

# The Fifth Season-Fastnacht/Carnival in Baden-Württemberg †

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† Presented at the International Workshop Habits and Rituals (H&R 2021), IS4SI Summit 2021, Online, 12–19 September 2021.

**Abstract:** This article discusses the Fastnacht Carnival celebrations in the village of Büßlingen in Baden-Württemberg (Southern Germany) which has both a rich local tradition and a multi-faceted history. The authors present the social practice of German Carnival from four perspectives: the first one shows the historic-religious background of Fastnacht, the second presents the social-political aspect, the third one is the music that people listen to during the celebration of Fastnacht and which is an important element of the celebrations. Finally the fourth and the last perspective deals with the Fastnachtsvereine, the associations which plan and execute the celebrations. In times of globalism Fastnacht keeps its traditional local character as the participants speak in their regional dialect in all the activities which take place, as well as identifying strongly with the region they live in. The authors gathered the ethnographic data in February and March 2019 in Büßlingen and in Singen, Germany, through participant observation and in-depth interviews.

**Keywords:** carnival; Fastnacht; ritual; Germany; local communities



**Citation:** Mostowicz, I.; Braunstein, D. The Fifth Season-Fastnacht/Carnival in Baden-Württemberg. *Proceedings* **2022**, *81*, 25. <https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings2022081025>

Academic Editors: Raffaella Gio-vagnoli and Robert Lowe

Published: 11 March 2022

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## 1. Introduction

Carnival is one of the most commonly practiced festivals and has a long tradition in many areas in Europe. It is also one of the most investigated rituals in anthropology, starting from Frazer, who described the function of seasonal festivals in Europe and found their origins in ancient times [1]. Carnival is inseparable from common drinking (together with common eating), which according to Arnold van Gennep is an incorporating ritual, building a physical union and community [2] (p. 29). Carnival can also be described as rite of passage in ceremonies pertaining to the seasons of the year [2] (p. 179). According to Marcel Mauss's theory of rituals and festivities, carnival is a total social fact, when it comes to a synergy of different kinds of institutions: religious, legal, economic and political [3]. A connection can be drawn from Carnival as a commonly celebrated ritual, as we theoretically framed it, to a social practice approach that focuses on human social behaviour (Searle, Durkheim, Weber, Scheler, and other authors are part of this theoretical umbrella framework of social practices) [4] (p. V). For a both recent and interesting publication in the social practices and collective intentionality field, that touches different topics such as habits, rituals and responsibility, see [4]. The philosophical origin of the social practice approach is American Pragmatism (Dewey), compare [4] (p. V). The debate about the existence of collective intentionality can fruitfully include Carnival ritual as social habit.

This research paper focuses on exploring local communities as it pertains to rituals. Fastnacht in Büßlingen, Baden-Württemberg, in Germany, serves as an example of the Carnival ritual which is the main event of the year for the local community. The towns around Lake Constance are very noteworthy, as their long-time Fastnacht traditions have been preserved for centuries in many small communities. The popularity of Fastnacht in the village of Büßlingen is impressive in many respects. First of all, Fastnacht has a very

strong regional character. It is the main event in community life, demanding long-term preparations on the part of the local inhabitants, exclusively, and it is even called “the fifth season of the year” by them due to its importance. Secondly, the participants speak only dialect during the celebrations. That emphasises their identity and differentiates them from the other neighbouring communities which speak different dialects. Thirdly, some elements of the celebrations are linked to the history of the village. Büßlingen was initially a Roman settlement. In many areas previously inhabited by the Roman Empire, citizens kept celebrating fertility festivals, including Carnival, for centuries. A link to the past following its history, tradition, and heritage builds a certain feeling of otherness and diversity due to social phenomena that can be characterised as traditional, and as such can be easily linked to the aforementioned identity aspect in Büßlingen. Lastly, the celebrations have a strong family aspect. Many generations participate in the event and through it manifest their identity and kinship.

It is believed that Carnival celebrations in Europe are experiencing a kind of revival after many years of social and economic transformation, when urbanisation, secularisation, and industrialisation jeopardised traditional regional festivities [5]. Late modernity reintroduced historical public rituals [6] (p. 18). This statement might serve as a broader context for celebrations in Büßlingen; nevertheless, Fastnacht should not be perceived as a form of reinvented tradition. Due to being a rural area inhabited by the same families for generations, and to the fact that the festivities were only interrupted for very short periods, right after the World War II and during the pandemic COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, the village maintained its ability to perform a continuous social ritual for centuries. Although some elements of the rite may change throughout time, the core of celebrations—disorder and carousal—remains unchanged. We focus on exploring local communities as it pertains to rituals. Together with Alessandro Testa, a major contemporary scholar in the field of Carnival research, we (and others) agree on the importance of Carnival as a key element of European culture: “Carnival has been described as one of the foundational elements of European culture, if not the festive phenomenon *par excellence*” [5]. Starting with this theoretical statement, we go on to explore the community in Büßlingen: How is the ritual of Carnival organised and celebrated in Baden-Württemberg (Southern-Germany) nowadays by the local communities? How does the ritual of Fastnacht shape the local community and influence its members? What are important historic factors which have an impact on the festive Carnival celebration in Baden-Württemberg (Southern-Germany)? To answer these research questions we present four different key findings. The first one shows the historic-religious background of Fastnacht, the second presents the social-political aspect, the third one is the music that people listen to during the celebration of Fastnacht and which is an important element of the celebrations. Finally the fourth and the last perspective deals with the *Fastnachtsvereine*, the associations which plan and execute the celebrations. Fastnacht shapes the local community and has an influence on the members (not only) during the few days of celebrations in Büßlingen. Through self-exaggeration and irony, the villagers perform Fastnacht rituals and by doing so they extol their local microcosm in a globalised world. Büßlingen is special because the local community uses only dialect and emphasises the kinship aspect and the history of their village. For generations, the same families have organised the festivity in the same way. Historically speaking, Fastnacht is clearly related to pre-Christian fertility rituals performed by people at the beginning of spring to initiate magic rites aimed at a good harvest, especially in the European countryside. Fertility rituals allowed people to act licentiously, and their fertility-related behaviour was condoned. During the Carnival celebrations, the whole life of the local communities was literally turned upside-down, making the Carnival a reverse festival continuing till this day.

We collected the material during the participant observation and in-depth interviews during Fastnacht in February and March 2019. We interviewed the head of the Carnival Association “Narrenverein Clown und Römer e.V. Büßlingen” and altogether ten activists from the village Büßlingen and the neighbouring settlements Singen and Hilzingen. Our

participant observation took place during four days of Fastnacht in Büßlingen and in the town of Singen, 13 km from the aforementioned village. The most important literature for our research comes from Alessandro Testa [5,6], Miller [7], Jehle [8], Georg [9], Wolfgang Oelsner [10], Kutter [11], Testa [12] and Mikhail Bakhtin [13,14].

## 2. Historic-Religious Background of Fastnacht

We present the German Carnival from four perspectives: the first one shows the historic-religious background of Fastnacht: People in Büßlingen feel connected to the Roman past. Ancient Rome used to have Carnival-like celebrations—*Bacchanalia*, a tribute to the God of wine and feast Bacchus [7] (p. 172). One can see Fastnacht as a historical continuity of the ancient ritual. Roman dresses, symbols and references are one of the key leitmotifs during Fastnacht in Büßlingen. Their connection can also be seen in the name of the Fastnacht organisation (*Narrenverein Clown und Römer*). The name includes clowns and Romans. By including Romans into the name (and identity) of the Fastnacht organisation, the latter pays tribute to the importance of the Roman settlement [8] (p. 139). Nevertheless, the possibility of the historic influence of the Romans on Fastnacht in Büßlingen is a matter of conjecture [9] (p. 12ff). Eventually, the reference to Romans is a means to give a sense of identity to the Fastnacht organisation and to make it different from other organisations in the region. For centuries the celebrations of Fastnacht have been tolerated by the Church and the state as hierarchical and legitimate institutions. As we will show, this means that the celebration of Carnival uses the possibility of changing the relationships on the level of power and its citizens. For a few days citizens are allowed to assume competencies of power they could not have otherwise. The reason for such permissiveness lies in the rhythm of life, which consists of flesh and soul versus flesh and spirit. People are both, but at different times. There is a time rhythm of each year to organise the order in which the two things are supposed to manifest themselves.

## 3. The Social-Political Aspect of Fastnacht

The second perspective presents the social-political aspect. Fastnacht is the only time in the year when many Germans abruptly stop sticking to the rules and the state allows them to do this. There are several symbolical acts which illustrate the change of power in the community. The *Narren* (jesters) symbolically get the keys to town halls in towns and villages. *Narren* “free” children from schools, which means that pupils have no classes and can go home. The police tolerate drunkenness, littering, obscene sexual behaviour, as well as small signs of aggression up to a certain degree. All age groups, professions and visitors join Fastnacht. A diverse group is based on full egalitarianism. Only in a group can a person cross the borders of social norms. Only in a group can people feel happy, merry and accomplished. Fastnacht is limited in time, so it is important for the individual to have all the extraordinary experiences he/she seeks in only a few days [10] (p. 17). This can only happen through several socio-political factors which regulate the connection of the individuals to the authorities. The Fastnacht celebration is a controlled legitimization of crossing different personal and social borders [10] (pp. 33–37). It gives people a unique opportunity to try out new identity roles in a playful manner. Another social-political aspect of crossing various borders is the disappearance of normal hierarchies. Some hierarchies are even reversed. There is no usage of the formal “Sie”, people use a more colloquial and familiar way of communication. The *Narren* also address the mayors, ministers, chancellors and representatives of the church with the informal “Du” [10] (p. 35). There is political power in Fastnacht There is also a democratic power: common citizens take over buildings and organise Fastnacht celebrations in buildings which are normally visited by the upper-class citizens exclusively. For instance, village musicians take over the best concert halls in the city, where on a regular base they would have no chance to perform [10] (p. 60). Nowadays, Fastnacht seems to be perceived by the authorities as a useful element of culture which has a stabilising effect on the society [10] (p. 55 ff). Once a year people are allowed to enjoy a broad sense of freedom, but for the rest of the time they

are expected to follow all the rules. During Fastnacht the participants can fully enjoy their freedom and to do that they want music.

#### 4. Music during Fastnacht

The third perspective is the music that people listen to during the celebration of Fastnacht and which is an important element of the celebrations. Originally, the music during Fastnacht was only performed by whistling and drumming. In the second half of the 19th century the *Harmoniemusik* became influential, and local brass bands started to compose and to play songs that became typical for the specific local villages. Moreover, younger *Narrenzünfte* created their own trademark Fastnacht compositions [11] (p. 59). Nowadays, the most played genres are folk music and pop, which are closely related to the genre of *Schlager* music that connects folklore with the contemporary musical styles. There are two main elements of a Fastnacht pop song: hedonism and melancholia. It is the community which gives a voice to the content. The musical form depends on the community members. While many participants pursue their individual fantasies during Fastnacht, there are other moments when the desire to be one with the community can be experienced by the individual. *Schunkeln* (there is no English equivalent to “Schunkeln”) is a certain rhythmical movement to the beat of the music performed when people hold hands and sit on the long benches at long tables. People sway side to side moving only their upper bodies. Very often they sing together. *Schunkeln* is a great example of community performance and does not require anything but a group of people and well-known music.

#### 5. Fastnachtsvereine

Finally, the fourth and the last perspective deals with the *Fastnachtsvereine*, the associations which plan and execute the celebrations. The organisation of Carnival and the extensive celebrations are impossible without the Carnival associations. The associations keep the *Heimatkultur* alive—local activists keep the tradition alive, imbuing the local residents with a proud feeling of local identity and bringing them together to perform a common festivity. An important role of the *Fastnachtverein* is to create a regional identity and to keep it alive. Every village keeps its own Carnival traditions. In South-West Germany, a lot of families have lived in the same villages for generations. People pass on their knowledge about Fastnacht rites from generation to generation. Through the Fastnacht celebration, local communities build their own unique bond with the inhabited region and with their own family past. The task of the *Fastnachtverein* is to preserve this collective memory and to present it to others. People want their Carnival traditions to be recognised by others. They donate money to cultural and social causes—for example, donating family masks and costumes, many of which are handmade and often over a hundred years old, to local museums and to foundations which focus on preserving German regional culture. The Carnival associations organise the Fastnacht events starting with *Schmotzige Dunschtig*, *Narrenbaumumzug*, *Hemdglonckerumzug* and *Römerball* and ending with *Aschermittwoch*.

Nowadays, Fastnacht seems to be perceived by the authorities as a useful element of culture which has a stabilising effect on the society. Its unchanging continuity remained unaffected, apart from the short period after the World War II and the pandemic of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021. In the age of globalism, the continuity of Fastnacht sheds an interesting light on the local tendencies to preserve tradition.

#### 6. Conclusions

Fastnacht in Büßlingen, Baden-Württemberg, serves as an example of the Carnival ritual which is the main event of the year for the local inhabitants. Fastnacht shapes the local community and has an influence on the members during the few days of celebrations. Through self-exaggeration and irony the villagers perform Fastnacht rituals, and by doing so they extol their local microcosm in a globalised world. Nowadays, Fastnacht seems to be perceived by the authorities as a useful element of culture which has a stabilising effect

on the society. Its unchanging continuity remains unaffected, apart from the short period after the World War II and the pandemic of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, D.B. and I.M.; methodology, I.M. and D.B.; software not applicable; validation, not applicable; formal analysis, not applicable; investigation, I.M. and D.B.; resources, not applicable.; data curation, not applicable; writing—original draft preparation, D.B. and I.M.; writing—review and editing, I.M. and D.B.; visualization, not applicable; supervision, not applicable; project administration, not applicable; funding acquisition, not applicable. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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