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Habilitation thesis by Alessandro Testa, PhD

I have received the documentation for the evaluation of the book *Rituality and Social (Dis)Order, the Historical Anthropology of Popular Carnival and Europe*, proposed by Dr. Alessandro Testa as a habilitation thesis.

Right at the outset, it should be noted that Dr. Alessandro Testa is, in my opinion, one of the most promising researchers of cultural phenomena in the discipline called ethnology or cultural or social anthropology. His work and research in the field of rituals, heritage and religiosity is extensive, on the one hand historical and on the other grounded in committed fieldwork; additionally, it is well-founded and based on a wide range of sources. His polyglot ability allows him to read and write in several languages, which is particularly important in such a branched and researched field as rituals and routines. He is highly active in SIEF, the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore Studies, serving on both working groups: as a member of the Heritage Committee, and as co-chair of the Religion Section. At the same time, he is one of the main initiators of scientific meetings.

The work *Rituality and Social (Dis)Order*, published by Routledge, definitely meets the criteria of a habilitation thesis, while making a significant contribution to the knowledge of the phenomenon.

In the first part, I shall answer in some way questions regarding the content: if we assume that the task of ethnology / cultural anthropology is to know the habitus of the Other, then rituals are certainly one of the most important elements of the description of the culture of the Other, and this from Herodotus to Paul Santonino to the famous writings of Moskovia by Sigmund Herberstein, to Wolfgang Goethe... discerning how another individual or community structures time and space, and how this indicates transitions, in the year or in the life, of an individual or community. Therefore the study of rituals and routines is an essential part of the foundation for understanding and discovering another's culture. Within rituals, carnival is certainly one of the most established ways to gain this type of knowledge – as in the carnival study, as has been done by many researchers, for example Victor Turner, Mikhail Bahtin, Dan Handelman or Catherine Bell. It is usually the most compact and extremely lively dynamic event, where the complex structure of rural or urban communities is released, and numerous active and passive actors are activated and addressed. Methodologically, this complexity is explored by Alessandro Testa in four chapters, of which we may state they establish four starting points attempting to capture the complexity of carnival phenomena in Europe.

In the first chapter, a historical review of the evolution of the relationship between man and culture (largely dominated by the Italian production of knowledge), the author refers to Antonio Gramsci, Maurizio Bertolotti and Carlo Ginzburg. He deals with the questions of structure, order, and ultimately the hegemony of culture. The quality of the work also lies in its historical contextualization. Testa cites many sources, whose single drawback, in his own speculation, is their limited perspective since they were written by literati. In the second chapter he reconstructs typical carnival models, focusing on the relationship between the carnival season and Lent, on the masks, and on the extremely important role of the *scapegoat*. Reading the third chapter, i.e. the historical carnival and the long history of the prohibitions before year 1000 related to it, I remember especially the excitement of my predecessor Dr. Niko Kuret, when he had discovered the prohibition from 1340 where the government of Cividale del Friuli forbade walking and presenting in "habitu scaramatta". The author explains very clearly the problems with shamanic theories, popular especially among amateur interpreters who neglect other sources of belief. In the last chapter, which is in a

sense synthetic, he sketches three possible models of ritual: a "homeostatic" or social control model; a conflict-based one whose main content is social protest; a third that can be attributed to the elite. He uses the sketch of the carnival scheme (168) to explain the dynamics or politics of carnival and illustrate the transition from social order to disorder and vice versa. These are three forms of the carnival experience, whether it is the Venetian elite or carnival as a "safety valve", or a basis for social protest: In each case, however, these are events in which the actors, in most historical cases, accept the old or only slightly altered status quo.

When I reflect on the contribution of the habilitation thesis to the knowledge of the phenomenon of carnival, paralleling it with other works and authors, it strikes me as an upgrade, in terms of content since the author discusses and summarises theses of different authors; whereas integrating these works also allows him to write a most dynamic and fresh interpretation of the phenomenon. The book is thus a most serious attempt to cover the Mediterranean and Western European carnival area.

The question of the most appropriate and relevant methodological approach was first elucidated by Wolfgang Goethe's description of the Carnival in Rome. We may say that both Goethe, as well as many who came after him did not have an instrument or methodology that could satisfactorily resolve this question. In the twentieth century, researchers focused on single phenomena or single levels, e.g., in the Encyclopaedia of Masks in sixties or on single "ethnic" treatments, e.g., Kuret on Slovenian Masks (1984). Awareness of complexity emerges in questions about participants, e.g., in Helge Gerndt (1979), in research on carnival societies in Mainz (Herbert Schwedt), or in contemporary research in Binche (Markus Tauschek). Alessandro Testa solves this problem by treating the problem of carnival from four aspects. Theoretically in the first chapter, defining the concepts of popular culture, mainly from an Italian and French point of view; in the second chapter he constructs possible models of carnival, dealing with the "carnavalesque", the masks, the scapegoat; in the third the history of origins, discussing in the final fourth the question of hegemony and the basic scheme of the carnival event, the transition from social order to disorder and back to order. In his research he focuses not only on morphological or formal dissimilarities, but is also interested in functional, structural, semiotic / semantic similarities, changes over time and discontinuities.

The text relies largely on Italian and French sources and authors; the English world is largely considered, but there is also some German. In the bibliography, besides M. Bakhtin, there are notably but a few names of individual researchers hailing from the Slavic world. In any case, his linguistic abilities allow him to consider Slavic sources either within the Prague linguistic school (e.g., Peter Bogatyrov) or a Tartu circle in further works and research.

In critically reading this work, I would like to address two issues. The first relates to the established distinction between the rural and urban types of carnival, for example, between a mumming group procession through the village and the Nuremberg carnival. To what extent is there a different "safety valve", then, or potential for social control, and to what extent was the ritual implicitly important to the identity of a particular village or urban settlement? The second question relates to the lack of Slavic research, and it is not clear whether this is related to different, either less visible or more folklore studies-oriented research in Eastern Europe, or to the question of languages, or something else.

The work incorporates a great deal of citations, which make up quite an extensive part of the book, and many of them can be read independently.

I hereby opine that the habilitation thesis in question meets the standard requirements placed on habilitation theses in the field of ethnology, as evidenced above.

El Paso, TX, February 1, 2022