



**Review of Rituality and Social (Dis)Order. The
Historical Anthropology of Popular Carnival in Europe
by Alessandro Testa**

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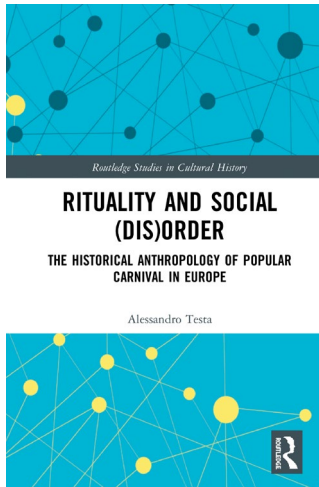
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1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 122.

2. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Cultural Memory and Performance in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). See also Lisa Voigt, "The Archive and the Festival,"

REVIEW

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European carnival, an object that literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin described as "one of the most complex and most interesting ... in the history of culture," has inspired a number of excellent, detailed case studies but few reliable conceptual models.¹ Bakhtin's work, as foundational as it was, has been criticized for being insufficiently grounded in historical evidence. Conversely, such books as historian Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978) or literary scholars Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter's more recent *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (2002) have provided researchers with an abundance of examples and microanalyses, but their theoretical insights have been limited.

The absence of a comprehensive comparative cultural history of European carnival can be ascribed to at least three factors. First, the sheer diversity of carnivalesque forms that have been recorded throughout the continent threatens to challenge any attempt at synthesis or systematic thinking. Second, few scholars possess the linguistic skills necessary to mine the rich archives held by the main "carnival nations" of Europe (for example, Italy, Spain, Germany, and France). Finally, even fewer consider supplementing their archival investigations with ethnographic evidence from those areas, despite the awareness that repertoire and its attendant kinesthetic memory can sometimes fill in the blanks of the archive, to use Diana Taylor's famous dichotomy.²

Given his multidisciplinary and multilingual background as well as his intimate knowledge of the historiography of carnival, Alessandro Testa is more than equipped to overcome these obstacles. Not only does *Rituality and Social (Dis)Order* draw on his past exploration of the politics of festivals, the heuristic value of festive studies, the origins of ritual zoomorphism, the legacy of anthropologists James Frazer's and Claude Lévi-Strauss's thoughts, and the transformation of folklore into intangible heritage, but it is also informed by the fieldwork he has conducted in a variety of European locales (mostly Italy, the Czech Republic, and Catalonia) over the course of the past twelve years. The resulting "historical anthropology of carnival in Europe" is both wide ranging and insightful, as the ensuing analysis will show.

In the book's first chapter, Testa explains how, starting with Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s, Italian and French scholars (whom Testa labels as theoreticians "from the South") came to see carnival as the embodiment of a popular worldview, a "philosophy of the commoners" rather than as a mere survival of ancient customs or a retrograde force preventing political change (pp. 7, 2). He then connects the entry of European nations into a "post-Fordist, neoliberal" era, starting in the late 1970s, with the advent of a new theoretical model distinguishing high culture from both popular and mass cultures (p. 4). Though he insists

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1 (2019): 27–35, <https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2019.1.1.32>.

3. Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (New York: Verso Books, 1981), 148.

4. Claude Gaignebet, *Le Carnaval: Essais de mythologie populaire* (Paris: Payot, 1974).

on the relevance of such a tripartite model for the analysis of contemporary European societies, he makes plain that he finds it inappropriate to the study of premodern Europe. Indeed, one should not underestimate the extent to which the principle of hierarchy (and therefore inequality) was internalized by medieval and Renaissance European actors. Like Peter Burke and historian Jacques Revel before him, Testa argues that such words as “circulation,” “negotiation,” and “hybridization” can be misleading in the sense that they tend to overshadow the basic power relations that governed premodern European societies. Carnival did transform over the *longue durée*, but one should view such mutations within the frame of a basic ritual conservatism.

This is a helpful reminder in view of the questions raised by chapter 4, concerning the political meaning of carnival. Since the 1980s, many scholars have challenged Bakhtin’s association of carnival with “the people” or the “Third Estate,” arguing that city elites, notables, and guilds were involved in the organization of pre-Lenten entertainment from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century and that participation in the festivities was therefore citywide. Testa does not deny the reality of festive patronage. The bourgeoisie and the nobility did allow their “subalterns” to enjoy the folly of carnival under their indulgent gaze. But he insists that such medieval euergetism should not be confused with a dissolution of social boundaries, or indeed with an actual inversion of existing hierarchies. “The very fact of granting permission to license should be perceived as an act of exercise, and not abdication, of control,” he argues (p. 138). His conclusion here resembles that of English literary scholar Terry Eagleton, for whom “carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of the hegemony.”³ Was premodern European carnival an invention from above, then? Using Gramsci’s inquiry into the phenomenon of dominance and how it perpetuates itself, Testa claims that it was in fact the result of a complex combination of elite engineering of consent and subaltern acceptance of the elites’ cultural hegemony.

In the book’s second chapter, Testa provides a synthetic description of premodern European carnival based on a combination of primary and secondary sources. After tracing the general history of the festival from 1140 to the early eighteenth century and commenting on its growing social as well as aesthetic significance, he highlights what he considers to be the three main components of the carnivalesque performance system: masks and masking (including cross-dressing and zoomorphism); feasting, binging, and unproductiveness as necessary preludes to the observance of Lent (Testa reminds us that such cathartic behavior also generated psychological and social “added value” [p. 37]); and the scapegoat mechanism involved in the mock trial and execution of carnival or the ritual door-to-door processions. Although the mock trial/scapegoat motifs and the mumming practices should perhaps have been distinguished, due to the latter’s shadowy origins and meaning (were they a ritualized form of food redistribution, a rite of initiation for young bachelors, or a retention of older fertility rituals?), Testa’s synthesis is useful because it offers both a compendium of the historical record (enriched with quite a few diagrams and illustrations) and a discussion of the most common interpretations of these phenomena. Testa’s verdict that these traits remained remarkably unchanged throughout the period, “as if [they] were not the product of popular culture but rather doctrinal dogmas and liturgical prescriptions imposed by a greater authority to be kept as unchanged as possible,” gives credence to folklorist Claude Gaignebet’s controversial yet appealing thesis of a “European religion of carnival” and allows for a subtle transition toward chapter 3, which investigates carnival as a form of popular religiosity (p. 23).⁴

In those pages, Testa investigates the prehistory of carnival and presents transvestitism and zoomorphic masking (very popular from late antiquity up to the Middle Ages) as possible predecessors to carnival throughout Europe. Though a strong historical—and logical—thread does seem to connect Roman festivities of the twelfth century to rural festivities of earlier periods, such as the *Roman Calendae*, *Saturnalia*, and *Lupercalia* (given that the late Middle Ages were centuries of great urbanization, it should not be considered surprising to see rural practices move to cities), Testa prudently navigates existing debates on the alleged existence of a premedieval European or Eurasian “religion of carnival.” Without adopting Frazer’s survivalist paradigm entirely, he argues that the festival was neither invented nor discovered in the twelfth century and was instead the product of many centuries of ritual accretion. Though the quest for origins may appear either vain or dangerous to some, Testa sees it as the cultural historian’s or historical anthropologist’s mission to understand how such a cumulation happened over time (“researching and understanding such dynamics and processes of development and emergence must be considered a legitimate and worthwhile research endeavor,” he notes [p. 64]), using such concepts as Lévi-Strauss’s “bricolage” and historian Michel De Certeau’s “re-employment.” He goes on to show how ecclesial prohibitions from the Middle Ages, far from uprooting all masquerades, pantomimes, excesses, and other ritual practices associated with the Roman calends of January, merely postponed them to a period that was already suspended between the old and the new year: the months of February and March (Luperci and Mamurius in the Roman calendar, the period between Christmas and Easter in the Gregorian calendar). Although this thesis is not new, and indeed dates from Frazer, Testa presents it convincingly, marshalling historical evidence not present in Frazer’s work.

The second half of the chapter goes one step further in the exploration of the connections between carnival and religion by looking at the possible links between zoomorphic masquerades and a hypothetical prehistoric “shamanic substratum” extending from Siberia to northern Europe (p. 77). Using anthropologist Margaret Murray’s and Gaignebet’s works as guides, Testa investigates the bear and the horned god as possible supreme beings in a prehistoric carnival religion, presenting arguments in favor and against such a thesis. He cautiously uses the regressive method himself to understand the meaning of ecstasy in the context of zoomorphic ritual, using insights gained from his past ethnographic fieldwork. To him, a combination of extreme fatigue, drunkenness, and overexcitement may lead to a state of trance similar to religious ecstasy. It does not mean that zoomorphic disguise is necessarily religious in nature. His conclusion, then, is that “it is not necessary to reach out to Paleolithic hunters and Siberian shamans to interpret European folkloric forms and attitudes, amongst them Carnival and its emergence from the brumes of the early medieval times” (p. 89).

As previously indicated, the last chapter in the book focuses on one of the most debated issues regarding carnival: the meaning of its inversions and the extent to which it should be regarded as a “subversive” ritual form. Testa first uses the example of medieval and early modern Roman Carnival to argue that carnival has often been conceptualized as an institutionalized break from daily rules, during which excesses were channeled toward more structured forms of transgression. He then reminds us that with the Risorgimento, which led Rome to free itself from the pope’s rule and to become the capital of Italy in 1870, the incidents occurring during the festivity, once tolerated, ceased to be accepted by the new rulers. To some, this proves that

5. On "exceptional normal," see Eduardo Grendi, "Micro-analisi e storia sociale," *Quaderni storici* 35 (1977): 512.

6. Aurélie Godet, "Introduction: Behind the Masks, The Politics of Carnival," *Journal of Festive Studies* 2 (2020): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2020.2.1.89>.

carnival is at its strongest when the divide between high and low is at its starkest. Consequently, the ideology of the "world upside down" should be seen as a folk worldview produced by the subaltern strata in a context of extreme, unescapable inequality.

The rest of the chapter, however, complicates this view by presenting three ways of thinking about the inversive properties of carnival. Testa identifies the first one as the "functionalist model" and summarizes it this way: "[It] considers the poetics and practices and representations of carnivalesque inversion as a symbolic and ritual tool instrumental to the confirmation, conservation, and reproduction of the social and political order, and therefore as inherently 'homeostatic'" (p. 117). Such a model was propounded by the likes of Arnold Van Gennep, Sir Frazer, Francesco Faeta, Peter Burke, Peter Weidkuhn, and Rob Scribner, and is more commonly known as the "containment of discontent" (Scribner) or "safety-valve" (Burke) theory. Its advocates tend to depict carnivalesque inversion as a metaphor for revolution itself: "certainly transformative, apparently subversive, but in the end regenerative vis-à-vis a given socio-political order" (p. 121). The second, heavily inspired by Marxist thought and most famously propounded by Bakhtin, sees carnivalesque inversions as inherently confrontational and as having real, though rarely successful, insurrectionary power. It gained traction in the late 1970s and 1980s when more cases linking carnival to rebellion and revolt in premodern Europe (in cities, especially) started to emerge. The third model lies somewhere in the middle and abstains from generalizations, based on the postmodern belief that carnivalesque performances are multifunctional, pliable cultural forms and can therefore convey hugely different messages to their audiences. Though this position may appear feeble to some, as it refuses to engage in the construction of a coherent paradigm or the validation of grand theories of carnival ritual and instead sees each historical case as "exceptional normal," it seems to have gained the upper hand in the vast field of carnival scholarship since its first formulation by literary scholars Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986).⁵

While I wholeheartedly agree with Testa's summary of the existing literature on carnival (in fact, I used a similar typology in a recent text about the politics of carnival in Europe and the Americas published in this journal⁶), the way he adjudicates the debate between these three perspectives deserves perhaps more nuance. Though he initially acknowledges them to be equally productive, Testa proceeds to argue that "the (structural-) functionalist or conservative theory ... has proved more adherent to the sources than others, in the long run at least, as a general theory of behavioral and imaginary patterns within carnivals of Europe" (p. 118). Though it is factually true that the number of carnivals that turned violent in European history is much lower than the number of those that occurred peacefully, what proof do we have that the "bearers of popular culture"—peasants, artisans, small traders, but also beggars and outlaws—saw their festive practices as protective of the status quo (p. 134)? In the absence of sources coming from "the subaltern," it seems to me that we should leave the *meaning* of carnivalesque inversions open to interpretation and refuse to favor one model over another.

Notwithstanding this slight objection, Testa's defense of the safety-valve theory is well crafted. Taking into account the hegemony of the Christian system of values in premodern Europe and using Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony as well as anthropologist Lombardo Satriani's description of southern Catholics' propensity to resignation and fatalism, Testa argues that

7. Marshall Sahlins, "The Return of the Event, Again," in *Culture in Practice: Selected Essays* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 301.

8. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, rev. ed. (1969; repr., London: Routledge, 2017), 176.

Turner's teacher was social anthropologist Max Gluckman, whose work specifically focused on the way rituals reinforced existing social structures. See

Max Gluckman, *Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954).

political control in premodern Europe was exercised "not in spite of Carnival or against Carnival but *through* Carnival" (p. 138). To him, the examples of fifteenth-century Venice and sixteenth-century Nuremberg suggest not that carnival was a tool of power in the hands of the elites but that it was in most cases a means of self-subjugation in the hands of the people. This is an interesting hypothesis, which nicely dovetails with another idea: that of carnival as an "escape from history," a temporary way out of the hardships of daily existence for popular historical subjects (p. 147). Carnival, by promoting a form of ritual "as if" (through land of Cockaigne or Ship of Fools floats, for example), may thus have acted as the opium of the masses, a form of narcotization typical of premodern popular culture. When living conditions started to improve for the subaltern (through class consciousness, technological advances, education, literacy, democracy, etc.), the need for carnival consequently declined.

In the end, Testa treats episodes of violence during carnivals as mere "happenings" rather than "endogenous events," to use cultural anthropologist Marshall Sahlins's conceptual terminology.⁷ To Testa, they allow historians to understand the structures that underlie societies ("the structure of the conjuncture"), but, in themselves, they are neither statistically nor historically significant. Carnival in premodern Europe was, according to Testa, "not a politically conservative festival, but most definitely, in the majority of cases, and taking into consideration inconsistencies, ruptures, and exceptions (sometimes confirming the rule), one that contributed to the restoration of social order through a transgressive but only temporary negation of it" (pp. 102, 171). Though he describes Bakhtin's and Stallybrass and White's insights as extremely useful, Testa thus reverts to a Gluckmanian conclusion, according to which, "by making the low high and the high low," rituals "reaffirm the hierarchical principle."⁸ Applied to carnivals from later periods or other locales (New Orleans, Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo), this would be a highly debatable conclusion. Within the frame of an investigation of preindustrial European carnival, however, I consider it a reasonable one.

All in all, then, this is an accomplished little book, the reading of which I would strongly recommend to students as well as to researchers looking for a historiographical synthesis on medieval and Renaissance European carnival. One can only hope that such a compendium will soon exist for other geographical areas and periods or that, even better, someone takes up the monumental challenge of writing a global history of carnival from the twelfth century to the present.

AUTHOR BIO

Aurélie Godet is an associate professor of US history at the University of Nantes and is currently at work on a political history of festivity in New Orleans from the eighteenth century through today, tentatively titled “Festive City: The Politics of Play in New Orleans from the Colonial Period to the Present.”

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