Carnival – pleasantries and politics

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If you thought that carnival meant merriment, and masks, and pageant and boisterous banter, you had better think again. Of course, it also meant that, but the subtext often camouflages power struggles, subservience and dominance, protest and servility.

Vicki Ann Cremona's new book on carnival in Malta during the British colonial period, recently published by Palgrave Macmillan in the UK and Switzerland, is essentially a beautifully researched overview on 'carnival and power', in which what started as a popular run of 'religious' festivities is exposed for what it often was: overt and covert politics.

Vicki Ann Cremona, chair of the School of Performing Arts at the University of Malta, has for many years had carnival at the passionate centre of her observations – historical, sociological, political, theatrical spectacle and enactment at the service of power. Her dedication and her years of sleuthing in the archives and in the printed media of the last two centuries have borne bountiful fruit.

This is a finely written account, spanning the whole British period, of how carnival was never far from politics, and politics never far from what was meant to mesmerise and control the masses. The Romans wielded power through bread and entertainment. The British learnt from the Romans; Maltese politicians started as students, only to become outstanding professors of those enduring lessons. Spread crumbs for the people, let them believe the entertainment is free, and they sleep on your lap.

Cremona's programme only meant to throw light on the British period, but this only forms part of a continuity in history. It is not as if anything in the carnival-power interplay differed radically after the change of flag from the Order of St John to the Union Jack. The same tensions, the same manipulations, the same objectives. Obviously, the more recent have the benefit of being better documented. The author has taken full advantage of the harvest of evidence begging to be explored in the more modern archives. What she garnered proves so rich and rewarding I find it difficult to think it could be improved upon (but the illustration on page 220 is not the Casino Maltese).

The origins of carnival in Malta remain quite obscure. Stanley Fiorini already recorded carnival in documents dating to the early 1400s and these give the lie to the common misconception that the Knights of St John introduced it after their arrival in Malta in 1530. From then on, what evidence survives associates carnival with recreation for the governed and power stratagems in the governing.

Take the very serious rioting in the carnival of 1639 which led to the violent expulsion of the Jesuits from Malta. The Italian knights staged their usual carnival theatricals in their auberge in the festive spirit of season. Grand Master Jean Paul Lascaris formally banned the presence of women (read courtesans) at the Italian theatre during carnival, and the younger knights hardly took kindly to this vexatious curb on their right to fornicate. They went on a violent rampage. Rightly or wrongly they blamed the repressive measure on the influence the Jesuits wielded on the Grand Master and avenged themselves by looting the Jesuit College in Merchants Street. To make fun of the meddling priests, they dressed up in mock-Jesuit habits as their carnival costume.

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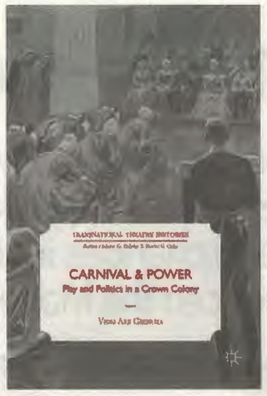
Their ringleader, the 'lascivious' Fra Girolamo Salvatico, paraded lewd posters, highly offensive to the Jesuits, turning a coarse hormonal issue into a fake political protest: they resented the Jesuits' interference in the internal affairs

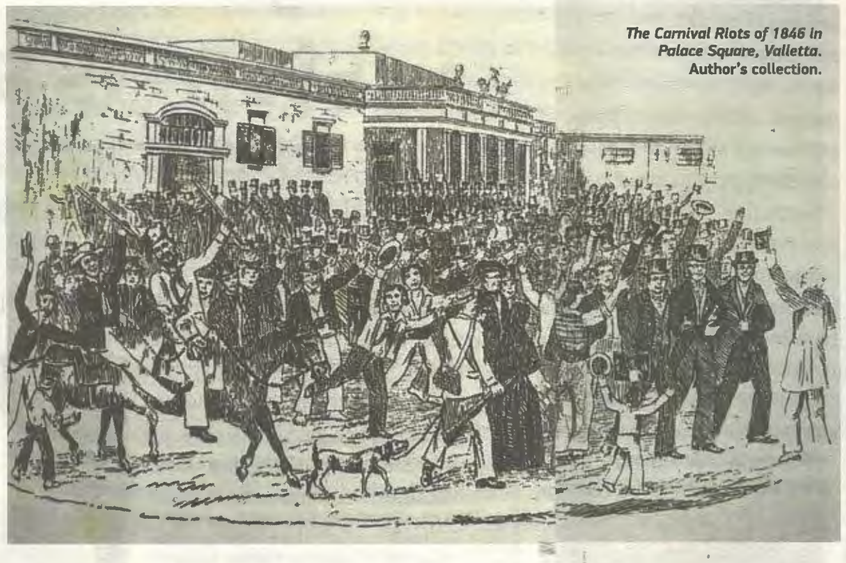


Front cover of Vicki Ann Cremona's book *Carnival & Power – Play and Politics in a Crown Colony* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 304 pp, illustrated).

of a sovereign Order. The knights smashed up everything they found in the Jesuit College, hurling furniture and school equipment out of the windows, and herding all the Jesuit priests onto a vessel, which, under duress, sailed at top speed from Grand Harbour, taking the priests to their sudden banishment in Sicily.

Many other instances have been recorded of 'political' strife at the time of the Order with carnival as a backdrop. A decree by Grand Master Raphael Cotoner cancelled the 1663 carnival because of reports that Christian sovereigns were on the verge of going to war against each other, and also to atone for the sacrilegious theft of a ciborium full of consecrated hosts from a village church. Some knights celebrated carnival 1661 by setting fire to the door of rooms where a prostitute lived, no doubt to avenge overcharging for unsatisfactory services. Suspicion fell on some Spanish or Provencal knights, but the police detained no one, as an arrest during carnival would have caused serious unrest and commotion.

Carnival as an identifier of class distinctions is also present in the



***The Carnival Riots of 1846 in Palace Square, Valletta.* Author's collection.**

records. In 1697, a slave broke the rule that in carnival only freemen and women could wear masks. He thought he would join the revelry by donning a disguise. Only to be instantly disillusioned: the police arrested and tortured him with three sessions of the *strappado*. There was talk of confiscating him from his private owner to be sent to row in the galleys.

Carnival also served as a background for various episodes of lawbreaking: in the carnival of 1709, the forces of order arrested Fra Ancislao Mosca from Pisa for beating a Maltese young man, but then released him when the victim forgave him. This act of generosity did not spare other knights being assaulted violently by some Maltese. During carnival 1741 a thief from Żabbar was imprisoned. As custom prohibited torture throughout carnival, he was merely detained, to be tortured later. He fell ill, or feigned to, was taken to the Infirmary and padlocked to his bed by two heavy chains. Notwithstanding the security, he managed to knock a hole in the roof and escaped through it by means of bedsheets, the chains still secured to his body, and hurried to seek sanctuary in the nearby church of All Souls, where his arrest led to his return to the Infirmary.

The death of a priest, apparently by suicide, marred the carnival of 1750. He had earlier murdered his mistress, believing she was cheating on him. Detained in the bishop's prison, he fell to his death while outrageously drunk, when leaning against a stone balustrade which gave way under his weight. Two knights fighting over the graces of a woman at the Manoel Theatre made the carnival of 1770 memorable. They both ended cooling off in the underground *guva* which, everyone agreed, had the ideal relative humidity.

By far the most outstanding carnival tragedy was the 1763 stampede which resulted in the deaths of no less than 54 revellers, a veritable massacre. The *coccagna* had been introduced as part of the carnival festivities, with a two-storey-high pole to be climbed by athletic youngsters in the middle of Palace Square. At the top of the pole hung an array of delicacies, alive and slaughtered – fowl, piglets, peacocks, hams, cheeses, confectioneries and other mouth-watering goodies. The competitors would scurry to get at them at a signal from the Grand Master.

On this occasion, the head of the Order delayed, and the impatient contestants rushed to get there first, giving rise to a pandemonium during which 17 were bayoneted to death by the Grand Master's guards, dying on the spot, and another 37 succumbed to their injuries shortly later. The unprecedented ferocity of this massacre had major political repercussions – what started as a public relations exercise to advertise the wealth and munificence of the Grand Master, misfired into a veritable bloodbath which provoked deep-seated popular resentment, feared to erupt into widespread rebellion. These stories are all about merry carnival, and not one of them ends well.

Secret *coccagne* paralleled the public carnival *coccagne*. Grand Master Pinto is said to have held them behind closed doors inside the Palace, when stark naked young people rushed up a high trellis to grab objects of jewellery, all for the delectation of the horny Grand Master and a small select entourage. The records make it appear the actors were young men, though the grammar could be ambiguous. Fowl and pigs for the populace, gold and jewels for the Grand Master's toyboys – that's a political statement in itself.

Nothing much changed during the British period. Carnival, and what went on behind it, had all the appearance of spontaneous popular entertainment, but very often it worked as a political tool to enlist the support of the people for those whose only function was to exploit the people. Cremona's book abounds with instances of this ambivalence. Even the gracious permission granted by the authorities to allow themselves to be openly satirised by carnival revellers was sold as proof of tolerance and liberality, when in fact it served as a safety valve to give popular resentment the illusion of having a voice. Vicious political satire today, to ensure everything remaining the same tomorrow.

Cremona's thoroughness in identifying the currents and cross currents that profiled carnival in the British period is nothing short of breathtaking. And not much can be added to it. Perhaps the huge massacre of boys in the carnival of 1823 when a stampede on the ground floor corridors of the Ta' Ġieżu Convent in Valletta killed some 110 teenagers, who the good friars had invited for a spiritual retreat to keep them away from the lustful temptations of carnival. The stampede, which crushed so many adolescents to death, seems to have started when free bread was distributed and a number of bullying adults rushed to grab what they could.

Carnival company by Stephen Sant'Angelo, Senglea, 1895. Author's collection.

This carnival carnage immediately acquired pronounced political undertones – poverty, unemployment, bigotry, impunity, laissez-faire, resentment, impotence, and the Maltese anyway don't count.

Perhaps we could also add the carnival duel in which the only Maltese is known to have taken part. During carnival 1842, a group of young British officers persisted in pestering any girl they came across, including Annetta Levick, flirting and throwing confetti at them. Septimus Adams went one invasive step further – he plunged his hand down the pretty girl's cleavage. Her father, the Maltese-speaking John Levick, learnt of the outrage. He instructed his Maltese friend, Antonio Mattei, to ask Adams for a full apology. The culprit refused – what, a British officer apologise to a Maltese native? Adams agreed to duel Levick that afternoon. They fought it out with pistols, with Mattei as Levick's second, and Adams dropped dead. Carnival always starts in mirth. In Malta, it often ended in tragedy.

The police arrested Levick and Mattei and put them on trial for murder before the Maltese criminal court (the British authorities arranged for the hurried escape from Malta of Adams's second). Highly-charged political events, both the carnival duel and the death penalty trial, gripped the nation, the invincible colonisers versus the puny natives. And a forgone conclusion. The public hissed and booed the British witnesses. The jurors handed out a hasty verdict of 'Not Proven' on all the eight charges, for both the accused, to the thunderous applause of the audience, and the court acquitted both the defendants. The trial by jury, so laden with political undertones, strengthened the insurmountable barriers between the rulers and the underdogs. Carnival had again resonated with unambiguous political vibes.

I believe Cremona is reserving to an autonomous book the carnival riot of 1846 when the fanatic Sabbatarian governor Sir Patrick Stuart unguardedly prohibited the wearing of masks on carnival Sunday and set a Scottish regiment to beat up the rebellious masses and the court prosecutions which followed. It is so sad to note that the Maltese were not protesting for political liberties. In 1763 they rioted in a scramble for free ham, in 1846, because they were not allowed to clown in carnival masks. We reserve our heroics for rather unheroic causes. Hardly the pinnacles of nobility on a national *risorgimento* scale.

The very terminology associated with carnival gives away its political function: we speak of 'king' Carnival, the feudal monarch who dispenses happiness, of the *parata*, the re-enactment of Christian David defeating the infidel Goliath, of the *qarċilla*, the submission of the populace to the professional classes. We knew carnival dances as *veljuni*, a word that only means the great *veglia*, an event in which one either watches or is watched; the carnival *prinjolata* originated in the Sicilian *pinolata* or *pignolata*, another submissive word which betrays lack of national assertiveness – if it is good it has to be imported. The very word 'carnival' is another submissive word – the authorities gave you gracious permission to eat meat.

Even Valletta's urban architecture was conditioned by carnival's political requisites. The necessity of passing carnival floats through it actually dictated the rectangular orifice of the Bergonzo-Zavellani Rossi city gate. And Freedom 'Square' remained unbuilt because Dom Mintoff wanted the carnival pageant shifted from Palace Square.

It is such a pleasure to read something that looks for the deeper truths concealed behind the more convenient smokescreens of truth. So far, carnival has mostly been treated on a two-dimensional plane – its historical evolution as populist entertainment. The fervent multi-disciplinary narrative and assessment undertaken by Vicki Ann Cremona has given much, but much deeper intensity to a recurring phenomenon which is as profoundly political as it is showbiz for the masses.

***Fancy Dress Ball at The Palace, Valletta, in 1877.* Author's collection.**

Political satire, Carnival 1932. Author's collection.