



Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy

By Barbara Ehrenreich

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Widely praised as "impressive" (The Washington Post Book World), "ambitious" (The Wall Street Journal), and "alluring" (The Los Angeles Times), *Dancing in the Streets* explores a human impulse that has been so effectively suppressed that we lack even a term for it: the desire for collective joy, historically expressed in revels of feasting, costuming, and dancing.

Drawing on a wealth of history and anthropology, Barbara Ehrenreich uncovers the origins of communal celebration in human biology and culture. From the earliest orgiastic Mesopotamian rites to the medieval practice of Christianity as a "danced religion" and the transgressive freedoms of carnival, she demonstrates that mass festivities have long been central to the Western tradition. In recent centuries, this festive tradition has been repressed, cruelly and often bloodily. But as Ehrenreich argues in this original, exhilarating, and ultimately optimistic book, the celebratory impulse is too deeply ingrained in human nature ever to be completely extinguished.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. It is a truism that everyone seeks happiness, but public manifestations of it have not always been free of recrimination. Colonial regimes have defined spectacles as an inherently "primitive" act and elders harrumph at youthful exultation. Social critic and bestselling author Ehrenreich (*Nickel and Dimed*) teases out the many incarnations of sanctioned public revelry, starting with the protofeminist *oreibasia*, or Dionysian winter dance, in antiquity, and from there covering trance, ancient mystery cults and carnival, right up to the rock and roll and sports-related mass celebrations of our own day. "Why is so little left" of such rituals, she asks, bemoaning the "loss of *ecstatic* pleasure." Ehrenreich necessarily delineates the repressive reactions to such ecstasy by the forces of so-called "civilization," reasonably positing that rituals of joy are nearly as innate as the quest for food and shelter. Complicating Ehrenreich's schema is her own politicized judgment, dismissing what she sees as the debased celebrations of sporting events while writing approvingly of the 1960s "happenings" of her own youth and the inevitable street theater that accompanies any modern mass protest, yet all but ignoring the Burning Man festival in Nevada and tut-tutting ravers' reliance on artificial ecstasy. That aside, Ehrenreich writes with grace and clarity in a fascinating, wide-ranging and generous account. (*Jan. 10*)

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From [Booklist](#)

At a time when social scientists are lamenting the loss of a sense of community, Ehrenreich offers an absorbing look at the joy of life expressed in communal rituals of dance and celebration. From cave drawings through the celebrations of weddings, religious rites, healing, and war preparations of various cultures to modern "carnivalization" of sports celebrations, she traces the appeal of synchronizing individual movements to a group. Western culture, with little understanding of the ecstasy of love expressed in group celebrations, has looked on such celebrations as primitive hysterics and banned them among African slaves, Native Americans, and other cultures. But Ehrenreich details a long history of such celebrations in European cultures, from the festivals of Dionysus to those of medieval Christians. She also explores other cultures' reactions to dance celebrations they viewed as somehow socially or spiritually subversive, whether it's Protestants banning carnivals or Wahhabist Muslims frowning on ecstatic Sufism. Given the social nature of humans, Ehrenreich is optimistic that the drive to "civilize" will never fully eliminate the impulse for group celebration. *Vanessa Bush*

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Review

"A fabulous book on carnival and ecstasy, skillfully arranged and brilliantly explained." ?Robert Farris Thompson, author of *Tango: The Art History of Love*

"Barbara Ehrenreich shows how and why people celebrate together, and equally what causes us to fear celebration. Here is the other side of ritual, whose dark side she explored in *Blood Rites*. She ranges in time from the earliest festivals drawn on cave walls to modern football crowds; she finds that festivities and ecstatic rituals have been a way to address personal ills like melancholy and shame, social ills as extreme as those faced by American slaves. *Dancing in the Streets* is itself a celebration of language -- clear, funny, unpredictable. This is a truly original book." ?Richard Sennett, author of *The Culture of the New Capitalism*

Users Review

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Coleen Faircloth:

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