

Politics and Migration

Provence as Backdrop: Bastille Day's Petanque Competitions in New York

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Provence fascinates millions of tourists worldwide, an eternal Provence magnified by numerous artists singing its beauties and dolce vita, in the lightness of spring and summer colors. Attracted by the dazzling blue sky, the green Aleppo pines, the disheveled black cypress in the wind, the white limestone mountains, captivated by the charm of the villages, by the ochre facades, tiles and roofs, visitors are inspired by images coming from literature, painting, photography and cinema. One must not forget the *santon* craftsmen who build, based on the Nativity, emblematic characters of a reasonable, wise, Provence frozen in the past, which bring life to the dioramas (Provençal mangers) annually constructed in the privacy. Provence overflows far beyond its borders. The contemporary representations of this traditionally Provençal society accompany Provence natives who migrate with their both lived and dreamt country. Petanque¹⁷⁹ is an excellent subject to use to think about the horizon lines of the Mediterranean Sea. How can Provence be dramatized in the Brooklyn and Manhattan streets, in the beginning of the 21st century? There are today many petanque courts in New York and two very active clubs¹⁸⁰. Some commemorations, especially 14th of July parties, honor the petanque tournaments, which embody the French Revolution.¹⁸¹

First of all, it is important to note that after the French Revolution, France decided to unify. Regional cultural practices (languages, local habits) were then relegated to folkloric cultures, at best in a showcased in museums or in a show, most of time laughed at as a contradiction of the idea of sociological progress. People from the *Midi* (expression meaning from South of France) suffered from

¹⁷⁹ Petanque is a game invented at the beginning of the twentieth century in the south of France. In the context of Petanque, one should keep both feet fixed when throwing a boule. In Provençal language, that's called "pieds tanqués", from the verb "tanquer" i.e. to anchor or tie down. This marked the difference with existing bowl games in Provence, like *le jeu provençal* and *la boule Lyonnaise* where one takes a number of steps prior to throwing the boules. In Petanque the players do not run, contrary to Long. It was this detail that brought it success. Petanque is a variation of *la longue provençale* (BROMBERGER 1989, TORNATORE 1993, REESINK/REESINK 2004, FESCHET 2014).

¹⁸⁰ FESCHET 2013c.

¹⁸¹ FESCHET 2013b.

negative statements conveyed by observers who were eager to show Provencal people as gushing and protestant. The produced works, although painting with genius a complex society, were not understood for their philosophical depth. We kept in mind the picturesque situations and the spicy characters. Some literary and cinematographic works gave rise to mockery and self-derision, since local inhabitants have reclaimed the happy fool character to which Parisianism had restricted them.

But it seems that times are changing, as we see these representations evolving today. What was before a lazy game (according to the conveyed pictures) becomes a well-thought-out political choice!¹⁸² When it was once a “popular” game in the pejorative sense, now it is a game for celebrities and white-collar society. In brief, petanque has crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and in so doing, changed the status of the heaviest clichés, which define the Mediterranean ethos. This article aims to analyze social and cultural uses of petanque during the *Bastille Day* in New York and associated representations.¹⁸³ Colors that form the horizon line of Provence are marked by blue and yellow tone (as part of advertising, cultural performances and pictorial representations), but during the last decade we observe also harder colors overlapping blue and yellow, like red or black, which shows a mutation of connotations associated with petanque. In last twenty years, this game has also become the symbol of the French Revolution and therefore the symbol of France. Red gradually superimposes to blue and yellow.

Petanque in New York

Petanque is a popular bowls game invented at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the south of France, near Marseille. This outdoor, masculine game has spread rapidly throughout the world. More than eighty countries are affiliated with the International Federation. There are more than 500,000 licensees (2009) and millions of amateurs players all around the world. Petanque isn't very well known yet in the United States but it is beginning to get rank in several towns. In 2011, in the US, about 40 clubs were affiliated with the FPUSA. But there are about 30,000 regular players in the USA (according to *PetanqueAmerica*, an organization trying to promote the game in the USA). The considerable distances, the travel costs, the absence of financial support and the overwhelming mediatization of other ball sports have slowed its development. In 2009 there were just 1,456 registered players in the whole of the United States (in France there are 313,985). As in other American cities,

¹⁸² FESCHET 2013a.

¹⁸³ The « Bastille Day » is the name given by Americans for the Celebration on July 14.

petanque is expanding in New York, which now has two very dynamic clubs: The “Boule New Yorkaise,” founded in 1968, and the “New York Petanque Club” founded in 2009. The players have access to three public bowls areas: two in Manhattan (Bryant Park and Washington Square Park) and the third in Brooklyn. There are also informal playing fields as the Central Park alleys (Manhattan), in Harlem, in Flushing Meadow Park, in Queens, in McCarren Park (Brooklyn) and in the backyards of several restaurants.

For the celebration of July fourteenth, the French¹⁸⁴ enjoy banquets, balls and firework displays, both in France and abroad. For the last fifty years or so in France, and the last twenty in New York, petanque has been added to the festivities program. According to information received on the ground, the first Petanque Bastille Day was organized in New York by the restaurant Jacqueline on McDougal Street (Manhattan south).¹⁸⁵ In 1993 the Bastille Day tournament was taken over by another restaurant, Provence, in the same neighborhood, Soho. The tournament was kept up until 2006. The restaurant Florent, situated a little further north in the Meatpacking District, also proposed petanque competitions (that lasted just two years). In an on-line Internet video, the restaurant owner, Florent Morellet, an icon for the gay community, appeared dressed as Marie Antoinette. The ambiance was “hip”. The restaurant owner explained that the French Revolution was a bloody event. For him, the old slaughterhouses were the ideal place to reflect this tragic aspect of history. This testimony shows once again the strange link between petanque and the French Revolution. However, these events were reserved for competitors working in the restaurant business. Petanque was simply an allusion, a wink, at French culture and despite the prestigious prizes (voyages, cultural evenings) petanque wasn’t really the top of the bill for July 14th Celebrations.

Petanque: Top of the bill

In Brooklyn at that time (2006), a neighborhood committee (South Brooklyn Local Development Corporation/Bette Stoltz) was trying to improve a street where several French people lived (Smith Street). “The best thing to do” said the restaurant owners concerned (originating from the South of France), “is to have a petanque competition!” Georges F. (originally from St-Rémy-de-Provence) and Bernard D. (Marseille), two restaurant owners, were extremely critical about the Manhattan tournaments. They considered these tournaments to

¹⁸⁴ French immigration is characterized by an extreme demographic modesty. Between 1961 and 1975, only 61,000 French people immigrated to the United States, just 1.1% of all immigration. Nevertheless, though not massive, this immigration is neither negligible nor ephemeral. In 2010, 70,000 French people were living in the states of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

¹⁸⁵ This restaurant was run by run by people from Nice.

be “Veuve Cliquot Champagne” events. They thought that the excessive presence of the sponsor (a Champagne house) had “perverted the spirit of the game!” It wasn’t a “real petanque tournament” they said. They wanted to hold a “good neighborhood party” open to all, as in France, and organize a real competition in the traditional manner. They set reasonable prices: two dollars fifty for a glass of Pastis¹⁸⁶ and five dollars for a “sausage sandwich.”¹⁸⁷ It immediately became a great popular success.

Despite the complexity of the organization (clearly shown in the photos) the formula has proven its worth. Since then, other establishments have attempted to organize similar competitions, such as the “Cercle Rouge” restaurant in south Manhattan, TriBeCa, which adopted the idea in 2009, or the restaurant “La Défense” (2 Metrotech Ctr, Brooklyn, NY 11201), a dozen blocks away from the Bar-Tabac, which organized in 2010 a new Bastille Day. In short, since 2010, players have been able to participate in several Bastille Day Competitions (La Défense, Cercle Rouge and the Bar-Tabac), two in Brooklyn and one in Manhattan. The main difference from the earlier competitions was the petanque’s status. Petanque is no longer a nod to the past, a fantasy. It is now the pillar of the commemorative event. The rules of the game are respected and the size of the pitches is in conformity with (from the semi-final onwards). The sponsors no longer “run the show.” Of course, there is a large “Ricard” banner across the street with “Come Celebrate Bastille Day” written on it and the Ricard stand is central,¹⁸⁸ Ricard being the main sponsor. Ricard has always used petanque as promotional support. It is “quasi-natural” scenery. The company is trying to make progress in the United States by surfing on the wave of American interest in the game. Nevertheless, petanque is the centre of the event despite the banners.

The New York petanque tournaments, organized for Bastille Day, have become highly awaited festive events. The spectacle produces an emblematic scene (baby-foot, table-soccer), grilled sausages, drinks kiosk, orchestra of French Cancan, etcetera), which reflect an “art of living” that the organizers, all originally from the south of France, sought to recreate on American soil. We can see yellow and blue everywhere, color lines used by the Ricard brand. Sand spread on the asphalt recalls the beach and the South. These colors completely change the urban landscape. These petanque competitions bring together both top champions and amateurs. The competitions attract more young adults and women than in France. The public is also mixed and fairly young whereas in town and villages in France the young are losing interest in this type of event that they consider “old fashioned.” The teams (eighty teams of three people

¹⁸⁶ Pastis is an emblematic and alcoholic aniseed drink in the South of France.

¹⁸⁷ Merguez sandwiches!

¹⁸⁸ « Ricard » is a French brand specialized in the production of pastis.

each) are formed through socio-cultural affinities. On the French side, several groups stand out: the “Marseillais” (according to the local classification used) and the “Bretons” (that is to say French from the South and French from the North of France). There are many French people, but they are not alone. The competition also welcomes French speakers of African origin (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Madagascar, Guinea Conakry, Cameroon and Senegal among others) who share the French cultural experience of petanque (a masculine sport played daily in the urban space). While the French and French-speaking tonality is undeniable, many players are American or English speaking. The socio-professional diversity is also quite varied (businessmen, employees, artists, traders, rich and poor play together). There is much to say on this point¹⁸⁹, but this article aims to focus on the motivations of the French community in relation to Bastille Day and on the symbolic horizon line that is drawn at this occasion.

The Bastille Day Posters

These Bastille Day Celebrations are an occasion for exuberant behavior. We can see unusually chic or eccentric clothes and very relaxed behavior, which is sometimes even provocative in relation to the standard etiquette. There are never young girls wearing bikinis playing petanque in France in official competitions. On the beach, yes, but not in urban public spaces. These are possible visions in the U.S. of Bastille Day, feast days marked by excess and the exhibition of French colors. Some players go barefoot (which is forbidden in competitions), some have cigarettes in their mouths and/or a glass of *pastis* in their hand (which is no longer done in high level sport). This isn't the case for everyone of course, but it is interesting to note these behaviors to understand the meaning of petanque in relation to festive events, to France and to Provence. These relaxed behaviors, which demonstrate a free and festive petanque without hindrances, are reflected in the posters announcing the event (2009 and 2010 edited by “Bar-Tabac restaurant” and “Cercle Rouge restaurant” - fig. 37). Thanks to a brilliant semantic composition, that might be called call a “disheveled” style becomes almost the archetype, almost ideal. The petanque player is a sort of “chubby walrus.” In 2009 at least, it was the identifying banner for this community of French players. A similar poster for 2012 (for a petanque competition in Brooklyn) brings out the untidy and somewhat drunken aspect of players. These posters are humorous but they also carry an underlying ideological message. This relaxed appearance is characteristic of petanque players, who from the beginning of the rules' implementation have built a

¹⁸⁹ FESCHET 2013C.

modest representation of themselves even if they seriously invest in the game (fig. 38).

These relaxed appearances propose a Mediterranean imaginary which is far more politically committed than one can imagine. Of course it is necessary to laugh at oneself, but these posters take a political position in the context of the International Federation's desire to change petanque's image. Cigarettes on the bowling pitches, alcohol, sandals, shorts above the knee, t-shirts that show hair on chests or underarms, are now forbidden. In official competitions clothes must be "correct" and each team member has to have an identical shirt. The federation wants petanque to be associated in people's minds with the spirit of sport and not as a game of "degenerates." Even in 1988, Jacky Roggero, a French petanque player, urged people to pay more attention to their appearance in the competition: "See what M^r and M^{rs} Everyone thinks of us," he wrote.

We are unrepentant and vulgar loudmouths, who only know how to stuff our faces with pastis and sausages... our sporting profile is that of an overweight walrus whose abdomen flirts dangerously with his socks. Our chronic lack of discipline makes it so that our competitions have more in common with a noisy sausage party than a sports competition. And our disheveled and ill-assorted clothes don't do us any more favors.¹⁹⁰

During one Bastille Day Celebrations in 2010, Pierre L. wore a T-shirt with the slogan: *Ricard: preservons la couche d'eau jaune* [Ricard: Let's preserve the yellow water layer] (a phonetic play on words between *couche d'ozone* [ozone layer] and the color *jaune* [yellow] of the anise drink). In 2009 the slogan was in the same semantic register: *Pastaga special club* (*pastaga* being the popular slang name for *pastis*). These allusions are nods to the fraternal and warm ambiance that surrounds the game.¹⁹¹

This sudden rigor in the competition is the exact opposite of traditional habits. Some players, but only a few (smokers obviously), are scandalized by this attack on their liberty that, according to them, is contrary to the spirit of petanque. I heard virulent discussions on this point among the New York players in 2009 and 2010. "Petanque is liberty", they said. "Petanque doesn't have to bow to anybody." It was a surprise for me to see that in New York the most scandalized players were not the French but the English-speakers, who couldn't understand why they had been forbidden to smoke while participating in competitions. In short, the etiquette reform was imposed between 2009 and 2010, which is exactly when petanque became a Bastille Day icon. Perhaps this is not a coincidence!

That being said, the Bastille Day posters changed their style and reflect the evolution of uses and representations. The imaginary horizon is changing. The 2011 poster presents a very politically correct scene with a player who is half

¹⁹⁰ ROGGERO 1988 cited in CHALE 2010, 148-149.

¹⁹¹ FESCHET 2013a.

French and half New Yorker, young, slim, well-dressed, his head covered with a fashionable urban cap. No eccentricity or outrageousness other than a young woman dressed in a short shorts and tank-top (now forbidden), who is also playing. The participation of women (15%) is very recent. This poster clearly illustrates the changes taking place. Petanque is essentially a masculine game and this is still very much the case in France. In New York a greater number of women play seriously. The clichés are finished. The poster now expresses the new reality of the game. The 2012 Bastille Day postcards go even further. Their compositions are abstract, no players nor scenery, just bowls and the jack. Bastille Day is referenced by the colors blue, white and red. The postcards volunteer a conceptualization of the sport rather than depicting it literally with a picturesque scene of players.

Now that petanque no longer needs its folklorish identity to exist, that is to say it is neither Provençal nor French, it has broken its chains, cut ties, to become just itself with an increase in republican values. The superposition of petanque/French Revolution is increasingly marked, as can be seen on another 2012 tournament poster from Smith Street (fig. 39). What do we see here? Marianne, the Republic's muse, attacks the royalist regime, her breasts uncovered, the French flag in her right hand and a petanque ball in her left. She's accompanied by a child (probably Gavroche from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*), a direct allusion to the Delacroix's famous masterpiece *La liberté guidant le peuple*, (Liberty Leading the People). Revolutionaries follow her, raising their arms in protest, a petanque ball in their hands. In the distance, we see the Brooklyn Bridge. In the foreground Marianne walks on a petanque pitch alluding to the most famous slogan of May '68 revolution, "under the paving stones, the beach"? Petanque ball has replaced paving stones. The young revolutionaries of May '68 threw paving stones at the police. The horizon line initially carried by petanque evokes less and less the Mediterranean (sun, relaxation and sociability leisure).

Some New York players don't identify with the French representations of the game. To better understand the symbolism's mutation, we must consider works composed by a New Yorker artist. Tristram Drew proposes "alternative" posters on his blog (<http://brooklyn-boule.blogspot.fr/>). There are no folklore stereotypes and no allusions to either New York or Brooklyn. Petanque is announced in a sexy, light and fantasy way. There is no yellow, but red, blue, black. The Tristram Drew's latest creation (independent of the Bastille Day this time) is particularly interesting (fig. 40). It consists of a photomontage of images taken from the movie *The Warriors* (1979).¹⁹² We identify the logo of

¹⁹² A charismatic leader summons the street gangs of New York City in a bid to take it over. When he is killed, The Warriors are falsely blamed and now must fight their way home.

the Manhattan club “La boule New Yorkaise” (his petanque club) on the jackets of the characters in the subway. This urban context is not associated with the traditional culture of petanque. The Mediterranean Sea, Provence and France are no longer on the horizon line across this artwork. With Tristram Drew, the game is connected to another “world” that was in another time associated with a certain form of sociological marginality by reference to urban and marginal gangs (sociological characteristics however recurrent in petanque in France which are highly appreciated by popular social strata). Today's etiquette remains deliberately non-conformist.

Plunging into Childhood Souvenirs

But let's go back playing bowls on Smith Street... The Bastille Day organizers and players have several motives. Plunging back into childhood souvenirs and reconnecting with their passion for ball games is one of them. In particular, the Smith Street “Bar-Tabac” embodies this relationship with the “old country.” Created in 2000, the “Bar-Tabac” was thus named by George because as a child his father used to take him to the “Bar-Tabac” in Saint Rémy en Provence. He's never forgotten this familiar place where regulars went to buy their cigarettes, have an aperitif or a coffee while betting on horse races, playing cards or playing petanque depending on the season and the time of day. Through its restaurant (a café, a bar, a bistro according to French terms), he wanted to mirror his youth memories by transferring to NYC an almost exact copy of the restaurant of his childhood (colored cement floor tiles with geometric patterns typical of French cafés, a zinc counter, small wooden tables, checked tablecloths, various characteristic objects on the shelves such as water jugs with advertising slogans, baby-foot). George is perfectly aware of the process: “Bastille Day is a highly awaited event where the French remember together their childhood, their village and their neighborhood”, he says. “It warms my heart each year.” Everybody is very excited. Perhaps I just do it all to see people smile! Each person tries to recreate the “Provencal spirit” in their own way.”

This style of interior design is not unique. There are other restaurants/cafes in New York that correspond to the same aesthetic marked by a nostalgic romanticism¹⁹³. Nostalgia for France is often embodied by objects related to petanque. Gilles, the owner of the “Flea market” (in East Village, Manhattan) played petanque as a child with his grandfather and his uncles on the banks of

¹⁹³ Like in Robin Hood's restaurant, *Robin des bois* Restaurant, Smith Street, Brooklyn.

the Loire river. He took up petanque again in New York five or six years ago (the interview was conducted in 2010). Hung on walls or sitting on shelves, he has a large collection of old objects bought in France during his trips there. For Pierre, the head of the “Cercle Rouge” in the TriBeCa area since 2006, Bastille Day is a “great festive day” which allows him to get back to his roots. Originating from the south west of France, he was already “crazyabout petanque” before moving to NYC. Every time he returns to France the first thing he does is play a game with his father. They go outside and chat. And just as in France, he has always his petanque balls in the car “in case there’s a chance of a game.” Pierre was mentioned earlier in the article for his T-shirts, which highlight the fraternal and drunk ambiance. He is the creator of two slogans, more political than one might think: *Pastaga special club* and *Ricard. Préservons la couche d’ozone!*

A Group of Friends and the Provence as Backdrop

It’s also the passion for petanque combined with his love of Marseille that motivates Xavier, “Maitre d’hôtel” in the French consulate. He moved to NYC in 1999. Xavier has always had a very close relationship with petanque. His childhood in Marseille, his friendships, his early adult life, and his first professional experiences are directly related to this sport. He is also, like others interviewed here (Bernard, Gilles, Pierre, George) one of the creators of the new club of petanque, the “New York Petanque Club” (2009). For him, petanque, and especially Bastille Day Tournaments, are also driven by the desire to construct a structural community in New York around “Provençal identity”. Petanque is just one aspect of this desire to “get together” from time to time and exchange emotional moments between people from the south of France. Xavier founded “OM-NewYork” in 2003 so that its members could follow the OM games and international soccer championships live on the screens in the Nevada Smith’s pub at 74, Third Avenue, rebaptized by the French the “Nevadadrome” (a nod to the name of the Marseille stadium, the *Vélodrome*).¹⁹⁴

Bernard, the owner of the Robin des Bois restaurant and co-organizer of the Bastille Day events, moved to New York in 1982. It wasn’t easy for him in those days. He felt isolated and uprooted. People called him “*le Marseillais*” disparagingly. Most of the French inhabitants at the time were from Brittany (Bretagne). The wave of Breton immigration had taken place much earlier, from the 1930’s to 1960. Relationships were not very cordial between immigrants of these two French regions, according to testimony. They are now much

¹⁹⁴ MATHIEU G., « Quand New York prend l’accent provençal », revue en ligne *France-Amérique*, 20 mai 2010.

friendlier. Moreover, it wasn't until the nineties that people from the south began to appear on the urban scene in NYC. Bernard told me that he had suffered from "a cultural separation," "a terrible absence," "a cruel uprooting." Everything he does now, the Bastille Day Tournament as well as the other associative structures with Provence as background that he's involved in, "lift him up," he says. "I don't want the kids who arrive now to live the same thing." There are indeed a lot of young people of French origin, around 20, who are students, probationers, or in New York for a first job, in short "ex-pat" as the saying goes. Bernard is trying, with Xavier, to create a "group of friends," "trying to get people from the South to meet." He has "always followed OM" (the supporters' club of the "Olympique de Marseille," a soccer team) and he's a member of the "OMNEWYORK" association, like many other petanque players originally from the South of France.

A Regenerating Bath for Identity

Petanque is not the main New York French leisure activity, not by a long shot. Only 240 players take part in the Bastille Day petanque tournament but the high attendance (ten thousand people on average), the presence of many French stands on site and the highlighting of the event by the French Consulate itself in 2010, suggests that the percentage of French involved in petanque one way or another is far from being negligible. These competitions allow participants to bathe in a fountain of nostalgia and at the same time to celebrate their new life in New York. They also reflect the symbolic changes in petanque: from "old fashioned" the game has become "fashionable", there are many more young players, more women. While the federation wants to improve the image of petanque and make this game a modern sport with all the formal and ideological implications (more restrictive rules, sponsoring, professionalization), the players are also becoming aware of the game's deep identity and its structural relationship with liberty and fraternity. Petanque in New York framed by Bastille Day stages a narrative speech that superimposes several colored lines, here seemingly contradictory, but in the same time complementary in the identity field. Yellow and blue symbolizes South, the Mediterranean Sea, the fraternity, but also the freedom of the people to define its own way of life. Red and black symbolizes France, the North, but also the order, the rules, and the strength of democracy and liberty. Blue and yellow are the colors of Provençal festive and fraternal petanque. Red is the colour of a petanque freed from its cultural roots and ready to conquer new horizons. Either way, parties with friends or sports competitions organized by the federation, the Mediterranean horizon is never far from petanque, despite the superimposition of political and ideological symbols, which add very positive additional lines.