

## Why Do We Have So Many Carnivals in Town Today? An Event Between Ritual, Politics, and Festival

DANIELA STAVĚLOVÁ



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2023.4.33> © Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV, v. v. i. © 2023, Daniela Stavělová. This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons

*Daniela Stavělová, Department of Ethnomusicology and Ethnochoreology, Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Na rovní 8, 162 00 Praha 6, Czech Republic; e-mail: stavelova@eu.cas.cz*

Since the late 1990s in the Czech Republic, rural carnival celebrations in urban environments have become a phenomenon through which to experience and gain knowledge of cultural patterns associated with the pre-industrial period. This article explores some of the key elements that make carnival tradition an ideal resource for reimagining festivities in the modern era. The study also highlights the ways communication takes place within the public space and the sharing of common ideas through non-verbal means, which significantly strengthening society's capacity for social resilience. The article focuses on carnivals held since the 2014 in Prague and its surroundings, examining how their contemporary manifestations are a tool for individual districts to make certain groups of inhabitants and their visions more visible. Based on long-term qualitative research on these events, the paper analyses the process of 'carnivalisation' and 'communitisation' in recent times and reflects on the role of collective memory in constructing the form of today's carnivals. The main question asked is what kind of event these newly rethought carnivals represent. Carnival is perceived here as a politicised process of community building, lifestyle narration, and/or social protest.

*Keywords:* carnival, community, urban, memory, politics, Prague

*How to cite:* Stavělová, D. (2023). Why Do We Have So Many Carnivals in Town Today? An Event Between Ritual, Politics and Festival. *Slovenský národopis*, 71(4), 342–364. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2023.4.33>

The composer Leoš Janáček (1958) asked himself a similar question to the title of this article at the beginning of the twentieth century; in his essay “Why we do have so many Polkas and Waltzes?” he wondered why these two dances had gained the upper

hand over more aesthetically diverse traditional folk dances.<sup>1</sup> These other dances were falling into oblivion, eclipsed by those that were becoming message bearers in a society that swayed to the rhythm of the polka and waltz to dance its way into the modern age. The astonishing number of carnival celebrations in various parts of Prague and its surroundings leads us to a similar reflection. It forces us to look for answers that would clarify today's use of traditional forms of Mardi Gras for the needs of a society looking for ways to communicate and possibilities to share.

Since the late 1990s in the Czech Republic, rural carnival celebrations in urban environments have been a phenomenon reflecting the experience and knowledge of cultural patterns associated with the pre-industrial period (Stavělová, Kratochvíl, 2016). In these urban festivities, expression through music and dance becomes part of a so-called ritual language capable of transferring commonly held symbols to the plane of public communication. They borrow elements of traditional rural popular festivities and manipulate their form and content to fit the new sociocultural context of the city or, by their conception, help to shape the identity of the place. The process of carnivalisation is similar in many countries in Europe and beyond; we can find several examples where elements of the carnival are adapted and utilised to harmonise with the appropriate environment and time (Creed, 2011; Tauschek, 2010). Among the many elements of this polysemic form, those that can become part of the ritual language are deliberately selected.

The aim of this study is to understand the motivations and reasons for celebrating carnivals today. It examines some of the essential elements of traditional carnival culture that make these events a timely resource ripe for rethinking and repurposing to today's needs. These include carnival's flexibility and adaptability to different conditions of functioning; the elements of creativity; the possibilities for broad participation; and the ritualisation and authenticity of carnival's manifestations which push the boundaries of everyday existence into the realm of the sacred. The study also highlights forms of communication within the public space and the ability to share common ideas through non-verbal means, significantly strengthening society's capacity for social resilience. It also asks to what extent this expressive culture helps form a strong attachment to place and satisfies the human need to belong somewhere. Finally, it analyses the process of 'carnivalisation' and 'communitisation' in recent times and reflects on the role of collective memory<sup>2</sup> in constructing the forms of today's carnivals.

- 
- 1 Leoš Janáček published his short essay *Why do we have so many Polkas and Waltzes?* in *Lidové noviny* on 9 April 1905. It was more of an ironic sigh at the decline of traditional Moravian folk dances, whose diversity had been superseded by these two universalized dances. He sees in this a decline in national consciousness and a loss of cultural identity (Janáček, 1958). See also (Vysloužil, Procházková, Eds., 2009).
  - 2 Collective memory in our case means the sum of knowledge of traditional folk carnival practices and their transmission through various media. This can be done today through the experience of practices in some rural areas, but also through field research, popularization literature, mass media, etc. As Ann Rigney (2019: 66) states, cultural practices are not simply those which merely reflect social attitudes but are formative in their own right, and need to be understood on their own terms as well as in relation to the actors whose attitudes and emotions they shape.

The article analyses carnivals held since the end of 1990s in Prague and its surroundings, where their contemporary constructs – hybrid forms mixing contemporary and traditional elements – have become a tool for individual districts to make visible certain groups of inhabitants and their visions. The aim is usually to emphasise the connection to a given locality through the preservation of its memory. This is done by seeking out local sources of cultural memory, often embedded in traditional music and dance, by emphasising sites of memory and local specificities, or by reinforcing collective memory through the creation of collectively selected and accepted rural cultural expressions of the pre-industrial period (masks, music, dance, food, clothing etc.). Systematic fieldwork for this project started in 2014 in the districts of Břevnov, Letná, Hlubočepy, Buštěhrad and Roztoky near Prague. It is a repeated and long-term qualitative study based on observation, ethnographic interviews,<sup>3</sup> visual studies and CDA (critical discourse analysis) supported by analysis of various forms of self-presentation: leaflets, posters, and websites.

Interviews were conducted with both ordinary participants in the event and its key organisers and leaders. Due to my repeated visits to the event, I also was considered an actor and my position was somewhere in the middle between insider and outsider – in some situations I was a “masked ethnographer” and in others I was invited as a performer in the accompanying programme – for example, I delivered a lecture on the Mardi Gras tradition. The long-term and regularly repeated research allowed me to get close to the actors and establish friendly relationships with them. As a result, I was invited to the meetings of the preparatory committee and could thus directly follow debates on the design of the carnival of a particular district, that is, the process of negotiating its essence and meaning for a given locality. These debates included, among other things, negotiating the itinerary of the carnival parade in such a way as to allow for the greatest possible participation of the residents. There was also a desire to find an “iconic” place for local residents to come together for a communal dance that would enhance mutual social ties and attachment to the area. These debates also revealed the extent to which the dialogue between residents and their representatives of the locality, including various policies and strategies, is reflected in these events.

### Feast, or Celebration?

The first question to ask is what kind of event these newly rethought carnivals are. The sociologist Winfried Gebhardt distinguishes between two basic types of festivities and arrives at a somewhat paradoxical definition of a “feast” or “Fest” – a term he uses to describe events characterised by a regulated order that allows for unregulated, disorderly, and unplanned events within a precisely timed period. However, by “routinising” festivities, i.e., by rationalising their content and formalising

---

<sup>3</sup> For the sake of conciseness, I use quotations from interviews related primarily to the Roztoky carnival, but similar reflections are also captured in interviews conducted in other localities.

their course, they lose their extraordinary power. Such events, which Gebhardt refers to as “celebrations” can become hollowed-out traditions, losing the experience of spontaneity and authenticity, and thus lose their relevance for the everyday. While the stability of the holiday as a social institution may be very strong and enduring, its function may be weakened such that its impact on the formation of social bonds is diminished (Gebhardt, 1993: 61; 1994).

Gebhardt (1987: 40) also draws on extensive research to distinguish two sets of characteristics that stand in opposition to each other. On the one hand, there are festivities that represent ecstatic, spontaneous, emotional and excessive moments, such as carnivals, Roman saturnalia and beer festivals. On the other hand, there are festivities that are characterised by calmness, contemplation, solemnity and organised ceremony, such as religious services, jubilees and commemorative events.

For Gebhardt, this opposition is the starting point for further reflection on the social theory of festivities in two directions: he links festivities to emotional or affective behaviour and to value-rational behaviour. This corresponds to an understanding of the feast as the institutionalisation of an action that shapes the community, or communalisation (“Vergemeinschaftung”) and the celebration/festival as the institutionalisation of an action that constitutes society (“Vergesellschaftung”). If we understand the feast (“Fest”) as an ideal type, we can therefore see in it the institutionalisation of an affective action that temporarily cancels out everyday reality. Within it, spontaneous, emotional action is not only allowed but even expected. Specifically, this exacerbated behaviour corresponds to a state of ecstasy that frees up space for activities that stand outside everyday norms, manners and values. The forms of festivities that come closest to this ideal type are those associated with ecstatic rituals, feasts, music and dance. Dance in particular, which involves controlled body movement and provides the opportunity to experience physical release, provides detachment from the everyday, often aided by the use of altered lighting effects that promote sensory immersion (Gebhardt, 1987: 40–45).

As a result, the feast brings a disruption of everyday rules and norms. The classic example here is Mardi Gras, which allows the overturning not only of everyday morality but also of the social order and the power relations associated with it. Subjects and servants are allowed to play kings and masters. The high mixes with the low and gender roles are loosened and reversed. Prohibitions associated with the everyday order of sexuality and power are lifted and creative freedom is awakened in individuals. The burdens that one carries in the form of the uncertainty and vicissitudes of everyday life can be cast off and one can give oneself over to the experience of the transcendent world. But the negative definition also dialectically carries with it the experience of unity, the assurance of one’s own existence. The fragmentation of human existence into many roles and situations is concentrated in the festive moment into the singularity of existential fulfilment. According to Gebhardt (1987: 53), this occurs both on an individual level and collectively. Differences within a social group can be overcome through the co-experiencing of the moment of unity. A togetherness is established which, through the festivity, escapes from everyday reality, forgets it, and thus rebuilds itself in its unity.

The feast draws on a direct common existence intensified by a shared affective experience. The interrelationship of feast and celebration is thus dialectical. One disrupts the social order, the other confirms it. One is based on affective, the other on conscious action. One is associated with emotion and release, the other with ideas and regularity. Gebhart concludes that modern leisure activities cannot have the same function as holidays/feasts according to his previous definition. They are in fact only an escape from work, not from everyday life in general. Moreover, they do not provide an opportunity for relaxation and detachment from everyday values and norms because they are organised commercialised activities designed to make a profit. This, however, makes feasts disappear from Gebhardt's modern world altogether, leaving us with only the modern form of festival: a celebration. Despite the declared symmetry of the two concepts, traditional society is primarily associated with specific feasts, but in modern times we mostly find only festivals or celebrations.

Despite not agreeing entirely with Gebhardt's conclusion, we can use it as a starting point for a different type of analysis. In exploring the importance and value of these events for today's city residents it is, I propose, possible to draw more from them than merely their symbolic meanings and historical permutations. We have to defend leisure as a meaningful, theoretical, framing concept and demonstrate that leisure theory is central to understanding wider debates about identity, post-modernity and globalisation in contemporary societies (Bennett, Taylor, Woodward, *Eds.*, 2014; Merkel, *Ed.*, 2015). Put another way, the best single answer to all the questions posed above is that these rituals became intimate and integrative elements of people's lives, perhaps more so than other elements of life to which researchers have devoted more attention since 1989. So why not look to them for insight into the broader social, political and economic forces impacting contemporary life? Historians and literary critics have found similar carnival activities to be revelatory of an earlier European folk culture (Le Roy Ladurie, 1979; Bakhtin, 1984; Burke, 1989; Heers, 2006). Following their example, and the lead of carnival participants, I suggest that we can learn a lot about life in post-socialist Bohemia by looking through the lens of this seemingly esoteric cultural practice (Creed, 2011: 2).

## Carnivalisation and Communitisation

It is important to understand the motivations for celebrating the carnival today and the reasons for doing so. We cannot ignore the current sociopolitical and economic context, which at any given moment is decisive for the setting of lifestyles, the perception of everyday life, the distinction between public and private and, especially, the concept of carnival. Just as the abundance of polkas and waltzes in early twentieth-century society intrigued the composer Leoš Janáček and led him to reflect on the social significance of these cultural expressions, today we also ask what these parades and masquerades, combined with feasting, music and dancing, reveal about society itself, about its needs and shortcomings. Even after more than thirty years of

transition to capitalism, this process remains long-term transformation generating a broad range of new situations that have significantly transformed the lifestyles of ordinary people, bringing uncertainty and fear of the future. The question of belonging (Appadurai, 1996) emerged in the 1990s in the Czech Republic following the sociopolitical changes brought about by the collapse of the Iron Curtain. In urban settings, people were seeking possibilities for how to stimulate life in a common space. The elements of carnival proved helpful in creating an escape and a space for sharing. Proven practices and mechanisms from the past for overcoming fear or facing uncertainty by creating and strengthening social relationships have disappeared. However, new ones are being found, while those that have disappeared are being rediscovered. Mumming, which is an integral part of carnival, (Creed, 2011) is the perfect response to the difficulty and uncertainty of contemporary life. We ask to what extent this expressive culture helps form a strong attachment to place and has the potential to locate and satisfy the need to belong somewhere. At the same time, it raises the question of the formation of local communities – which often become a form of security, albeit a fluid one, in an uncertain world – and how community helps to counteract anomie and other consequences of the uncertainty and unsettledness of a mobile world (Bauman, 2001).

These uncertainties can become an important reason for the emergence of local forms of today's carnivals, as evidenced, for example, by an interview with the founder and organiser of the carnival in Roztoky:

I realised when I moved to Roztoky how hard it is for me when nobody greets me on the street, nobody at all. ... And when my children got sick, because I lived there alone for the first three quarters of the year, my husband only came on weekends because he still had a job in Benešov, how hard it is not to be a local. ... And the carnival, given that I did it in Břevnov when I was still living in Benešov and before that in Nymburk, was offered as a gateway to Roztoky, as a way of getting to know the people and the institutions. First, I felt comfortable in it because I had studied a lot of things and I know that it works attractively as something that people can participate in without barriers, let me put it this way. And what I mean by that is that there's no skill or opinion or predilection required, like if someone goes to [hear] classical music, someone goes to the puppet theatre, the carnival is so barrier-free that you don't have to overcome any shyness. (Interview, woman, organizer of the carnival, Roztoky, 15 February 2022)

As it is often the case at Shrovetide, a much greater degree of emotional excess is permitted than in everyday life. Carnival denies formality, authority and prejudice. Mardi Gras can become a means, in today's disintegrated and mobile society, to create a space for mutual communication, to strengthen the attachment to a given place related to the formation of a kind of collective identity – simply to belong somewhere and share common ideas.

In Roztoky it was very easy because the population is composed differently and those people were very interested in it; and, at the same time, it was a place that suffered from proximity to Prague, where it was customary to go for culture and not to have any local culture there. ... So, the second ambition that was born with the Mardi Gras was to create a local culture that people from Prague would come to and not just be a bed and breakfast of Prague. (Interview, woman, organizer of the carnival, Roztoky, 15 February 2022)

Celebrating Mardi Gras can also be a tool for a democratising society to create a public space for social conversation. The induction of temporary chaos, as well as legitimised violence in the form of a mock fight or clash, has a cathartic function. At the same time, creating space for alternative ideas also helps to re-establish and maintain order. This letting off of steam is a time-tested element that is probably still one of the main reasons for reinventing and constructing the Mardi Gras celebration today.

I don't think that carnival is only for children, but that it is across generations, that there are all kinds of moments, so everyone can find their own. And on top of that, [the participant] can put something over his face to stay hidden, and have some anonymity, so he doesn't have to worry about putting himself out there. Or, on the other hand, he can get closer to people because he's protected by that role or that mask. ... the essential thing was my desire to get to know the place and the people who live there. And it keeps working that way for people who want to try different skills. And I found that getting it out in front of people, it actually attracts other people from the community like a magnet. But I had tried that in Benešov, so I reached for something that was proven, that I felt safe and comfortable in. And I knew it worked as a dating tool ... I just took out the dating tool and offered it to the town, or rather to the Central Bohemian Museum, and it took off very quickly. (Interview, woman, organizer of the carnival, Roztoky, 15 February 2022)

### **Between Cultural Heritage and a "Post-traditional Communitisation"**

While traditional Shrovetide carnivals held today in rural settings are, despite a number of innovative elements, often thought of as cultural heritage with the possibility of inclusion on the UNESCO list, urban ones are completely excluded from this perspective. This can be something of an advantage, allowing the holiday to function as a modern feast because it is not perceived as a cultural heritage associated with the pre-industrial period; in other words, it is not bound by any obligation or responsibility to the original model. It can unrestrictedly realise the most daring variations on the borrowed, proven structure of Shrovetide. Creed (2011)



*Photo 1: Queen Emerita of the head of the Roztoky tour. Photo: D. Stavělová, Roztoky 2014.*

points out the pitfalls of integrating a traditional holiday into today's society in his monograph on traditional Mardi Gras in post-socialist Bulgarian society. He points out that while carnival is perceived as a cultural heritage, mumming is not always seen as something of current relevance; in the eyes of many observers, it is quintessentially premodern. When Creed mentioned his interest in mumming to urban politicians or even urban intellectuals (other than folklorists or ethnologists), it often provoked embarrassment. The link between civil society and modernity disqualifies particular activities that are, for whatever reasons, interpreted as premodern. Seeing mumming as premodern is determined by its purported antiquity, abetted by the fact that it is performed in "backward" rural areas (of a country whose hold on modernity is itself tenuous). This view remains prevalent, despite the fact that the rituals have shifted significantly in response to modern demands. At the same time the incorporation of mumming as a prime piece of national(istic) folklore since the 1960s also works against the image of civil society as a vehicle of diverse interest representation distinct from the state within a Western framework that automatically links the national to the state (Creed, 2011: 129–130).

A similar situation arises in our case, but with the difference that these newly constructed carnivals are often regarded by both the professional and lay public as



mere frivolity with no deeper meaning. While Mardi Gras, which is now held in rural settings with a sense of continuity in the local tradition of the feast, can be seen as more conservative in structure and form and in its basic elements (Stavělová, 2008), urban manifestations are much more innovative. In the contemporary urban environment, there is a selective choice of elements associated with the form of rural Mardi Gras in the pre-industrial period that fit contemporary ideas regardless of regional origin; it is common to invent or construct a new form of one's "own" Mardi Gras based on eclectic knowledge. Elements are chosen that identify with the created environment, using visual symbolism (masks, clothing) or the possibility of transmitting emotions (music and dance), as can be seen in Figure 1.

However, it cannot be denied that this rethinking often involves efforts to consider at least a suggestion of local tradition, even if what emerges is quite different from the original. An example of this is the use of "Dolnopovltavský"<sup>4</sup> costumes in Roztoky's Mardi Gras carnival. The costume locals have (re)constructed is a fiction, but it is nevertheless an important element in the present-day festival:

We are now doing a lot of studying; we have immersed ourselves in all the possible collections in the Central Bohemian Museum and we have visited many people [memorials] in the Ruzyně and Středokluky area who still have their original costumes at home. So, we have a lot of material and now we are going to sew it ... as we don't have the mantles and we are making them ourselves, we are going to do it in our own way so that we are comfortable, and we enjoy it. (Interview, woman, organizer of the carnival, Roztoky, 7 March 2019)

The essential thing about these "invented" carnivals is their harmony with the place they are constructed. A completely unique form was given to the Roztoky carnival with original names of the masks worn by participants. This is not unusual, but neither is the transmission of these new forms to other localities with their "own" carnivals.

What is specific to these new carnivals, and directly related to the need for identification, is the strong emphasis on the process of community building. Sociologists Ronald Hitzler and Andreas Hepp mention "post-traditional community" (Hitzler, 1998; Hitzler, 2008; Hepp, Hitzler, 2016) and make a distinction between communitisation as the subjective process of being affectively involved in community building and community as the more stable figuration of those individuals who share with each other such feelings of "belonging" and a "common we".

They argue that the typical contemporary communal form desired today is one that offers the individual a maximal prospect of self-realisation linked to the least possible degree of dependence and obligation. For them, what has been labelled as a post-traditional form of community is based on a shared sense of belonging, the coincidence of inclination, preferences and passions, together with what is regarded as the "proper" behaviour of those involved. Consequently, the ties binding a community

---

4 Traditional clothing from the Lower Vltava region.



*Photo 2: Death and Lent, specifics masks/puppets from Rostoky. Photo: D. Stavělová, Rostoky 2015.*

of this kind together are structurally unstable – if not in every case, at least as a rule. They link processes in which a sense of community is created with the term of “communitisation”, whereas “community” relates to the resulting (situational) sense of community in a figuration of actors. Hepp and Hitzler characterise the constitutive of communities of any kind as demarcation with respect to those who are “not one of us”. However, they define it as a feeling of collectivity, whatever its origins; the establishment of a shared set of values among members of the community, whatever these values might be; and some kind of space that is accessible to members for their interaction with each other (Hepp, Hitzler, 2016: 136–137).

Both authors begin with Max Weber's (1972) definition of communitisation. There are two reasons for this. In the first place, his definition is sufficiently open to encompass very different communitisations. The examples that he takes – reaching from small group to nation – make it clear that, from a subjective point of view, “collectivity” and the feeling of being “one of us” are central to communitisation, and that this can be applied to quite different social relationships. Secondly, Weber does not link his definition of communitisation to *specific* traditional collectivities (such as family or village) but emphasises that the felt sense of belonging can also have other origins (Hepp, Hitzler, 2016: 139). They also mention a subjective horizon of communitisation. This means that for the subject a general horizon of communitisations arises beyond the situational experience of communitisation, within which the subject can recognise and position itself. The horizon of communitisation is the “backdrop” against which the situational experience of communitisation occurs. On the other hand, it is also the “point of departure” from which situations of communitisation can be evoked as experiences (Hepp, Hitzler, 2016: 139–140).

Thus, what is important to observe in the construction of today's carnivals is not their final form but the negotiation process itself, which reveals the needs and intentions of contemporary society. Just as the process of communitisation, the rethinking of the content and visual form of Mardi Gras gives this holiday a participatory dimension. From this spectrum, however, we cannot exclude commercialisation in the use of modern means in the implementation of some plans related to the use of public space, while even an originally intimate event can take on the dimension of a festival. It must be acknowledged that even the attributes of a holiday can change in a social context and the distinction between a holiday/feast and a festival is arbitrary.

## Negotiating Between a Feast and a Festival

In all the “invented” carnivals I have observed, there is a tendency to use elements of the traditional carnival, and the most consistent is the one in Roztoky. It is divided into two parts – private and public.

The private part of the parade has the character of a traditional carnival procession from house to house, although only a certain number of households who have expressed an interest in participating are selected, with prominence given to newly arrived residents of Roztoky, who are welcomed and accepted into the local community. The website of the Roztoč Cultural Association, which is also the main organiser of this event, acts as a communication hub. The public masked parade includes members of the Roztoč association and is accompanied by a live band, which also consists of regular local participants. The masks are close in concept to the zoomorphic masks of the traditional carnival – the goat, the bear and bear-keeper – who lead the local women in a dance. A feast is prepared in front of each selected house, the main speaker being the Mardi Gras Queen, who wishes all its inhabitants' prosperity and health. To confirm this wish, a traditional dance is then performed

under the direction of the Queen, which can be traced in various Bohemian sources. The simple dance moves are easy to follow, so everyone has no problem joining in. The same is true of the next dance, the Jewess, which was also selected from collections of folk songs and dances mainly for its simplicity and participatory nature. There are also folk songs associated with Mardi Gras in Bohemia. Refreshments are homemade, as recommended by the website. The tour ends either in a local pub or in a private room, where participants feast on donated food, dance, and sing to the accompaniment of musicians into the night.

The carnival grew gradually, so from the very beginning it wasn't that we were doing something for the locals and something for the public, it evolved gradually. ... We always just had a house tour [a circuit involving house-to-house visits]; we usually started at the castle or the square, we would go round the people, we would randomly say – let's go this way. ... Because it was impossible to go around the whole town at once, we ended up back at the museum, and that's just how it was for a long couple of years. But it just happened that gradually people from outside came to see our tour, the so-called gawkers. ... And these are the people who don't put on [a mask], they just come to see. And because we used to conceive of the round in such a way that the householders would treat us [to refreshments], that we would dance with them, wish them something, and so on, suddenly the number of these people who would need to be offered treats, to be consulted somehow, to dance with them, grew so large that it was just uncomfortable for the households [visited as part of the parade]. It was unpleasant for us [local participants and organisers] too. But we understood the tendency to join, and we didn't want to lose that, so we came up with this way of separating the parade, which stayed in that neighbourhood form [of house-to-house visits]. And what's just important for us is to, for example, go to those people who have newly moved in, welcome them to Roztoky, get to know them, and establish just those neighbourly relationships. And this is actually. ... the good living in that town, this is what we actually nurture with the visit, the purpose is to make the others happy, to please each other and somehow just to get closer – by dancing, singing, even by offering treats, eating together and so on.

... And we didn't want to miss that. So, we cut the [private] parade off from the [public] gala parade, if I put it that way, which we then led through the town, where again those who just wanted to look and enjoy the sight of the masks could come. (Interview, woman, organizer of the carnival, Roztoky, 7 March 2019)

The public aspects of the ceremony have gradually taken the form of a festival which, today, attracts around 10,000 people from Prague and the surrounding area, but also from abroad. Apart from students, the entertainment is mainly provided by travelling musicians who usually come to play at their own expense. This often results in a mix of different musical styles, including Czech and Balkan brass bands, African drums, klezmer and other forms. The variety of masks also knows no bounds; visitors



*Photo 3: Participation is most evident through offering refreshments and dancing together in the houses visited by the private parade. Photo: D. Stavělová, Roztoky 2015.*

are encouraged to participate with their own masks, and masks are also available for loan from the Roztoč association. The people of Roztoč wear specific masks created especially for this carnival, dominated by the figure of Bacchus, but also featuring dogs, stilt walkers, and so on. Each mask has its own legend, which can also be found on the Roztoč website. The masks are very photogenic and add to the attractiveness of the public parade and attract many photographers to the event. Many go on to publish or exhibit their photographs. These “photographers on the hunt” convey their view of this event, which they interpret in an aestheticised form through their photographs. They are more drawn to the visual aspects, the bizarreness of the masks, looking for a kind of mystery of times past and gone. Jan Mihaliček, for example, states in his exhibition catalogue that he aims to capture

fading glimpses of the magic and mystery of carnivals. ... these have moved away from the original meaning of the ritual and are reappearing mainly in the form of visually interesting gatherings of a large number of people and masks, which, although they follow the original traditions, are mostly devoid of that strong spiritual element. Although it is a very colourful spectacle, the monochromatic



Photo 4: *Dancing with households.* Photo: D. Stavělová, Rostoky 2015.

nature of the black and white photographs refers to the former traditions and imagery of this festive period.<sup>5</sup>

The public parade follows a fixed route across Rostoky; it is not a walk, but rather a carnival parade across the city, where masked participants engage in excessive and outrageous behaviour. The parade is accompanied by several bands, with local drummers leading the procession. They are followed by the “plasterers”, who dance with broomsticks to clear the path of watchers and traffic and signal the arrival of the parade. All the mask-wearers follow them, accompanied by the other bands. Many people come just to watch; such people cause resentment among some of the actors, who label them “gawkers” who “just watch and take and add nothing to the carnival themselves”. When asked the organiser why so many come here, she replied:

those gawkers, I’m so sorry for that expression. ...They’ll come, they’ll make merry, and they’ll leave. And they’re not contributing anything but their physical presence, right? Why come? There’s a magnetism there. I know why the expats come here because they write to me and I interviewed her for French radio or TV, I don’t remember, and that’s where I learned that there’s some kind of closed Facebook group in France where people who live here in the Czech Republic post

5 <https://martinfryc.eu/vystavy/vernisaz-jan-mihalicek-masopusty/> (accessed August 10, 2023).



Photo 5: Meeting on Holý vrch and preparation for a common round timed for the beginning of dusk.  
Photo: D. Stavělová, Rostoky 2015.

when the Rostoky carnival is and when they're going to meet and who's going to wear what. So, they go there to meet up, maybe people from all over the country just come together.

... There are different groups [laughs] the UK has a group like that, the Scots meet there, people who have managed to say that, and it's a space for them to enjoy something in February, to be part of what I call Czech culture ... But why do the gawkers go there? Maybe it's just the aesthetic, somehow original and unique. So, it's just a spectacle, maybe it's also that they just take the kids or grandma and stand on that sidewalk and watch ... it's street theatre, I've actually spent a lot of time doing theatre on the street in Italy and for me it's something that I'm obviously interested in, excited about, and enjoy. (Interview, woman, organiser of the carnival, Rostoky 15 February 2022)

The parade used to end before nightfall on Holý vrch (Bare Hill) on the outskirts of Rostoky, where masked participants from three neighbouring villages (Horoměřice, Suchdol and Rostoky) would fight or duel and dance in one big common round, a moment perceived by all participants as significant. Since 2023, however, a change has been made and the round on the "sacred" Holý vrch (Bare Hill) has been kept private by the local actors to complete the non-public aspects of the festival. The public parade thus ends at another location in a specially built *chapidó* (circus tent), a paid event with a hired band for dancing and stallholders providing food.

It is evident that there has been a long process of negotiation in Roztoky about the carnival and the final distinction between what is perceived as a feast – that is, an intra-community event with the aim of strengthening community ties – and what has acquired the status of a festival with commercial exploitation of the spectacle.

However, not all contemporary urban carnivals can be characterised in this way; the differences are mainly in the degree of presentational and participatory character (Nahachewsky, 1995, 2001; Turino, 2008), which seems arbitrary (see also Hafstein, 2004, 2018; Mair, 2019). Furthermore, what is perceived as private and public has no fixed boundary and is a continuous subject of negotiation when constructing the form of carnival in each locality, but the common feature remains the desire for the expression of local identity.

## Strategies of the Carnival

Negotiating the appropriate shape of a carnival in each locality usually goes hand in hand with various policies that are reflected in the language of the carnival. Often it reflects the current lives of the citizens of the locality and can become subject of dialogue with the local municipality, for example, in opposition to inappropriate urban planning interventions by developers, or to protest against the marginalisation of local services, etc.

Roztoky Mardi Gras is somewhat reminiscent of the Mardi Gras in Buštěhrad near Prague, which involves a house-to-house walk and a joint party in the local wine bar at the end of the festival. It is also a grassroots event; visiting musicians also attend it but mostly only from Prague. Most residents of Buštěhrad moved there from Prague and continue to commute to the capital for work. The effort to build and maintain a local community is symbolically supported by the commemoration of places on the route which are a source of local pride, such as the museum commemorating the writer Ota Pavel which is on the principal street of the settlement.

An offshoot of Roztoky's festival is the relatively young carnival in Hlubočepy, Prague district, which also originated as a grassroots festival. It has many elements, such as the masquerade, in common, but it is gradually building its own image. It is organised by the Prokopovo Nature Conservation Association and the actors of the carnival, like the residents of Hlubočepy, are united by the desire to protect the area, which is near the Prokopské údolí nature reserve, from unwanted development.

Carnival in other districts of Prague is linked to other intentions. In Břevnov, the oldest district of Prague, the masquerade processes across the main street of the district on a route based on records of a carnival held by the Guild of Craftsmen from the nineteenth century. From that time up to the present day, the same family of butchers has been trading here, maintaining continuity even during the totalitarian period. Although they operated under the state trade, they were among the first to resume independent trading after 1989. Gradually, they also brought the tradition of Shrovetide to life, and to this day the butcher, who is also the main organiser of this



annual event, leads the parade. Tradition and its longevity are emphasised here, especially in terms of gastronomy, and tried and tested recipes of the Czech tradition are highlighted. Localism, provenance and quality are again emphasised, with the intention of making an important contribution to the sustainability of the small traders that line the main avenue of the neighbourhood. These traders are threatened with extinction by the municipality's decision to replace them with a large supermarket, which will saturate the area with cheap goods and repurpose space used by the original traders for other development projects. However, local service providers and small shops are constantly increasing in number and are consistently visible in the carnival procession.

Songs selected from collections of folk songs related to Holešovice, one of the oldest districts of Prague, in turn, serve to strengthen the identity of the old inhabitants of this district, which is better known today as Letná. As this district is currently one of the most expensive, it is currently undergoing gentrification, with some residents leaving in search of cheaper housing while luxuriously renovated apartments attract more affluent buyers. But these incomers also arrive with different ideas about municipal policy, and expect the municipality to deliver some of the bolder projects that support their lifestyle. This creates tensions between these two groups of residents, who have different ideas about life in the borough. The folk songs linked in content to the events of the district, together with their contemporary interpretation by the musicians of Old Prague, are meant to be a representation of continuity and resistance to the lifestyle manifestations of the new social class. Again, everything is geared towards community sustainability – where people thrive, they stay.

These carnivals should be seen as events that straddle the line between feast and festival, and the direction in which this line shifts will depend on future circumstances. Clearly, however, these “fool's feasts” can be seen as a separate category, which has also retained some elements of ritual even to this day (Muir, 2005).

## Social Cleansing As a Ritual

Just as in the past carnivals were not only associated with prosperity and fertility magic but often functioned as rituals associated with social renewal, so too can their present forms be seen as social rituals (Stavělová, 2008). Their inclusion at the beginning of a new year takes on further symbolic significance when there is a need to get rid of the accumulations of the past period and to cleanse, sustain and build social relations. This section discusses carnival as form of social cleansing – in particular, its modes of social cleansing, such as staged conflict, the reversal of status, satire, and so on. It is then just a matter of what local carnivals use at what time with an eye to their actual needs. Creed (2004), in his publication on Bulgarian mumming, paradoxically emphasises staged conflict as an effective way to sustain the community, considering a means of social cleansing as it helps people to vent tension and relieve social pressure.



*Photo 6: Alternative form of the carnival queen in Rostoky in the period of pandemic-related restrictions on gathering: instead people created an image of the queen in any form and displayed it on the outside of their house. Photo: D. Štavělová, Rostoky 2021.*

Unlike photographers seeking to aestheticise a kind of past in the present, I perceive these holidays primarily as situated in the present. A present that is built on a cultural memory that has a purely communicative dimension – only what works in the present is preserved (Buckland, 1995, 2001; Assmann, 2008; Schwartz, [2016] 2019: 13–18). The carnival is therefore not a commemorative reminder of something that is no more, but rather a lived present manifested as a ritual in modern society (Burke, 1989; Ricoeur, 2004; Muir, 2005).

The most striking element of ritualisation is the apparent repetitiveness of the feast, which has its fixed place in the annual calendar cycle. This is most often reflected by the actors themselves, as described by one of the key organisers of the Letná carnival:

would I miss Mardi Gras if it stopped? That's the same as missing Christmas or Easter. ... I think that such a holiday is part of the annual cycle. ... It's an enrichment, although of course it can always be missed. ... And nowadays, actually, cultural things are more and more expendable, everything is getting more expensive, people live in fear. ... But again, these are events where we meet, where the spirit is nurtured, so from that point of view I would miss it. (Interview, man, leading figure, Letná, 20 February 2022)

Rituals of this type can also be characterised as social drama (Turner, 2004). Their purpose is to create social control, a social mechanism to help maintain the stability of society. Social control offers a way to regulate the state of the community in times

of both stability and change, and means through which informal pressure can be exerted on group members. This mechanism can only be understood if expressed in terms of the ordinary behaviour of the individual actors. This can refer to any meaningful activity where the reactions of other people are taken into account, and this activity does not have to be rational – the irrational nature of ritual is emphasized. Ritual, as a formalised, collective, institutionalised form of repetitive action, functions here as a rule that guides people's behaviour in the vicinity of the sacred and can help create an experience of solidarity where consensus is lacking (Muir, 2005: 3). It can also be characterised as a way of doing that sustains and modifies society itself.

One form of social cleansing is satire. Satire, like staged conflict in carnival structure, is a means of venting tensions in society to circumvent real conflict. It can thus be seen as a form of social control, a way to prevent tensions in society from escalating in an undesirable way. In the context of Prague's carnivals, satire is used with restraint, but the actors admit that they must restrain themselves from allowing their imagination more space. This is mainly due to the desire for consensus in the creation of a common space, which includes the local authorities, so the local authorities choose other ways to communicate their views on local politics; social networks, for example, are an important medium. Satire is therefore only a very cautious means of negotiation, it takes the form of reflection on current events where there are shared expressions of solidarity, as was the case, for example, after the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The joint public sharing of emotions related to this event contributed to the creation of more tangible mutual bonds at the time. This affective dimension of such holidays is thus an important element that is also an indispensable part of the ritual itself.

Despite the satirical elements of carnival, the local mayor of the district is an essential figure in the opening of the carnival. The carnival opens with the symbolic passing of "carnival law", where the mayor formally hands over to participants the right to rule the municipality for the entire duration of the carnival – an element of the traditional carnival that has been retained unchanged in the modern manifestation. None of the observed carnivals begin without the mayor's involvement. It is another of the stable recurring elements that elevate this holiday to the sacred and separate it from the everyday. The presence of the mayor or deputy mayor is seen as representing the participation of the authorities, even if it happens at different times, in different places and to different degrees. In some places the mayor may have a more formal role, while in others they take part in the masquerade and procession or prepare an original opening speech. In doing so, they show a greater or lesser degree of their own participation and, as a rule, it is always possible to learn something about the interrelationships in the locality from this performative act.

## Conclusion

As the above findings show, it is impossible to characterise today's carnivals unambiguously and it is necessary to view this phenomenon in its complexity and ambiguity. The carnivals discussed here undoubtedly adopt the cultural patterns of traditional Mardi Gras but manipulate them according to contemporary needs, and this is the main reason to perceive such events as cultural property, a concept that deals with local strategies of labelling a tradition as a cultural property of a specific community by reconstructing the historical dimension of a local property regime. Cultural property can be analysed as a cultural technique in its own right that produces powerful local hierarchies and that refer to both material and symbolic dimensions (Tauschek, 2010). Concrete examples then show the main themes of today's urban society and the needs of people who are creating their own space for a stable life. It is not possible to clearly characterise what kind of event is involved; this is part of a constant process of negotiation by the actors themselves, taking into account the trends of the current era, characterised by a considerable degree of eclecticism. We can therefore find here elements of a feast with a focus on the intimate experience and sharing of the sacred, as well as a festival or celebration with commercial motivations. The manifestations of modern eventisation are clear for all to see (Gebhardt, Hitzler, 2000; Hitzler, 2011; Přikrylová, 2019; Popelková, 2023), with an emphasis on experientiality, interactivity, uniqueness and creativity meeting the practices of ritual as a situational strategic activity that can only be understood in relation to other activities (Bell, [1997] 2009). The purpose of the carnival is to attract people to participate in the experience of a non-repeatable event to which they must pay attention in a given place at a given moment.

Communitisation seems to be the most promising concept to reflect the popularity of carnivals. An important factor of the selected research areas is that they are also preferred destinations for citizens looking for the possibility of communitisation. The depopulation of central Prague, as it increasingly becomes a tourist attraction dominated by shopping centres and office buildings, is leading to a search for alternative and sustainable residential options. People often move to the outskirts of neighbourhoods or suburban areas that combine rural and urban lifestyles. These "semi-peripheral" places then offer new ways to create sustainable ways of living (Nebřenský, Šima, 2017). This urban/rural hybridity finds its shape in carnivals, which have historically taken place in both environments, taking into account their specific needs. In both cases, however, it appears (based on historical sources and today's ethnographic research) that they are primarily a means establishing and strengthening local social ties, providing the feeling of security.

In summary, carnivals invite the possibility of working with alternative content. The emphasis on creativity, participation and the sharing of emotions, as well as on tradition and the provenance of certain practices, give these events the appearance of a modern holiday/feast that provides a counterbalance to everyday life. However, the fluidity of the boundaries of the carnival must be considered. What is important

is that these boundaries, in the case of the carnivals discussed here, are set and negotiated by actors who are connected to the locality to which they consciously want to belong.

#### Acknowledgments:

The study was carried out in the framework of the RVO: 68378076 (Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences). It was produced with the support of the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic and was created within the project *Folklore revival in post-socialist countries: politics, memory, heritagization, and sustainability* GA 22-31474K.

## REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. (1996). The Production of Locality. In: A. Appadurai (Ed.), *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (pp. 178–199). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Assmann, J. (2008). Communicative and Cultural Memory. In: A. Erll, A. Nünning (Eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International Handbook* (pp. 109–118). New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2001). *Community. Seeking safety in an insecure world*. Cambridge and Oxford: Polity.
- Bell, C. ([1997] 2009). *Ritual: perspectives and dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, A., Taylor, J., Woodward, I. (Eds.) (2014). *The Festivalization of Culture*. Surrey, Burlington: Ashgate.
- Buckland, T. (1995). Embodying the Past in the Present: Dance and Ritual. In: G. Dąbrowska, L. Bielawski (Eds.), *Dance, Ritual and Music. 18th Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology, Skierniewice, 1994, Poland* (pp. 51–58). Warsaw: Polish Society for Ethnomusicology, Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences.
- Buckland, T. (2001). Dance, Authenticity and Cultural Memory: The Politics of Embodiment. In: A. L. Kaeppler, D. Christensen, S. Wild (Eds.), *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 33, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1519626>.
- Burke, P. (1989). History as Social Memory. In: T. Butler (Ed.), *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind* (pp. 97–110). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Creed, G. W. (2004). Constituted through Conflict: Images of Community (and Nation) in Bulgarian Rural Ritual. *American Anthropologist*, (106)1, 56–70. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2004.106.1.56>
- Creed, G. W. (2011). *Masquerade and Post socialism. Ritual and Cultural Dispossession in Bulgaria*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Gebhardt, W. (1987). *Fest, Feier und Alltag. Über die gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeit des Menschen und ihre Deutung*. Frankfurt am Main – New York: P. Lang.
- Gebhardt, W. (1993). *Charisma. Theorie – Religion – Politik*. Berlin – New York: W. de Gruyter.
- Gebhardt, W. (1994). *Charisma als Lebensform. Zur Soziologie des alternativen Lebens*. Berlin: D. Reimer.
- Gebhardt, W., Hitzler, R. (Eds.) (2000). *Events: Soziologie des Außergewöhnlichen*. Opladen: Leske+Budrych.

- Hafstein, V. Tr. (2004). *The Making of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Tradition and Authenticity, Community and Humanity*. Dissertation, University of California. Berkeley.
- Hafstein, V. Tr. (2018). Intangible Heritage as a Festival; or, Folklorization Revisited. *Journal of American Folklore*, 131(520), 127–149. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.131.520.0127>
- Heers, J. (2006). *Svátky bláznů a karnevaly. Fêtes des Fous et Carnavals*. Praha: Argo.
- Hitzler, R. (1998). Posttraditionale Vergemeinschaftung. Über neue Formen der Sozialbindung. *Berliner Debatte, INITIAL*, 9, 81–89.
- Hitzler, R. (2008). Brutstätten posttraditionaler Vergemeinschaftung. In: R. Hitzler, A. Honer, M. Pfadenhauer (Eds.), *Posttraditionale Gemeinschaften. Theoretische und ethnographische Erkundungen* (pp. 55–72). Wiesbaden: VS.
- Hitzler, R. (2011). *Eventisierung*. Wiesbaden: VS.
- Hepp, A., Hitzler, R. (2016). Collectivities in change: The mediatization and individualization of community building from a subjective and figurational perspective. In: L. Kramp, N. Carpentier, A. Hepp, R. Kilborn, R. Kunelius, H. Nieminen, T. Olsson, P. Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, I. Tomanić Trivundža, S. Tosoni (Eds.), *Politics, Civil Society and Participation: Media and Communications in a Transforming Environment* (pp. 133–150). Bremen: Edition Lumière.
- Janáček, L. (1958). Proč máme tolik polek a valčíků? [Why do we have so many Polkas and Waltzes?] In: *Fejetony z Lidových novin. Se studiiemi J. Racka, A. Nováka, V. Helferta a L. Firkušného* (p. 72). Brno: Krajské nakl. v Brně.
- Le Roy Ladurie, E. (1979). *Carnival in Romans*. New York: Braziller.
- Merkel, U. (Ed.). (2015). *Identity Discourses and Communities in International Events, Festivals and Spectacles. Leisure Studies in a Global Era*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mair, J. (Ed.) (2019). *The Routledge Handbook of Festivals*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Muir, E. (2005). *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*. Second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nahachewsky, A. (1995). Participatory and Presentational Dance. *Dance Research Journal*, 21(1), 1–15.
- Nahachewsky, A. (2001). Once Again: On the Concept of “Second Existence Folk Dance”. *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 33, 17–28.
- Nebřenský, Z., Šima, K. (2017). Interlocking of Urbanity and Rurality in the Popular Culture of East Central Europe. Editorial Note. *Urban People/Lidé města*, 19(2), 165–170.
- Popelková, K. (2023). Easter Holiday and the Pandemic – the Case of Slovakia in 2020. *Slovenský národopis*, 71(2), 126–146. <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2023.2.14>
- Příkrylová, J. (2019). *Moderní marketingová komunikace*. Praha: Grada Publishing.
- Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago II.: University of Chicago Press.
- Schwartz, B. ([2016] 2019). Rethinking the concept of collective memory. In: A. L. Tota, T. Hagen, (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of memory studies* (pp. 9–21). London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Rigney, A. (2019). Cultural Memory Studies. Mediation, Narrative, and Aesthetic. In: A. L. Tota, T. Hagen (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* (pp. 65–76). New York: Routledge.
- Stavělová, D. (2008). *Red Rose Why Don't You Thrive. A carnival carol from Doudleby: dance, identity, status, and integration. Multimedia study*. Praha: Etnologický ústav AV ČR, v. v. i.
- Stavělová, D., Kratochvíl, M. (2016). Inventing the Carnival: Contemporary Festivities, Tradition, and Imaginaries. *Český lid*, 103(4), 569–595. <https://doi.org/10.21104/CL.2016.4.03>

- Tauschek, M. (2010). Cultural Property as a Strategy: The Carnival of Binche, the Creation of Cultural Heritage and Cultural property. *Ethnologia Europea*, 39(2), 67–80.
- Turino, T. (2008). *Music as a Social Life. The Politics of Participation*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Turner, V. W. (2004). *Průběh rituálu. Struktura a antistruktura. The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure by Victor Turner*. Computer Press: Brno.
- Vysloužil, J., Procházková, J. (Eds.) (2009). *Leoš Janáček. Folkloristické dílo 1886–1927: studie, recenze, fejetony, zprávy*. Souborné kritické vydání děl Leoše Janáčka (pp. 295–296). Brno: Editio Janáček.
- Weber, M. (1972). *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*. Tübingen: Mohr Verlag.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DANIELA STAVĚLOVÁ (ORCID: 0000-0001-8989-559X) – is a senior researcher of the Department of Ethnomusicology and Ethnochoreology, Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences; Associate Professor in Dance Studies, Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. She is a member of the Editorial Board of journals *Český lid* and *Národopisná revue*. As a member of the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology she organizes conferences and Sub-Study Group meetings; for several years she gave lectures in the IPEDAM – Erasmus Intensive Programme for New Ethnochoreologists organised by NTNU in Trondheim, Norway. Her research interests encompass ethnochoreology and dance anthropology with a focus on the significance of music and dance in different sociocultural, political, or historical contexts. She is a co-editor of the book *Folklore Revival Movements in Shifting Contexts* (2018) and editor of a collective monography *Tíha a beztíže folkloru / The Weight and Weightlessness of Folklore* (2022).