Forum on the *Montagnes Russes* of the Restoration

Introduction

What Is Old Is New Again

Jeff Horn

Through a variety of disciplinary lenses, this innovative forum, coedited with Victoria Thompson, investigates a particular cultural space and time, namely the emergence of proto–roller coasters known as *montagnes russes* or "Russian mountains" in Paris in 1817. Peggy Davis, Sun-Young Park, and Christine Haynes depict the early years of the Restoration (1814/1815–1830) as a liminal moment in the emergence of modernity. Although this forum began as a panel at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies, the authors have extended and improved their pieces significantly. Taken together, they show that as foreigners flocked to Paris and the French adjusted to diminished circumstances in the aftermath of Napoleon's second defeat, identities were in flux. This forum explores how and why the *montagnes russes* became such a cultural phenomenon and suggests their role in forging a new French identity in the wake of war and revolution.

Beginning in the summer of 1816, Parisians and visitors (both French and foreign) flocked to take a ride on proto–roller coasters inspired by Russian winter sports. The first of ten roller coasters was constructed along the customs barrier to the Faubourg-du-Roule in what is today the eighth *arrondissement.* In pleasure gardens across the city, wheeled carts careened down wooden structures up to 24 meters high at top speeds of 60 kilometers per hour. These *montagnes russes* or "Russian mountains" were all the rage from 1816 to 1818, when the fad began to peter out. The proprietors of various entertainment venues vied for riders, who included many women, with a diverse assortment of amusements. Among Paris's ten roller coasters were English, Swiss, Egyptian and even Lilliputian mountains. But the best, largest, and most patriotic mountains were, of course, the French mountains, the highest and, reportedly, the best of them all. Thus, as all our authors suggest, this thrilling diversion became part of a wider debate about France's place in the world and the meaning of military defeat and occupation.

The spectacle of Paris's range of roller coasters was the subject of travelers' accounts, a typically large number of government and medical reports,

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many newspaper articles, some satirical prints showcased in the forum, and even a one-act vaudeville entitled *Le Combat des montagnes, ou la Folie Beaujon* ("The Battle of the Mountains, or the Beaujon Folly") written by Eugène Scribe and Henri Dupin and first performed in 1816 at the Variety boulevard theater. The play features a character named M. Calicot who caricatures the salesclerks peddling this popular cotton fabric. Angry at the perceived insult, these young men rioted repeatedly at performances of the play, touching off a "*calicots* war" that was more sound than fury. This public demonstration of the resonance of a play ostensibly about Russian mountains suggests how the fad illustrates the intersection of fashion, masculinity, entertainment, and the vogue for all things foreign in the early Restoration.

Peggy Davis's reading of the images and texts associated with the *montagnes russes* highlights the emergence of a patriotic discourse surrounding the merits of the various "mountains" as a means of dealing with the trauma of military defeat, occupation, and narrowed horizons. She traces the development of the fad through sympathetic newspaper coverage that emphasized "the health and beauty benefits for women," since they were perceived to be the most common riders. Medical reports made similar claims. In addition to the gendered understanding of the attraction of roller coasters, Davis delineates how this form of entertainment became "an allegory for instability of social status" as part of urban development and political reconstruction in the aftermath of Waterloo.

Complementing such textual discourses, Davis examines the host of prints that used the *montagnes russes* as a favored site for social observation. By poking fun at foppish fashion wannabes like the *calicots* who sported military-style outfits that aped foreign designs, the Russian mountains were part of efforts to reshape French national identity, though that process needs greater elucidation beyond the scope of this forum. At the same time, the *calicots,* who were too young to have fought in France's wars, responded violently to perceived insults to their virility, signaling the cultural importance of these caricatures to their individual and collective identities. Davis's analysis brings out the importance of social observation in the new types of public spaces that contained the various roller coasters, demonstrating the challenges of interpreting these images and the texts that reported on the events they helped to inspire.

Sun-Young Park explores the phenomenon of Russian mountains by focusing on medical discourse, the organization of space (especially the uses of "nature"), and gendered bodies. Her conclusion is that "both the hygienic impulse of leisure gardens and their ultimate failure were instrumental in shaping the modern city and social order to come," thereby situating the creation of private spaces open to the paying public during the Restoration in a frame that stretches toward the end of the nineteenth century and beyond. Park discusses the trials and tribulations of the Grand Tivoli's pleasure gardens. She uses this frame to consider how new forms of entertainment grew out of Paris's *jardins-spectacles,* that were so common during the revo-

lutionary era. Initially health and hygiene were subordinated to the enjoyment of reactions to the new pleasure gardens, but these themes grew more important as their commercial success blossomed. Amid Paris's accelerating building frenzy, nature became an increasingly vital "urban commodity," Park finds, which helps to explain how even the "artificial nature" of the various roller coasters came to have such an important hygienic benefit ascribed to them, especially for women.

Going far beyond the medical discourse that is at the heart of her paper, Park also shows how landscaped environments were advertised, described, and debated through travel literature and popular prints that highlight the role of speed, health, and the consumption of entertainment as vital "characteristics of modernity." For Park, these amusements were intended to distract the French from the political situation, both domestically and internationally, and to rescue both Parisians and tourists from a profound sense of *ennui*—an analysis that strongly evokes Émile Durkheim's concept of *anomie.* In Park's hands, the roller coasters provide insight into the imbrication of artificial nature into the changing urban landscape of a rapidly modernizing Paris.

Christine Haynes portrays the conflict over national identity at stake in commercial rivalries between the diverse roller coasters and the pleasure gardens where they were on display. She links such competition to the foreign presence in France after June 1815. This presence was physical in the form of occupying soldiers, tourists, and foreign-made goods or styles. For Haynes, the proliferation of discourse around and the cultural conversations regarding the Russian mountains reflected the broader combat between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. "Defining fashion as French" was a vital task in terms of both identity and the economy.

Like the other two authors, Haynes emphasizes "the new uses of public space, new ideas about health and hygiene, and new practices of consumer culture and 'inter-mediatization' in France, which are typically dated much later during the Belle Époque." Her analysis of the play featuring the *calicots* underscores its critique of "the foreign origin of consumer culture in France." Patriotic French were urged to reject the preference for goods, styles, or fads from abroad in favor of buying French. The commercial contest between pleasure gardens emerged as a sort of referendum on entrepreneurship that Haynes links to the preparations for the Industrial Exposition of 1819 and the push for French economic competitiveness. This framework provides a different sort of concrete manifestation of the importance of the fad for roller coasters in the early Restoration.

The three authors' emphasis on the uniqueness of Paris's cultural moment in the early Restoration deserves some comment. I would argue that several aspects of the context for the events discussed in these articles represent continuity more than change. Exploring these aspects highlights the originality of these authors' contributions to the study of the Restoration and its liminal position in the emergence of modernity.

Christine Haynes and Peggy Davis both discuss the nationalistic or patriotic reaction of the population of Paris to the influx of foreign visitors and soldiers. For both authors, this reaction was essential to the popular embrace of the Russian mountains. Foreign styles and popular interest in all things foreign were vital to the emergence of the fad. Yet, Paris has welcomed fashions from the East since the seventeenth century. In the age of Louis XIV, French fashion embraced styles, fabrics, and colors identified with the East. From *siamoises* patterned after the costume of the first Thai diplomat at the court of the Sun King, to the vogues for Japanese art, Chinese pottery, Indian calicoes, and English manufactured goods imitating those same cotton goods, foreign fads regularly obsessed the *ancien régime* French public in a seemingly never-ending cycle. *Anglomanie,* the preference for English-styled clothes, marked the middle of the 1780s and 1790s, and smuggled goods from the United Kingdom were much sought after by both elites and lower-middle-class shopworkers like the *calicots.* The French state reacted strongly to this commercial preference by banning the manufacture of *indiennes* from 1686 to 1759. Government intervention to combat the popular taste for English goods spiked around the Anglo–French Commercial Treaty of 1786, the Treaty of Amiens in 1802, and the Treaty of Paris in 1814. Haynes alludes to a major public effort to respond to that foreign challenge to domestic manufacturing as part of the planning for an Industrial Exposition in 1819. The central theme of this event, as with the previous Industrial Expositions in 1798, 1802, and 1803, was to demonstrate to consumers and merchants alike the concrete possibilities and benefits of "buying French." The point here is that popular demand for foreign ideas and styles was second nature to French culture and that this passion almost always generated patriotic discourse that rejected these foreign influences in favor of "France for the French." The commercialization of patriotism had been a theme of mercantilist state policies since the seventeenth century; what is novel is the cultural forms that those policies took in the early nineteenth century.[1]

From at least the eighteenth century, the French state was also deeply concerned by the growing role of women as consumers of leisure. For centuries, Paris had had a well-developed market for female-oriented goods and services both individually and collectively. There was profitability in female sociability.[2] Park argues for the development of an "artificial nature" as part of its emergence as an urban commodity. The role of women in the articulation of modernity seems to represent continuity, while Park's emphasis on the role of an "artificial nature" appears novel. Her work reveals in a different context the mix of old and new in the amalgam of modernity.

The question of what constituted a "foreigner" is also worth asking. After all, the swollen borders of France under Napoleon encompassed people who spoke German, Dutch, Danish, Italian, and Serbo-Croatian, while the Empire stretched from the Portuguese border to the Bug River and from the Baltic Sound to the southern reaches of the toe of the Italian boot. Paris

was full of non-French speakers, especially under the Continental System established in 1806.[3] Catering to these "foreigners" was big business as was Paris's position as the fashion *entrepôt* of Europe, where new and different styles were constantly in vogue. It seems likely that some of the "visitors" and "foreigners" of 1817 were the "French" and the "Allies" of 1806–1814. The impact of this continuity of individuals and economic exchanges surely had some impact on the cultural moment, but how exactly is not immediately evident, though the issue might be worthy of further consideration as a way to shine a new light on perceptions of identity across the divide of Waterloo and the Restorations of 1814–1815.

Continuity also marked the politics of the theater raised by the discussions of the play *Le Combat des montagnes, ou la Folie Beaujon* discussed by Davis and Haynes. For contemporaries, even those too young to remember earlier events, the rather tame *guerre des calicots* could not but evoke the more violent confrontations that marked the *parterre* of the French theater across the eighteenth century delineated so ably by Jeff Ravel.[4] As the image of *La folie* in Haynes's article illustrates, the *montagnes russes* were a direct link to the Mountain of the First Republic, and the dandyism of the *calicots* recalled that of the *muscadins* of the Directory amid the violence of the White Terror (1794–1795). In short, the theater riots of 1817 were a pale shadow of the violence that marked the *parterre* in earlier eras.

The rather tame events of 1817 underscore the diminished stakes of popular politics in the early Restoration, as occupation and the *Chambre introuvable* of 1815–1816 dominated by Ultras prevented any sort of threat from below. They also confirm the middle-class nature of the conflict and the emphasis on consuming and consumerism.[5] Obviously, these were not new issues, but in straitened political circumstances, perhaps consumption was the best and even the only way for these concerns to be expressed.

With the French state and the occupying forces equally insistent on avoiding any recurrence of French nationalism that might lead to calls for the return of either the Republic or the Empire, government censorship was heavy-handed and omnipresent in the early Restoration. With open political dialogue almost impossible, the use of satire in theater and fashion that are so important to the articles in this forum was one of the few outlets available to public-minded individuals in 1817. The *ennui* evoked by Park surely sparked some of the creativity on display in the cultural critiques that surrounded the fad for the Russian mountains. Perhaps this very diversion of energy into cultural matters helped keep the politics of the Restoration so tame.[6] This forum is therefore also an important consideration of the role of culture in French society under the Restoration, thereby emphasizing the limits of continuity and the emergence of a new political amalgam.

Peggy Davis, Sun-Young Park, and Christine Haynes have seized on a fascinating incident in French cultural history. Their evocative articles bring to light economic, political, spatial, and literary facets of this moment to demonstrate the liminality of the early Restoration. Collectively, they suc-

ceed brilliantly in reconstructing the sources of and then exploring the impact of the popularity of the *montagnes russes* in 1817. Davis's evocation of a new social type, the *calicot,* in the more mature capitalism of the nineteenth century is one of the novel aspects of the collective story told in this forum, as is the invention of the term itself, given that these fabrics had been known as *indiennes* until the Empire.[7] The articles in this forum suggest that the roller coasters brought together the new and the old in different socioeconomic spaces to accomplish innovative cultural tasks.

Due to a lack of space, the authors can only drop a few hints about the continuity of the factors they emphasize in their analyses, but attentive readers will want to consider the longer-term implications of the socioeconomic and political contexts and to examine how the early Restoration functioned as a cultural transmission belt between the Age of Revolution and the rapidly industrializing, capitalist world that began to take shape after Waterloo. Understanding what made Parisians and tourists wish to ride proto–roller coasters and how they became the subject of a literal and figurative *guerre des calicots* in multiple prints and theatrical productions provides a wonderful entry point into this crucial set of issues. To anticipate a line from Peggy Davis's article, satire directed at government policies represented a dangerous activity that was very much in fashion.

Acknowledgments

Victoria Thompson of Arizona State University was the co-commentator on the original panel and coeditor of the forum. Because of other commitments, she was unable to coauthor this introduction, as intended, but her many contributions to this forum merit recognition and appreciation.

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Notes

1. On these subjects, see Jeff Horn, *The Path Not Taken: French Industrialization in the Age of Revolution, 1750–1830* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) and *Economic Development in Early Modern France: The Privilege of Liberty, 1650–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

2. Natacha Coquery, *Tenir boutique* à *Paris au XVIIIe siècle: luxe et demi-luxe* (Paris: Éditions du Comité historique et scientifique, 2011); Clare Haru Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex: Economies of Regard in Old Regime France* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); and Jennifer M. Jones, *Sexing La Mode: Gender, Fashion and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).
3. For the mobility of entrepreneurs during the Continental System, consult François Crouzet, *L'Économie britannique et le blocus continental (1806–1813),* 2 vols. (Paris: PUF, 1958).
4. Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680–1791* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).
5. The literature on consumption's role in becoming modern is truly voluminous. For a thoughtful analysis of its economic impact with superb notes on many different facets, see William J. Ashworth, *The Industrial Revolution: The State, Knowledge, and Global Trade* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). For the original, more cultural analysis of this current hot topic, start with the foundational work of John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
6. On the French theater during the Restoration, the best work is Sheryl Kroen, *Politics and Theater: The Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815–1830* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). On the Restoration's political cleavages, the clearest work remains that of the venerable Guillaume Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration,* 2nd ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 1963 [1956]).
7. See Serge Chassagne, *Le Coton est ses patrons: France, 1760–1840* (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 1991), on the evolution of this product category.