



## KEYWORDS

public festivities  
private parties  
folly  
libertinage  
eighteenth century  
France

1. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 2002), 100.

2. "Le mot 'folie' peut alors se décliner dans tous les sens. Il désigne d'abord ces maisons de plaisance qui semblent spécialement conçues pour toutes les fêtes possibles, des plus intimes au [sic] plus

## REVIEW

**Masseau, Didier.** *Fêtes et folies en France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime*. Paris: CNRS, 2018. 303 pp. EUR 24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-2271089977.

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The double plural of the title (Feasts and follies in late ancien régime France) testifies to the measured ambition of this synthesis: Didier Masseur, a specialist of eighteenth-century French literature, does not propose to study ancien régime festivity as a "total social fact."<sup>1</sup> He does not seek to cover the full range of its cultural manifestations or its multiple economic, political, symbolic, and anthropological implications. Neither does he resort to the notion of "madness" when describing late eighteenth-century festive practices, although revelry and insanity have been intertwined since at least the Middle Ages. The connection between "festivities" and "follies" actually initiates a much humbler project, as the author mostly concentrates on public festivities organized by the king and by royal or city officials ("festivals organized for persons of rank in Versailles and for the people of the capital" [p. 10]<sup>2</sup>) and on private parties organized by the moneyed elites (aristocrats, financiers, the urban bourgeoisie, etc.). Furthermore, the word "folly," which the author describes as "highly polysemic at that time," finds itself reduced to its architectural sense—referring to "these ornamental structures which seemed specially designed for every conceivable festivity, from the most intimate to the most spectacular, from the most shameful to the most refined."<sup>3</sup> Centering as he does on landscape architecture and building design—both of which experienced tremendous expansion in the late eighteenth century—the author claims that the 1770–89 period was marked by "an extraordinary phenomenon of [festive] escalation."<sup>4</sup> Though he admits that "excess may well be an inherent characteristic of festivity," he insists that it became "a source of veritable dread in the thirty years that preceded the [French] Revolution" (p. 11).<sup>5</sup> One may wonder, however, if the immoderation traditionally attached to festive practices has not always been an object of "dread" and if this supposed prerevolutionary specificity is not a teleological illusion.<sup>6</sup>

The book is made up of eight chapters, the contents of which are not summarized in the introduction. The first four deal with public and official celebrations: "Des fêtes omniprésentes et spectaculaires" (Ubiquitous, spectacular festivities), "Les fêtes royales et princières" (Royal and princely celebrations), "Frénésie festive en province, en ville et à la Cour" (Festive frenzy in the provinces, in Paris, and in Versailles), and "Folies, caprices et démesures" (Follies, fancy, and excess). Leaving out the "most ancient of traditional festivities" (fêtes traditionnelles les plus anciennes), including carnival, as well as "popular festivities"—the only ones to which Masseur assigns a "ritual" dimension—the author does not dwell on the relationship between festivity and revolt and thus overlooks important books on early modern festivals (pp. 10, 25).<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, he offers a great quantity of erudite information on the "festive splendor" (*faste festif* [p. 21]) of the late eighteenth century by compiling the numerous, rich descriptions of official festivals provided by memorialists (incidentally, the baroness of Oberkirch's lengthy account of

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3. “Le mot ‘folie’ peut alors se  
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de plaisance qui semblent  
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toutes les fêtes possibles,  
des plus intimes au [sic] plus  
spectaculaires, des plus  
inavouables aux plus raffinées.”

4. “On isolera toutefois les  
dernières années de l’Ancien  
Régime, parce que les fêtes sont  
le théâtre d’un extraordinaire  
phénomène de surenchère.”

5. “La démesure et l’excès sont  
certes le propre de la fête, mais  
elles font l’objet d’une véritable  
hantise dans les trente années qui  
précèdent la Révolution.”

6. On the long-standing fear  
of festivity in France, see the  
anthology *La Fête, cette hantise ...*  
(Paris: Autrement, 1976).

7. Among these are Yves-Marie  
Bercé, *Fête et révolte: Des  
mentalités populaires du XVIe au  
XVIIIe siècle* (1976; repr., Paris:  
Hachette, 1994); Emmanuel  
Le Roy Ladurie, *Le Carnaval  
de Romans: De la Chandeleur  
au mercredi des Cendres,  
1579–1580* (Paris: Gallimard,  
1979); and Natalie Zemon Davis,  
*Society and Culture in Early  
Modern France* (Stanford, CA:  
Stanford University Press, 1975).  
See also the important article  
by anthropologist Daniel Fabre:  
“La fête éclatée,” *L’Arc* 65 (1976):  
68–75.

8. For a theoretical discussion  
of festivity and its relationship  
with the sacred or with rituals,

then-dauphine Marie Antoinette’s 1770 entrée into Strasbourg is quoted twice, on pages 59–60 and 74). In the same way as the notion of festivity is not theorized, the concepts of the sacred and of ritual are not invoked to problematize the period’s diverse public celebratory practices (which the author reconstructs chiefly on the basis of contemporary reports published in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries).<sup>8</sup> The section on Versailles festivities at the time of Louis XIV might have benefited from a reference to historian Jean-Marie Apostolidès’s theoretical model.<sup>9</sup> Were eighteenth-century royal celebrations as “consubstantial with monarchy” as they used to be in the seventeenth, though (p. 82)? The author’s theoretical reticence goes along with a lack of precision concerning the sociological composition of festive crowds. For instance, one learns on pages 69–70 that at Louis XV’s invitation, “the populace” “came en masse” to watch the Knights of the Order of the Holy Ghost parade on Whit Monday, 1724, and that “foreign visitors mingled with Parisians and people from the provinces” (p. 70).<sup>10</sup> Who exactly attended the royal festivities? What do we know about their background, occupations, and motivations? Masseau’s study of “mentalities” (announced on page 10 of the introduction) and of the social, anthropological meaning of public balls, Vauxhalls, and other hydraulic or pyrotechnic displays merely leads to a classic interpretation of festivity as a “factor of social cohesion and social harmony” or as an “outlet allowing the underprivileged to temporarily forget their unhappy condition” (pp. 17, 18).<sup>11</sup> From there, the author moves on to long developments on the French craze for English gardens, the decor of banker Nicolas Beaujon’s pleasure palaces, and the folly of Parc Monceau, in line with his interest in eighteenth-century architectural art and landscape gardening.

The next four chapters deal with festivities that were organized in private settings: society banquets, libertine parties, theatrical performances, etc. Such practices inspire developments that occasionally border on digressions. Indeed, chapters 5, “Folies et libertinage” (Follies and libertinage), and 6, “Surenchères et transgressions” (Escalation and transgression), only connect with the general topic of the book via the premise that follies “became sites of architectural and decorative experimentation that stimulated the imagination of their creators, who never forgot that their customers meant to use their property for parties and gallant encounters” (p. 162).<sup>12</sup> The problem is that the only “parties” mentioned in the volume are *haut monde* feasts and libertine suppers, whose festive character can be questioned. The author implicitly recognizes this when he encloses the word “festivity” with quotation marks or when, to describe the orgies and sadists’ ceremonies enlisting prostitutes that were staged in this environment, he writes that “the festive spirit that pervaded those sessions was rather limited” (pp. 178, 197).<sup>13</sup> By the way, the libertine revels organized by kept dancers and actresses are not described or analyzed. Neither are the spectacles (skits and pornographic scenes) that were given in society theaters. Masseau merely lists the various domains in which the taste for mockery manifested itself when he discusses dramatic parodies. Chapter 6 might have been an opportunity to relate the elite taste for the burlesque with the French tradition of *culture joyeuse* (merry-making culture). The author actually mentions the existence of *sociétés badines* (organizations dedicated to good cheer), including the Régiment de la Calotte and the Ordre des Lanturelus (whose birth he dates to 1771 without connecting it to the carnivalesque Lanturelu revolt that took place at the beginning of Lent in 1630 Dijon or to the famous popular tune of many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century songs and satirical *vaudevilles*).<sup>14</sup> But the rest of the chapter reverts to a lavish anthology of anecdotal comments by memorialists, before veering into a long development on persiflage, mystification, mesmerism, and the “Necklace Affair” (pp. 218–30), whose links with festivity are

see the seminal work by Roger Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré* (1939; repr., Paris: Gallimard, 1988), esp. chap. 4. See also François-André Isambert, *Le Sens du sacré: Fête et religion populaire* (Paris: Minuit, 1982).

Masseau never quotes from the scholarly editions of these eighteenth-century accounts that have been produced since the 1990s (though he mentions many of them in the bibliography).

Marie-Claire Grassi's edition of Antoine Courtin's 1671 *Nouveau traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnêtes gens* (Saint-Étienne: Presses Universitaires de Saint-Étienne, 1998) is thus unused. So are the important critical editions of the anonymous chronicle known as the *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres en France* and of Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* (1781–88), respectively edited by Christophe Cave and Suzanne Cornand, 5 vols. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2009–10) and by Jean-Claude Bonnet, 2 vols. (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994).

9. Jean-Marie Apostolides, *Le Roi-machine: Spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris: Minuit, 1981).

10. "Le peuple, très friand de ce genre de spectacle, accourt en masse dans un lieu qui finit par prendre une allure populaire.... Les fêtes royales attirent une foule bigarrée et diverse. Les visiteurs étrangers se mêlent aux provinciaux et aux Parisiens pour un événement auquel tout le monde veut participer."

rather tenuous (victims were duped "in a festive, extravagant atmosphere," the author writes on pages 225–26).<sup>15</sup> This section, by the way, would have benefited from a reference to Pierre Chartier's 2005 book on persiflage and his effort to reconceptualize it by bringing the notion of carnivalesque inversion to bear on Denis Diderot's and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's contrasting views on mockery as a discursive form.<sup>16</sup>

In the two chapters that follow—"Effacement des identités sexuelles et ébranlement des codes sociaux" (The blurring of sexual identities and the weakening of social codes) and "Critiques de l'hédonisme festif" (Festive hedonism under fire)—Masseau emphasizes the "carnavalesque craze for worlds turned upside down" that manifested itself in festivities through cross-dressing, the inversion of ranks, and the blurring of conventions and moral categories (p. 253).<sup>17</sup> Regrettably, the feasts, masked balls, and private theatrical shows that he mentions are only allusively compared to carnival practices ("There is no carnival without such disguises"), although references to eighteenth-century carnivalesque culture, images, and symbols would have helped contextualize such society masquerades and increase the heuristic impact of the author's assertions (p. 232).<sup>18</sup> When Masseau suggests comparisons between ancien régime inverse practices and older festivities that turned the world upside down, his comments are sometimes incorrect, either because he uses second-hand sources or because he ignores the existing scholarship on the topic. For instance, when discussing the Feast of the Ass and the Mère Folle festive association, active in Dijon from the sixteenth to the early seventeenth century, he relies on the August 21, 1779, entry in Louis-François Mettra's *Correspondance littéraire secrète* (Secret literary correspondence), which itself references the 1778 *Septième Recueil philosophique et littéraire de la Société typographique de Bouillon* (Seventh philosophical and literary compendium of the Bouillon typographical society), based on the writings of lawyer-poet Bernard de La Monnoye. But Jacques Heers's *Fêtes des fous et carnivals* (1983) indicates that the Mère Folle was *not* created by "Feast of the Ass pranksters" and that the Feast of the Ass did not take place "at Carnival time," contrary to what is written on page 251, but during the twelve-day cycle between Christmas and the Epiphany (December 25–January 6).<sup>19</sup>

In his quest to bring together a wide range of distinct historical objects, the author endeavors to recreate the pomp and the spectacular dimension of public celebrations, the extravagance and architectural fancies of residences and gardens that hosted private parties, and the excesses and transgressions of the games and masquerades that were organized in such places. The result is both appealing and shaky, as Masseau abstains from problematizing his object in a coherent manner and relies instead on impressionistic sketches disseminated throughout the book. "It was as if reason and wisdom were only accepted as long as they were counterbalanced by some measure of madness, whimsicality, and sheer nonsense," the author writes on page 206.<sup>20</sup> Paradoxically, he presents this as a new phenomenon while adding that it revived "a tradition born at the end of Louis XIV's reign and maintained through the Regency," a period that, he adds, "was as much fascinated with madness as the Renaissance used to be" (p. 206).<sup>21</sup> There is still room for a study that would strive to conceptualize this "madness" and to problematize its historical articulation with eighteenth-century festivity.

### Notes, cont.

11. "Dans l'esprit des gouvernants, la fête publique, lorsqu'elle est organisée et canalisée dans de justes bornes, est

aussi un facteur de cohésion et de paix sociales"; "Les fêtes urbaines ... représentent alors, plus que jamais, un exutoire permettant aux déshérités d'oublier un moment leur condition malheureuse."

12. "La petite maison figure un lieu d'expérimentation architecturale et décorative, stimulant l'imaginaire des créateurs qui n'oublent jamais que leurs clients destinent leur propriété aux fêtes et à la galanterie."

13. "L'esprit festif qui préside à ces séances est des plus limités."

14. On Lanturelu, see Mack P. Holt, "Culture populaire et culture politique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: L'émeute de Lanturelu à Dijon en février 1630," *Histoire, économie et société* 16, no. 4 (1997): 597–615; and Dominique Le Page, ed., "La Révolte du Lanturlu de Dijon (1630)," special issue, *Annales de Bourgogne* (2019): 362–63. Not as recent but still authoritative on the "sociétés badines" is Arthur Dinaux's study *Les Sociétés badines, bachiques, chantantes et littéraires*, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie Bachelin-Deflorenne, 1867). About the Régiment de la Calotte, see Antoine de Baecque, *Les Éclats du rire: La culture des rieurs au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2000), 23–55; and Henri Duranton's helpful corrections to this work in "La très joyeuse et très véridique histoire du régiment de la calotte," *Dix-huitième siècle* 33 (2001): 399–417.

15. Concerning mesmerism, Masseau does not appear to have read Jean-Baptiste Radet and Pierre-Yves Baré's *Les Docteurs modernes*, an anti-Mesmerite satirical comedy (*comédie-parade*) staged at the Comédie-Italienne on November 16, 1784 (Paris: Brunet, 1784) (available at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k841523.image#>) and mixes it up on page 213 with a pamphlet targeting the Paris Medical Faculty that supported the theory of animal magnetism (*Extrait des registres de la Faculté de médecine de Paris: Du 1<sup>er</sup> décembre 1784*, 1784). The mix-up is all the more strange as his source—the December 7, 1784, entry of the *Mémoires secrets*, vol. 27 (Londres: John Adamson, 1786), p. 66—clearly distinguishes between the two.

16. Pierre Chartier, *Théorie du persiflage* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005), esp. part 4, "Le carnaval des Lumières" (Enlightenment carnival), 129–66.

17. "L'engouement carnavalesque pour le monde à l'envers."

18. See, for instance, Masseau's statement that "Needless to say, escaping one's social status through temporary play did not mean relinquishing one's privileges. Sometimes it was actually the deep-seated belief in one's superiority that warranted all sorts of license. Such behavior nonetheless ended up confusing representations and generating unease in public opinion" (Échapper à son statut social par un jeu provisoire ne signifie pas évidemment qu'on y renonce. Ce peut être, au contraire, la profonde conviction de sa supériorité qui autorise toutes les licences. Reste que de telles conduites finissent par brouiller les représentations et créer un malaise dans l'opinion) (p. 241). Jennifer Ruimi, *La Parade de société au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Une forme dramatique oubliée* (Paris: Champion, 2015) would have been especially helpful in contextualizing society masquerades.

19. Jacques Heers, *Fêtes des fous et carnivals* (Paris: Fayard, 1983), chap. 3. See also Juliette Valcke, *Théâtre de la Mère folle de Dijon, XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Orléans: Paradigme, 2012). The second half of Jean-Baptiste Lucotte du Tilliot's famous *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la Fête des fous, qui se faisait autrefois dans plusieurs églises* (Lausanne: Marc-Michel Bousquet et C<sup>ie</sup>, 1741), which the author mentions in a footnote on page 203 but not in the bibliography, provides a "history of the celebrations that used to take place in Burgundy, and elsewhere, under the name of Mère-Folie" (histoire des réjouissances qui se faisaient autrefois en Bourgogne, et ailleurs, sous le nom de Mère-Folie), which could have been used to correct this inaccuracy.

20. "On a l'impression que la raison et la sagesse n'ont désormais droit de cité qu'à condition d'être contrebalancées par toute une part de déraison, de fantaisie capricieuse, voire de non-sens."

21. "Ce type de mascarade renoue manifestement avec une tradition propre à la fin du règne de Louis XIV et à la Régence, qui était tout autant que la Renaissance fascinée par la folie."

## AUTHOR BIO

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