



Routledge Studies in Cultural History

RITUALITY AND SOCIAL (DIS)ORDER

**THE HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY
OF POPULAR CARNIVAL IN EUROPE**

Alessandro Testa



Rituality and Social (Dis)Order

Carnival has been described as one of the foundational elements of European culture, bearing an emblematic and iconic status as the festive phenomenon *par excellence*. Its origins are partly obscure, but its stratified and complex history, rich symbolic diversity, and sundry social configurations make it an exceptional object of cultural analysis.

The product of more than 12 years of research, this book is the first comparative historical anthropology of popular European Carnival in the English language, with a focus on its symbolic, religious, and political dimensions and transformations throughout the centuries. It builds on a variety of theories of social change and social structures, questioning existing assumptions about what folklore is and how cultural gaps and differences take shape and reproduce through ritual forms of collective action. It also challenges recent interpretations about the performative and political dimension of European festive culture, especially in its carnivalesque declension.

While presenting and exploring the most important features and characteristics of European premodern Carnival and discussing its origins and developments, this thorough study offers fresh evidence and up-to-date analyses about its transversal and long-lasting significance in European societies.

Alessandro Testa is Research Fellow in Anthropology at the Institute of Sociological Studies, Charles University, Prague.

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The Historical Anthropology
of Popular Carnival
in Europe

Alessandro Testa

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Alla pervicace volontà dell'esserci. A dispetto di tutto.

In memoria di una certa idea di Europa.

E a Heleen.

“The problem of carnival (in the sense of the sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals and forms of a carnival type) – its essence, . . ., its development under conditions of class society, its extraordinary life force and its undying fascination – is one of the most complex and most interesting problems in the history of culture.”

Mikhail Bakhtin¹

“In a sense, every type of cultural performance, including ritual, ceremony, Carnival and theatre 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 Turner²

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