

4-1-2010

**Barbara Ehrenreich. Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy. New York: Metropolitan Books-Henry Holt and Company, 2006.**

Ann Canale Ph.D.  
Lindenwood University, [acanale@lindenwood.edu](mailto:acanale@lindenwood.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Canale, Ann Ph.D. (2010) "Barbara Ehrenreich. Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy. New York: Metropolitan Books-Henry Holt and Company, 2006.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 1: No. 2, Article 15.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1030

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol1/iss2/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

**Barbara Ehrenreich. *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*. New York: Metropolitan Books-Henry Holt and Company, 2006.**

Recently, to an audience at the Chicago Humanities Festival (Jan. 28, 2010), Barbara Ehrenreich commented that “we’ve forgotten real fun.” Ehrenreich, a trained cell biologist (Ph.D., Rockefeller University), whose extensive writings address, for example, student protest, women’s health care issues, war’s origins, and poverty in America, has directed her attention to the subject of community joy, its suppression, and its substitutes. In her historically expansive 2006 study *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, she continues to critique the actions of hierarchical powers against the lower classes and the poor, with her eye on rites and festivities that have provided cohesion, joy, and power to communities, but that have been suppressed by powers of church and state and appropriated by commerce. Her writing is lively, without jargon, passionate, informed, and speculative; she is an adventuresome researcher, drawing broadly from anthropological, psychological, historical, and religious studies, for example, as well as from contemporary popular culture.

Ehrenreich describes her mission in this book as “to speak seriously of the largely ignored and perhaps incommunicable thrill of the group deliberately united in joy and exaltation” (16). Noting that representations of dancers occur on pre-historical cave drawings and then surveying ancient religious rites and medieval and Renaissance carnivals and festivals, Ehrenreich identifies the key elements of these community activities to be feasting, drinking, song, music, dancing, costuming, and masking. Ehrenreich sees the rites of Dionysus, whose female followers may achieve an ecstatic encounter with the god, as “a primordial form of festival” (37) and describes the women’s ritual action, in which they inhabit the role of powerful hunters, as a kind of “ritual of inversion.” Such temporary ritual-based role reversal continues in Roman Saturnalia, in European carnival, and in many other cultures’ festivities; it is this particular element of role reversal that draws holders of power, from Romans through fascist dictators, to suppress practices of “collective joy.”

Responding to the dancing of “oriental” religions, Romans executed thousands of Bacchus’s worshippers before later persecuting Christians. Ehrenreich also sees the early Christian patriarchs as increasingly forbidding ecstatic forms of worship among the early Christian community, attempting to reduce “the community of believers . . . to a state of dependency on central ecclesiastical authorities” (76). Despite these efforts, Christianity remained a “danced religion,” and to purge this unruly action from the Church, regularly scheduled festivities began to be allowed only *outside* the churches, though this restriction inadvertently led to the celebration of Carnival, with all its festal elements: feasting, drinking, and dancing, along with mocking social inversion, as demonstrated by the appointment of a *Lord of Misrule* (typically a peasant who, for the duration of the festival, was given the authority to “oversee” the revelry). Collective joy survived in secular festivities through the Middle Ages, despite attempts at its suppression. By the sixteenth century, when the upper classes had withdrawn from such rowdy practices, the revolutionary spirit of Carnival contained the possibility of actually inverting the hierarchy.

Ehrenreich suggests that the continued suppression of the drinking and carousing of carnival resulted not only from Calvinism’s condemnation of all festive behavior but also from the need for social discipline coming from gun-based warfare, as well as from the demand of industrialization for daily laborers. The suppression of communal rituals and festivals, she

speculates, likely contributed to the prevalence of melancholy from sixteenth- through eighteenth-century Europe (133), during which time, the modern, isolated individual was separated from the healing powers of community celebration.

In an impassioned discussion, Ehrenreich addresses Imperialism's "global campaign against festivities and ecstatic ritual" (158), describing African traditions preserved, in spite of the African diaspora, both through syncretic religions and through Carnival, referring to practices in the Caribbean, Brazil, Cuba, and Trinidad. Acknowledging "broken cultures, wrecked economies," and ruined individuals, Ehrenreich comments,

[i]n the face of so much destruction, it may seem petty to focus on the obliteration of communal ritual and festivity. But in any assessment of the impact of European imperialism, "techniques of ecstasy"—ways of engendering transcendence and joy from within the indigenous group itself, without any recourse to the white man's technologies or commodities—must at least be counted among the losses (180).

Through her concluding chapters, Ehrenreich acknowledges that in the modern, or "post-festive," era, there are collective ceremonies of many types, most notoriously the military spectacles ("inverted forms of carnival") that aim to enforce, rather than to mock, the social hierarchy. As a tool of fascism, participants in mass rallies through Italy and Germany stood still as observers, "merging with the larger collective" (201).

Ehrenreich appreciates that our own times have seen the "revival of ancient traditions of ecstatic festivity" (206), first, in the "Rock Rebellion" of the 50s and 60s, as African and African-American music drew white folks into celebration, movement, and community. "Rock and roll opened the possibility of . . . a joy beyond anything else the consumer culture could offer" (224). Secondly, sport events became "carnivalized" as spectators began to dance, sing, drink, eat, and paint their bodies. She does, of course, note the commercialization of both these areas: we don't break into dance when we hear a rock tune that has degenerated into muzak, and the lower income of sports enthusiasts are being priced out of new stadiums.

After Ehrenreich's spirited journey from pre-historical cave images of dancers to the crowds of sports enthusiasts, she looks somberly at our highly populated and impersonal world, at our competition for resources, at the "hostility to ecstatic undertakings," from both Protestant fundamentalism in the U.S. and from Islamic radicalism in the Mid and Far East. She does, however, acknowledge that "festivity keeps bubbling up," at planned and at spontaneous festivity or protest.

Barbara Ehrenreich's *Dancing in the Streets* has been roundly praised, even by reviewers who criticize particular assertions, such as that dancing is hard-wired in the human brain. It is a work whose timeliness might be highlighted by events that followed January's devastating earthquake in Haiti. Only a few hours after the quake, likely drawing from their African roots, "several hundred gathered to sing, clap, and pray in an intersection." Referring to the singing, a nearby Haitian-American commented, "Haitians are different. People in other countries wouldn't do this," he said, "It's a sense of community." (MRzine. 14 Jan. 2010. Web. 14 Feb. 2010.) For its compassion, readability, and the importance of its message, Ehrenreich's study deserves ongoing attention and response by a wide readership.

Ann Canale, Ph.D.  
Lindenwood University  
acanale@lindenwood.edu