

# The Politics of Carnival

## Festivals Medieval & Modern that Slip Out of Control

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FE Note: In the random manner carnivals can get out of hand, so, too, does this article appear in our pages. A staff member sent it to us months ago, and we found it tucked away in our on-line files. It seemed like a good fit for our theme and we liked the subject matter, but upon reading it, realized that it had been printed elsewhere, particularly since it makes reference to an accompanying CD which obviously isn't here.

We made an effort to find its origin and its author to no avail. We assume neither the writer nor the publication will have a problem with the article being reprinted since the text cites the *Fifth Estate* approvingly.

However, we want to give credit where it is due, and apologize for not giving attribution in this edition. We will in the next one when those who produced the article contact us.

Since the early 1980s, there has been a bit of an academic cottage industry largely concerned with Mikhail Bakhtin's book, *Rabelais and His World*, and the interpretation of medieval carnival and festive misrule. Bakhtin famously described "the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything." Festive misrule then is the inversion permitted during a carnival, the license to swear, drink, criticize the elite of church and society, break social norms, to take green boughs and maypoles off of church or noble land, mumming and various plays and games (often with comic elements criticizing gentry and church) cross dressing and so on.

The list could literally go on for pages. There is ample evidence for the existence of festive misrule, what is at debate is its function and consequences. The debate is between people who see carnival as conservative, that it lets off steam and preserves social cohesion, and Bakhtin and many others who see carnival as subversive.

This debate is interesting, but not necessarily as important as it is to those involved. I want carnival to have had (and continue to have) a mostly subversive function. But even if it doesn't I'm not heartbroken. Firstly, I think misrule, play, celebration, all these things are intrinsically valuable in and of themselves.

So, even if a French peasant, or an English commoner, never took part in a conspiracy or insurrection against the nobles, at least they told them to fuck off several times a year (there were a lot of carnivals and celebrations), played at Robin Hood, danced, drank and had a good time. Also, even if carnival and festive misrule was usually a conservative force in society (and I'm not conceding that it was), it wasn't always.

There are a lot of examples of carnival getting out of hand. Sometimes a little out of hand, like the Edinburgh riots in 1561. Despite prohibitions against traditional games including the election of Robin Hood and Maid Marion, a tailor was nonetheless elected Robin Hood. He led a riot and was dubbed by his mock subjects Lord of Inobedience. They smashed things up and got arrested.

Twelve years earlier in England, things got a lot out of hand when Robert Kett helped transform a summer game into insurrection. "Kett held parliament beneath a ceremonial oak tree. His followers carried green boughs to recognize each other. The symbolic language of game became the language of rebellion" (Wiles).

Kett's followers defeated an army of 14,000 before later being defeated by an even larger army. I would say that was well out of hand! There are suggested connections between the burning of festive bonfires and the origins of the 1381 peasants uprising in England.

E. Le Roy Ladurie chronicles one of the bloodiest uprisings in France prior to the 1789 revolution, in his *Carnival: A People's Uprising in Romans 1579–80*. The conflict was long in duration and was put down with extreme force, and it had its origins in carnival. Natalie Zemon Davis presents a huge list of such events in her wonderful essay, "The Reasons of Misrule." More than anything else I would recommend reading this relatively short essay.

By the politics of carnival, I mean the insurrectionary potential latent in carnival, but also the contestation of the meaning of carnival. The contestation of meaning in history is political and it has real relevance to struggles today. I also mean something quite separate from these debates over events often hundreds of years in the past.

The phrase "the politics of carnival" also brings to mind the struggle for joy and celebration in our lives today. Carnival is political today because political oppression involves the imposition of misery. To affirm joy in our lives, to truly have something to celebrate, is to deny the passive consumerism of this society and the "safety" of the police state.

New Orleans Mardi Gras, the real unofficial one, is not safe, not completely. It is not well managed, or carefully controlled. It is chaotic and organic and joyous, and it can have a dark side. Affirming joy means taking chances. Some say that revolution is the carnival of the oppressed. To this we might answer that carnival is the carnival of the oppressed.

That we believe that joy is subversive and that we affirm pleasure and laughter and eros; that we hate this death culture and its misery and work, factories and war, sitcoms and mediation. Simulations of joy and laughter, but real prisons and real death.

Carnival is political where it is contested, and that is not just in the halls of academia. The meaning of carnival is up for grabs all over the place, most of all the streets. In New Orleans, Mardi Gras means gentrification, ethnic cleansing frat-boy-ism, corporate sponsorship/control if you talk to some people.

So much of New Orleans black culture, the jazz, Zydeco and Black Creole culture, Mardi Gras Indians, the secret societies and krewes, etc., is so intertwined with Mardi Gras that attempts to drive blacks out of New Orleans is an attempt to kill the real Mardi Gras, and vice versa. Mardi Gras as an image sold as a package deal to bored tourists is struggling against Mardi Gras as lived experience, of deeply rooted culture, of chaotic play. And, its not just New Orleans. Wherever big tourist dollars are involved, mixed with imperialism in the guise of the passive consumption of (official, sanitized) culture, then carnival is in danger. This is happening throughout the Caribbean, South America and elsewhere.

The Greenwich Village Halloween parade was founded in 1973 by puppeteer and mask maker Ralph Lee, "who wanted to create a meaningful, mythologically resonant Halloween celebration for his own as well as for neighborhood children; the pageant included dramatically over sized puppets and effigies, and wound through the narrow street of Greenwich Village" (Skal).

The parade became a huge draw for participants from the gay community As the parade became more popular, it began attracting more and more spectators from outside the neighborhood. What began as an event with no distinction between participants and the community, transformed into a parade with bleachers and a barricade keeping gawking spectators from the participants. It became more and more managed until it was moved to a larger thoroughfare.

In many ways, this mirrors the sanitation and corporate control of Gay Pride parades. This trend has been contested by anti-assimilationist and anti-consumerist queer groups such as Gay Shame and many others. Corporations want to turn queers into niche markets, radical queers want to turn corporations into rubble. At least I do, are you with me?

As anarchists and radicals, we should be fighting to preserve grassroots carnivals. We should be doing what we can to nudge them in anti-authoritarian, anti-corporate directions, not as outsider agitators, but as community members.

The Krewe of Eris is doing this in New Orleans, and radical queers around the world are doing it in their own communities, I did a zine, *Idle Hands The Devil's Work: Radical Interpretation of Halloween*, that attempted to do the same with that day. I'm sure there are many other examples. We should also make our own carnivals and festivals

and celebrations. We should challenge ourselves to make them truly joyous, anarchic, full of misrule and good cheer.

Reclaim the Streets comes to mind, radical elements within the Rave community, Earth First! and similar gatherings have elements of carnival. This is part of what a recent issue of the *Fifth Estate* (Play! Fall 2008) is about. Also, a recent issue of *Communities* magazine (Festivals and Gatherings #142).

The work of Hakim Bey is obviously relevant; every real carnival is a temporary autonomous zone. His proposal for an Immediatist Potlach in *Immediatism* is relevant, too. His love of Fourier and dinner parties. But, I digress. The point is that we must make our own carnivals to our own tastes. The CD this zine accompanies is a small contribution to this process. It is my soundtrack to an imaginal carnival. It reflects my tastes and interests, but I hope you will like it too. For a world of joy and pain, of lived experience, of wilderness and burning factories, of song and dance.

A world where every carnival gets way out of hand.

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