



IMAGE TAKEN BY ALEXV SERGEEV

MAKING PEACE WITH CONFLICT NOISE AND NEIGHBORS IN NEW ORLEANS, REDUX

“Culture” in New Orleans has recently found itself at loggerheads with “community.” As music and performance venues have expanded into new spaces, neighborhood associations have mustered their political clout to tighten noise ordinances and crack down on unlicensed activities. Musicians and impresarios have fought back by organizing themselves and advocating for their interests. Similar controversies have arisen in regard to food trucks, street vendors, buskers, public artists, and second-line parades.

In each case, creative advocates rebuke residents for ostensibly embracing New Orleans culture, only to suppress it when it lands on their doorstep. Residents respond by pointing out that culture also implies quality of life, and that all are welcome so long as they do not infringe on the rights of others. Each side speaks on behalf of the best interests of the city, whose government, realizing it has a stake in both sides, nervously deploys peacemaking envoys to contentious venues. To give an idea of the polemical tone of this discourse, one of the panels to which I was invited to speak was titled “Does Progress Destroy Culture?”

A frustrated musician might well answer affirmatively. The sense on the street is that these recent regulatory efforts, which

seem related to the city’s recent economic renaissance and social gentrification, represent a sort of “end of history” moment—that is, that such proscriptions are unprecedented and insidious, that they will put an end to all that we know and love, and that whatever fills the volume afterwards will be insipid, homogenized, and inauthentic.

It’s been a common theme since Hurricane Katrina; we’ve heard such admonitions floated in regard to the city itself immediately after the flood, to its population amid the diaspora, to its culture as newcomers arrived in ever-increasing numbers, to coastal communities as BP’s oil drifted in their direction, and now to the live music and street culture scene.

Let’s save these latter topics, as well as the technicalities of noise ordinances, for another discussion. What I offer here is evidence that these recent discontents represent not an end of history but rather only the next chapter of normalcy. I’ll illustrate by focusing on a place known, loved, and/or hated by all, Bourbon Street.

Bourbon Street as we know it today emerged out of a shift in the geography of nocturnal adult entertainment from the urban periphery in antebellum times to the inner core. Downtown

concert saloons with names like Zeigler's, Wenger's, and The Napoleon were the Siberias, Bacchanals, and Spotted Cats of the 1870s, and forces like the progressive muckraker *The Mascot* railed against them as organizations like the Vieux Carre Property Owners and Renters Association do today.

The establishment of Storyville in 1897 restricted concert saloons as well as prostitution into a specific space behind the French Quarter. But upon Storyville's closure in 1917, the nighttime economy drifted back to the rear of the French Quarter, to an area known as the Tango Belt. Subsequent police raids allowed Bourbon Street to seize the advantage in the late 1920s and 1930s, and after thousands of troops and plant workers discovered it during World War II, Bourbon Street became nationally famous—and infamous.

It is at this point we see the first salvos of the ongoing civic war. Local papers abounded with struggles between VCPOA and Bourbon bar owners over issues that could be lifted from today's headlines: noise, liquor licenses, crowd control, signage, lights, obscenity, parking, zoning, crime. City officials, namely Mayor Chep Morrison, were caught in the middle, recognizing the importance of a preserved French Quarter and the political clout of the neighborhood associations (what we would call "quality of life" today), but also the rising importance of the tourism industry ("the cultural economy").

Other operatives saw political opportunity in regulation. In the early 1960s, District Attorney Jim Garrison calculated that burlesque clubs were costly operations with big staffs which could only turn a tidy profit if they ran illicit money-making schemes on the side—which they did. His vice crackdowns from 1962 to 1964 knocked the gaudy, old-school nightclubs out of business.

But instead of cleaning up Bourbon Street, the crackdowns made it worse. Clubs no longer subsidized by gambling and scams had to lower their costs dramatically and did so by becoming tawdry, low-end strip joints or obnoxious clubs with boisterous cover bands. Bars later discovered they could make more money with less staff by selling drinks directly to pedestrians through a practice called "window hawking." This led to the "go cup," the pedestrian mall, and a dramatic shift in Bourbon action from the stylized private space of the club to the dirty public space of the street. By the 1970s, the nightly Bourbon scene became a campy cavalcade of crooked carnies.

The crisis did not go unnoticed by New Orleans' new chief executive. Mayor Moon Landrieu realized Bourbon Street's chronic problems had become acute, and something had to be done. So he did what most politicians would do. He formed a task force.

Chaired by heavy hitters and fairly well funded, the task force united key agencies with a local planning-design firm to study Bourbon Street's history, conditions, and communities; survey stakeholders; analyze results; and propose improvements. In October 1977, it issued its recommendations:

To remedy shady spot-zoning and nonconforming-use decisions, the task force helped pass a new Vieux Carre Entertainment zone, which "set up the mechanisms by which other recommendations can be implanted and enforced."

To remedy unsightly signage, the task force forged a formula

to determine modest sign size proportionate to frontage.

To remedy the lousy retail scene, Councilman Mike Early helped pass a resolution for the removal of outdoor T-shirt displays.

To remedy cheating on taxes and codes, the task force clarified and enforced which enterprises were bars as opposed to restaurants.

To remedy littering, it increased the number of trash receptacles and synchronized street cleaning and trash collection with pedestrian cycles.

To remedy the lack of organizational cohesion, the task force formed the Bourbon Merchants Association, which, among other things, produced a newsletter and communications mechanism. Perhaps its wisest decision concerned what not to remedy—and when to just let Bourbon Street be Bourbon Street. In all, the task force had been a model of public/private sector collaboration, evidencing that cooperation among parties of differing views can resolve more problems than litigation. Its momentum throughout 1977 parlayed into an equally successful implementation phase in 1978.

Readers might counter that Bourbon Street today is anything but a cultural hearth, much less a place that has ironed out its conflicts; VCPOA battles Bourbonites to this day. And that is exactly my point: that while the Task Force did successfully stabilize a nighttime district that was in free fall 40 years ago, it did not come close to remedying all conflicts, nor could it.

In fact, culture and regulation remain in ongoing interplay; they are permanent features of a democracy, particularly when people live in close urban proximity, when that society produces a joyful noise, and when we have two legitimate notions of "culture"—one featuring performance; the other, everyday living—pitted against each other. Conflicts between neighbors and music makers, while problematic, do not necessarily comprise a problem—that is, a failure with a technical or legal solution—but rather a condition, an expected reality of urban life which ebbs and flows in different ways at different times in different places. That movement, I believe, is healthy and reflective of a vital society. It's what a physicist might call dynamic equilibrium rather than static equilibrium. Dynamic equilibrium is what keeps a moving bicycle upright. Static equilibrium is what keeps a chair upright. We're the bicycle.

The ongoing tussle between the two sides of culture do not represent a societal failure. Quite the opposite: I would argue that the conflict and the pursuit of a mutually acceptable truce represent exactly how citizens and government are supposed to resolve matters in a gloriously messy democracy. We have two centuries of evidence that no perfect technical solution will resolve this discord, that both sides have legitimate rights and legitimate complaints, and that one will endeavor to keep the other in check and balance and vice versa forever. It's not the end of history, nor the end of culture, but simply the next chapter of both.

So perhaps, then, we should plan to make peace with conflict.

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