

Cunha, Maria Clementina Pereira, org. *Carnavais e outras f(r)estas: Ensaios de história social da cultura*. Campinas, SP: UNICAMP, CECULT, 2002. 447 pp.

The essays of this congregation of contemporary social historians address carnivals (Venice and New Orleans as well as Rio de Janeiro and Porto Alegre) and a range of Brazilian festive modalities from capoeira displays to high society clubs, principally in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador and in the nineteenth century.

The collection draws on a community of prominent historians in or allied to the *linha de pesquisa* of *História Social da Cultura*, within the *área* of *História Social*, within Unicamp's graduate programs in History, which also houses the separate *área* of *História Cultural*, as well as many other *linhas* and *áreas*, each with a disturbingly high frequency of common abstract terms and bibliographic key-references (see <http://www.unicamp.br/ifch/pos_graduacao/m_historia/index.html>). The erudite cacophony of this nomenclature suggests a state of radical democracy at the university departmental level, an empowerment of individual historians or small groups to institutionalize their particular *weltanschauungs* and, for a time, gather a following of graduates, capitalizing on the ambiguous free-play between an intellectual "project" and bureaucratic administration. My flippancy duly noted and hopefully forgiven, the proliferation of *linhas* et al. is also significant as a genuine intellectual manifestation, at the intra-departmental level, of the post-disciplinary confusion inherent in cultural studies today.

In view of this state of carnivalization of the classic western compartments of knowledge, the first thing to say about this book is that the introduction by the organizer, Maria Clementina Pereira Cunha, provides a solid identification, crucial to non-historian readers, of the collective position of the contributors in the culture wars within History. As she locates "social history," the most prominent models are the mid-century group of English materialist historians, notably E.P. Thomson and Eric Hobsbawm, who pursued hermeneutically rich portraits of collective proletarian protagonists in encyclopaedic frescoes, thereby stretching the bounds of Marxist thought toward a leftist humanism, and steadily diverging, to the point of alienation, from the stricter materialism of economic history. These historians were eventually subsumed within the broader mantle of "Cultural Studies" (here, in its seminal mid-century British matrix) with politically empathic scholars of other disciplines. The position of these contemporary Brazilians in relation to more purely intellectual and theoretic French models of radical cultural analysis—an alternate species of "cultural history" which privileges formal structural paradigms over the mimetic representation of social "types"—is more oblique here, despite the solid bridges between tertiary educational institutions in the two nations. While the organizer is disinclined to polemics specific to this, her position is categorically antithetical to the postmodern deconstructions of the epistemological validity of History that abound both in post-war French radical thought and in more recent and principally North American configurations of cultural studies theory. Of course, the French theorists greatly influenced and stimulated the British cultural studies movement from the 1960s to the 1980s. One crucial notion was the Foucauldian conception of power as inter-subjective and relational rather than individual. Prof^a Cunha notes that a consequence of this structural awareness is the inappropriateness of focusing on a single subaltern subject, whether defined by class, race or gender, instead of also exploring the subjectivity of the elite reciprocators of the power relations, not to mention the range of alternate subaltern types.

The organizer names and rejects various possible theoretic or discursive master narratives: from Marx, Bakhtin and DaMatta to any notions of a Brazilian *über*-vocation for festive *communitas*. What we are left with, judging not only by her pieces (the

introduction and a chapter on the old carnival character, Zé Pereira), but also by the other contributors, and with unmistakable consistency, is essentially a vindication of informed common sense, grounded in deep organic familiarity with the cultural subject, and married to orthodox leftist solidarity. The emerging pragmatic doxy is best captured in the leitmotif phrase of the wonderful Bahian historian, João José Reis, *luta e negociação*—the struggle and the art of dissenting self-affirmation (expressed implicitly by sustained cultural practices or explicitly by word) by a subaltern group, and the subsequent consolidation of its legitimacy in a trade-off with an elite whose privilege is preserved at the expense of significant concessions to its subaltern antagonist.

It is important to note, however, that not only are the contributing historians here experienced and mature, but also that they have traveled through the topography of theory and, if weary, are thoroughly conversant with its analytic tenets. In fact, even as they compose their descriptive evocations of scenes past, their periodic interrogations and alerts suggest a sort of constant haunting by theory, a hyper-awareness of how a critical academic reader might react—a good number of subordinate phrases serve essentially to ward off anticipated allegations of conceptual naïvety.

Their own unanimous methodological concern, however, is to be critical rather than theoretical. As to their topics, most of the contributors write about chapters of the cultural past (a century, a region within Brazil, an ethnic or social identity group) to which they have dedicated all or a good part of their careers. In short, one wonders if there is not a trend to compensate for the vast analytic voyages of the academe with a sort of personal *compromisso*, a concern to “get it right” in the attempt to authentically capture the Others of an alternate time and space, to avoid imposing ephemeral and subjective contemporary conceptual frames. The work stresses a series of methodological features: primarily, solid archival field research (exposed, in fact, to the point of the argument prevailing on the reader by dint of sheer saturation, since some chapters run to 50 pp. with 100 notes or more); secondarily, currently circulating *ferramentas* or “conceptual tools” (plausible notions about specific mechanisms of cultural circumstance rather than broad analytic rules about the nature of society); thirdly, their own interpretive intuition. Recourse to this pragmatic bricolage is also a consequence of the epistemological heterogeneity of the complex of phenomena studied—groups, practices, situations. Prof^a Cunha notes that the “social history” school has moved beyond the privileging of class pursued by materialist studies of power relations, and incorporated the curiosity of “cultural history” about race, gender and other culturally bound human circumstances and diverse practices. These include aesthetic and ludic practices, which are now read as implicit texts into which are dissolved the symbols of social and political agendas of the respective human communities associated with the practices.

It is gratifying to note the relatively frequent incorporation of literature as testimony or evocation. The tolerance of art by social science has often been restricted to practices of a popular character, which are interpreted as implicit articulations of mass social contestation, and automatically validated by their subaltern credentials. The new or recuperated legitimacy of bourgeois novels as testimonial or illustrative discourse suggests a complete distension and atrophy of the theoretical logic of discrediting the genre on the basis of its incorrect location in the political master-paradigm. In the present book, Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares study of XIX capoeira in Rio gives the last word to Machado de Assis. The longest quote in Martha Abreu’s study of *lundu* and other popular XIX carioca musical genres is an evocation of Rio *fado* (not to be confused with its Portuguese homonym) from Manoel Antônio de Almeida’s *Memórias de um sargento de milícias*. Wlamyra Albuquerque’s piece on the peculiar Bahian celebration of Independence of Brazil from Portugal (celebrating a battle, in Bahia, on *dois de julho*, 1823, and not Pedro’s grito of *sete de setembro*, 1822)—a fascinating study of the fused

symbolism, in the *caboclo* and *cabocla* figurines displayed in annual parades and also cast in bronze in various Bahian monuments, of very distinct religious-cultural performances and historico-political narratives—mentions specific literary characters, such as the *malandro* Perílio Ambrósio from João Ubaldo Ribeiro's *Viva o Povo Brasileiro*, and Jubiabá from Jorge Amado's eponymous novel. Rachel Soihet's study of *Festa da Penha* and late XIX Rio popular cultural miscegenation reads like a social science companion to Aluísio Azevedo's *O Cortiço*. Prof^a Cunha's chapter examines Zé Pereira not only as a carnival performance entity (of several parading people making a musical racket) but also as a character originally created for the popular stage. The presence of literary testimonial is usually peripheral to the arguments, but occasionally uniquely eloquent. One hopes for further exploration of literary works by historians, not merely because they can inform readers of novels as to the corresponding material society but also because their reading of the social intention of the writer is often more balanced and grounded, if less imaginative. The cross-disciplinary dialogue does more than promise a hybrid; it also fertilizes each discipline as a separate entity.

This circuitous route brings us to an essay to be singled out. Despite his specific Bahian focus, João José Reis is fast becoming a point of reference for social historians throughout Brazil and for scholars from diverse synchronic disciplines working on Afro-Brazilian themes. The present essay on black *festas* in XIX Bahia, all involving music and dance as primary expressive vehicles, focuses on the gradual transition from a (non-Brazilian born) African hegemony, which spurred elite fears of violent insurrection, to a popular *negro-mestiço* class praxis incorporating a broader socio-ethnic range, which spurred the desire of the Euro-centric elite to disassociate itself from popular mass culture but also inspired condescending efforts to edify the latter through the purgation of "barbaric" (African) vestiges. On the other hand, the essay reveals the inconsistency and fickleness of elite intolerance, given several factors: the sheer material impossibility of suppressing the aspiration to manifest this kinaesthetic heritage; the competitive division of power between authorities with different strategic interests (State, Church and private landowners); finally, the substantial ideological differences even within a single elite group, such as liberal versus conservative urban parliamentarians. Prof. Reis's pursues his hermeneutic path with admirable method and long-range vision. While it is a long road, because of the pauses to consider and probe relevant cases or instances, he succeeds in positing and addressing key issues as to the overall development of society, issues which remain crucial to non-historian scholars of the contemporary scene. While not theoretical, this is exemplary analytic historical thinking. In this sense it is a legitimate successor to the essay of Peter Burke on the Venice carnival, a brilliant and remarkably economical synthesis of several centuries of carnival(esque) development to which one may find a surprising number of analogs, both socio-economic and aesthetic, in Brazilian carnival. The other foreign contribution is from Reid Mitchell, currently perhaps the most respected interpreter of New Orleans Mardi Gras, whose essay here, like Reis's, hinges on intra- and inter-ethnic nuances and questions of strategy, though with greater attention to performance-theoretic issues (including H. Gates's notion of *signifying*). His forthright manner of enunciating interpretive questions, cautiously honest about the degree to which they can be answered on the basis of available evidence, and yet insightful, is an exemplary approach to the task of marrying broad cultural theory to case-specific empiricism.

This book is an indispensable acquisition for libraries and scholars covering the fields of Afro-Brazilian studies and nineteenth century Brazilian history.