



## ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

### Video Transcript

#### **Rituals, rebellions, revolutions**

GEORGE-PAUL MEIU: What is the connection between masks and power?

Think about carnivals – they often feature masks and masked performances that parody people in power or mock society's usual rules. But do these performances actually challenge the status quo? Can they flip the script on dominant values?

Some thinkers say yes. Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, believed that carnivals give people a break from everyday norms. With their chaotic energy and upside-down moral codes, carnivals free us from the usual order, at least for a short period of time.

Not everyone agrees that masked performances are truly subversive, however. Anthropologist Max Gluckman described such events as "rituals of rebellion". They might look like revolts, but they actually help society stay the same. By letting people blow off steam and express frustrations, they keep deeper tensions in check. Once the carnival ends, everything goes back to normal. So, in that view, these performances don't really challenge power. They help reinforce it.

There is an interesting side note in this context, however. Even if we take the view that carnivals are not truly rebellious, masks and masked performances can be subversive for carnival participants.

For people at the Rio Carnival, for example, dressing up is about imagination and becoming someone else. Carnival can offer a joyful form of expression, allowing them, for a few days, to be what they wished they could be all year round.

At the carnival in Basel, the Basler Fasnacht, masks are so large that they cover the whole face. This gives participants a sense of anonymity. They can observe without being seen. Participants say that wearing a mask can feel like meditation, like timelessness or solitude. It allows for self-reflection.

On both an individual and a collective level, therefore, carnival can reveal and release hidden desires and tensions through masks and performances.



At the same time, it also serves as a commodified form of self-expression. On social media platforms, it blurs image and identity, reflecting modern performances of the self.

Let's go back to Bakhtin's overturning of the usual order and Gluckman's "rituals of rebellion". There is a possible middle ground between these two views.

In their book "The Politics and Poetics of Transgression", authors Peter Stallybrass and Allon White suggest that carnivals aren't just acts of rebellion or submission – they're acts of transgression.

That means they cross lines, play with rules, and explore cultural boundaries. Even if they don't spark revolutions overnight, they can slowly shift how we think and feel about those boundaries. Over time, those small changes can reshape society in quiet but powerful ways.