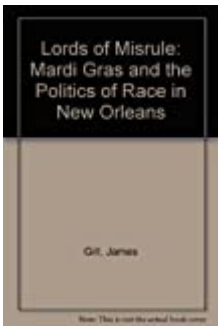
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



James Gill. *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997. vi + 303 pp. $47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87805-915-7.

Reviewed by Michael L. Kurtz (Southeastern Louisiana University)

Published on H-Pol (April, 1998)

James Gill is a writer for the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* newspaper. The British-born Gill's columns focus primarily on city and state politics and on the legal system and are frequently accompanied by a heavy dose of sarcasm. So it is with *Lords of Misrule*, a historical account of the development of New Orleans' most famous celebration, Mardi Gras. The book recounts the dominance of certain elements of the city's social and business elite over the leading Carnival clubs, or "krewes," as natives call them. Gill relates the heavily racist undertones of these old-line clubs as they took over control of the parades and balls and imposed their own rules on them. Journalistic rather than scholarly in style and documentation, the book offers a probing insight into one of New Orleans' darker sides.

The book begins with an account of the New Orleans City Council meeting of December 19, 1991, when the council debated and approved an ordinance requiring all Carnival krewes that marched in public parades with permits from the city to desegregate their memberships. Introduced by Councilwoman Dorothy Mae Taylor, one of the city's most outspoken African-American leaders, the ordinance ignited a firestorm of controversy, for it challenged the historic tradition of all-white hegemony over Mardi Gras. Some of the newer krewes that paraded, such as the spectacular Bacchus and Endymion, had integrated their memberships, and, much to the surprise of the general public, even the Zulu parade, commonly thought to be all-black, contained members of both races. But the old-line krewes–Comus, Momus, Proteus, and Rex–had retained their traditional insistence on maintaining all-white rosters, and they attempted to use their considerable social and economic clout to maintain the status quo. But as Gill recounts, they failed to appreciate the changing demographics of New Orleans, a city that by 1991 had a population nearly three-quarters black. That the ordinance passed came as little surprise to anyone familiar with the city's changing power structure. Gill then relates the story of the founding of Mardi Gras in its modern form.

During the French and Spanish colonial periods, as well as much of the antebellum era, Mardi Gras featured unstructured, raucous celebrating in the streets, often accompanied by violence. In 1857, to give the celebration a more structured organization, a group of citizens, spurred by their friends from Mobile, Alabama, organized the Krewe of Comus and staged the first public parade. After the disruptions of the Civil War, the leadership of Mardi Gras was assumed by leading former Confederates, many of whom openly espoused the violence and racism of the Ku Klux Klan. Gill describes how Comus and other krewes adopted many of the Klan's most

visible symbols, including elaborate costumes, codes of secrecy, and racial bigotry. In one of many bloody racial incidents in New Orleans during the Reconstruction era, the so-called Battle of Liberty Place–in which a large contingent of armed ex-Confederates defeated the Metropolitan Police forces, a conflict that left two dozen people dead–the instigators of the rebellion, a racist group that called itself the White League, was organized and led by the leaders of Comus and Rex. In 1891, many of the city's social and business elite, including future Governor John M. Parker and comprising virtually the entire membership rolls of Rex, Comus, Momus, and Proteus, became ring leaders of the mob that lynched eleven Italian citizens acquitted of murdering the city's police chief.

In his treatment of the twentieth century, Gill focuses more on political disputes than he does on the history of Mardi Gras. He describes the bitter clash between the leaders of the main Carnival clubs and the flamboyant political dictator, U.S. Senator Huey P. Long. According to Gill, the New Orleans elite despised Long and looked down on him with a large measure of contempt. He also describes the conflict that the krewe leaders had with Huey's brother, Earl, and their close relationship with Earl's political enemies, including the city's mayor, de Lesseps S. Morrison. He describes how in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, Mardi Gras expanded, with the addition of many new parades, but how the traditional krewes continued their domination over the celebration. Gill then describes how the advent of the highly spectacular Bacchus and Endymion parades in the 1960s changed the face of Mardi Gras by giving it a much more popular basis. Finally, Gill describes how the City of New Orleans filed a lawsuit against the traditional clubs to force them to integrate their memberships. The case, however, was thrown out by a state court that declared the city's efforts and violation of the First Amendment.

Lords of Misrule is an entertaining book, well worth reading for anyone interested in the evolution of Mardi Gras. It also contains a glimpse into some episodes in New Orleans history and the role played by the leadership of the Carnival krewes. Written in a lively, engaging style, it holds the reader's interest throughout. It is not, nor does it pretend to be, a definitive scholarly account. Gill is a journalist and clearly has written the book for the general public rather than for a select group of academic specialists. The book's greatest strength is its uninhibited examination of the historical development of Mardi Gras without the veneer of pomp that has accompanied previous efforts. Gill does not hesitate to probe deeply into the racist views and activities of some of the nineteenth-century ancestors of some of contemporary New Orleans social lions. The book's main weakness is its lack of depth. By covering such an extensive time period–more than two centuries–in less than three hundred pages, Gill necessarily provides only a superficial account of many of the main events and personalities he treats. Gill writes so well, and his interpretations and analyses are so incisive, that the reader is left wishing for more detail. Nevertheless, this book is highly recommended.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu. [The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <renlex@csd.uwm.edu>]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol

Citation: Michael L. Kurtz. Review of Gill, James, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. April, 1998.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1905

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.