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.

1. Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1912). A list of my recent publications that may be considered examples of works in the (sub)field of “festive studies” can be found in the bibliography at the end of this text.

2. Marcel Mauss, “Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques,” in *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 143–280 (first published in two issues of *L’année sociologique* in 1924–25).

3. Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 13.

4. Thomas Pettitt, “Preface: Of Easterlings and Their Festivals,” in *Urban Carnival: Festive Culture in the Hanseatic Cities of the Eastern Baltic, 1350–1550*, by Anu Mänd (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), xxi.

5. Don Handelman, *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 9.

6. Even though I am not myself an enthusiast of the usage of psychology in the social sciences, I must admit that, occasionally, the application of methods and theories borrowed from psychology and used for anthropological investigations of festivities has produced interesting and convincing results:

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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.

see, for instance, Gerald W. Creed, *Masquerade and Postsocialism: Ritual and Cultural Dispossession in Bulgaria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); and Dorothy Noyes, *Fire in the Plaça: Catalan Festival Politics after Franco* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

7. I consider this “differential—or relational or positional—paradigm” one of the greatest advancements in social sciences during the second half of the last century. I explain and use it at length in my *Il carnevale dell'uomo-animale*. Its main sources are to be found in structural, poststructural, and postmodern anthropologies, which theorized and used it differently: Claude Lévi-Strauss, “L’analyse structurale en linguistique et en anthropologie,” in *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958), 51–69; Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979); Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques: Sur la théorie de l’action* (Paris: Seuil, 1994); and James Clifford, introduction to *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 13–34.

8. I discuss theories and methods of comparison in several of my works: Alessandro Testa, “Discorso sul mito: Il mito greco interpretato dagli storici delle religioni italiani e dagli storici—antropologi francesi: Un’indagine epistemologica e metodologica comparativa,” in *Miti antichi e moderne mitologie: Saggi di storia delle religioni e storia degli studi sul mondo antico* (Rome: Aracne,

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.

2010), 107–406; “Quale futuro per la comparazione in storia delle religioni antiche? Una lettura critica di *Comparer en histoire des religions antiques: Controverses et propositions*, a cura di Claude Calame e Bruce Lincoln,” *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 80, no. 1 (2014): 426–35; and “Ritual Zoomorphism in Medieval and Modern European Folklore: Some Skeptical Remarks on a Possible Connection with Shamanism,” *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 25, no. 1 (2017): 3–24.

9. To date, I have undertaken my ethnographic fieldwork in Castelnuovo al Volturno, Italy (2010–11), Hlinsko v Čechách, Czech Republic (2013–14), and Solsona, Spain (2016–19).

10. I am intentionally smoothing out the (still significant) differences between these social phenomena in order to stress the suitability of their study under the same disciplinary umbrella (“festive studies”). For a typology and a theoretical emphasis on their differences, see Testa, “Rethinking the Festival: Power and Politics.” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 26, no. 1 (2014): 44–73.

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.

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