

accessible means of attending to the relation between reality and the play activity.

—Michael DeAndrea, *Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, IL*

American Fun: Four Centuries of Joyous Rebellion

John Beckman

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English Professor John Beckman's book is an erudite, engaging history, utterly free of jargon. His thesis is simple but one that gives him plenty of room for telling delightful stories and offering insight. Somehow, he says, inherent in the American character is a love of "fun," the active, risk-taking, often irreverent enjoyment of "flaunted pleasure in the face of authority" (p. xiii), but also a fun that unites "the crowd in common joy" (p. xiv). This love of fun originates with the people, even though it was co-opted by impresarios like P. T. Barnum during the Gilded Age and, later, by Walt Disney; but the best fun still is rebellious and mocking, while remaining civil. American fun descended from the festivities of Thomas Morton at Merry Mount in Puritan Massachusetts and the playful Sons of Liberty whose protests against the British imposition of the Tea Act precipitated the American Revolution in 1776 to the Merry Pranksters of Ken Kesey and the new leftists of the Yippie movement in the 1960s and even the antics of punks and anti-World Trade Organization rallies in the 1980s and later.

For Beckman, fun disdains convention and breaks boundaries (as in Morton's embrace of the "savages" and discovery of the indigenous people's playfulness). While acknowledging differences, Beckman sees a bright thread of rebellion running through American history, an affirmation of individualism and personal freedom in an often conformist and repressive culture and society, but also an expression of community, often absent in an America divided by class and race. Repeatedly, the fun-loving play of the risk-taking hero is posed against a dower, repressive authority or even a reformer who wants to "guide" fun (Sam vs. John Adams; the African American "King Charles" vs. the respectable abolitionist, Frederick Douglass).

Beckman is at his best in identifying exemplary personalities and retelling the stories of their often brief appearances on the national stage. Many of his figures may be familiar (Morton, Sam Adams, P. T. Barnum, Zelda Fitzgerald, and perhaps Abbie Hoffman). But he tells us also about some like John David Borthwick and his observations of the dances and jokes of California gold rushers. In Beckman's account of playful congregations of slaves in antebellum New Orleans at "Place Congo," he tells the intriguing story of how the oppressed expressed themselves on their Sundays of freedom. And his writing about the vaudeville team of Bert Williams and George Walker (originators of the African American cakewalk dance craze of 1896) is sensitive and enlightening. He is a great storyteller, bringing to life the adventures of Mae West, Clara Bow, and many more. And, while he may overdo some sections (like his detailed accounts of the antics of

the early hippies in San Francisco and the Yippies during the Vietnam War), losing at times the thread of his narrative, and the argument gets a little tired by the time he reaches the 1970s, he finds ways of integrating divergent expressions of American “joyous rebellion.”

Yet, although he is careful not to present merely a naïve celebration of American impishness or ignore the “playful” glee that Americans have taken in the racism of minstrel shows or the sadism of public hangings, he does have a tough time explaining why the fun of scorning authority so seldom has had positive effects beyond the moment. He certainly realizes that “fun” could be sold “back to the people” (chapter 5) as in the deceit or humbug of P. T. Barnum’s fake shows. And he offers a sound history of other late nineteenth-century showmen such as Buffalo Bill Cody and Edward Tilyou of Coney Island. Yet he finds Barnum “a large-scale prankster in the spirit of the Sons of Liberty” (p. 110), even though Barnum was hardly political. And his claim that the Jazz Age of the 1920s—with its speakeasies and flappers and their risk-taking and defiance of prohibition—somehow advanced democracy by energizing and modernizing it seems a stretch. In the end, Beckham finds that what held all these stories together is that American fun seekers get the “joke,” and win the “personal and communal experience of freedom. It requires only a cavalier attitude toward killjoys, tyrants, limits, and timidity” (p. 311). Is that really enough?

Repeatedly, Beckham delights in the presumed American story of “fun,” but has no sense of why it is American, nor does he explore its roots in British or European

traditions such as saturnalia, mummung, or Mardi Gras festivals. By narrowly defining fun as rebellion, he ignores other forms of active pleasure. At the same time, he lacks an understanding of the social origins of his preferred fun, which was often found in the young or expressed in special periods or places where “rebellion” was tolerated or was possible. He also does not explain why and how these episodic expressions of delight come and go or how they serve different social purposes such as youth rebelling against parental culture or middle-class “slumming.” Rather, he jumps from one delightful example of playfulness to another.

Still, Beckham has little patience for the passively consumed pleasures of immersive video games, and he is imaginatively open to the playfulness of movements that—to many adults—seem merely chaotic, destructive, or mindless (like mosh-pit dancing and punk music). His optimism and good cheer, for me, at least, overcome a lot of my academic concern about a lack of historically analytical rigor. And that is not easy coming from a guy who in the spring of 1970, after organizing a successful antiwar march at my college, refused to join a party of rock music (and sex and drugs) that my coconspirators organized.

—Gary Cross, *Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA*

Toys of the '50s, '60s, and '70s

Kate Roberts and Adam Scher
St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2014. Images, image and