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Terres de taureaux
Les jeux taurins de l'Europe à l'Amérique

Casa de Velázquez

Summary

DOI: 10.4000/books.cvz.7744
Publisher: Casa de Velázquez
Place of publication: Madrid
Year of publication: 2010
Published on OpenEdition Books: 8 July 2019
Series: Bibliothèque de la Casa de Velázquez
Electronic EAN: 9788490962459

http://books.openedition.org

Electronic reference
SUMMARY

This study starts with a redefinition of bullfighting practices founded on material criteria and as far as possible stripped of the ideological assumptions that have for so long hampered any critical examination. If we agree to consider the bull in bullfighting practices a generic animal —be it a calf, cow, bull or ox and without going into the different value systems engendered by breed, gender and the transformations wrought in the animal— then all practices that entail a real confrontation between man and bovine can, we believe, be analysed in the same way. This considerably enlarges the range of bullfighting modes and their geographical spread and diverges from the numerous Hispano-focused approaches to bullfighting. Bullfighting practices then embrace the various forms of bullfight in South-Western Europe and their exportation to the New World, including the great variety of North and South American rodeos, which are generally excluded from this category. These practices may then be divided into highly-structured and more or less professionalised bullfights and the large variety of mass-participation events. The latter present great flexibility of form and are constantly evolving to the extent of blurring the ostensibly well-defined distinctions between professional and popular bullfights, bullring events and street events, European bullfighting and American bullfighting, corrida and rodeo.

In the field of modern leisure, bullfighting practices are an exception inasmuch as there are practically no other public shows in the course of which men engage in real, violent hand-to-hand combat with animals. This is a particularly controversial subject because of the personal risks involved and the use of the animals. It is also an eminently political subject if we consider that the control of violence is a primary concern of civic life. Bullfighting practices pose the problem in a particular way in view of the circumscription of the regions where they are authorised and the circumscription of the places where such events are staged, given that they frequently entail the alteration of public spaces.

The fact is that in many regions —and sometimes even at the level of the United Nations— these practices are seen as the most emblematic cultural expression of what distinguishes this land or that: course landaise, course camarguaise, corrida (Portugal), rodeo (Chile), rodeo montubio (Ecuador), charreada (Mexico), vaquejada nordestina (Brazil), etc. This identification of bullfighting practices with particular locations is all the more interesting from a geographical standpoint in that the modes of fighting follow the same pattern only very roughly, for in fact certain types of show and
certain types of movement are common to more than one region. Culture in this context appears less a manifestation of the local geist than a means of appropriating and redistributing space. For the geographer this problem leads back to the fundamental question of territorial behaviour and the capacity to interiorise shared cultures. For instance, in a transatlantic context, bullfighting practices serve to mark spatial boundaries, draw frontiers, force different cultures to coexist, create poles of identification and embody feelings of territorial belonging. Bullfighting practices are then viewed as territorial markers bequeathed by the spread, transformation and intermingling of European and American cultures. Thus bullfighting practices, which are generally raised in the context of a discourse on identity and tradition, constitute a common field of territorial differentiation.

By listing, describing and mapping these practices we can lay down the basis for a new debate on how they have spread, how they have changed and how they interrelate, albeit many of these types of fight have never been linked to any significant extent formally, historically or geographically. These practices cover a range of different man/bovine/horse permutations which vary geographically and express territorial identities which straddle, overlap or are absent from regions with bullfighting traditions that are more or less interlinked. What emerges then is a mosaic-patterned “bullfighting area” that has seen a discontinuous process of territory-building in two successive eras of Western globalisation: Iberian imperialism, contemporary with the colonisation of the New World starting in the 16th century, and US hegemony in America commencing in the mid-19th century in a context of consolidation of nation-states.

The most obvious result of an analysis of the different modes of bullfighting, their societal significance and their spatial distribution is the strong geographical contrast between Europe and America. In the south-western corner of Europe formed by Spain Portugal and part of southern France, the Spanish-style corrida predominates. The predominant practice in America is the rodeo of various kinds, all more or less subject to the hegemonic influence of the spectacular US model in the continent as a whole. This basic difference, which also evokes the difference between the bullfighter on foot and the bullfighter on horseback, sits side-by-side with transatlantic survivals due to the depth of Iberian cultural roots in the Americas. In fact Spanish-style bullfighting—the corrida—is practised in many countries: Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and lately in California in a bloodless Portuguese version. There are also divides in bullfighting forms on the American continent, between Latin America and Anglo-Saxon America, between Spanish-speaking and Portuguese-speaking America, between the Andean countries and the Southern Cone—in addition to the distinctions deriving from the subtle grammar of variations in rodeo format. These are essentially elaborations of three main modes: bull- and bronco-riding, lassoing, and horseback steer tailing. Rodeos are a continent-wide evocation of the figure of the centaur, which has consistently been appropriated in connection with the construction of the nation-state: US cowboys, Mexico’s charros, Venezuela’s llaneros, Brazil’s vaqueiros and gauchos, Chile’s huasos, Argentina’s gauchos. And bullfighting modes reflect a divide between a Hispanic-oriented South-Western Europe and the rest of Europe. On a smaller scale, bullfighting practices reveal internal geopolitical similarities and differences between regions with their own characteristics: Andalusia, Castile, Levante, Landes, Camargue, Alentejo-Ribatejo, etc.
Whether bullfights are generally accepted or rejected, their geographical limits and their variations—all these are largely functions of the identitary logic of territorial differentiation. In the context of this study, that logic generally poses the question of cultural distance with Spain and/or the USA. That distance can be measured through the exclusions, amalgamations and cross-formations that give form and meaning to most bullfighting practices. The *corrida*, while forming part of the heritage of each of the countries where it is practised, still represents a special tie with Spain, reflecting a singular balance between advanced acculturation and incomplete assimilation. In America the *corrida*, which was rejected in some countries and firmly established in others, attained its present stable frontiers in the long course of the 19th century, at the same time as rodeos acquired individual national forms. Rodeos thus embody a species of bullfighting watershed in which the problematics of man/bovine confrontations became set in a Pan-American context dominated by the USA but influenced by Hispanic traditions. This analysis helps to understand the foundation on which the cohesion of a cultural area rests. Leaving aside the blank areas where bullfighting has no roots, the cohesion, the differences and the internal breaks in this mosaic are products of interactions between three types of spatial configuration: the meccas of bullfighting culture, the areas where different practices coexist, and the areas of cross-border influence.

The meccas of bullfighting practice, whether economic or emblematic, produce polarisations and spatial shifts which stretch well beyond the confines of the practices concerned (*corridas* in Seville, *encierros* in Pamplona, rodeos in Las Vegas). Areas where different bullfighting practices coexist encourage competition and complementariness by generating fruitful oppositions of rural bullfighting versus urban bullfighting, regional bullfighting versus national bullfighting, or bullfighting on the periphery versus bullfighting at the centre. Such areas are generally structured around pivotal towns, district capitals, where more than one bullfighting culture coexist. Such coexistence may occur within the same township, the same quarter, or even the same bullring, in some cases becoming amalgamated, with different modes in one and the same show. Some representative examples in south-western Europe include Dax (*corrida* and *course landaise*), Arles (*corrida* and *course camarguaise*), Pamplona (*corrida* and *encierro*), Zaragoza and Valencia (*corrida* and concurso de recortadores). In America we can cite Los Angeles in California and San Antonio in Texas (*charreada* and rodeo), Mexico City and Guadalajara (*charreada* and *corrida*), Villavicencio in Colombia or Barinas in Venezuela (*toros coleados* and *corrida*). In short, the “bullfighting boundaries” drawn by the convergences and disparities between practices and between political frontiers generate intense territorial dynamics within the field of bullfighting culture: cross-border mobility, differentiating or unifying effects of frontier discontinuity, effacement or highlighting of the notion of the frontier, echoes of irredentism, etc. These cross-border dynamics generated by bullfighting culture act as a species of territorial links between enemy brothers and sister nations (Spain-Portugal, USA-Mexico, Venezuela-Colombia). This study, then, offers an analysis of the modes of cohesion and overlapping of cultural areas, with a view to enriching the discussion of the processes whereby culture spreads and is transformed in the long-term process of globalisation. And in a more general way it proposes a procedure for analysis of territorialised cultural differentiation.