to be put back in order and the Maypoles have to be picked up, *another trial*" (*Les Dépêches*), 3 May 1984, Mirebeau-sur-Bèze).

with the tables and chairs are placed in extremely burlesque positions. This inversion may be compared to the phrase used by René: “The city centre was not topsy-turvy.”

When all is said and done, these principles may be summarised in a single principle: diversion. Diverted from their place and function, the objects take on a new ironical meaning (giving rise to laughter or indignation). This ironical diversion (which also happens to be a founding principle of surrealism) is perceived as a joke by René: “In Crépand on entering the village, I thought for a moment that all the inhabitants had been invited to a wedding. Cars, doors, and even a telephone booth had been decorated with a pretty pink paper: going closer, you could see it was toilet paper. And then, that alignment of letter boxes in the square, you couldn’t have asked for a better *poste restante*.” The pranks René reports are based, as we can see, on the opposition of two elements placed together incongruously: an institutionalised practice, on the one hand, a trivial detail, on the other: wedding/toilet paper; *poste restante*/alignment of boxes. What I perceive as surrealist is thus seen by its usual public (of which René is a part) as a rather good prank. What remains now is to reconstitute from the one night of farce and disorder the order disturbed by the ritual.

### **The systematic disordering of property and the symbolic marking of families**

The objects displaced all have owners; they are attached to houses. What does this displacement tell us about the owners and the houses?

At first glance, all the objects lying around are displaced. Could the ritual thus be considered as a call to order? The verb “*traîner*” in French (to lie around) always has a strong pejorative connotation, be it with respect to domestic objects (it designates the opposite of a neat and clean house, a value highly esteemed by the people), or people (locally, a woman called a “*traînée*” (slovenly) is viewed in the same light as a prostitute). Is the ritual intended mainly for women and domestic order? This interpretation is all the more tempting as Van Gennep considered the erection of Maypoles to be an expression of feminine reputations. However, such an interpretation is false on two counts. On the one hand, the ritual cannot function as a call to order: as we have seen earlier on, the owners of the objects lying around are happy to give a helping hand to the young people by not putting back things in their place on the eve of May Day; this attitude reflects the good will with which the public lets itself be taken by surprise. On the other hand, the ritual is not especially intended for women: indeed, the objects displaced are more often used by men than women (wheelbarrows, ladders, tools – a handyman’s do-it-yourself objects in a working class milieu; tractor wheels, rollers – objects of masculine work in an agricultural

milieu), even though flowerpots and dustbins – objects with a more feminine connotation, including in the working class milieu<sup>12</sup> – are displaced.

In reality, the displacement of objects is not aimed specifically at either the husband or the wife, but the family, that is to say all the co-residents and the objects which manifest the existence of this residential group. The house, the car and the letter box are thus, as a priority and everywhere, at the heart of the ritual. One displaces objects the ownership of which is beyond doubt and which at the same time happen to be the family's most commonly used, and thus the most interchangeable objects; consequently, while trying to reclaim them, the owners find it difficult to identify their property. What can be more similar to a wheelbarrow than another wheelbarrow? And, at the beginning of May, a flowerpot (in which the flowers are yet to bloom) to another one? The amusement comes precisely from this confusion which creates misunderstandings among the people who come to reclaim their objects. The identical objects form amusing series (series of flowerpots placed in front of the Bordes low cost houses; series of letter boxes in Crépand) which bring out both the similarity of things and the tiny differences that distinguish them. A remark by a policeman on the time he used to erect Maypoles makes the same point: "The flowerpots were removed; the good women fought over them the next day; the prettiest one was theirs."

The house and the car,<sup>13</sup> visible (and non movable) signs of the co-residence group, are flooded with objects belonging to other families: flowerpots atop cars or on different windows. They are decorated as well: the cars with branches or toilet paper; the houses with Maypoles. Thus, the disordering of property (which may be akin to theft) goes hand in hand with the reaffirmation of the entity that each family constitutes. The individualisation of each house as manifested by the erection of a Maypole is so obvious in the case of detached houses that it goes unnoticed. On the other hand, low cost houses, which present a greater number of material obstacles, highlight such individualisation: the boys expend endless energy and display great inventiveness in hanging their Maypole on a balcony or an upper floor window so that the spectators can identify clearly for which apartment (i.e. for which family) it is intended.

---

<sup>12</sup> The villages and localities observed are overwhelmingly working class; that is why I have emphasized the gender division of labour in the working class milieu; gardening and do-it-yourself are masculine domains, flowerpots and the daily maintenance of the house are reserved for women. In the agricultural milieu, gardening is a feminine task. In any case, these details are of little importance for the purposes of my demonstration.

<sup>13</sup> In the milieu observed, a household rarely has two cars; the only car is often meant for collective use; people use mopeds and bicycles to go to work.

Accordingly, the analysis of the displacement of objects only confirms what an initial approach to the erection of Maypoles *strictly speaking* had already suggested: the ritual brings to the fore not a boy (actor) and a girl (recipient), but a group of young people and a family. We will now try and see in the villages where the ritual takes place what explains the differences in the way it is received.

### **Social organisation of physical space and the relationship between “the young people” and the public**

For this, I will compare the characteristics of eight places (three localities and a hamlet of Montbard, four villages) where I observed in 1985 the presence (in six cases) or the absence (in 2 cases) of the Maypole ritual.

#### ***Central square or fragmented space***

In the six “positive” places (where I observed the presence of the ritual in 1985), the first element which made a sharp distinction between the three independent communes and the three “localities” of Montbard (Bordes, Saint-Pierre and the agricultural hamlet of La Mairie) was this: the former accept a centre, the latter do not. The morning scene is thus intrinsically different in both cases: in the first case, the objects are gathered in the squares of the communes observed, whereas the Montbard localities present the sight of objects displaced and juxtaposed almost everywhere - in the streets, near houses - without favouring any particular space. The form of the ritual show thus depends on the political status of the place: the villages have central fountains (the town hall or church square) and war memorials which structure the space where the disorder occurs; localities without political autonomy (located far away from the municipal authorities) do not have any sufficiently symbolically marked space in which to concentrate the disorder. In the villages, the ritual invests the place with politics and collective memory, but not in the new functional empty spaces such as the squares of the Montbard localities.

#### ***Public reactions and social composition***

The distinction, based on the symbolic dimension of municipal autonomy, between commune and locality, does not however take into account the differences in public reactions. Indeed, while a “good natured” atmosphere prevailed in the three communes and two localities observed, the accusation of delinquency led to the disappearance (perhaps provisional) of the ritual in two places observed, namely the commune of Saint-Rémy and

the Fays locality in Montbard. To understand this, we should perhaps take into account the numerical relationship between the working class population and the agricultural population in the working population.<sup>14</sup> In the course of my observations, the relative strength of the agricultural population seems correlated to the absence of accusation of delinquency: this is the case in the hamlet of La Mairie, in Senailly (48 per cent engaged in agriculture and 29 per cent engaged in industry) and also at Viserny (31 per cent engaged in agriculture as opposed to 49 per cent engaged in industry). On the other hand, the strength of the working class population in the working population is not sufficient to explain the accusations of delinquency. Indeed, if the emphasis is placed on delinquency in three industrial workers areas, Les Bordes, the Fays townships and the village of Saint-Rémy (6 per cent engaged in agriculture and 69 per cent in industry), hardly any accusation of delinquency has been recorded in overwhelmingly working class areas: the Saint-Pierre locality and the village of Crépand (9 per cent engaged in agriculture and 66 per cent in industry).

The divide between the accusations of delinquency and the good natured atmosphere is not between communes and localities, nor is it between agricultural and working class populations, but cuts across working class residential areas, whether in villages or localities. What are the factors that can thus explain why the Maypole custom is tolerated so differently, from one working class area to the next, from one village to the next? If we make an exception of the Fays townships, the comparison between tolerant neighbourhoods (Crépand and Saint-Pierre) and the accusing neighbourhoods (Saint-Rémy and Les Bordes) shows that the population of the latter is characterised both by a high degree of social heterogeneity and savage development (housing development schemes, in Saint-Rémy, or urban development zones in Bordes), two factors likely to cause conflicts, as shown by J.C. Chamboredon (1985: 441-471), due to the disappearance of traditional solidarities and the confrontation of different “class moralities”. Thus, the Bordes area, built through a municipal decision in the late seventies, gets young couples (middle rung executives, employees, skilled workers) acquiring home ownership and older segments – more down market – of the local working class, living in low cost housing. It may be further pointed out that the locality has been divided into two sub-localities, one exclusively of detached houses and the other where detached houses and low cost houses are juxtaposed; among the groups of young people, the group which was not considered delinquent came from the

---

<sup>14</sup> For the four communes, the figures quoted come from the commune records of the population census 1975 (INSEE); for the four Montbard localities, I have less precise indications drawn, depending on the case, from my surveys or the 1975 census block-wise list of names.

exclusively detached houses sub locality (and it only operated in its sub locality), whereas those groups accused of delinquency were more mixed (boys from detached houses along with boys from low cost houses) and operated in the mixed detached and low cost houses sub locality.

In Saint-Rémy, the presence of a rather downgraded development estate (it dates from the sixties) near the old village where middle class retired people live can also help in explaining the difference in the way the custom was received from the village of Crépand where, on the contrary, the arrival of working class families took place gradually on the basis of personal relationships (even family relationships) with the former inhabitants of the village: new detached houses are separate, built as and when the land was bought or given by owners within the framework of pre-existing relations of interknowledge.

As for the Saint-Pierre locality, the product of a real estate operation which was the joint initiative of the municipality and the factory, it is characterised by a very high degree of social homogeneity and interknowledge based on family ties.

The emphasis laid on the vandalism of the young people may thus be explained by social heterogeneity all the more conflictual because it is not tempered by the existence of traditional solidarities. Indeed, the difference in sensitivity to “breakage” does not reflect differences in the practices of the groups of young people; even when they are tolerated, these practices assume a certain number of illegal acts or those which simply play on the appearance of illegality: cutting of trees, secrecy, displacement of objects which resemble theft and inevitably leads to damage (you can’t move a letter box without damaging it). As one worker from Bordes says (who used to set up Maypoles in the past and whose son recently set up one): “In every group if you’ve got several youngsters, there are bound to be some who break things.” Such an attitude of indulgence assumes familiarity with the custom, i.e. either having practiced it oneself, or having children practicing it. If the heterogeneity of the population explains in part the intolerance, then it means an increase in the number of people who have never set up Maypoles and whose children do not do so. This is the interpretation that René gives for the absence of Maypoles in a locality of Montbard traditionally reserved for foremen and middle ranking factory executives: “This can be explained by the stricter upbringing by parents.” The mixture, in the same locality, of workers who allow their children to “do stupid things” (and consider with indulgence the “stupid things” of others’ children) and of executives (or even workers who have climbed or hope to climb the social ladder based on a stricter morality) explains the transformation of tolerated “stupid things” into minor delinquency.

However, this explanation does not hold good for the Fays townships. This locality is in point of fact inhabited, since its construction in 1904, by factory workers at the time of their arrival in Montbard (whether immigrants from other regions or abroad) and its social (though not cultural) homogeneity has for long been the symbol of the working class at the level of the small industrial region. "In Fays, people used to work together, used to live together literally on each other's doorstep," one of the former inhabitants recalls with nostalgia. Since the seventies, and on account of the drying up of immigrant workers (inter regional and international), the locality no longer takes in new inhabitants and is progressively losing its former inhabitants who have shifted to more comfortable accommodation in other localities of Montbard or in the workers' villages of the region. We may thus consider its present day population as a residue, the result of a negative selection: the main people involved consider themselves as "cast offs" and are fully aware of their social inferiority which is further aggravated by the deterioration of accommodation and the gradual physical destruction of the locality. They react all the more badly to practices, the laxity of which reminds them of their inferiority. The progressive criminalisation of the Maypole custom has thus gone hand in hand with the rising social despair of the inhabitants who found themselves constrained to remain in this locality. It must be added that the aging of the population has contributed in the declining number of young people, thereby making their practices unusual and abhorrent.

The Maypole custom is thus, as we have seen, a well tolerated peasant practice but one which is also a working class practice to which in some cases a certain stigma has been attached. To understand its insertion in working class culture, it must be placed once again in its ritual context.

### **The upside down world of working class rituals in the month of May**

I will thus examine its immediate context, defined spatially (what is happening in Montbard itself) and temporally (the month of May). It is constituted chiefly of two events: a carnival shifted to the month of May, on the one hand; the working class demonstrations related to May Day (the Fays locality fete, La Fête du Muguet and Labour Day), on the other hand. The amazing conjunction of these different rituals will shed light on the new significance of the Maypole custom among the working class population of Montbard.

#### **A carnival in May**

On the first Sunday of May in Montbard, a "regional Cavalcade" takes place which has all the

characteristics of a carnival without being called so and without respecting the date.<sup>15</sup> The two day programme is this: on Saturday evening, a first procession gathers the population (not disguised) behind the municipal brass band and the firemen: this is the “torchlight procession”, as night falls, where the most beautiful torches are carried by firemen in uniform (who, for once, brandish fire rather than extinguish it – the symbolic fire/firemen relationship is explicit), whereas the children (and some adults) carry lit Chinese lanterns and torches and the young people enjoy themselves with crackers (without this ever having given rise, to my knowledge, to complaints). It is thus a consensual nocturnal public and joyful demonstration. On Sunday afternoon, a second procession divides the population into actors and spectators. The actors who, this time, come from the entire region are disguised and go in procession disguised on floats accompanied by brass bands and cheerleaders. The “star attraction” of the show – which also marks its end – is the putting to death, in flames, of “His Majesty Carnival” who, since 1946, has been represented by an enormous cardboard dummy of a capitalist (easily identifiable by his hat, cigar and bags full of dollars).

I will not refer again to the significance of the carnival as a whole,<sup>16</sup> but I will dwell on two elements which to my mind are revealing.

First and foremost, this is a ritual of reversal. Firemen carry fire instead of extinguishing it, as we have seen. In 1983, a group of young people simulated an attack on the police station. The same year, a group of cheerleaders coming from a village of the Massif Central and made up exclusively of men was very successful. As the cheerleaders (dressed exactly like young female cheerleaders wearing wigs under their hats) passed by, delighted jokes could be heard in admiration of the dignified bearing and hirsute legs of these transvestites for a day. Finally, the Cavalcade is the time when one exhibits a (fake) swapping of sexual partners. The disorder which, a few days earlier, was directed at objects (at the time of the Maypole), is now directed at people: men disguised as women, false couples, pyromaniac firemen, young people who attack the police station, and, in conclusion a capitalist who is burnt.

---

<sup>15</sup> Shifting the carnivalesque cavalcade to the month of May (to which sometimes the weather is attributed: the weather is better in May) had already taken place in the fifties. The first regional cavalcade on the basis of which the current cavalcades are numbered goes back to 1947. The local saint’s day festival of Montbard takes place on the first Sunday of September; it coincides with the anniversary of the Liberation of the city and, since 1965, with a regional fair. The calendar of local festivals is organized around these high points: early May and early September.

<sup>16</sup> For this, I suggest the seminal book by J. Caro Baroja, *Le Carnaval* (1979), which has influenced some of my analysis. However, shifting the carnival to May reduces to almost naught the religious dimension of the phenomenon in Montbard, a region which has been considered for a long time de-Christianised.

Furthermore, the ritual is part of a working class tradition and, more precisely, a political tradition of class struggle. The organisation of the Cavalcade is however not entrusted to a political party or union, but to the festival committee of Montbard. The neighbouring towns, invited to participate in the regional Cavalcade, are not necessarily part of the working class tradition (far from it). Each one of the Montbard localities organised in committees takes part in the procession on their floats. Sometimes, one or the other locality may or may not participate. In 1983, the localities of Saint-Pierre and Fays (whose float was rather stark and identified by the spectators as yet another indication of the locality's decay) participated in the procession. The Bordes locality (whose vitality we witnessed on the occasion of the Maypole) had neither committee nor float. The absence of villages is more systematic: their inhabitants, faithful spectators of the Cavalcade, do not have the right to a representation in the form of an independent float or procession. From this point of view, the Cavalcade is an urban display and even specifically one from Montbard: the municipal festivals' committee reserves the place of honour for itself with the float of His Majesty Carnival. The Cavalcade thus appears as a unifying demonstration in which all the inhabitants take part and which offers a show of the unity that constitutes the city, in particular with the prominent presence of the Montbard trumpets and a second Montbard float where the Queens of Montbard sit on thrones.<sup>17</sup> Thus, one finds this significant sentence in *Les Dépêches* of 11 May 1975, when the Vallourec factories were in their third week of strike (the longest strike since 1968): "At the time of the Cavalcade, the inhabitants of Montbard forgot all their troubles." The localities are subordinated to communal unity, even if they enact (or more precisely, in "living tableaux") their specific personality: in 1983, the float of the Fays townships was made of a tandem ("meagre" resources easy to reconcile with the low numerical strength – two people – of the participants); the Saint-Pierre float is pulled by a tractor, which displays the good relationship of the locality with a farmer; the float of the Festivals' committee is driven by a truck unit (thanks to the support of the municipality which has equipment). The decorations, too, imply "work time" and make visible the mobilisation network at the disposal of the locality.

The Cavalcade, in a display of unity, shows a moderate degree of a- politicisation. However, the municipality has been communist since 1971 and the symbolism of the closing (burning of a capitalist Carnival) is clearly part of a working class political tradition. Now,

---

<sup>17</sup> The election of the Queens and their roles would also be an interesting opportunity to analyse the present day motives for a custom entirely reinterpreted. One can say, very quickly, that they *represent* the City, along with the Mayor, in all the official ceremonies and that they are girls from working class families chosen not on universal criteria such as beauty and measurements but thanks to the support of their kin.

a few days earlier, on May Day too there were certain elements which are part of the same working class tradition. After analysing the carnivalesque reversal, let us now deal with all the customs which mark May Day.

### **The working class traditions of May Day**

After the morning show of disorder linked to the Maypole custom, the day is punctuated by workers rallies, without any apparent link with the nocturnal custom.

Indeed, 1 May at the international level is Labour Day, a day which is a holiday for all. Union events take place at Montbard as elsewhere. In 1985, union disputes had led to the separate organisation of a CGT rally at 9.30 a.m. in the Saint-Pierre locality and a pétanque (bowling) competition sponsored by the CFDT at 2 p.m. also in Saint-Pierre. In 1985, the union topography corresponded to the social geography (we have seen that Saint-Pierre is a homogenous working class locality). This is further confirmation of the declining influence (demographic, social and political) of the Fays quarter which maintains nonetheless a symbolic value. Before 1975, the Fays townships were the centre of all May Day public festivities: May 1 was also in point of fact the festival day of this locality. As a CGT unionist, former inhabitant of Fays, says: "It was the working class locality which celebrated the 1<sup>st</sup> of May." Fays was a working class symbol. On account of this, the Fays locality committee used to organise a free ball on 30 April and enjoyed a monopoly on the sale of lilies of the valley: Labour Day, May Day, Fays Festival, working class festival, were all indissociable. In 1985, the 30 April ball, still "popular" and free, was organised by the CGT because of the failure of the Fays committee whose last chairman committed suicide in 1982; the union rallies shifted to Saint-Pierre. The Fays townships maintain nonetheless their locality celebrations, as well as the monopoly on the sale of lilies of the valley (the proceeds of which are intended for the Elders of Fays).

The analysis of the Fays festival celebration in 1985 brings out the elements that resisted change in the social geography, and why the symbolic geography was partially perpetuated. At 11 a.m., a procession goes through the parallel streets of the Fays Townships (single storied individual houses, two side by side) with the young fire-fighters in uniform, the Montbard Trumpets and the Queens of Montbard; at 11.30 a.m., an aperitif concert is offered by the municipality with the support of l'Harmonie des usines; at 3 p.m., a fete gathers the inhabitants in the Fays Townships but also the inhabitants of Montbard from other localities around a refreshment stall, a few game stalls (physical and of chance) and a podium where a succession of speakers address the gathering (one of them being the communist mayor) and a troupe of folk musicians. The highly municipal character of the celebrations stands out in all the following details: the presence of the mayor and the Queens as well as the firemen. At the same time, the celebrations have lost their specifically working class characteristics:

the musicians dressed as traditional peasants came from Morvan and their folklore is foreign both to the immigrants and the natives (Montbard has never been a part of Morvan which is situated 50 km away). The attempt to preserve the symbolism of the Fays Townships, even when bereft of its social foundation, is an act of political will on the part of the municipality. In the Fays Townships, all that remains is the landscape – insalubrious houses marked by the date and the conditions of their construction, earmarked for demolition (which began in 1987) both for health reasons and the apprehensions of the factory that its image and erstwhile paternalism would take a beating.

Even if the Fays Township symbol has lost its meaning, it still remains that for about fifty years, May Day represented the meeting of a place, a social class and a political tradition. Can this analysis be taken any further?

### **A set of customs and their reinterpretation**

The custom of setting up Maypoles led us to refer to the Cavalcade in so far as it expresses the same reversal in a carnivalesque mode (disorder of things on the night of 30 April, disorder of people during the first weekend of May); the Cavalcade reminded us of the political dimension of May Day through the intermediary of Capitalist Carnival.

Let us once again look at the chronological order of the practices to bring to light the general meaning of the “May cycle” specific to Montbard. On 30 April at 10 p.m., the CGT local union ball in the festival hall of Montbard is attended by young people (girls and boys) from a working class background. On the night of 30 April (after the ball), the young boys get together in groups in every locality; the youngest among them have already set up Maypoles during the ball.

On May Day, the working class community shows itself in its most explicitly political dimension, in response to a call by the Communist Party and unions. The divisions here are political, between leftist workers and all those who do not demonstrate, but also, recently at least, between the different organisations of the workers’ movement.

The first weekend of May, the Cavalcade reunifies Montbard (young and old, boys and girls, workers and non workers, all localities together) and its neighbourhood.

In the entire cycle, the intervention of distinct groups is observed (from the point of view of gender, age, locality, political and social affiliations); the cycle is also an enactment of their rediscovered (recreated) unity.

It may be argued that the Maypole custom has drawn its vigour from the partially political context of the working class populations of the Montbard localities and the working class villages on the outskirts of Montbard (of which Crépand and Saint - Rémy are a part). The reinterpretation of the carnival linked to its shift to the month of May is particularly visible in the central character of His Majesty Carnival. Indeed, the latter combines carnivalesque characteristics with political allusions.

he is huge, red in the face with a large mouth, features that can be associated with the “carnal” significance of Carnival, emphasised by J. Caro Baroja (1979: 103); he is depicted as a potbellied red-faced glutton (references to meat);

he is dressed in a black tuxedo, cigar hanging on his lips, and is preceded by placards referring to current events. This set of political symbols associates capitalism with Switzerland, attire, cigars and, more generally, greed, a kind of “gluttony” for money. He is the “profit eater”.

In this example, we do not know which representation has contaminated the other: is it the carnival (symbol of gluttony as opposed to the fasting of Lady Lent) which has acquired a political meaning in this traditionally communist commune? Or conversely, is it the image of the capitalist who has been transformed into a glutton, a grotesque monster on account of his coexistence with the “dietary” significance of Carnival?

Other elements show the (inextricable) overlapping of a carnivalesque symbolism and a tradition of workers’ struggle. Thus, the similarity between the importance of not working on Labour Day (comparable to a religious “Sabbath”) and J. Caro Baroja’s (*ibid.*: 121) observation on Shrove Tuesday: “On this strictly observed holiday, one must not do any kind of work”, or further (*ibid.*: 125, note 50): “The sacred character of the carnival is present in the Ergel region where it is forbidden to work during this period, especially on Carnival Monday.”

In truth, the association could be more general. Indeed, the essential character of the carnival, according to J. Caro Baroja, is to “disguise oneself, reverse the order of things, insult or give offense, eat and drink in excess”, etc. (*ibid.*: 157) or further, “destroy social order” (*ibid.*: 156), all of which fits the Montbard May cycle as a whole and which allows us at the same to understand the indulgence in respect to the “stupid things” the young people do and the accusations of “breaking everything” levelled against them. The scattered references to “madness” in the interpretation of the carnival by J. Caro Baroja may well, in this perspective, refer to one of the indigenous ways of speaking about the Maypole custom: “Joyous lads” who “lark about”, this is how my co-researchers describe the young people observed. Furthermore, the first reaction of Joëlle, when I announced my intention of observing the Maypole custom, was: “You’ve got to be crazy for having come up with such an idea.”

Finally, the very idea of having a “Labour Day” on which one doesn’t have to work already has an element of the carnivalesque through the regulated reversal of the order of things that it brings about. A slogan written on a placard hung on a door on the night of 30 April sums up perfectly the multiplicity of references and mixtures to which the custom gives rise; it is for this reason that I chose it as the title: “On May Day do as you please”. Its first reference is a common saying related to the weather: “en avril, ne te découvre pas d’un

fil, en mai, fais ce qu'il te plaît » [in April, don't remove your warm clothes, in May, do as you please]. The error which led the author of the placard to replace “in May” with “May Day” indicates an explicit reference to the 1<sup>st</sup> of May as Labour Day. On the other hand, the meaning of “do as you please” has undergone a corresponding change: from an indication on how to dress (one can wear what one wants without fearing the cold) it has become the affirmation of a “right to pleasure” for all those who, in normal times, do not enjoy this right.

## Conclusion

Thus, the strangeness (the amusing picturesque, the oddity) that at first glance seemed to characterise the Maypole custom, an apparent relic of a hundred year old peasant tradition in a rural but working class milieu (large scale metallurgical industry), is explained when one understands the logic of the reversal of the social order which governs this custom, particularly when related to the central phenomenon from which it draws, to my mind, its entire meaning: the 1<sup>st</sup> of May as Labour Day with its paradoxical and subversive force, one could say, or more simply, with its carnivalesque characteristics.

Here I can do no more than suggest further lines of enquiry. First, the role of humour in the workers' culture: the reference to the carnivalesque reversal may be useful to understand the omnipresence of humour in the workers' relationship to their social world – of which besides I have given several examples. Humour – with its two corollaries, laughter and irony – draw, to my mind, their significance both from the reversal (well-known characteristic of irony as a figure of style stating “white” to mean “black”) and distance (or “tongue in cheek”) as processes that it uses to provoke laughter. Apart from these regulated moments (rituals?) of the reversal of the world (the order of things, the order of people, the social order) of which I have analysed here one of the most striking examples in Montbard, humour is a very frequently used form of discourse (or speech) among the workers I observed for one and a half years, including (and perhaps above all) in the succinct verbal exchanges, during meetings on the street, or discussions in a café, for example. The demonstration of this hypothesis requires systematic research on the occasions which give rise to humour, their forms, etc.

A second line of enquiry relates to the relation between political culture and festive culture; it leads us to think about the genesis of the forms of protest and social critique. The answers to these questions, even if at the local level, presuppose a historical study of the points in time the Montbard May cycle crystallised. Indeed, it was during the same years, after the Liberation, that the carnival was shifted to the month of May and its central character acquired political significance. It is thus necessary to study the history of local political relations during the War as well as the different aspects of the Resistance in this

working class region to reconstitute finally the conditions in which the influence of the Communist Party spread in the immediate aftermath of the War.

It was also during this period (1944-1948) that the current organisation of the school festivities was established (since then, a school fair has been taking place in June), which makes one wonder whether it was from this period onwards that the traditional carnival, linked to Shrove Tuesday with its specific food practices, has been confined to the universe of childhood: the only ones to respect the religious calendar of the carnival are schoolchildren, not just the primary schoolchildren, but also the older ones under the influence of their teachers. This ramification of a historical approach built around the relations between childhood and folklore will undoubtedly permit us to take into account the lowering of age observed in the Maypole custom.

Finally, another line of enquiry deals with the problem of tradition (or folklore) and the status accorded to it. The role of tradition in the Maypole custom as viewed by the various interlocutors should have been analysed. This is what gives respectability (at least in the eyes of the middle classes) to the regulated momentary disrespect for social order. From this perspective, tradition is brandished as a protective flag by those who use it to allow themselves from time to time to “lark about”, “break everything” or more peacefully, “enjoy themselves”. On the other hand, the potential victims of this traditional disorder brandish tradition to “limit the damage”. A few words of the mayor of Saint-Rémy illustrate how tradition can be used as bulwark against excesses, nonetheless traditional: “In 1983, they broke everything, lit crackers in letter boxes... So, around the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, I put an article in the papers asking them to respect tradition and not break anything (...). I’m not against traditions, but when it is done nicely. What I can’t tolerate is that one breaks everything.”

Beyond the analysis of the justifying role of indigenous references to tradition (whose specificity is that they can be used to justify anything and its opposite, like sayings), the intellectual process which in the guise of description transforms practices observed into customs or rituals must be questioned. Sifting and classification are indispensable to transform a complex and diverse changing reality into the “observance of a custom”. Thus, it would have been easy to compare the facts I have attempted to analyse in a traditional framework and reduce them to a more or less strict observance of the custom, even if this means questioning subsequently the “deviations” from the custom constituted (as it was observed elsewhere and in the past) and the facts observed today in Montbard. On the contrary, my attempt has been to understand what these facts revealed about the relationship among people, on the one hand, and specific combinations of symbols, on the other hand. The desire to restore the complexity and equivocalness of the practices, like the refusal to

classify and simplify, is perhaps dangerous in the long term: one runs the risk of prohibiting any kind of conceptualisation or interpretation. It is undoubtedly for this reason that I was persuaded, after an in-depth analysis of all the oppositions expressed in the Maypole custom (age groups, localities, gender, social classes) and showing their limitations, to extend the field of observation to the point of risking a more general interpretation of the relationship between carnivalesque phenomena and workers' symbols and even more, reflecting on the link between some working class culture traits and carnivalesque reversal.

Undoubtedly, one could take this analysis further and link the deviations of meaning suffered by the objects and people (the process of deviation takes into account a larger number of phenomena than reversal alone) with the material deviations on which are built the recovery practices of the working class (do-it-yourself, picking, etc., which I have analysed elsewhere). Whatever the case may be, the emphasis placed on "foolery" and (one's) pleasure during the Montbard cycle appears to me opposed to (in its modest way) the frequent interpretation of working class culture as a culture of necessity.<sup>18</sup>

## References

Belmont N.

1978. "Le joli mois de mai", *L'Histoire*, no. 1, May (16-25).

Belmont N.

1982. « La petite graine et les jeunes filles en fleurs », *Pénélope*, no. 7, autumn (100-104).

Bourdieu P.

1979. *La Distinction*, Paris, Minuit.

Caro Baroja J.

1979. *Le Carnaval*, Paris, Gallimard, Madrid, 1965.

Camberoque C., Fabre D.

1977. *La fête en Languedoc, regards sur le Carnaval aujourd'hui*, Toulouse, Privat.

Chamboredon J.-C.

1985. « Construction sociale des populations » in Roncayolo dir., *La Ville aujourd'hui*, volume 5 of *Histoire de la France urbaine*, Paris, Seuil (441-471).

Hastings M.

1986. « Communisme et folklore, étude d'un carnaval rouge, Halluin 1924 », *Ethnologie française*, volume 16, no. 2 (137-150).

---

<sup>18</sup> Many works are based on this hypothesis; one will only recall that Pierre Bourdieu reduces popular tastes to "the taste of necessity" (1979: 435).

Jakobson R.

1929. « Le folklore, forme spécifique de création », translated in *Questions de poétique*, Paris, Seuil, 1973 (59-72).

Lenclud G.

1987. «La tradition n'est plus ce qu'elle était... », *Terrain* no. 9, October (110-123).

Luxemburg R.

1972. *Der I. Mai, Kampftag der Arbeiterklasse*, Berlin.

Maget M., Rivière G.-H.

1943. « Fêtes et cérémonies de la communauté villageoise », *Agriculture et Communauté*, Paris, Librairie de Médicis (75-94).

«Le monde à l'envers dans le trésor des contes d'Henri Pourrat », 1987, *Cahiers Henri Pourrat* no. 5, Clermont-Ferrand.

Morand S.

1978. *Wackes Fassenacht, Carnaval des Voyous*, Strasbourg.

*Naître, vivre et mourir. Actualité de Van Gennep*. 1981, Museum of Ethnology, Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

Perrot M.

1984. *Jeunesse de la Grève (France 1871-1890)*, Paris, Seuil.

Pop D.

1986. « Le tablier des sapeurs », *Ethnologie française* 16-2 (177-190).

Van Gennep A.

1949. *Manuel de Folklore français contemporain*, part one, volume 4, « Cycle de mai », Paris, éditions A. et J. Picard et Cie (1421-1726).

Villadary A.

1968. *Fête et vie quotidienne*, Paris, Les Editions ouvrières.

Weber F.

1986. « Le travail hors de l'usine, bricolage et double activité », *Cahiers d'Economie et Sociologie rurales*, no. 3, December 1986 (14-36).

Weber F.

1989. *Le travail-à-côté, étude d'ethnographie ouvrière*, Paris, Ed. EHESS [2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2001, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 2009]