

INSIGHTS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF THE FESTIVITIES: CARNIVAL SEEN BY SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Festivities not always are taken seriously as objects of study, but they have long attracted the attention of social scientists and other researchers. However, its analysis tends to be restricted and enclosed in some classical conceptions that, although relevant and useful, have become mere buzzwords and do not live up to the richness and complexity of this field of study. This article aims to provide some insights for the analysis of the festivities, focusing particularly on carnival and the way it has been treated by Social Sciences. It begins by exposing and discussing some theoretical recurrences – namely the theories of inversion, escape valve, resistance and *communitas* – and then presents other analytical perspectives that look at different facets of the festivities – cultural, social, economic and political – thus suggesting more in-depth and committed approaches to social reality and less hostage to the abstraction and dryness of theoretical models.

KEYWORDS

festivity; carnival; Social Sciences; theory

SUBSÍDIOS PARA A ANÁLISE DA FESTA: O CARNAVAL VISTO PELAS CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS

RESUMO

As festas nem sempre são objetos de estudo levados a sério, mas atraem há muito a atenção de cientistas sociais e outros investigadores. No entanto, a sua análise tende a restringir-se e fechar-se nalgumas conceções clássicas que, sendo relevantes e úteis, tornaram-se meros chavões e não fazem jus à riqueza e complexidade deste campo de estudo. Este artigo pretende fornecer alguns subsídios para a análise da festa, focando-se particularmente no carnaval e no modo como este tem sido tratado pelas Ciências Sociais. Começa por expor e discutir algumas recorrências teóricas – designadamente as teorias da inversão, da válvula de escape, da resistência e da *communitas* – para depois apresentar outras perspetivas de análise que olham para diferentes facetas da festa – cultural, social, económica e política – sugerindo assim abordagens mais aprofundadas e comprometidas com a realidade social e menos reféns da abstração e secura dos modelos teóricos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

festa; carnaval; Ciências Sociais; teoria

INTRODUCTION

Studying festivals, any festival, is an analytical endeavour that is not always lively or relaxed, as the object of study might lead one to think. At first glance, festivals are moments of joy and detachment, but they require serious observation and careful vigilance by the analyst, in order to look beyond the festival itself. Even for the participants, the feast is not always just a feast. There is also worry, tension, disappointment. The feast is not only celebrated on the street and in public space, it is also built at home and in the neighbourhood. The feast is not only experienced during a single day or season, but all year round. The feast is not just a present event, it also summons the past.

Festivals, any festival, whether during, before or after, are always characterised by a huge diversity of motivations, emotions and interpretations, and they contain a complexity that often goes unnoticed in the midst of euphoria, colour, sound and revelry. In order to reach this complexity, or some of its segments, it is important to suspend certain more immediate looks and evaluations about the festival. Not everything is what it seems. And there's a lot more at stake than just celebrating.

Festivals are not all the same, although they have many things in common. Being aware of these differences and similarities allows a better understanding of certain aspects and dynamics of the festivals themselves.

Carrying out this analytical endeavour, after all serious, but also encouraging, thanks to its richness, does not however, dispense a theoretical armour, whose main goal is to help contemplate that same complexity and richness. However, the insights of social theory are often scattered, and not many theoretical overviews exist in this area of study, which makes those that cross various approaches, thus problematising them, even more scarce.

Without intending to be exhaustive, this article proposes a reflection on some of the central arguments for the field of study of the festivities, and particularly carnival. The theoretical concepts and analytical perspectives discussed here are obviously not the only ones possible. The festival has a potential for analysis and deconstruction that goes far beyond what is summarised here. Nevertheless, these contributions are almost always unavoidable and can serve as starting points for future analyses, which are expected to enrich the interpretation of both carnival and other festive celebrations. But it should be highlighted that these theoretical discussions must always be supported by empirical data. Therefore, what is intended here is to present some lines of argument and, from there, initiate a theoretical problematisation that opens up the debate, instead of enclosing it in its own terms, thus fostering interest in the study of festivities.

The article begins by exposing certain recurrent conceptualisations in the literature, and then proceeds with a theoretical problematisation that dialogues with them, but surpasses them. Thus, the theoretical recurrences – already very worn out and sometimes too limiting – function as the theoretical foundations for broader and deeper interpretations and analyses.

Festivities are fertile ground for social analysis. They are multifaceted and inexhaustible objects of study. The plurality of approaches to carnival by the Social Sciences proves this, and I find it is useful to revisit some of them.

THEORETICAL RECURRENCES: INVERSION, ESCAPE VALVE, RESISTANCE AND COMMUNITAS

Carnival has already been the subject of extensive theoretical scrutiny in Social Sciences. Carnivals of Trinidad and Brazil (particularly Rio de Janeiro and Bahia) have received the most attention and prominence, but there are also major studies on carnivals in Europe and the US.

Carnival has been viewed many different ways. In the literature, different approaches to this feast proliferate, which cross various perspectives of social theory and that have generated a wide range of interpretations.

For its theorisation, there are some unavoidable references, either because they inaugurated the social analysis of carnival, such as the classic work of Bakhtin (1984/1965)¹, or because they incorporated it in the debates of other thematic areas, namely the anthropology of ritual, performance and symbols, as Victor Turner (1988) did², or in the critical examinations that focused on its cultural and political dimension, as James Scott (1990) did, making it compatible with well-established theoretical currents.

It is not my purpose to examine the entire pertaining bibliography here³, or to discuss in detail its theoretical foundations, but it is convenient to recall and confront some of the many ways carnival has been interpreted in social theory.

One of the most common currents, and widespread far beyond the thinking of theorists, is that carnival expresses an inversion of social order. As a common-sense idea, it finds concrete examples in some of the most trivial carnivalesque scenarios. However, men dressed as women, youth as elderly, or other humorous performances are not enough for us, as social scientists, to see carnival as an inversion of social order.

Seen as social satire, as a moment of transgression and disorder, carnival would have a subversive or even regenerating potential. For Bakhtin (1984/1965, p. 10), “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal”. During carnival, social norms and hierarchies would be suspended, prevarication was even allowed, and more, this disobedience would mean a subversion of social order.

However, if for some carnival instigates change, for others it is a way of ensuring permanence. According to Da Matta (1977, p. 58), “it would be naive to suppose that Carnival only neutralises and reverses the oppositions and social positions of daily life, abolishing its contrasting dimensions. In reality, carnival inversions (...) end up provoking confidence in order”.

¹ I obviously refer to *Rabelais and his world* (1984/1965). It is important to remember that this work was written in the 1930s and first published in 1965 in the Russian version, and in 1968 in the English version. And we should also not forget the pioneering works of Roger Caillois, who also discussed carnival in his theory of the festival (Caillois, 1988/1939; 1950, pp. 95-124; 2001/1958).

² Stallybrass and White (1986, pp. 16-17) maintain not only a convergence but an anticipation of Bakhtin regarding symbolic anthropology.

³ I also set aside the approaches that perceive carnival from a more folklorist matrix or situating it in the annual cycle, or by using classifications that oscillated between the sacred and the profane, licentiousness and abundance, burlesque and satirical. For this foray, two references to keep in mind are Baroja (1965) and Heers (1987).

As a ritual of inversion, carnival can be perceived as both a mechanism of emancipation and subversion, and one of control and social conformation.

In this order of ideas, there is another conceptualisation of carnival, equally usual, that conceives it as an escape valve. The escape valve theory has also given rise to different interpretations. In fact, I believe that the same type of misconception that happens with the inversion theory, also happens with the escape valve theory, because it stems from it. Its two main ramifications – both from the inversion theory and from the escape valve theory – lie in each other’s antipodes. One, of a functionalist nature, and another, emphasising the transformative or even revolutionary potential, start off from the idea that, during carnival, social tensions would be released. Both presuppose that carnival is an *extra-ordinary* moment, outside the usual constraints of daily life. For some authors, carnival would be a moment of liberation and a form of exorcism from the evils of society, whose capacity to symbolically purge their demons would allow a social renewal. For others, while being all this and serving to express and relieve tensions and oppressions, carnival would eventually be an inconsequential break and would eventually legitimise and maintain the prevailing social order, confirming the existing shackles and hierarchies. Moreover, many argue that carnival is used by dominating elites and groups as a mechanism of social control. These two conceptions are the result of two “valve” perceptions that are not necessarily incompatible, they only suggest distinct outcomes. The former frees to transform, the latter frees to maintain. In the literature, this is not always clear and the results are often confused with the mechanism⁴.

The same is true of the way in which inversion is viewed⁵. The bifurcations of the inversion theory are not always unravelled. To say that carnival is an inversion, an “upside down” occasion, or an upside down world, is not so much a reference to the performance itself, as to the intentions behind it. For some, it means an upside down world that not only presents itself that way, but is also claimed or desired. For others, a disorder that eventually reverts back to order, thus contributing to the stability and maintenance of the *statu quo*. Again, it is not a matter of denying inversion, it is a matter of seeing it during and after, or only during. Therefore, not all those who speak of inversion mean the same thing. Inversion is always the starting point for these conceptualisations. In my opinion,

⁴ In other words, generalisations are easily made about concepts, theories, and their proponents, which create confusion, and worse, theoretical inaccuracy. Consider the “escape valve” and two much cited authors in this matter: Max Gluckman and Mikhail Bakhtin. Although neither of them has used the term, their names are associated with it, which is perfectly acceptable. The problem is when it is indiscriminately asserted that Gluckman viewed the ritual as such, and Bakhtin did the same for carnival, without explaining the differences between the theories of one and the other. For Gluckman (1955, 1963), who attuned to the functionalist diapason, the rites of inversion and rebellion served to reinforce the dominant order. As for Bakhtin, who dealt with carnival, his approach to inversion led him to the opposite conclusion: carnival, countering that order, would incite change. However, both could have agreed on the appropriation of the “valve” concept. And obviously, the fact that they did not formulate it in those terms does not mean that it is not implicit in what they wrote. Indeed, Bakhtin took that conceptualisation of his Russian compatriot Anatoly Lunacharsky into account (Bakhtin, 1984/1965, p. xviii). What is certain is that the escape valve theory (along with the inversion theory) has been used recurrently, but under different prisms, and the term itself is used to mean different things. Some use it as a synonym for subversion, others imply some kind of oppression. However, what is at stake and should be clarified are the different interpretations made regarding these concepts.

⁵ Although his focus is not carnival, even though he does consider it, Balandier (1999) describes different cases of inversions, offering an eclectic overview of the cultural diversity and historical depth of these performative and symbolic rituals.

the changing perspectives of the inversion theory are the founders of the other discordant and even opposing understandings and interpretations that have monopolised carnival theorisations. In this domain, the tendency to see either side of the coin prevailed, and I believe that the theoretical disagreements stem largely from ideological oppositions.

Several authors contested the inversion theory, viewed as an alteration of social order and its hierarchies, or even their annulment. Many of the critical voices that were heard came from Brazil, the “country of carnival”, where the idea of egalitarianism promoted by this festivity is widespread⁶. In fact, class asymmetries in carioca carnival are undisputed. Just consider the Sambadrome, whose entry is not within reach of the poorest⁷. Obviously, this does not apply only to the Brazilian carnival. And as I demonstrated (2018), it applies entirely to the carnival of São Vicente in Cape Verde.

If carnival is viewed as a temporary disorder and, as such, a form of maintaining order, it becomes theorised as a means of social control, that is, an authorised inversion, granted by the elites to the subordinates, a safety valve where the excesses of the moment would compensate the everyday inequalities. In this case, carnival is a sign of oppression rather than liberation. This perspective was contradicted by the theory of resistance.

Carnival ceases to be a form of control by the dominant to be a form of resistance by the dominated. As a form of resistance, carnival would be a counter-hegemonic instrument in which not only asymmetries and inequalities would be revealed and questioned, but other alternative worlds would be created and experienced, even if only temporarily. Carnival’s potential for subversion could even affect power structures and relationships.

However, in his “hidden transcripts”, the apologist of the theory of resistance, James Scott, argues that the idea that carnival is a mechanism of social control authorized by elites is not entirely wrong, but it can be misleading, as we risk confusing the intentions of the elites with the results they are actually able to achieve. For Scott (1990), this functionalist perspective is not only riddled with essentialism, but attributes agency to the elites only. And so, the author continues, it is not right to view carnival as being set up exclusively by dominant groups in order to allow subordinate groups to play at rebellion and insubordination. The existence and evolution of carnivals always results from social dynamics, with their conflicts, and not from the unilateral creation of elites. It is therefore plausible to see carnival as a political victory wrested from elites by subordinate groups. Scott tells us that, throughout history, what is striking about carnival is not how it has contributed to maintaining existing hierarchies, but how often it has been the

⁶ Among these dissonant voices is Queiroz (1985, 1994), who demonstrated how the social structure remains in carnival and, in fact, the maintenance of socioeconomic hierarchies prevails, and Armstrong (2010) who, referring to the carnival of Bahia, defends that carnival is not an inversion of order, but an intensification of a daily culture. Carnival practices reflect social conflicts and the dialectical relationship between a dominant cultural order and the subaltern masses. In this sense, the author supports the relationship of mutual influence between carnival and daily life. For the Brazilian case, see also Risério (1995) and Agier (2000).

⁷ Indeed, many of these poor people follow the show from afar, from their favelas, either on television or with the sound that echoes all the way to the slum hill. Regarding this exclusion, see, for example, Sheriff (1999).

scene of open social conflict⁸. Still, and despite questioning the validity of the safety-valve theory, Scott (1990, p. 173) states that carnival is like a lightning rod for all types of social tensions and animosities. But the author ends up considering that:

a complex social event like carnival cannot be said to be simply this or that, as if it had a given, genetically programmed, function. It makes far greater sense to see carnival as the ritual site of various forms of social conflict and symbolic manipulation, none of which can be said, *prima facie*, to prevail. Carnival, then, may be expected to vary with culture and historic circumstances and is likely to be serving many functions for its participants. (Scott, 1990, p. 178)

The conciliation of perspectives was also defended by other authors⁹. For Abner Cohen (1980, 1993), carnival is a complex phenomenon characterised by contradictions between the serious and the frivolous, the expressive and the instrumental, the controlled and the uncontrolled, conflict and consensus. Although it is a cultural and artistic show, it is closely and dynamically related to the political order and the struggle for power. But its political meaning changes, depending on the context. It is the dynamism of the event that gives its study a heuristic reach, in the analysis of political and cultural dynamics. Cohen claims that carnival is simultaneously characterised by conflict and alliance. In this “ideal type” of carnival, domination and opposition do not cancel each other out.

In Nagle’s (2009) opinion, we should refrain from valuing these shows as demonstrations of resistance, or denouncing them as mechanisms of incorporation and conformation. They are multidimensional and encompass a diversity of motivations among the participants.

Notwithstanding conciliatory attempts and the efforts for the convergence of perspectives, the range of possible readings regarding carnival is generally based not on the complexity and ambivalence of social reality itself, as it should be, but on starting points that are too closed off and deeply contrasting. There is a tendency to place carnival between antagonistic poles, considering it either positively or negatively. There is a certain Manichaeism in the approach to this festivity. When this is not the case, and the intention is to overcome this duality without seeking to abandon the dichotomies that precede it, one falls into a register that is too rigid and abstract.

Another recurring idea in the literature, and also widely shared in the common sense, is the one that sees carnival as the festival of communion and equality. Bakhtin (1984/1965, p. 10) also suggested this prism of analysis when he stated that, unlike the official ceremonies of the state and the Church, “all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age”. And Da Matta (1997/1979, p. 119) described carnival as a festival for everyone, a festival without an owner.

⁸ In this regard, see Le Roy Ladurie (1979), who gives us a literal account of the social tensions that opposed the different social classes of the French city of Romans and which erupted in the tragic and bloody carnival of 1580.

⁹ See also Green (2007b, p. 79).

Equality easily gives way to the idea of a democratic festival, transversal in terms of class, a moment when differences are erased and where everyone shares a common status. And with this, another theoretical model that has been very appealing in the analysis of carnival is revealed: *communitas*.

Roberto Da Matta incorporated into the study of carnival Victor Turner's (1988) anthropology of ritual and this author's reinterpretation of Van Gennep's theory of rites of passage. This gave rise to an auspicious theoretical opening, which generic and automatic application often results in banality. According to this approach, carnival, as a liminal period, would provide an occasion for *communitas*. This doctrine was intended to underline the inclusive nature of carnival, but ended up accentuating its ambivalence. If, on the one hand, the anti-structure that carnival would institute eventually contributed to the revitalisation of its own structure, on the other hand, it allowed the expression of opposites and the enjoyment of ambiguities (Da Matta 1977, 1997/1979)¹⁰. For Da Matta (1977, p. 21), carnival is "a great *communitas*, where races, creeds, classes and ideologies commune peacefully to the sound of samba and racial miscegenation".

Risério (1995), who also highlights a double game between resistance and co-optation, maintains that the denunciation of socio-racial asymmetries is compatible with the feast and with *communitas*. The author draws attention to the fact that there is a difference between inversion (in this case, the hierarchical relationships between whites and blacks) and a dramatisation of the desire for equality, or the recognition that it does not exist.

It seems clear to me that carnival is not reducible to a liminal ritual, to an interval, to a utopia. Nor is it a moment of affirmations or inversions, liberties or censorship, dominations or resistances. All of these theoretical contributions have been important and decisive, but taken in isolation, they circumscribe the debate far too much. Considering all these conceptualisations, it is important to keep in mind that carnival does not have the same meaning for all the groups and individuals that participate in it, and that society is not a homogeneous whole, regulated by a single order that can be inverted or reinforced.

Moreover, in all these theoretical elaborations, there is a tendency to focus on the gregarious nature of carnival, instead of the individualities and subjectivities that it contains. In fact, most studies regarding carnival neglect the social relationships that underpin it. And also for this reason, much of the theory that is usually associated with it must be put on hold. Many of these theorisations are too abstract and rely little or poorly on empirical research¹¹. If carnival offers us an analytical key to a multiplicity of aspects regarding social reality, we have good reasons to suspend theoretical reductionism and pursue carnival practices.

¹⁰ Turner's ritualistic *communitas* have been transposed into the carnival field by various authors. Among them, Da Matta (1977/1973, 1997/1979) will have been the most committed and greatest diffuser, applying this theoretical formulation and this carnivalesque ideal to the Brazilian case. However, Maria Goldwasser and Turner himself also did the same for carioca carnival (Goldwasser quoted in Turner, 1983, p. 117; Turner 1983).

¹¹ There are of course exceptions and some are noteworthy, such as the empirically grounded analyses of Raphael (1990), Freitas (1994, 2007), Sheriff (1999), Agier (2000), Green (2002, 2007b), and Scher (2007b).

GOING BEYOND THE BUZZWORDS: CARNIVAL AS A MULTIFACETED PHENOMENON

Carnival turns various aspects of daily life inside out, but also mirrors continuities. Still, as a mirror of a certain state of affairs, it does not necessarily constitute a clear and symmetrical reflection. In the case of the carnival of São Vicente, I suggested (2018) that the general premises of the social order do not change, although their expression is very different, precisely because it is a feast.

The rhetoric “a festival for everyone”, which is also heard in São Vicente, coexists with the identification, by the participants themselves, of social asymmetries and hierarchies. If, on the one hand, it can be argued that the problems and difficulties of daily life are forgotten or put on hold, it is an extraordinary moment after all, it is time for fun, on the other hand, these misfortunes and social and economic contingencies are consciously considered. Although it is implicit a presumption of egalitarianism – contestable, as several cases show –, this idea of carnival belonging to everyone should not be underestimated.

But often, as is the case of São Vicente, it becomes evident that carnival does not contradict inequalities and does reflect social order. Carnival seems to attract almost everyone with the same passion, but a festival for everyone, experienced by everyone, is not necessarily experienced by everyone in the same way, and does not even constitute a moment of equality or inclusion, as so many advocate. Despite the idea of an inclusive and egalitarian festival, the verticality of society remains, despite the apparent horizontality of the festivity.

Through carnival, a terrain sometimes viewed as apolitical, we can detect discursive and symbolic positions regarding the social order that is experienced in daily life and expressed in the festival. For Scott (1990), carnival is an institutionalised form of political disguise and a good analytical tool for dissecting social order. Cohen (1993, p. 132) for whom “carnival is thus politics masquerading behind cultural forms” is in agreement. Let us then proceed along these paths.

Using a Weber’s formulation, Risério (1995, p. 106) states that “what exists is a ‘game of reciprocal effects’ between carnival and society”. Green and Scher (2007) propose that we view carnival as a collective expression of perceptions, aspirations and struggles, engendered by the material conditions of social life and the cultural traditions of communities. For these authors, we should take into account “the polysemic nature of the carnival as a social, cultural, political, and economic phenomenon. The event is composed of numerous events and activities, none of which may be said to be of greater importance than another” (Green & Scher, 2007, p. 8) . The authors acknowledge the ambiguity and contradiction in carnival, such as Zavitz and Allahar (2002), who state:

because the character of Carnival remains ambiguous and contradictory, it cannot be owned. As a symbol of Trinidadian culture and society, Carnival’s most powerful element is its ambiguity, which allows it to express certain ideals and their opposites simultaneously (...). Carnival is not a single, monolithic, or unified thing; it is a multicomplexity of parallel practices with

multiple meanings and therefore can satisfy a plethora of conflicting needs at the same time. (Zavitz & Allahar, 2002, p. 143)

Scher (2002, p. 478) is therefore quite right when he observes that “the indeterminacy of public rituals such as Carnival provide more a forum for a debate than neat conclusions”.

John Stewart (1986) also mentions the tensions and contradictions at play in carnival. Turning his attention to the Trinidad carnival, the author sees it as an event in which society comments on certain aspects that characterise it and in which multiple objectives and social impulses, sometimes contradictory, are met. Following Geertz, who stated that the ritual dramatises certain aspects and silences others, the author notes that this is particularly visible in carnival, which is why it maintains a prominent place in Trinidadian culture. The author insists that the carnival experience is grounded in a system of paradoxes and happens in a tension between license and constraint.

Agier (2000), in his work on the carnival of Bahia, states that, without being a rite in the strict sense, carnival is a *ritual context*, that is, a space-time outside of daily life, conducive to symbolisation, and viewing it this way makes it possible to account for the heterogeneity of individual and collective symbolic investment: ritual symbolisation is different according to the social actors and the moments, and these differences account for the segmentation of this space, according to the social and socio-racial categories present in society and in the festival¹².

Victor Turner (1988) argued that the relationship between the mundane, everyday sociocultural processes and their performances is not unidirectional and “positive”, in the sense that performance “reflects” or “expresses” the social system or the cultural configuration, but is rather reciprocal and reflective, in the sense that performance is always a direct or veiled critique of social life. Moreover, cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture, they can be agencies of change.

As a reflection of societies and cultures, carnival is a historical product. As Green and Scher (2007) argue, the history of Trinidad carnival has always been made with reference to the history of the island itself. This past can be identified in calypso and steel pan, just as in samba, afro blocks or samba schools. The history of these elements incorporates aspects of the countries’ histories, constantly recreating them. In the words of the authors:

whatever the Carnivals may be in their many incarnations, they are the products of unique histories, manifestations of social tensions, barometers of cultural change, and crucibles for creating, discovering, and asserting identities. The Carnivals encompass contradictory ideas and practices. (Green & Scher, 2007, p. 9)

¹² Still on the subject of inversion, Agier (2000) argues that the criticism of the inversion thesis is fuelled by “externalist” studies, which focus on the sociological dimension of the ritual, that is, on the observation of the external components of the rite. Conversely, the “internalist” analysis is concerned with constructing the intelligibility of the structuring scenario, the development of the ritual event. According to the author, the inversion thesis proves to be tautological: roles are inverted because ritual space is the reverse of daily space.

Also, the expressive and representational dimension of carnival always lies in a given historical, social and political context. Carnival performative expressions are not arbitrary expressions detached from their sociocultural contexts. In the analysis of carnival symbolism, it is therefore important to consider the ideological constellations and the political contexts that are implicit in it, as well as its “polyvocality”, that is, the diversity of interpretations, including conflicting ones, that it lends itself to.

Scher (2002) shows us how carnival is sold as Trinidad’s national festival, uncovering the cunning ways in which the processes of preservation of cultural heritage are developed and how a national cultural narrative has been built, in which carnival occupies a decisive place. The positioning of carnival as a central expressive form in a national cultural identity that supposedly transcends ethnic, class and gender divisions, was part of the nationalist agenda in Trinidad. However, this cultural rhetoric, which composes a national narrative, is based on the celebration of certain cultural and carnivalesque forms, concealing other aspects of the history of carnival and thus manipulating it according to political agendas. By excluding certain developments and transformations of carnival, this narrative silences various elements of society¹³.

Zavitz and Allahar (2002) also warn that this very widespread idea in Trinidad, of carnival as a national festival, serves to camouflage class inequalities. According to the authors, the tendency to view racial differences as crucial, leads to the minimisation of the importance of class in understanding social inequality. For many of those who view carnival as Trinidad’s national festival, the carnival is synonymous for tradition and heritage or African ancestry. As the authors state, these ideologies and rhetoric are based on the uncritical use of notions such as “community”, “race” or “ethnicity”, and comprise various essentialisations, namely a homogenisation of Africa and Africans, inevitably accompanied by an essentialisation of Europeans and Westerners.

In an ironic tone, the authors recall that carnival was introduced in Trinidad not by Africans but by the French, in the 18th century, and since then it has been a negotiating arena between a multitude of ethnicities and classes, rather than a mere field of opposition between whites and blacks. Thus, while African heritage is part of carnival, this does not mean that it is an exclusively African tradition. An unruly Afrocentrism, in his view, seems to prevail in the descriptions of the Caribbean carnival and becomes exaggerated when the question of carnival is transposed to diaspora studies, once again reifying ideas of a “community” and its supposed ancestry and cohesion. In the case of Trinidad, these issues are particularly relevant and possibly disconcerting, since we are talking about a Creole society whose ethnic, cultural and religious heterogeneity should impose extra caution. As stated by the authors: “carnival, with its race and class controversies, is the great mirror of Trinidadian society that has historically reflected its social divisions” (Zavitz & Allahar, 2002, p. 142). Thus, carnival is a historical, political and social reflection

¹³ Da Matta (1997/1979) also sees the carioca carnival as a national ritual. However, the metonymy presented between carnival and Brazil is designed from a functionalist perspective and is based on the assumption that carnival is the feast of the dominated. His reasoning is that in a hierarchical society there is an egalitarian carnival and to that extent carnival is a ritual of inversion.

of society. But, by becoming the national symbol of Trinidad, of its unity and diversity simultaneously, it is necessary to problematise the way these definitions and categorisations are processed, especially when carnival is commodified under the logic of political orientations and power games.

Green and Scher (2007) also point out this politicisation and commodification of the Trinidad carnival in the post-independence. According to the authors, there are many studies that promote a nationalist agenda and advocate nostalgias of authenticity that supposedly should be recovered, electing, delimiting and defining cultural expressions presumably more representative of a national culture. As a mechanism for the recovery of endangered primordial identities, carnival is a minefield.

Risério (1995) also accounts for these instrumentalisations. Regarding the process of “re-Africanisation” of the carnival of Bahia, the way the “black” character of the Bahian carnival was reborn in the 1970s, with the rebirth of the *afoxé* groups and the birth of the afro blocks, the author refers to the triple effort in the appropriation of distant realities, in time and space, by Brazilian black mestizos: appropriation of the past, appropriation of the African present and appropriation of the Black American present, noting that “what matters in the appropriation of what is distant, is the appropriation of what coincides with the interests of the present which is being lived. What is ‘distant’ is selected, renewed and, above all, justified” (Risério, 1995, p. 98). According to the author, the tourism industry, with the support of the business sector, transformed the Bahian carnival into a black mestizo carnival. And, this way, realities are created because, as the author states, in Bahia, the black mestizo culture is not predominant, but is certainly hegemonic.

Sheriff (1999), in an inspiring work on the racial issue in a Rio de Janeiro favela, gives us some insight into the complexity of these topics and exposes some of their contradictions: “the contemporary carioca carnaval, which is conventionally understood as a demonstration of *democracia racial* and the temporary collapse of class-based boundaries, is the negotiated product of a history of racialized struggles for public space” (p. 21). The author provides us with valuable clues: the difference between blocks and samba schools, the change that the construction of the Sambadrome brought to the carnival experience, the exclusion of the poor, who cannot afford to pay the Sambadrome ticket or to join a samba school, the young black man who is respected by middle-class whites, but only as a *pagode* samba dancer, the idea that samba is a thing of the *povo*, the people, and of blacks, etc. The author demystifies:

when people in Morro do Sangue Bom critique the carioca carnaval of the 1990s, they rely less on notions of resistance and cooptation than on the more concrete and practical processes of theft – those that limit or preclude their actual (as opposed to merely symbolic) participation. The point for them is not that black culture has been appropriated and depoliticized but that their role as the nationally and internationally recognized representatives, producers, and performers of the samba-driven carioca carnival has been usurped. (Sheriff, 1999, p. 20)

Therefore, what is equality, diversity, inclusion to some, to others is inequality, exclusion and marginality. If, on the one hand, Rio's carnival is promoted as an exemplary show of Brazilian culture, on the other, it is also a field where we can observe the political marginality to which certain fringes of society are sanctioned. This does not imply that they do not participate in carnival. But it denotes that unity is made at the expense of hidden marginalities. The myth of racial democracy is just one of the many misconceptions at work when samba and carnival are presented as symbols of national culture and Brazilian identity.

As Da Matta (1997/1979) argues, ritual is a privileged occasion to penetrate the cultural heart of a society, its dominant ideology, and its value system. Similarly, for Geertz (1973, p. 448), “[cockfight] is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves”.

As Agier refers, regarding the case of Bahia, treating terms such as identity and culture, or racism and miscegenation separately, would lead to the realisation of the ambiguity of each one of them. In order to bring them together, it is productive to approach the ritualisation of different identities. The situations of identity *mise en scène* are good occasions to observe culture being made. In this sense, the anthropology of carnival is a form of anthropology of ritualised identities (Agier, 2000, pp. 228-229).

FINAL REMARKS

As we have just seen, through carnival it is possible to explore various facets of social life. Thus, the theoretical conceptualisations I set out above, go hand in hand with other common approaches to the carnivalesque feast. Among the most common are those that view carnival as a manifestation of a region's cultural identity or even a national symbol. Often, the nation presents itself in carnival manifestly¹⁴. And in some countries, such as Brazil and Trinidad, carnival is viewed as a national festival and even as one of the nation's symbols¹⁵.

Carnival has been used as an analytical tool of themes such as national identity, as well as other central aspects of social life, such as class, race¹⁶, tourism¹⁷, or gender¹⁸,

¹⁴ This use of carnival for nationalist purposes is not always spontaneous. In the Rio de Janeiro's carnival, since the 1930s (during the Getúlio Vargas government) up to the 1990s, there was a requirement for samba schools to have nationalistic plots. Turner (1983, p. 112), Queiroz (1985, p. 20) and Raphael (1990, p. 77), for example, highlighted this situation, and Fernandes (2001, pp. 86-89) problematised it and framed it.

¹⁵ It would be unfeasible to list here the numerous works that explore this theme, but see, for example, for the case of Trinidad, Freitas (1994), Ho (2000), Scher (2002), Zavitz and Allahar (2002) and for the Brazilian case, Da Matta (1997/1979), and Sheriff (1999). In the Brazilian case, the national symbol may be carnival itself or its supreme musical expression, samba. In this regard, see the works of Sodré (1998/1979), Vianna (2002/1995) and Chasteen (1996).

¹⁶ As did Raphael (1990), Morales (1991), Agier (1992, 1996, 2000), Freitas (1994), Risério (1995), Zavitz and Allahar (2002), Armstrong (2010) and which is almost always inseparable from class.

¹⁷ Normally approached in articulation with the themes of tradition, authenticity and commodification (see Green, 2002, 2007a, 2007b and Scher, 2007a) and, accordingly, of memory (see Green, 2007b and Scher, 2007b, who addressed different nostalgias implied in the Trinidad carnival and regarding national memory, see Scher, 2007a).

¹⁸ As in the case of Scheper-Hughes (1992), Freitas (1994, pp. 249-272; 1999) or Agier (1996).

themes that are often intersected. However, although this thematic range may indicate certain vitality in the analyses of carnival, it seems to me that carnival has been treated more as a pretext than as an object in itself.

As I intended to show through the Cape Verdean case, carnival is a privileged lens for social analysis and helps thinking about a diversity of issues, from social stratification to relations with the past, from cultural and national identities to interpersonal relationships. However, regardless of the focus on a more micro or macro scale, we should not disregard carnival's own dynamics. Carnival should not just be a pretext, it should be a focus. Thus, major issues should not distract us from what is most important, which is to look at carnival with a keen sense and as the prime material for our research. If we are predisposed to see, hear and feel social reality, we will reach the different senses behind the festivity, the experienced worlds, with their own values, logic and meanings.

The great theorists highlighted exactly this. Bakhtin (1984/1965, p. 211) launched the motto as follows: "popular-festive images became a powerful means of grasping reality". And Turner (1983, p. 104) reinforced it: "the way people play perhaps is more profoundly revealing of a culture than how they work, giving access to their 'heart values'".

In line with Michel Agier (2000), I consider carnival as an appropriate key institution for analysing society as it establishes a "factory of identities". As argued by Vale de Almeida (1997), in an overview of other authors, identity is an activity and not an existential state; moreover, it updates itself performatively. Festivals are therefore great occasions to watch this action unfold.

This factory, where identities are made and remade, is comprised of several assembly lines and works with numerous raw materials. The identities that can be unveiled at carnival are manifold and not all overt or immediately apprehensible. We can look at national identities, as well as regional and local identities. And we can both unveil the way they are built, as well as the way they are promoted and displayed. We can place the emphasis on collective participation and community's senses of belonging, as well as filter race, class and gender identities. We can grasp the way heritage and tradition are forged in historical processualism, as well as see them as mechanisms for tourism promotion in the present. We can look at the official narratives, as well as the discourses of those who make and feel, of those who participate and those who are excluded. And it is these various analytical perspectives that give rise to more in-depth and committed approaches to social reality and less hostage to the abstraction and dryness of theoretical models.

As shown by the reflections of the authors presented here, by looking at carnival carefully and critically, it is possible to examine the cultural, social, economic and political facets of this festival. And all this is extendible to many other festivities. It is up to social scientists, and researchers in general, to use this intellectual heritage and enrich it with other angles of analysis and other festivals, any festival.

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