

## HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Applicant

Habilitation thesis

Reviewer

Reviewer's home unit,  
institution

Alessandro Testa, Ph.D.

Rituality and Social (Dis)Order: The Historical  
Anthropology of Popular Carnival in Europe

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### [Review text]

The work is as a solid survey of the researches accumulated over time in the context of the redundant multidisciplinary scientific literature on the forms, functions, symbolic and historical, socio-cultural and political values of Carnival in European societies. The topic of the Thesis is high relevant for the etno-anthropological academic field and is formulated in a clear, thoughtful and easily understandable, though not simplistic way.

Testa condenses here - as also emerges from his bibliography and from his intellectual and research biography - the over ten-year commitment on the topic that has allowed him, between opportunities for ethnographic study, comparative experiences and theoretical-methodological deepening, to accumulate a detailed knowledge of theories of Carnival produced in the past decades, but also the set of theoretical frameworks and critical devices developed by European demo-ethno-anthropological studies, providing a high-level analysis of different background debates and issues implied in the topic.

His Italian training allows him, among other things, to open his gaze to a scientific and critical literature perhaps less known than the history of European and North American studies on folklore, cultures and popular traditions: that "outlook from the South, which for a long time has framed the relationships between popular forms of expression and erudite knowledge in terms of "internal asymmetries in cultural levels", as the Italian anthropologist Alberto Mario Cirese defined them.

In this way, Testa accurately and critically traces the genesis of the debate on folklore in southern Europe and in particular in Italy, starting from the Gramscian theory of the opposition between hegemonic and subordinate cultures, favoring a dynamic interpretation of cultural processes and the persistence of traditional cultural forms in change. This is how the processes of cultural exchange between 'high' and 'low' come to be framed in the dynamics of circulation and re-functionalization of cultural content and practices in the popular sphere and vice versa (Ch. 1).

In chapter 2, "A Critical Model of European Carnival", Testa questions whether there is a popular Carnival model and how this category of "carnival" was formed. Taking up Bakhtin's famous work on Rabelais and the theories of performance by Victor Turner, he accentuates the dynamic and tensive element already outlined in the first chapter. Moreover, he discusses the oppositional dichotomy productive / unproductive, sacred time / lost time along which the partition has historically been constructed between an institutionalization of popular and peasant cultures and the progressive or subversive forces of peripheral and / or marginal groups.

Even in this case the reference to the critical literature is solid and documented and shows a scientific and critical maturity,

Chapter 3 on the "Elusive Origin of Carnival" refers to a series of historical carnivals in their various forms of codification of cultural practices, ruptures and discontinuities, with respect to established order and powers. Thus, the "religion of the Carnival" is brought closer to shamanism and enigmas to be challenged in theoretical-methodological terms.

In the fourth and final chapter, Testa returns to the opening category by addressing the theme of the ritual inversion of the carnival action, to the possibility of overturning the transgression / norm dialectic, consequently, that derives from the processes of repression and collective oblivion of fatigue and suffering from the horizon of life. Meanwhile Testa defines the Carnival policy "oblique", i.e. lateral, non-linear, elusive, even, referring to the ambivalences, to the processes of "dehistorification" and dismissal that require the anthropological critical analysis. Testa's work benefits from a relevant and coherent editorial collocation (The series "Routledge Studies in Cultural History") and shows a solid knowledge of the historical debate on traditional cultural practices and rituals as well as a sure control of the most recent debate on the subject of heritagization processes and their criticalities. In the background there is also a robust ethnographic reference which he has clearly shown in his previous works dedicated to specific Carnival occurrences in peripheral contexts of the central-southern Italian Apennine.

At the same time, his work, by questioning the conflicts and asymmetries rooted in the category of "Carnival", offers a critical rethinking of the intersections between rituals and traditional practices and the socio-political shaping of groups and territories.

Overall, therefore, the volume reveals a solid anthropological and ethnographical competence and shows the author's substantial scientific maturity.

**Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence** (number of questions up to the reviewer)

- 1) A first question aroused by the reading of the Thesis is about methodology and fieldwork: I consider important to develop considerations about the construction of the field, the ethnographer's position the crucial topic of restitution/feedback by the community
- 2) A second relief is about the possibility or the impossibility of comparing different contexts of celebration taking in count the huge the scientific literature on Carnival ceremonials and performances and observing at what extent can different carnival rituals really be compared or juxtaposed in a hermeneutic context of explication of gestures and practices and communication of sense.

### **Conclusion**

The habilitation thesis entitled "Rituality and Social (Dis)Order: The Historical Anthropology of Popular Carnival in Europe" by Alessandro Testa, Ph.D. fulfils requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Ethnology.

Date: 15/12/2021

Signature: