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Review of Nikos Potamianos, “Της αναιδείας θεάματα”: Κοινωνική ιστορία της Αποκριάς στην Αθήνα, 1800–1940

Katerina Sergidou

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Nikos Potamianos

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Nikos Potamianos

“Της αναιδείας θεάματα”: Κοινωνική ιστορία της Αποκριάς στην Αθήνα, 1800–1940

[“Spectacles of insolence”: The social history of carnival in Athens, 1800–1940]

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Katerina Sergidou

Universidad del País Vasco/Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences

Readers of the book under review will encounter a fascinating, historical narrative not only of the Athens Carnival over a 140-year period (1800–1940) but also of Athenian society. Historian Nikos Potamianos traces the origins and evolution of carnival culture in modern Athens, from the Ottoman to the interwar periods. His main sources are the newspapers and journals published in Athens over a century (1840–1930), although he also uses other material providing even the smallest detail about the carnival in the period he studies. These sources include the descriptions of European travellers, literature, memoirs and diaries, police orders, existing oral testimonies as well as more recent oral accounts. Each chapter of the book reflects the richness of the sources and the effort to collect the historical traces of the Athens Carnival.

Potamianos introduces us to telling histories that revolve around the process of the domestication of popular carnival performances, a history that is a common European (but not only) experience with the attempts of the bourgeoisie to dominate the political and cultural sphere of social life and to draw a line between popular culture and bourgeois culture. This “cultural process”, the taming of the popular character of the carnival, which at times spread over Athens as part of the zeitgeist and at others was deliberately pursued and institutionalised, reflects not only an aesthetic shift, a change in taste and habits, that came from the outside, but, according to Potamianos, mirrors the general bourgeois efforts to exert social control over the popular classes, and to integrate, urbanise and homogenise the new immigrant population that had concentrated in Athens from the 1880s and 1890s.

In addition to the analytical category of class, the author adds that of gender, devoting an entire chapter to the carnival of women, although the gender dimension permeates the entire study. Potamianos is also interested in the spatial dimension of the changes that the Athenian carnival underwent, a theme that is interwoven intersectionally with the category of gender since the exit of women from the *oikos* also signifies their entry

into new festive spaces such as masked balls and European dance halls.

The political, cultural and analytical category around which the historian choreographs the oppositions he discovers through his sources is that of hegemony. He focuses not on the binaries, but on the ongoing oppositions that emerge from the research material, through a historical perspective. According to his own classification, these are: popular and bourgeois culture; European paradigms and traditional customs; magical thinking and civilisation; nostalgia and progress; street carnivals and the amusement offered in bourgeois halls. To sum up, besides a social history of carnival and Athenian society, Potamianos' study allows us to engage in anthropological, ethnocultural and folkloric readings and to approach cultural performances from a cultural studies and gender studies perspective.

In the book's introduction, the historian's intention to open up his work to other related disciplines is clear. One of the central questions/dilemmas that carnival scholars, from Bakhtin to Baroja, Turner, Schechner, Scott, Gluckman and Testa, have grappled with is whether we can argue for the "death of carnival",¹ whether we can see carnival as a "safety valve" to vent popular anger, or whether we can perceive it as a *per se* subversive, popular, rebellious and immutable festivity, following Bakhtin's idealistic approach. Potamianos joins the contemporary generation of scholars with an intermediary approach that recognises carnival as a polysemic event and emphasises the class, gender and dynamic character of this polysemy, which leads to the understanding of the refinement and urbanisation of the carnival under study that avoids deterministic approaches.

From the rich literature that the historian cites to support this position, some significant theoretical starting points stand out. The first is the perception of social behaviour, the formation of the state and other structures, as well as the forcible imposition of the upper classes on the lower as a "process of civilisation", as understood by German sociologist Norbert Elias. This compliance by individuals and Athenian society in Potamianos' book does not follow the possibly linear approach that Elias gives to his own historical examples; they are presented as ongoing dynamic processes. This leads us to three other significant theoretical references highlighted by Potamianos. The Gramscian and post-Gramscian (see Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall)² readings of hegemony that he uses to argue for the dynamic, conflictual and open-ended nature of the cultural process; the polyphony of carnival, according to Peter Burke; and James C. Scott's approach to carnival as a moment of the emergence of the "hidden transcripts"³ of resistance by submissive groups competing against the hegemony of the dominant.

Placing such a central political and cultural concept at the heart of a historical or anthropological study carries certain risks in terms of a researcher's ability to discern indigenous meanings that emerge from the material; dangers also related to the flow of the historical narrative. Potamianos, who has a profound knowledge of class stratification in

Athens (see his earlier work on shopkeepers and craftsmen, 1880–1925), not only avoids these dangers, but reveals the multiple expressions, institutions and pathways through which bourgeois political and cultural hegemony was achieved in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Athens, without interrupting the historical narrative or abandoning the process of detailed historical documentation of his hypothesis. An example of this direction is the emphasis he places on the institution of *comitia* and its connection with the project of bourgeois modernisation. He brings out the institutions and instruments through which the hegemonic section of the bourgeoisie attempted to impose its hegemony, contain political satire and transform carnival culture from a participatory process into a spectacle. Thus, the concept of hegemony serves the social history of the subjects, the festive customs (*Apokria*, *Koulouma*, Clean Monday) of the public spaces (Temple of Olympian Zeus), the symbols (camels, dung idols) and even the carnival sounds, the transition from street noise to European music. Another interesting feature of the study is the situatedness of the carnival within other popular spectacles and local customs. Thus, the Athenian carnival is also seen as part of a broader indigenous theatrical culture.

Another theoretical axis in Potamianos' study is the work of anthropologist Victor Turner on the concept of liminality. Potamianos draws on Turner's distinction between liminality and liminoid to describe the changes that the contemporary carnival has undergone. Although Potamianos notes that no vigorous and sustained resistance to the hegemony of the bourgeoisie emerges from his examination of the material, his dynamic reading of the carnival and the theoretical tools he recreates through his reading of the sources enable him to question totalities and avoid generalities: First, to identify the relations and oppositions between the different parts of the bourgeoisie, distinguishing the modernist from the conservative tendency (including the monarchist forces); second, to identify with his lens the fragments of resistance in the long term, without being determined by the few accounts offered by the press of the time; and, third, to recognise the autonomy of those social categories that were fascinated by or even benefitted from the new hegemonic culture, namely the petty bourgeoisie and women in particular.

As for the study of gender relations from the perspective of women, Potamianos posits that bourgeois culture found in women an important ally to spread and strengthen its hegemony. In his study, we trace the changes in women's movements towards a greater coexistence of the sexes and the spread of mixed sociality. We could say that the bourgeoisie's desire to civilise the carnival encountered women's desire to leave the home and enter safer spaces, away from teasing and harassment. Although Potamianos notes that the material he has at his disposal is not always sufficient, the way he describes carnival masquerades and the ambiance of freedom that masked balls offered allows us to identify women's agency as well as the different gender performances of men dressed as women. This may be why the author wonders if the norms of hegemonic masculinity were enforced or challenged. However, if we launch forward from the radicality of women's participation in the carnival, as pointed out in the work, we can better understand the

historical dimension of the recent renewal of traditional male-dominated carnival and festive performances (since 1980) in Europe and in Latin America through the dynamic presence of women in those. In these cases, the counterhegemonies of marginalised social groups that emerged from the historiography of the 1970s and 1980s (women, blacks, LGBTQ+ subjects) are present in Potamianos' work. In this sense, the study is in dialogue with studies of contemporary carnival and festival performances from the perspective of gender relations and feminist hegemony.⁴

One of the book's merits is its dialogic methodology, which reveals the backstage of its author's research, and the transparent exposition of research dilemmas and aporias, which offer us the possibility for alternative readings of the stories he tells. The historical description is dense and, most times, ethnographic, while the accompanying illustrations support the narrative and allow the reader to visually experience and sense carnival vignettes.

Finally, it could be said that the very title of the study, “*Spectacles of Insolence*”, is both an allusion to the carnival and a topical commentary. The title emerges from the research material, particularly an 1884 issue of the *Logos* newspaper, and although, as the author notes, it is more appropriate to the nineteenth century, it reminds us that the “insolence” of the carnival survives to this day. It is these small resistances of impudence that Potamianos speaks of that perhaps allow us to identify, even in the twenty-first-century carnival, subversive moments in the festivities of Cádiz, Notting Hill, and Mobile, Alabama, for example, where new radical counterhegemonic groups have taken the floor and new popular festive performances keep renewing carnival traditions.

¹ Julio Caro Baroja, *El carnaval: Análisis histórico-cultural* (Madrid: Taurus, 1965).

² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Stuart Hall, Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁴ Katerina Sergidou, “‘Living Like Queens’: Gender Conflict and Female Counter-Hegemony in Contemporary Cádiz Carnival,” *Journal of Festive Studies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 153–78, <https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2020.2.1.34>.