REVIEW


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“This book is a plea for a gender-sensitive interpretation of events, festivals and celebrations” (p. 89).

Doing Gender in Events: Feminist Perspectives in Critical Event Studies by Barbara Grabher is the third book in the newly established Routledge Critical Event Studies Research Series, which considers underrepresented themes in event studies (gendered violence, well-being, family events) from inter-/multidisciplinary angles.

Grabher’s short volume looks at festivals from a gender perspective, assessing their gender-inclusivity and gender-sensitivity. Her study is grounded in ethnographic fieldwork she conducted at Hull UK City of Culture 2017 (abbreviated to Hull2017) in Kingston upon Hull (Yorkshire, England), a year-long program of festivals, exhibitions, concerts, and lectures from which she culled a few events that had “gender-sensitive profiles in their form, content and/or purpose” (p. 25).

The book is structured in six chapters, beginning with an introduction that also lays the theoretical foundation for the entire book. The next chapter outlines Hull2017 and the author’s methodology. In the following three chapters, Grabher analyzes gender and equality during Hull2017 from different angles: the engagement of audiences, the performances themselves, and the infrastructural frame. The final chapter differs a bit from the conclusions one usually finds in academic works: rather than merely summarizing the contents of the book, it focuses on the (potential) future of gender in event studies and highlights areas for further research: gender politics, event infrastructures, and the meaning of the absence of events.

While Grabher resorts to traditional ethnographic research methods such as semi-structured interviews and participant observation, she also approaches her topic in innovative ways. Especially original is her collaboration with nine “observing-participants,” a term she coins to highlight “their active involvement and crucial contributions to the research process and analysis” (p. 27). These collaborators were free to attend any event they chose and subsequently met with Grabher to discuss and reflect on their experiences, observations, and impressions. Their results informed Grabher’s interpretations. And although I would have liked to learn more about their socioeconomic profiles or biographies, I find this approach heuristically stimulating.

In her first analytical chapter, Grabher focuses on the audiences of the Hull2017 events. She and her team studied these happenings for themselves but also investigated the way participants experienced gender equality during them. Grabher concludes that the events did influence how
audiences, individually and collectively, understand equality. She also shows that the audiences’ engagement as communities and as individuals influenced the events as well. While inclusion was a central theme, participation in these events was sometimes perceived as a privilege. She further argues that although the “celebrations appear[ed] to offer space and time to encounter oneself as well as the wider community within the context of cultures of gender equality,” they ended up being attended by those already sensitive to issues related to gender equality (p. 37).

The next chapter traces the performance of gender equality in a few equality-themed events during Hull2017. Grabher focuses on six events and their performers. In doing so, the author defines performers and performances broadly to include a diverse range of actors and cultural expressions. Her results show that gender equality is perceived differently, but she was able to identify three dominant narratives: representation, awareness, and empowerment. To convey their messages, the performers mainly used two approaches: they tried to incorporate either an entertaining strategy or a comforting one, without really challenging the attendants’ preconceptions. With this latter strategy, as Grabher points out, performers did not take advantage of the opportunity to really initiate change.

Her last analytical chapter discusses infrastructural conditions and institutions and how they potentially both support as well as hurt the cause of gender equality. In her analysis, Grabher looks at three central themes: festivalization, material conditions, and the commodification of equality. She found that festivalization facilitated discussion of gender equality and resulted in a normalization of gender equality discourses. In contrast, though, it often left equality discourses at the events instead of incorporating them into the participants’ lives. In her section about material conditions, the author reminds us that participation does not just depend on monetary, temporal, and intellectual accessibility. Festival spaces such as toilet facilities may exclude as well when they do not offer all-gender bathrooms. Finally, Hull2017 also demonstrates that events often come with corporate and/or political sponsorships that participants might not approve of. Events need funding, but for some who do fund these events, “equality is used as a value, which can be co-opted, commodified and commercialised for the profit of its supporters” (p. 86).

Returning to the initial quote, this book is a very successful plea: the author convincingly demonstrates how important it is to consider gender in events—not only for events with a gender theme, but particularly for those that do not address gender at all. And while Barbara Grabher’s work certainly is of scholarly interest, it reaches beyond academia—or should: her results have important implications for event organizers, sponsors, and policymakers, in particular.
AUTHOR BIO

Cora Gaebel is a cultural anthropologist affiliated with the University of Cologne. She did her doctoral research on two Hindu festivals celebrated in Puri (East India), examining the relationship between these events and the economy in a broad sense. She is currently laying the groundwork for their postdoctoral research project on LGBTIQ+ lives in Bangkok.

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HOW TO CITE


The Journal of Festive Studies (ISSN 2641–9939) is a peer-reviewed open access journal from H-Celebration, a network of H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, and is the inaugural journal published through the H-Net Journals initiative. It can be found online at https://journals.h-net.org/jfs.