Doing Research on Festivals: *Cui Bono?*

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**ABSTRACT**

With this opinion piece, the author highlights certain methodological and thematic patterns characterizing his ten-year-long research into festivals, public rituals, and collective events, completing such recapitulation with a statement of ongoing commitment as well as with ideas about possible further scholarly developments. His final aim is to show how research about festivals, festivities, and festive events has benefited and still benefits from being conducted on the basis of a methodology involving critical comparison, intensive and in-depth ethnography, and a thorough study of historical sources.
As Émile Durkheim convincingly argued in his rightly renowned masterpiece about the religious life of Australian tribes, the study of festive events is an essential element to understanding social life.1 This is particularly true where such events acquire the characteristics of “total social facts,” a penetrating definition coined by Marcel Mauss, one of Durkheim’s most significant epigones.2 No wonder, then, that over time, scholars from sometimes very different disciplinary perspectives (folklorists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, psychologists, etc.) investigating festivals or simply acknowledging the importance of festivals for the study of societal configurations, collective life, and political orders have become legion. Having been exposed to historical and anthropological literature about festivities for years, and having myself undertaken extensive ethnographic fieldwork investigating carnivals, I have come to the conclusion that Durkheim, his disciples, and other academics perhaps not sharing his arguments and theoretical stance but surely sharing the opinion about the heuristic importance of investigating public events were fundamentally right: the study of festive events is a crucial tool to understanding social life.

In some of my writing and often during classes, I like to recite three quotes that substantiate my opinion on the matter certainly much better than my own words could: 1) “In a sense, every type of cultural performance, including ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre and poetry is an explanation of life itself…. Through the performance process itself, what is normally sealed up, inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning, in the depths of sociocultural life, is drawn forth” (Victor Turner)3; 2) “Social history has learnt to appreciate festival as a valuable window on society and its structures” (Thomas Pettitt)4; and 3) “For the ethnographer, public events are privileged points of penetration into other social and cultural universes” (Don Handelman).5 All these rather bold statements stress and articulate, from different angles, the importance of studying festivals to better understand societies and cultures.

The critical and diachronic study of festive events as I conceive it rests on three main methodological pillars: critical comparison, intensive and in-depth ethnography, and a thorough study of historical sources.6 The synergy between them guarantees a heuristic grasp that, if not total, can nonetheless aspire to some degree of holism.

Comparison, whether cross-cultural or undertaken within more homogeneous sociocultural settings (for example, within the same country), is an irreplaceable methodological tool. After all, it is no accident that it lies at the very foundation of several different and interconnected modern disciplines, such as history of religions and anthropology (but one could mention biology and geology as well). In my own experience, studying festivals in different contexts and then operating comparison has always been very informative and, at times, even illuminating. Once concerned mainly with the search for commonalities and “universals,” today’s comparisons, drawing from different sources—like semiotics and the differential or relational paradigm7—are equally useful in the effort of theorizing about cultural differences and social transformations.8 Since festivals (or better, collective rituality) are a cross-cultural, even “universal”—one might say—feature of humankind, it is needless to stress any further in how many different ways comparison can be a beneficial methodological instrument.
Just like comparison, ethnography is not only a method but also a veritable epistemological paradigm, one that has been recently “rediscovered” outside anthropological research and borrowed by a rather diverse set of disciplines, such as economics or political sciences. Doing participant observation—the practice at the very core of all sorts of ethnographic investigations—has taught me to leave the safe harbor of the library and dirty my hands, so to say, with the matters real social life is made up of, especially during the dense, pulsating moments of collective effervescence. Undertaking it in different European contexts has taught me about how similarities and dissimilarities, cultural continuities, and social transformations not only are a matter of theories and methods but also exist “out there” and drive—and are driven by—the lives of actual people performing, reproducing, contesting, and discussing their own cultural goods, much like what occurs in festivals. Theorizing and reflecting upon my own ethnographic endeavor has taught me that no sphere of social life is insignificant, no matter how trivial it might appear at first, and that literally everything counts, as anthropologist Victor Turner differently put, when it comes to understanding that thing called culture—even though some pretend it does not exist.9

Historical work—whether undertaken in archives and libraries, or differently, for example, in the case of the “ethnographic” methods used in oral history—is likewise important, especially to better understand social transformations in time and the diachronic dimensions of cultural life in general. I think that such an endeavor is of paramount relevance not only for historians (or for those interested in historiography more in general) but also for social anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists, and other categories of scholars who are normally associated more with the synchronic study of societies and cultures. In fact, both comparison and the study of the past can enlighten present matters—normally approached using said ethnographic methods—in many different ways: the case of festivals is exemplary because it is precisely in the fabric tightly interwoven by the synergy of historical factors, traditional constraints, the inventiveness and unpredictability of the present, the genius of the individuals, and the force of the many that such manifestations of the sociocultural effervescence of people reveal all their charm and complexity.

The fast-growing literature about this rich and diverse set of things we call festivals, festivities, public events, collective rituals, etc. demonstrates that studying those phenomena matters—at the very least to scholars.10 But cui bono? Certainly, all disciplines inside the ivory tower of academia benefit, in their respective ways, from understanding what is going on out there, in piazza, how such an effervescent and chameleonic phenomenon like a festival works; which symbolic mechanisms make it function; and what social meanings and functions it reflects. On the other hand, it is no mystery that, quite unfortunately, anthropological literature has still too little an impact on society. Rulers mostly ignore this literature, focusing rather on philosophy, political science, economics, and geopolitics. Still, as many studies have convincingly shown, studying festivals can provide important insights into pressing topics like immigration and integration, nationalism and political configurations, and identity construction and social resilience, and perhaps lead people to act on these issues accordingly. We cannot but wish that with time, a wider variety of social agents, such as politicians, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), social workers, and others, will make a greater and better use of the knowledge we offer about the festive dimensions of sociocultural life.
For all the reasons stated above, I warmly welcome the emergence of a disciplinary “conscience” of autonomy in the (sub)field of festive studies, which has the potential to fruitfully and transversally cut through several disciplinary traditions and epistemological paradigms and thus successfully join the broader family of studies focusing on rituality, performance, and collective behavior.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Alessandro Testa is a historian and anthropologist—he has not yet decided which identity suits him better. As a scholar, he likes to teach, especially in central Europe, and to write; in fact, his publications include three books, three edited volumes, and numerous articles in journals and chapters in volumes. Over the last fifteen years, he has studied, worked, and/or undertaken ethnographic fieldwork for extended periods of time in Italy, France, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, and Spain (Catalonia). He has presented the results of his research at conferences in some twenty countries.

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