Gardens of Versailles had political and military purposes, says UC San Diego professor

October 30, 1997

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The great formal gardens at Versailles, with their geometrically precise parterres and topiary-lined allees, are usually noted for their restrained classicism and elegance, not for their politics. But according to Chandra Mukerji, a professor of communication and sociology at the University of California, San Diego, the formal gardens of 17th century France were designed not just for aesthetic pleasures but were in fact exquisite manifestations of political and military control, embedding state power in the land and dominating the landscape with elaborate networks of canals, fortresses, and forests.

"The military presence in the gardens at Versailles had many levels, from the most symbolic to the most concrete, from the most dramatic to the most playful," said Mukerji, author of the new book Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles (Cambridge University Press). "The reason was that the military had such deep political meanings in 17th century France that military culture pervaded this social world. The military had helped to solidify the power of Louis XIV and the absolutist French state, and the gardens were a way to display and symbolically reinforce that power and at the same time assert a model of discipline over people and nature that testified to the power of the state."

The text of Territorial Ambitions is accompanied by a series of striking black and white photographs of Versailles and several other French gardens taken by Becky Cohen, a freelance artist/photographer. The book also includes numerous historic maps, architectural renderings, and drawings depicting land and garden designs, planting and engineering schemes, and court life at Versailles.

In the reign of Louis XIV, the famous French monarch known as the Sun King who ruled France in the late 1600s, gardens grew dramatically in size and cultural importance. A new kind of space, both architectural and natural, was needed to accommodate the rituals of state power -- elaborate rites in forest "rooms" or bosquets, formal promenades, feudal military rites, and hunting parties -- while asserting control over court ceremonial life. This need for a more grandiose political stage led Louis XIV to commission the legendary landscape architect Andre Le Notre to build the great gardens of Versailles.

According to Mukerji, the importance of the gardens to Louis XIV's reign was underscored by the king's direct involvement in how the gardens were to be laid out and experienced by visitors.

"The king had strict ideas on how visitors should see the gardens. The itineraries, penned by the king himself, prescribed where people should walk, how they should turn, what statues they should admire, and what views they were meant to appreciate," said Mukerji. "These promenades where no romps in the park; they were formal affairs with food and rest spots set out along the route. They required absolute obedience of participants to the itineraries of the king, and somehow were meant to inform their assessments of the king and his court. The promenades constituted an important, if obscure means for doing politics."

To build Versailles alone was a conspicuous exercise in political power, as whole village, abbeys, and cemeteries had to be appropriated and torn down or dug up to make way for the vast gardens. The gardens themselves became the embodiment of this political power, with militaristic themes and allusions dominating the landscape.

The gardens were bound by military-style fortresses and bastion-type walls were constructed and lined with topiary "guards." Many of the waterworks, topiary bushes, bosquets, and the statuary in the gardens symbolized warriors, land, or achievements in war. Even the elaborate grading and drainage systems were modeled after military engineering projects. According to Mukerji, all these military images spoke to the value placed on military power in regime of Louis XIV.

"French formal gardens had high points that commanded clear views over the surrounding countryside, and also depressed areas with canals, fountains, and statues that were masked from view until the visitor came near. This kind of systematic structuring of visibility and invisibility through grading was taken from the design of battlements. In fortresses, staying out of sight of the enemy while being able to see clearly provided strategic advantage," explained Mukerji.

Besides the political and military motivations behind Versailles and its design, the gardens were also designed to draw the eye away from the gardens of Italy. Unlike Tivoli, Frescati, or the other grand gardens of Europe, Versailles was a public garden whereas the majority of the Italian and English gardens were ecclesiastical and/or private and therefore devoid of any real political or military significance.

"The garden at Versailles may have been on one level a cold, inanimate structure in which military power was flaunted all for the celebration of power. But, it was also a stage on which the court played and tried to glitter brightly so that the glory of France would be visible throughout Europe," said Mukerji.

Although the garden at Versailles was a public space, it would be a strange public space by today's standards. The gardens were a place where the upper-classes practiced a form of "politics by other means," i.e. it was a highly censored and scripted "stage," with no venue for political debate or discussion. What was practiced was a politics of things and bodies, not ideology, according to Mukerji. Events that occurred in the garden were filled with costumes, predetermined roles, and choreographed ritual, all aimed at celebrating and marking the king's power.

Mukerji, who has been a faculty member in UCSD's departments of communication and sociology since 1975, is an authority on the impact of different forms of communication, including the mass media, on culture. In addition to her work on the political culture of 17th century French gardens, Mukerji has done research on the sociological impact of different television programs on children and their culture. Other research has included a book on the forms of communication between scientists and the state, A Fragile Power (1990), and From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism (1983), a study on cultural changes in early Modern Europe traced through pictorial printmaking.

(October 30, 1997)