The Quest for Leisure: 1820-1900

In the long run, industrialization brought the reduction of worktime. The hours per year committed to work have declined in the industrial West in a range from 3,000-3,600 to 1,800-2,000 from 1840 to the present. Simultaneously, the work life of the average individual has also decreased sharply at both ends—as the age of entry into the full-time workforce has risen from about 10 to 20 and retirement has become a common experience. Of course, not all of this time liberated from work went to additional hours of leisure; still, this gradual reallocation of time has made possible a dramatic change in the quantity and quality of free time.

This redistribution of time has been accompanied by a drastic “repackaging” of leisure hours. Industrialization drove play from labor and eliminated the seasonal ebbs in the flow of work so characteristic of artisanal and agricultural life; it also made possible new forms of leisure time, including the typically modern notions of free evenings, the weekend, paid summer vacations, as well as a lengthy childhood and retirement.

Why and how this occurred over the last one hundred and fifty years is more complex than it might first appear. This reallocation of time was not simply a byproduct of mechanization—a tetter-totter effect of rising productivity and declining working hours. In fact, as new technology increased output, that gain was more likely to be absorbed in higher profits or increased consumption than in freedom from work. Labor-saving devices did not often mean less work but more goods and investment. An increase in hours for leisure was sporadic. In a trade-off between money and time, money usually won. Indeed, as we say, time became money, signaling a defeat of the preindustrial “leisure ethic” that had so often frustrated merchants in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The reallocation of time was discontinuous. It occurred in brief and often sharp changes, usually only after years of political and intellectual ferment. This quest for leisure had two faces. First, it was a complex accommodation to a new industrial understanding of time. Second, it was a challenge to the social and cultural implications of the 19th-century gospel of work.
A Revolution in Thinking About Time

“All society,” says the French thinker Jacques Attali, “is constructed around a sense of time.” Temporality is both a matter of technology and politics; changes in the means of measuring time have a decisive affect on how we organize society. Moreover, whoever controls the use and significance of other people’s time has power over them. These two factors came together in the advent of the modern clock and the Industrial Revolution. It is a commonplace that the cadence of preindustrial societies was often set by the agricultural cycle and was marked by feasts and fasts organized by the clergy. The dominant attitude toward time was the notion of recurrence—the eternal repetition of nature—and the desire to merge past and present. This attitude sharply contrasts with the rhythm of industrial society, where work and society are synchronized and paced by the immutable regularity of the clock in service to business and industry. The driving compulsion in the modern world is mechanical regularity and the anticipation of the future in the present. Society no longer seeks to suppress time; rather, the object is to “gain” and “save” it. And the modern clock, with its capacity to measure minutes and (later) seconds, allowed a new intensification of the tempo of life.

As a result, time has lost its religious meaning. Rather, in the eighteenth century, time became a measure of work and wealth. The ancient measure of time, the calendar, allowed for the play of irregular labor. Not so with the clock, which became an economic weapon to eliminate the gaps in the traditional day of work and assured a continuity and uniformity of output. Politically, clock time became a tool of industrialists to regulate the minute flow of production. The clock, in part, allowed the employer to impose the work ethic upon the masses. From the 18th century British industrialist Josiah Wedgwood, with his fixed factory hours, to the early 20th century American engineer Frederick Taylor, with his stop watch, management capitalized on the power of the clock to regularize and intensify the pace of work.

As a result, traditional pleasures were purged from work and the pride of skill was diminished. More and more, a day’s work meant merely the selling of time rather than a “way of life.” Employers placed a monetary value on the hour and sought to increase its economic output; laborers responded in kind: they demanded overtime pay and a cap on the length of the “normal” workday. Thus they hoped to gain economically from their increased productivity, to make a job last longer, and often to share work among a larger group of wage-earners. Workers became aware that time was a scarcity to be protected and increased in value. They, too, realized that time was money.

But industrialization had a more profound impact on thinking about time. Workers and employers not only adjusted to the new economic realities of worktime, they attempted to recapture leisure hours lost during industrialization and to “repackage” it. There were several alternative plans for rearranging leisure time. For example, as you may remember, Benjamin Franklin’s strategy was to defer leisure to a later period in life—as early retirement. Other successful and well-to-do people concentrated leisure in lengthy holidays. In the 19th century, this tradition spread from the independently wealthy to the hard-working business and professional classes.

In contrast, the strategy of workers in the reallocation of time was more short-term. Their goal was to liberate hours from daily toil and to free a day or two from labor each week. Because the wage-earner lacked the opportunity to forego income for an extended period, he or she was unable to imitate the merchant, lawyer, and politician on the August vacation. With insufficient resources to “save” time (in reality, income), the worker sought to “spend” free time in frequent, regular, and necessarily short doses. Saint Monday was to the wage-earner of the mid-19th century what British artisan Thomas Wright, what the vacation was to the businessman. Part of the middle-class resentment of the worker’s inconstancy and apparent lack of “time thrift” may simply reflect contrasting ideas about distributing life time.

By the end of the 19th century, these different time strategies had largely merged. The goal increasingly became that of uniform durations of work, compressed into as few hours as necessary to maintain production and income. Leisure time was radically segmented from work and packaged into predictable frames of time. Leisure was distributed into long blocks of free hours extended over the day, week, year, and life span. This new approach to time contrasted with the traditional pattern of irregularity and the intertwining of work and leisure.

This change of strategy was, in part, an accommodation to the exigencies of industrial capitalism. Workers had surely adapted to the reality of the segmentation of life introduced by the separation of work and home. They recognized the necessity of synchronizing interpersonal activities in the complex organizations that characterize industrial society. After all, the compression of work into an 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM schedule, five days a week, is one of the most rational ways of solving these problems. This changing view of distributing time may also simply reflect a growing instrumental attitude toward work as a mere economic means to practically the only remaining arena of personal freedom: leisure.

This time strategy may also reflect the trickle down of the middle-class ideal to the masses. “Saving time”—forbearance of leisure until it could be coupled with income—was gradually embraced by all classes. Workers discovered the advantages of saving enough to purchase vacations sufficiently long to allow time away from the industrial environment. They also came to see the virtue of withholding children from work; and they even realized the value of time after retirement before ill-health reduced the use of “free time.”
The repackaging of leisure time was not without conflict, however. First, the differences of time strategies between classes was surprisingly persistent. In particular, the ten-hour and eventually eight-hour movements captured the imagination of workers long before vacations, retirement, or even an extended childhood. These latter doses of leisure were far more popular with the elite.5

More important, the quest for leisure of workers in the 19th century challenged the status quo and its gospel of work. Shorter working hours represented a concrete demand for liberty, a demand for not only freedom from the fatigue and boredom of industrial work, but from the increasingly authoritarian environment of the modern factory or office. For example, shop and office workers from the 1840s sought to limit the right of employers to their time. Retail clerks strove to end the “living in” system, wherein the employee had lodgings at the shop and was often expected to be on call at all hours; they attempted to create a clear separation between the masters’ time and space and their own.6

In many subtle ways, common people understood “free time” as a concrete expression of personal liberty. In an increasingly democratic age, the opportunity of leisure was seen as a right of citizenship. In the 1830s, reformers frequently compared long factory hours with New World slavery. In the 1860s, the American short-hours movement equated reduced working hours with the emancipation of Black slaves. And the American slogan, “Eight Hours for What We Will,” perfectly expressed the quest for a common right to autonomous time.7

Finally, the wage-earner’s embrace of the segmentation of time reflects a positive quest for family life. The ideal became not merely shorter workdays but the sharing of blocks of domestic leisure time. In effect, the objective was to reclaim family time lost when work and home were separate in industrialization. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century wage earners repeatedly resisted multiple shift work, sex and age-based variations in working hours, and even staggered vacations. There goal was simultaneous leisure time for working family members. With increases in income in the 19th century, people began to demand that working hours accommodate social as well as economic needs.8

Movements for Shorter Working Time: A Brief History

The above analysis has been rather abstract. Some of these points, however, can be illustrated by a concise overview of the movements for the reduction of worktime in American and Britain. Both 19th-century America and Britain were “liberal” or laissez-faire societies, reluctant, on principle, to regulate the interior life of business. The factory, like the cottage workroom, was viewed as private space, to be free from government intervention. The contract signed between worker and employee was likewise to be unconstrained. To regulate this relationship would deny the freedom to work. To be sure, this philosophy of government often coincided with business interests. Still, even when some employers called for reduced worktime, legislators and judges ruled for laissez faire. Thus, despite evidence that the new factories and their workday of thirteen or fourteen hours was detrimental to the health of workers, legislation was slow to reduce worktime. When hour laws were passed in the United States, they appeared in piecemeal fashion at the state level and were frequently reversed by the courts. And in Britain, such changes in worktime came very slowly and were formally limited to children and women.

Perhaps the earliest short-hour movement was the Manchester Cotton Spinners’ Association. It was organized in 1818 by the English worker John Doherty. While it failed in its efforts to gain a legal ten-hour day, the movement was revived in 1831. Craft journeymen in Philadelphia and Boston in the 1820s also began appealing to the state to expand their leisure; and, in the early 1830s, women textile workers around Lowell, Massachusetts, orchestrated a ten-hour movement. The depression of 1837 stilled these struggles but, again in the mid-1840s, short-time committees sprang up in the industrial regions of both countries.9

The question of what motivated these movements is complex and controversial. One obvious goal was to reduce fatigue insofar as employers repeatedly increased the workload. Another was to spread work among the laboring community as mechanization and especially in England rapid population growth combined to create a surplus of workers.10

Beyond these economic goals were views that reflected changing attitudes toward leisure. The women workers of Lowell, Massachusetts, sought a ten-hour day in order to cultivate their own education and “improvement.” Indeed, the religious piety that had swept New England in the 1830s served to instill not only a work ethic, but also a belief in the necessity of time for moral improvement. One short-hours activist wrote, “as a society we want to improve our moral condition—we want to increase the boundary of our knowledge and understanding—we want to have sufficient opportunity each day to perform the duties enjoined on us by our Maker and by mankind.”11

Family life was especially an important issue in Lancashire, where mothers, fathers, and children all worked in the mills. As an English leader of the short-time movement said in 1833, free time would teach both sexes to be “good fathers and mothers, good husbands and wives.” Short-time activists linked free time to the rights of “free born Englishmen” and to the American ideology of “Republicanism.” John Doherty asked “Is the personal liberty, or the actual imprisonment, of a very large portion of the king’s subjects, a mere matter of private business.”12 Doherty certainly did not think so. He believed that free time was essential for removing “slavery in every form” in that it provided the means essential for self-education and participation in public life. The New England-based journal, The Mechanic, argued for the “necessity of
promoting that independence, intelligence and virtue of the laboring classes which will enable them to wield the powers with which they are vested, with wisdom...."

The idea that all citizens had an equal right to personal liberty was well expressed in the American anthem of the eight-hours movement published in 1866:

We mean to make things over,
We are tired of toil for naught.
With but bare enough to live upon.
And never an hour for thought;
We want to feel the sunshine,
And we want to smell the flowers.
We are sure that God has will'd it.
And we mean to have eight hours.
We’re summoning our forces
From the shipyard, shop, and mill:
Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest,
Eight hours for what we will!18

Yet what were the results of these movements? In the 19th century, their victories were few and were channelled through the perspective of middle-class reformers and politicians. The British led the way: legislation in 1819 demanded a 12-hour daily maximum for children in cotton textile factories; in 1833, it was reduced to eight (with provisions for education); and in 1847, the working hours of women and children in textile mills were restricted to ten. Gradually, protection was extended to a variety of trades. While they excluded men, the close relationship between men’s work and that of minors often led to reduced hours for adult males.

In America, the results were even more meager. While children under 12 were prohibited from working in Massachusetts as early as 1842, this law was slowly adopted by other states. Following the granting of a ten-hour day to federal government employees in 1840, skilled male workers were able to win a ten-hour day in the 1850s. Yet, only after thirty years of agitation, were women factory operatives able in New England to win meaningful legislation in the 1870s.19

Two factors about this halting movement to liberate personal time should be noted. First, legislators focused their attention on the factory rather than on labor in general. Second, they applied restrictions first to children and then to women, leaving men outside formal legislation, reflecting in part, the fact that some men working outside the factory were sufficiently organized to prevent an extension of traditional workdays beyond ten hours. The restriction,

of course, directly affected the textile factories, where women and children predominated. In any case, legislators believed that the time of women and children should be protected from economic competition, whereas that of men should not.

From the late 18th century, there were signs of increased public interest in the welfare of the young, which was a direct consequence of the breakdown of the domestic economy or home-based work. While children of the poor had always worked, they had traditionally done so under the direct supervision of parents or a surrogate in a household. The factory often eliminated this tutelage and reformers sought to replace these natural protectors with a benevolent government.20

When legislators found that English parents were no longer in control of their children, they passed a law restricting the working hours of the young in 1819. The same argument was used by Richard Oastler in 1831, when he declared that children were “compelled to work as long as the necessity of [their] needy parents may require or the cold-blooded avarice of your worse-than-barbarian masters may demand.”21 Witnesses before an 1832 Parliamentary investigation complained of the “over-exertion and long confinement” of children in the factory and the need for the “improvement of their minds, the preservation of their morals and the maintenance of their health.” Rough discipline and immoral environments reminded observers of “brothels.” This led to an 1833 act restricting child labor to eight hours.22

The public in both countries was increasingly aware that children needed formal education (e.g., as provided in the 1833 law in England). The American educator, Horace Mann, supported hour laws for children. But the young also needed play. Some enlightened British employers like Robert Owen and Robert Peel provided playgrounds in the 1820s and a number of Manchester mill owners did the same by the 1840s.23

However, working-class parents, themselves, were often slow to embrace the idea that their offspring should enjoy a work-free youth. Children often earned half of the family income. Workers generally believed that child labor was a necessary form of discipline and training. Fathers sought to maintain authority over the training of their offspring by finding them jobs near them. Sociologist Niel Smelser has argued that early industrial families clung to the traditional ideal of the domestic economy, where the whole family worked together, and sought to transport it into the factory. Therefore, they favored the same workday for their children as for themselves. Thus, many families opposed the English eight-hour law for children only, and often attempted to evade it. In contrast, the middle classes adopted a new time strategy by withdrawing their offspring from the workforce; parents tolerated and even encouraged a lengthy childhood of education and play.24
Middle-class reformers accepted free time for women more slowly, however. By the 1840s, the idea of shorter working hours for females was widely embraced as a means of reversing an assumed decline of the family. Because of overwork, factory girls failed to receive proper domestic training, they were unprepared, reformers argued, to become mothers and anchors of social stability in the home. The Massachusetts House justified a ten-hour day for women on the grounds that “it was for the protection of the health of a large class of women of the State, and for the advancement of education among the children of our manufacturing communities.” Even Friedrich Engels (a socialist but no less middle-class) believed that women working outside the home in factories frustrated male roles and thus “unsexed” the man and took “from the women all womanliness.”

These reformers advocated a new, far sharper, sexual division of labor: males as essentially breadwinners and females as domestic workers and organizers of family leisure. During the 1820s and 1830s, this ideal was coming to dominate middle-class families. Reformers were simply advocating it also for laborers.

If workers were slow to adopt the middle-class view of the child, the cult of female domesticity won widespread support. For example, the Western Riding Short Time Committee in 1841 called for a ten-hour workday for women. The objective was to see the “gradual withdrawal of all women from the factories, for the home, its cares and its employments, is woman’s true sphere.” To be sure, male factory workers may have been advancing their own leisure interests “behind women’s petticoats,” as it was often said. Protective legislation for the “dependent” female (like the child) did not violate the sacred idea of the free labor contract (for women were legally incapable of making a legal contract). More important, such gender-based ideas had wide support during the Victorian era; the notion of a natural woman’s “sphere” that had to be protected from economic pressures was widely accepted by conservatives and liberals alike. It was also embraced by working-class men; many hoped that shorter hours for women would lead to the discharge of women workers. Laboring men may have been able to realize this dream of having a housewife later than the middle-class, but they probably clung to it with more tenacity in the 20th century than did the more economically advantaged.

Reformers did not, however, show this same openness to increased time free from work for adult males. Part of this was doctrinal: men were “free agents,” whose liberty would be abridged if the state regulated their worktime (or wages). Lurking behind such articles of laissez-faire faith was suspicion that male workers would “waste” additional leisure hours. Their presumed moral inadequacies were not consequences of the drudgery of overwork or the lack of time to cultivate family or refined leisure values. Such a view would have justified increased free time. Rather, their sins derived from the degrading culture from which the working classes sprung. More free time, the argument went, would only extend the period of immoral influence.

For example, Boston building contractors opposed a ten-hour day in the 1820s by claiming that “we consider idleness as the most deadly bane to usefulness and honorable living...[W]here there is no necessity, there is no exertion...We fear and dread the consequences of such a measure upon the morals and well being of society.” And, another employer confirmed that viewpoint by saying that shorter days would open “a wide door for idleness and vice.”

Elites feared that adult males would use free time for political or trade-union agitation. Englishman George Bull, a Tory supporter of shorter hours for children, opposed its extension to men for that would be “too Republican” (i.e. democratic). Such men may have found palatable the “liberation” of children from work (if that would provide time away from immorality at work and for the inculcation of middle-class values in school and organized play). Even free time for women was a virtue, for no one expected them to be diverted from their many domestic duties to meddle in politics. Not so for the working-class male. Shorter worktime meant cultural autonomy, which undermined the political order.

Finally, doctrinal laissez-faire ideas undermined the rationale for reducing the worktime of women and children. British economists argued against any regulation of the hours of children and, even more so, of women. In 1835, Alexandre Ure, in a famous passage in his Philosophy of Manufacturers, asserted that children took “pleasure in the light play of their muscles” in their work as piece workers in textile factories. And Nassau Senior (1847) claimed that “the extraordinary lightness of the labour, if labour it can be called” made long hours for children perfectly acceptable. Despite the ideology of protecting “motherhood,” economists warned again and again that shorter hours for women—essential to production—would destroy profit and give overwhelming advantage to foreign competition. Similar views were held across the Atlantic. The Massachusetts legislature rejected a ten-hour law for women in 1846, claiming that, if it were passed, the state “could not compete with sister States, much less with foreign countries.”

In Britain, a political crisis of the late 1840s was necessary to establish the principle of a ten-hour day in industrial work. A massive petition for universal manhood suffrage (Chartism) in 1847 and the revolution on the continent in the Spring of 1848 comprised the backdrop for the concession of shorter worktime. Universal white male suffrage brought unskilled males more political power in the USA. Still, the fact that Americans faced no parallel political crisis in the late 1840s may help explain the slower evolution of hours legislation in the USA.

Following the mid-century crisis, there gradually emerged a broad consensus in Europe that child and female workers should be protected from overwork. By the end of the 1850s, British textile employers generally conceded that sub-teenage children should not be allowed to labor in factories;
Despite dire predictions, they recognized that industry could flourish with a ten-hour day. From 1860 to 1878, the British ten-hours act was gradually extended to most branches of manufacturing; yet, these laws never reduced worktime below the standards of skilled workers. In America, following the Civil War, Short Time Committees sprang up in many industrial towns. In Massachusetts, these movements led by 1867 to a ten-hour law for children which was extended, in 1874, to women.

In the late 1880s, there appeared another upsurge in labor activism in an extraordinary confluence of international movements for increased leisure. Between 1884 and 1891, a wave of agitation for the eight-hour day swept western European and American labor. It pointedly rejected the paternalism of earlier legislation, demanding a shorter workday as a right for all, regardless of age, sex, or working conditions. In America, the eight-hour movement peaked in a march of 20,000 through Chicago on May Day in 1886. It was discredited in the eyes of many by the famous "Haymarket Massacre" three days later in the same city when at a rally, a policeman (and others) were killed by a bomb. Still, when the American Federation of Labor called for national eight-hour demonstrations on May 1, 1890, admiring European labor representatives at the Second Socialist International joined with a similar appeal in Europe. Petitions were made for general eight-hour laws throughout the industrial world.

The economic and social causes of this upsurge are complex. Despite diminutions of worktime at mid-century, continuing industrialization had not produced a corresponding decline of the workday. Instead, despite increases in real wages, sharp trade swings produced repeated bouts with unemployment in the 1880s. Many workers sought hour reductions in order to increase job security and wages. Most important, workers viewed a uniform six-hour maximum, regardless of age or sex or even of the intensity or danger of work, as an extension of the rights of citizenship. In Britain, hour demands followed quickly on the extension of male suffrage in the 1880s. Sidney Webb, a moderate socialist reformer, declared in 1890 that the eight-hour day would be the "inevitable result of an age of democracy."

The power of the eight-hour message was in its dream of increased and more predictable opportunities for leisure. The development of recreational opportunities in the 1870s and 1880s (Chapter 9) may explain a new interest in his reallocation of time from work. An eight-hour day, for example, to British painters and dockers meant a more regular work year, insofar as jobs would be stretched out over longer busy seasons. An eight-hour day would "equalize things a little" claimed an English miner in the 1890s. It would end alternating cycles of overwork and unemployment; instead, shorter working hours would create predictable blocks of leisure time and link income and free time.

Workers also sought a more compressed workday. For example, British coal miners demanded improved machinery to reduce time wasted in loading. Others insisted on the end to early-morning work. Many Victorians had it for the textile worker of Lancashire, who was obliged to be awakened by a "knocker-up," who rapped on the bedroom windows of workers' lodgings with his long pole and attached umbrella wire. Many a laborer had to dress in a fireproof room, trudge off to work to a cold and dark factory to make a 6:00 AM bell, and to work until 8:00 AM before having breakfast. Workers deeply resented this custom both because management often did not arrive until 9:00 AM and because so little work was done. Many Victorian workers sought a single-break system (beginning work after breakfast at 8:00 AM). Not only was it more "natural" but it allowed workers to stay up later and still be rested in the morning. As one supporter argued, the eight-hour day would assure the "full utilization of [workers'] evenings." After-work hours were necessary for the "satisfactory training of their families" and in order that workers would no longer be "strangers to the pleasures of home and domestic comforts."

Another source of interest in increased free time came from commuters to cities. Increasingly in the second half of the 19th century, workers moved to more spacious and wholesome housing in suburbs usually far from work. Shorter hours were necessary to compensate for the increased time taken to journey to work and to make more extensive use of domestic leisure opportunities. The quest for reduced working hours can be seen as the only practical means of recovering the "bits" of play time lost in industrialization in "blocks" of family/leisure time. As historian G. Stedman Jones notes, with urbanization, working-class men abandoned the pub of their workmates for the neighborhood bar, which they increasingly visited with their wives. Long evenings began to count more than long workdays.

Finally, by the 1890s, some workers no longer felt the need to justify their leisure on family or moral grounds. The American slogan "Eight Hours for What We Will" expressed this attitude clearly. Leisure was a right that required no rationale. Listen to T. Steel from the Tyneside General Labour Union, who refused to apologize for the leisure activities of his workmates. After they finished a 4:00 AM to 12:00 AM shift: "They please themselves; they have got their time to themselves....If there is a dog fight on or some other attraction, they will go out to that in the afternoon....I may say that dog fights are very nice things."

Nevertheless, this agitation for an eight-hour day produced scanty results. The eight-hour demonstrations on May 1, 1890, quickly subsided into annual May Day rituals. And, while American activists in the 1890s were able to win an eight-hour day for women workers in Illinois, the courts struck it down. Successful legislation had to wait until after World War I in Europe and to more piecemeal hour reductions in the USA (Chapter 11).

Franklin and Carlyle's homages to work stirred many a Victorian heart, but so did Dickens's cautionary tale of Ebenezer Scrooge, the workaholic businessman. Henry David Thoreau and his back-to-nature sojourn at Walden Pond in suburban Boston reveals doubts about the time-as-money ethic. The view...
that excessive time devoted to work was "unnatural" and "unhealthy" was expressed first by physicians against long working hours for children. But, by the end of the century, similar arguments were being used regarding adults, even men. Reformers recognized the physiological and psychological need for increased time from work. This concern with recreation as an antidote to the rigors of overwork became more intense in the 19th century. It seems to have paralleled the growing pressure and alienation of work, and it increased as salaried labor became, for many, a permanent fate and not a step to master or farmer status.  

Movements for shorter worktime are central for an understanding of the history of leisure. Without a reduction of the hours of work, obviously there could be no increase in leisure. Yet, despite dramatic increases in productivity, increased leisure lagged behind the material benefits of industrial society. Powerful political and economic forces frustrated the traditional desire to work less and to enjoy life as long as possible. Movements for shorter hours also represented an adaptation to industrial life—an abandonment of the "porous" and seasonal workday of the traditional domestic economy. In its place, short hours meant a more regular, predictable, and compressed workday, which freed relatively long blocks of time for autonomous family and leisure activity. These movements also expressed a protest against the workaholic society of early Victorian England and America. The content of this new, more positive, attitude toward recreation is our next topic.
Rational Recreation and the Victorian City: 1830-1900

Industrialization produced the modern city and urbanization created a leisure crisis in the 19th Century. Both the English and Americans were slow to extend leisure in proportion with economic growth. For employers and the upwardly mobile employee, "idleness" was a threat to industrial development and social stability. In Dickens's *Coketown*, "you saw nothing... but what was severely workful." And Alexis de Tocqueville noted in 1835 Americans "care much more for success than for fame." But many, including Dickens, also recognized that leisure time was the only arena for the "re-creation" of the physical and psychological capacity to work. Recreation also had broader cultural implications. By the 1830s, reformers recognized that work and economic time had deprived members of society of the means of expressing the noneconomic values of religion, family, and self-development. For some elites, leisure was necessary for the preservation of the value of the traditional rural community. At the same time, these reformers held that leisure was perhaps the best place to inculcate the personal values essential for a growing commercial economy: self-control, familialism, and "respectability."

They advocated new forms of community and paternalism, perhaps even of social control. The idea was to build bridges to the "dangerous classes" of the new cities and to remake them in the image of the middle class. Yet, their concern with making recreation "rational" meant more than imposing the values of the elites on the masses. Many craftsmen, miners, and cotton spinners, both evangelical and secular, also embraced a rational leisure style. It was more constrained, individualistic, and "improving" than the pleasures of the English village or American frontier. Some of these wage earners were upwardly mobile, aspirants to foreman or self-employed status, who often embraced the personal religion of evangelical Protestantism. Others were militant members of trade unions and hostile to the paternalism of the well-to-do. Both workers and the elite were anxious over the social and economic disruptions of the 1830s and 1840s; they witnessed the certainties of the old family economy give way to a more complex, impersonal urban industrialism.
While a few nostalgically called for a return to the days of rural Meme England or Thomas Jefferson's agrarian republic, the dominant trend was broadly forward-looking. New leisure forms would help to create a new type of personality in both the middle and laboring classes, more capable of adjusting to the new, expanding world of competition, urban life, and bureaucracy. Leisure reformers were not entirely successful in transmitting their values down the social ladder (or up it, in the case of the aristocracy), yet they helped to solidify a recreational style and ideology that still permeates modern youth and sports institutions.

These reforms were mostly urban. In many ways, the English created the modern urban and industrial landscape. By 1851, England was already half urban and, by 1911, 80 percent lived in towns or cities. Along with this precious urbanism came the ideas of "rational recreation." Somewhat later the Americans followed these trends when, with urban explosion and the peculiar problems attending mass immigration, the United States also become a center of rational recreation.

This chapter will concentrate on the reform of the leisure of men because public urban recreation was largely masculine and because reformers were concerned about the uncontrolled leisure of men. The role of women in this process of "improvement" and changes in children's play will be treated in Chapter 8.

Restrictive Trends

At the heart of much reform of leisure in the early 19th century was fear of the "dangerous classes" of the urban working poor. Middle-class anxiety toward the disrespectful street behavior of the poor in the rookeries of London or the famous slum of Five Points in New York were similar to the views of many suburbanites to inner-city minorities in mid-20th century America or England. As an English reformer, Joseph Kay, put it, the poor "live precisely like brutes, to gratify the appetites of their uncultivated bodies, and then die, to go they have never thought, cared, or wondered whether. They eat, drink, breed, work and die, and the richer and more intelligent classes are obliged to guard them with police." Social disorder in American cities was, if anything, more threatening: between 1834 and 1844 there were more than 200 gang wars in New York City, involving such gangs as the Dead Rabbis and Bowery Boys. Rivalries between Protestants and Catholics in Philadelphia produced armed conflicts in 1844; and throughout the 1840s and 1850s, Saint Louis was continually disrupted by fist fights between rival voluntary fire companies.

While Victorian employers on both sides of the Atlantic were gaining control over the work habits of their employees in the factory, after hours, and especially on Sundays, they were losing influence. Between 1810 and 1850, fairs and race days meant not only the appearance of pickpockets, prostitutes, and rowdy behavior, but even the prospect of insurrection. The English Beer Act of 1830 had allowed the proliferation of dens of humble ale sellers. The Victorian elite feared that, with higher incomes and increased leisure, the masses would be unworthy of their new freedom.

Some of the business class felt at least partially responsible; in England especially, they had participated in the withdrawal of land and money from traditional leisure and sports. In 1834, Edwin Chadwick reported to Parliament how "the extensive and indiscriminate enclosure of commons which were play-grounds, ...drive the labouring classes to the public-house." The new and old rich almost alone benefited from the construction of art galleries, concert halls, and lending libraries.

Still the first and most common response was not to patronize working-class leisure but to restrict and to moralize it. The early 19th century witnessed a Puritanical reaction to the geniality of 18th-century leisure culture. Many conservatives in both countries believed that the democratic "excesses" of the American and French Revolutions had reduced the docility of the masses. When the vote was extended in America to the poorer males in the 1820s, elites feared that politicians would look the other way when confronted with the threats of drink, gambling, and prostitution. And the city was the core of the problem. American historian Paul Boyer summarizes the mood:

The bawdy servant girl was transformed into the painted prostitute soliciting on the street. The village tavern became the beer cellar in the slum; the neighborly wager on the horse race or a cockfight, the organized gambling of the city. The unruly child and the discontented farm youth quarreling with his father became the multiplied thousands of street arabs and young urban newcomers who seemed to have broken free of all familial control.

The American Alien and Sedition Acts (1798) and the British Anti-Combination Act (1800), which were designed to control political or trade union disruptions, were paralleled by efforts to monitor leisure. Religious activists spearheaded this movement. As the English historian Brian Harrison noted: "Nineteenth-century Christians deplored that recreational complex of behaviour which included gambling, adultery, drinking, cruel sports, and Sabbath breaking and blasphemy—all of which took place together at the race-course, the drinking place, the theatre, the feast and fair."

From about 1800, British and American evangelicals organized campaigns to "Christianize" leisure. The most important expressions of this movement were Sabbatarianism and the Sunday School. The Lord's Day was not simply to be a day of rest for all. In fact, English Sabbatarians sometimes revealed their social biases by tolerating work on Sunday for servants of the rich. More important, Sabbatarian sought to purge Sunday of amusement for
parents to gain a little bedroom privacy on Sundays, they provided a wide array of leisure functions. They distributed youth magazines, offered musical training, and stimulated that unique English affection for the oratorio. Some offered social services and most provided an annual cycle of teas and Saturday afternoon excursions. The Sunday school became the home of many amateur football and cricket teams in 19th-century English mill and mining towns. It even became a center for political party agitation from the 1860s after the suffrage was extended to skilled labor. However broad the functions of the Sunday School became with time, it was designed to give a religious content to the leisure of the masses in an era when the village parish church was in rapid decline.

Perhaps even more typical of a manipulative, or even coercive, approach to leisure was temperance or teetotalism. These movements against alcohol, like Sabbatarianism, were mostly inspired by conservative religious forces. Temperance activists often saw abstinence as a complete solution to all society’s ills. The temperance movement was a reaction to a perceived epidemic of alcoholism, which swept the Anglo-American world in the 1820s. In Britain, temperance advocates at first favored only voluntary abstinence from distilled spirits; in fact, they approved of loosening beer sales in 1830 as a means of shifting popular taste from gin to the less malignant malt beverage. Their strongholds were within the dissenting churches and among the middle classes and Liberal party voters—although there were important Chartists and later trade unionists who supported this moderate approach. By 1835, frustrated by the failure of voluntarism, a faction of the British temperance movement group embraced voluntary teetotalism or complete abstinence; still others favored legal prohibition of drink. Totalitarians often came from the ranks of the wage-earner and some were reforming alcoholics. They saw the drunkard not as a weak person lacking the will to be a moderate imbibers, but as a victim who was paralyzed by alcohol. This addict must be liberated totally from the threat of drink and, if possible, be surrounded by a nurturing and separate teetotal culture.

While in Britain, prohibitionism was always politically marginal, in the USA, by the 1830s, socially powerful forces lent support to outlawing alcohol. New England ministers and their businessmen parishioners claimed that the sins of drink were especially prevalent among “the lowest classes [who] yield themselves up to the misuse of sordid appetite.” By the 1840s, aided by the religious enthusiasm that had recently swept America, prohibition had gained a prominent position in the Whig Party. Temperance employers eliminated the daily drags that had long been a part of workman’s wages in trades like construction. By the 1850s, Prohibitionists had succeeded in restricting alcohol use in 13 states and territories.

Temperance advocates, like Sunday School promoters, were not always from the elite. American groups like the Washingtonians (and the female Martha Washingtonians) had chapters among craftsmen and clerks of New York
City, as did Methodist teetotalers among the miners of Cornwall. They took the pledge to abandon all intoxicating beverages and championed "nature's drink," cold water. Some teetotalers alienated traditional churchmen with their rejection of wine at communion. Total abstinence, not just moderation, was the only alternative to the life of the drunkard. They sometimes aggressively confronted boozers in an effort to convert them; they particularly appealed to young people. In the Cornish town in Redruth in 1838, English teetotalers held a "field day."

Following a sermon in the market place, the members marched behind a band through the streets with flags, ribbons and banners flying. They returned to the market place where about 300 took tea before leaving once again behind the band for the Methodist chapel where at a large meeting many new members were joined.16

By the 1840s, in the USA, Independence Day became the occasion for a contest of leisure cultures: July 4 had developed in the early 19th-century into a day of unrestrained communal drinking. In an act of deliberate confrontation, the Washingtonians held cold-water celebrations and young women vowed to shun suitors who drank.17 Temperance groups, especially in New England, were dominated by women. For them, the saloon leisure of men was a threat to the economic and social security of the family. "To relieve the distressed mother and helpless children is our aim," claimed one American prohibitionist.18

Temperance was an alternative culture within working-class society. It often painfully separated teetotalers from neighbor and workmate who viewed them as "unfriendly" or even "undemocratic." Non-drinkers had to be shielded by an umbrella of alternative clubs, music halls, coffee houses, and reading rooms, in addition to churches, from the pervasive alcohol culture that surrounded them.

Temperance supporters, and especially prohibitionists, provoked powerful opposition. Their enemies were not only distillery and brewery interests, but the broad drinking public. In England, the Conservative Party sometimes rallied working-class support in opposition to teetotalism. In America, the ethnically-mixed Democratic Party (who attracted the Irish and other non-Puritanical peoples) became the party of "no coercion." Some of the tone of the opposition to temperance can be seen in the following complaint of a man from Rochester, New York, in 1832:

Who are the most temperate men of modern times? Those who quaff the juice of the grape with their friends, with the greatest good nature, after the manner of the ancient patriarchs, without any malice in their hearts, or the cold-water, pale-faced money-making men, who make the necessities of their neighbors their opportunity for grinding the face of the poor?19

In America, temperance forces reached a high-water mark in the early 1850s, but courts and legislators soon repealed or watered down many prohibition laws. The temperance movement was revived only after the founding of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1874 and the Anti-Saloon League in 1895, which won a brief victory in the Prohibition Amendment to the American Constitution (1919-1933). While consumption of hard liquor had decreased by half in between 1850 and 1900, saloon beer drinking rose from 2.7 at midcentury to 29.53 gallons per capita by 1911-1915. By 1900, there was one beer hall for every 50 men in American urban working-class districts.20

The emotional intensity of Prohibition can be summarized in this 1914 statement from the Anti-Saloon League:

The vices of the cities have been the undoing of past empires and civilizations. There is no greater menace to democratic institutions than the great segregation of an element which gathers its ideas of patriotism and citizenship from the low grog shop... Already some of our cities are well-nigh submerged with this unpatriotic element, which is manipulated by the still baser element engaged in the un-American drink traffic and by the kind of politician the saloon creates... If our Republic is to be saved the liquor traffic must be destroyed.21

In fact, much of the support for prohibition came from the small-town native American, whose image of the city was that of a beer-soaked Sodom doomed by God to perdition.

In Britain, teetotalism never had such legislative success; however, the more moderate aims of restricting pub hours did have an impact. For example, the 1872 Licensing Act forced pubs to close at 10:00 or 11:00 (depending on location). This law reduced the drunken rowdiness of the early morning hours. Public drinking decreased significantly during the century. The number of persons per pub increased steadily from the 1830s (161 in 1831, to 316 by 1901 and 668 by 1961). The drinking of hard liquor was partially replaced by beer and, thanks in part to the temperance influence of middle-class schools, the affluent largely abandoned public drinking to the working classes. In both countries, alcohol consumption gradually declined in its role as the principal lubricant of leisure.22

A final restrictionist approach to reforming city pleasures was the campaign against prostitution. "Social purity" movements in America were an offshoot of the revivalist activism of the 1820s. In New York, for example, brothels were picketed, and the names of patrons published. In 1848, women's purity groups presented the New York legislature with a petition to ban "seduction." In the wake of the gold rush in the 1850s, California vigilante mobs drove out the inmates of red-light districts and even hanged persistent brothel
Improving Time

Concern over leisure also took less rigid or authoritarian forms. Some reformers sought not to suppress or simply to moralize popular leisure but to transform it. The idea was, as British historian Hugh Cunningham argues, to replace “public, improvised and inconclusive” play with “regular and privatized” recreation. For example, instead of the anarchy and saturnalia of the bull run, recreation reformers at Stanford in the 1830s favored the race track, which confined sport to a defined area and offered commercial spinoffs. Replacing the day-long mass “football” contest in Derby was the new game of soccer with its well-defined playing field and referees to police action. The gangs of American city streets were to be transformed into supervised participants on municipal playgrounds. This stress on order has led many historians to refer to this movement as “rational recreation.”

Yet this movement stressed not only order but “improvement.” It shared with religious revivalism a belief that the individual could be converted from a life of sin to a new moral personality with a new sense of community. The close connection between the revivalism of the American, Charles Finney, and cultural reform has often been noted. The same could be said for the English Christian Socialists and other evangelicals. Moreover, elites were often torn between coercive reform and what the American historian Paul Boyer calls “positive environmentalism”—the attempt not to suppress drink or impose a strait jacket of religious conformity on the populace but to substitute the “coarser element of the environment” with wholesome recreational things. After witnessing Chartist demonstrations, Manchester banker Benjamin Heywood called not for more police but for new urban recreation centers. The idea was to create a “community of enjoyment” in order to develop “reciprocal feelings” between the classes. The problem was to restore social harmony—to “bring the individuals of different classes into actual personal contact.”

A few English employers attempted to resurrect the old traditions by patronizing rural games. The more common response was to accept the city and to create new recreational settings. The emphasis was often on collective leadership rather than the traditional personal approach of noblesse oblige; and the objective was not simply to provide a new community-controlled leisure but to transform the individual—in a kind of semireligious conversion experience. The ideal environment was a “conventicle of respectability”—alternatives to the “degrading” working-class recreations of pub, cockpit, and street. This counter-culture was not simply invented by the middle class to be imposed on the common man, but rather reflected (as we shall see in the next chapter) middle-class experience. Through a common intellectual fount of Puritan religion and the Enlightenment, working-class as well as middle-class reformers embraced an ethic of self-control, individualism, and respectability.

The means to achieve these ends were varied and sometimes subtle. The didactic methods of the British mechanics’ institutes were early experiments in “improvement.” Great time and expense were spent on constructing the imposing buildings for these institutes which were designed to contrast with the pub and music hall. These efforts culminated in the adult education movement of the late 19th-century. The program of lecturers in economics and science, however, seldom appealed to even steady artisans. As Cooke Taylor stressed, “The lectures of the schoolroom will be utterly ineffective when they are counteracted by the practical lessons of the playground.” The institutes frequently became centers not of craftsmen but of young clerks seeking cultural enrichment and business connections.

The obvious limits of this approach led other reformers to promote social clubs. From the 1850s in Britain, Henry Solly’s Working Men’s Social Clubs sought to combine education with entertainment and “unrestrained social intercourse.” These clubs, located in most English towns and cities, provided rooms for reading as well as regulated drinking, opportunities for cards and other games, and space for a vast array of musical, sports, and other evening and Saturday-afternoon leisure activity for adult men. Social superiors, argued the Christian Socialists and others who supported this approach, could freely mix with the lower classes in these clubs to the mutual benefit of both. Another “conventicle of respectability” was the Young Men’s Christian Association.
Established in London in 1844, the YMCA targeted young male clerks, whom the organization’s directors feared were tempted by saloon and cigar-store life of the city.

Americans adapted much of this approach. For example, in 1851, two young Americans brought back the idea of the YMCA from London to Boston and New York. Unlike the moral reform activists of the 1830s and 1840s, the leaders of the “Y” were not ministers but merchants and bankers. Their objective was to create a substitute ‘home’ for single lonely men—the new entrants into the commercial world of the city. Attempts to propagate middle-class respectability by founding “slum outposts” or “Y” facilities for transients in railway stations failed. Primarily directed to the young “respectable” clerk, the early “Y’s” concentrated on providing shelter, reading rooms, and uplifting lectures. Only later would the YMCA transform into a center of physical fitness. The Odd Fellows served a similar group with cozy lodges that provided a surrogate home for salesmen, students, and other lonely men of the middle class. Domesticity was the model.44

Much rational recreation was sponsored by enlightened employers for their workers. In the 1830s, Samuel Gregg, of Manchester, provided his child employees with playgrounds, and for well-behaved youth, he offered Sunday afternoon teas. If their parents lacked the respectable formal parlour, these children could, at least, be “improved” by contact with this domestic leisure culture. Factory employers in Northern England sponsored Christmas parties and supported company choral societies and brass bands in the hope of fostering a communal feeling among workers. Thousands descended regularly on London’s Crystal Palace for mammoth choral contests. Thomas Cook, in 1841, organized the first railroad excursion for 2,000 Leicester children to travel to Derby to avoid the temptations of revelry on race day. Excursions to the fresh air and natural settings of the English countryside became a favorite medicine for the disease of urban demoralization.45

American historians have noted a similar patronage in employer sponsorship of cultural activities of young women workers at the Lowell mills in the 1820s. In the 1870s, members of small-town churches opened their homes to slum-dwelling children during summer vacations and, with the help of New York City merchants, organized a “Fresh Air Fund.”46

Still, a lot of this improving leisure was organized by workers themselves. Indeed, prominent English radicals like William Lovett embraced rational recreation as a means of preparing workers for political leadership. By the 1880s, Workingmen’s Clubs became independent of their elite sponsors. The same was true much earlier of American volunteerist institutions like Fire Departments—(although these were often far from “improving”). Other institutions like choral societies or brass bands were often part of mutual aid societies, ethnic fraternal organizations, or other working-class organizations.47

Rational recreation also meant new urban services like libraries, museums, and especially parks. In England, the movement for the public library to replace costly subscription libraries emerged in 1845. An act in 1850 paved the way for tax-supported free libraries. Although libraries were far less expensive than parks (because of urban land values), few local municipalities jumped at this opportunity to raise their taxes. Public libraries usually depended upon philanthropy rather than public support.48

In America, the campaign for public libraries followed a similar course. Surely a dominant influence from the late 1890s were the hundreds of Neo-Roman buildings that housed the Carnegie Public Libraries. The steel baron, Andrew Carnegie, explained his philanthropy: “How a man spends his time at work may be taken for granted but how he spends his hours of recreation is really the key to his progress in all the virtues.” This civilizing mission was extended to libraries located in factories, YMCA buildings, and even churches.49

The park and playground movements, however, were probably the most important manifestations of rational recreation. As early as 1833, the British parliament appointed a committee to investigate the lack of public walkways. In 1836, the government prohibited the privatizations of common lands near large towns. The objective was to assure that some “open places reserved for the amusement (under due regulations to preserve order) of the humbler classes, would assist to wean them from low and debasing pleasure.”50

Despite encouragement from London, the earliest English parks were promoted by regional philanthropists (e.g., Preston Moor in 1833 and Joseph Strutt’s Arboretum in Derby in 1840). Perhaps the most important event was the creation of Peel Park in Manchester in 1846, which led to many imitations. London’s Victoria and Battersea Parks came at midcentury. Management of these parks fit what should now seem a familiar pattern. They were designed to exclude all games and sports; only walking was allowed along pathways, which featured a careful display of nature. This experience was supposed to stimulate a wholesome love of nature and to raise the strollers to new heights of sobriety and familial respectability. Robert Slaney, a key park advocate from the 1830s in England, found in parks the possibility of creating “pardonable vanity” among the poor:

A man walking out with his family among his neighbors of different ranks, will naturally be desirous to be properly clothed, and that his wife should be also; but this desire, duly directed and controlled, is found by experience to be of the most powerful effect in promoting civilization and exciting industry.51

To be sure, Sabbatarian opposition to the playing of brass bands in parks or the opening of museums on Sundays frustrated rational recreationists. Still, groups like the (British) National Sunday League (1855) challenged this
restrictive approach, arguing that such wholesome recreations on the Sabbath were the only alternative to the pub. By the end of the century, the rational recreationists largely prevailed.32

The American parks movement followed a similar path. Americans visitors to European capitals were impressed with the majestic scale of royal parks and found the urban blight emerging from their unplanned cities to be shameful. Cholera epidemics in 1832 convinced Americans of the need for open spaces. In the 1840s, American park advocates saw in green space an equivalent of rural life in the city. Frederick Olmsted, the landscape architect who largely designed New York’s Central Park in the 1850s, wanted parks that were large enough “to completely shut out the city.” These green spaces could inspire urban man to new standards of “courtesy, self-control, and temperance.” Meandering walkways, natural vistas, and landscaping would create this morally uplifting feeling for nature in the heart of the mechanical city.43

However, large downtown showcase parks were most often used by the middle class in the business districts; some provided golf courses and tennis courts used by the well-to-do. From the 1890s, however, social reformers advocated smaller neighborhood parks to make green space accessible to the poor in their own neighborhoods. In New York, Mulberry Bend Park was created by the clearance of the infamous Five Points District. Beginning with Kansas City in 1893, most American cities installed Park Commissions and networks of parks. Mayor Josiah Quincy of Boston (1895-1899) supported gymnasia, swimming pools, playgrounds, and free concerts in the poorer sections of the city as a means of combatting juvenile delinquency (Chapter 8). Park Commissioners also believed it their duty to reform leisure time as well as space. The city of Pittsburgh, for example, organized Fourth of July celebrations at Schenley Park, complete with vaudeville acts and fireworks, but banned liquor, the traditional lubricant of the mid-summer holiday.44

Finally, mass cultural centers became the hallmark of the rational recreation movement. The Crystal Palace, near London, that huge structure built for the Exhibition of 1851, was long after used for cultural events. Americans followed with the construction of White City at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. In the 1890s, numerous American cities built cultural complexes to house art and natural-history museums. The Carnegie Institute of Pittsburgh (1895) was just one attempt of the urban rich to create a higher leisure tone in the industrial cities of England and America.45

After mid-century, the rational recreation idea had influences far beyond its own organizational initiatives. For example, through licensing pressures, British reformers encouraged the growth of the music hall with its family-oriented entertainment. The music hall largely replaced the rough intimacy of the small, all-male singing saloons and supper rooms of the early 19th century, which had been noted for their scandalous songs and patter. By contrast, the music hall created a far more formal setting with a large, more passive audience facing the professional performer. Purged were the more bawdy or political songs, and managers paid for police surveillance of the crowd to assure respectability.46 These trends (along with regulated sport, which will be considered in Chapter 10) contributed to cultural uniformity and reduced the disorder associated with both rural popular leisure and the “degrading” pleasures of the new industrial cities.

Impact of Rational Recreation: An Assessment

What was the impact of these efforts at instilling the values of domesticity, self-control, and respectability in the working classes? As early as 1844, Léon Faucher noted, “There is no need now, (as there was twelve years ago) to engage an extra police force to keep the public roads clear, and pickpockets at a distance, while the inhabitants go to and from divine service.”47

By the end of the century, the British gin palace had disappeared, children had been excluded from bars, and disorderly urban fairs had been abolished. In place of the English carnivals and wakes were four regular bank holidays instituted in 1871.48 Thomas Wright observed that “steady-going” unmarried artisans spent their Saturday afternoons playing in brass bands or attending sporting events in the 1860s. Married men often engaged in home-improvement projects, digging in their small garden plots or tending their pigeons or rabbits. Some went to the reading rooms of the local workingmen’s club. Saturday night was often reserved for the family at the music hall.

Sunday morning was for the Sunday suit and a trip to the barber’s shop, followed by a midday meal with the family, and late-afternoon tea, often shared with relatives and other guests. At least some elements of the middle-class domestic leisure style had penetrated into the laboring classes.49

It is doubtful whether workers’ leisure became more respectable in precisely the ways endorsed by reformists patrons. Historians Stedman Jones and Peter Bailey have criticized those who have taken too seriously the influence of leisure reformers. To the worker, they argue, the idea of being respectable meant wearing a Sunday suit, not attending church. It meant saving for a carefree holiday, not accumulating for retirement. The wage-earning couple may have devoted more leisure time to home improvement. Some even invested in parlour pianos for Sunday evening family get-togethers. Yet surely more typical was the replacement of cock fighting with pigeon racing, of bull baiting with race-track betting, of gin with beer. The railroad brought not only the excursionist to the London’s Crystal Palace exhibition but also funnelled the masses to the Oldham Wakes and to race tracks. Only in the 1870s did alcohol consumption reach its peak in the century.50 The Saturday half-holiday was not a time for family activities, but rather for male get-togethers at football matches or baseball games. And sporting newspapers, rather than political or cultural magazines, dominated male-working class reading.51
Even those who participated in the improving activities sponsored by elites had many motives. Some sought contacts necessary for upward mobility, and others access to the less edifying recreations that were used to lure the people into the educational setting. And in the 1880s, British laborers usually had gained control over the Working Men's Clubs, as they had of other philanthropic organizations. The social classes may have met, but no new understanding, far less camaraderie, resulted. Finally, those poor to whom the rational recreationists appealed were primarily the already "respectable poor," those families who sought escape or shelter from the rough working class culture that surrounded them.52

Underneath this, of course, was the survival of traditional attitudes toward leisure, reinforced in some ways by commercialization and politics. Music halls and other seemingly improving recreations retained a great deal of the old leisure. Music halls survived by their drink trade and their songs were often in the saturnalia tradition. They mocked the pompous and kill-joy teetotaler. Humor focused on in-laws and the disappointments of marriage. Tory politicians often lent support to the conviviality of working-class leisure, opposing Sabbatarian legislation and favoring laissez-faire attitudes toward race courses and pubs. This position helped them, in many cases, to solidify a political base in working-class portions of the Midlands. Their belief that little could change—either people's manners or economic conditions—was not far off from the views of many workers. Ethnic neighborhood bars generally withstood the regulatory and moral pressures of "improving" elites in America.53

More important to the limited impact of rational recreation was the reluctance of the advantaged to participate in leisure reform. Just as few "ladies bountiful" volunteered to teach Sunday Schools, only 24 libraries were built in England during the first 16 years of the Libraries Act of 1850.54 This reluctance was not merely a matter of parsimony nor a doctrinaire faith in the free market; businessmen realized that more cost-effective means of reducing social disorder were improved police or urban renewal rather than public recreation. More systematic policing of cities largely cleared the streets of youth gangs and the Victorian underworld. By the 1880s, thanks to urban renewal, the jerrybuilt rookeries of East London, which had frightened the middle-classes, were demolished. They were replaced by far less threatening stands of commercial buildings and rows of brick tenements. Model dwelling companies, with their new caretakers, assured greater order and cleanliness. And finally, the National Sunday Leagues and other promoters of wholesome amusements had to compete continuously with the Sabbatarian for middle-class support.

At the root of the failures of rational recreation was the intractable character of social cleavage. Leisure reformers battered at the high walls that divided Britons and Americans by class and ethnicity. But leisure, after all, reflected the social divisions of society as a whole. In Britain, for example, proprietors of seaside resorts deliberately segregated classes (for the sake of "social tone"). In the 19th century, many seaside towns, including Brighton and even Blackpool, gained snob appeal by discouraging "day-trippers," the poor who could not afford a week or more of holiday. In America, Coney Island was divided into different amusement parks catering to various social levels, and Atlantic City appealed to the middle class who sought "symbolic mobility" in the imitations of the aristocratic spa. The boardwalk crowds, "whirlwind vaudeville," and dance halls contradicted the quest for respectability; but the "sentimental poetry, etchings, and prose which bubbled about the sea, and the untrodden shore...conveyed a sense of order and quietude which in fact did not exist." Rich Americans from the northeast retracted to Newport, Rhode Island, and others kept to themselves at Sarasota Springs, New York, or by 1894 "discovered" Palm Beach, Florida.55

Despite the fact that the music hall (and American vaudeville theaters) were more orderly than the singing saloons, the middle-class family still avoided them because of their working-class clientele and the presence of prostitutes in the galleries. And the well-to-do in the 1870s in both countries developed socially exclusive sports of tennis, golf, and cycling, which only increased the distance between the classes. Like their social inferiors, middle-class families increasingly were uprooted by urbanization; they, too, moved to suburbs and lost their tight-knit neighborhoods. In response, they formed their own clubs. Some joined "volunteer corps" (or militia in America)—ostensibly for reserve military training but really for social and recreational reasons.56

As Peter Bailey writes, the middle classes stood ready to defend the line of their own gentility with a judicious mixture of discrimination and neglect, and the reformers found themselves pulling against the stream. The latter were proposing to alleviate social tensions through the fraternal association of all classes in leisure at a time when the middle classes were acutely concerned to reinforce, not reduce, social distance.57 One of the things people bought when they consumed leisure was social status (Chapter 9).

However, it would be wrong to dismiss the efforts of recreational reformers and to argue that popular leisure culture and class division defeated them. First, we should remember that the exclusivity of a leisure class, the anarchy of popular recreation, and the organizational drive of reformers all coexisted before and after the Victorian period. Second, if most wage earners did not replace their traditional pleasures with rational recreation, many added elements of the reformers' ideal to their leisure repertory. The result was in part a more privatized, more sedate, and more universal recreational culture. For some individuals, rational recreation may have helped to create a personality suitable to the competitive upwardly mobile society of the Victorian city.

Finally, rational recreation was expressed in more subtle and probably more influential forms than the public (and largely male) leisure discussed in this chapter. The Victorian home, with its full-time housewife, became the site of a new leisure of domesticity. Organized in part by women, it helped to produce not only a privatized leisure, but shaped in many ways the play of children. This domestic leisure will be our next topic.
Gender and Generation in 19th-Century Leisure

"Happiness," wrote an English Quaker in 1838,

Does not consist in booths and garlands, drums and horns, or in capering round a Maypole. Happiness is a fire-side thing. It is a thing of grave and earnest tone; and the deeper and truer it is, the more it is removed from the riot of mere merriment.¹

One of the most popular songs of the late Victorian English-speaking world was "Home Sweet Home." In the 19th century, the family shelter was idealized in the novel, endlessly promoted in magazines, and even encouraged in the occasional housing project of well-meaning reformers. Nonwork time was focused on the home. Under the special leadership of women, leisure was to provide not merely diversion but moral training and sustenance for the young and men.

Origins of Home-Centered Leisure

In the 19th century, the home became the specialized place of recreation. Industrialization and the commercial office had driven work and business from most residences. Apprentices no longer needed to be sheltered in the master's house, nor were employers willing to do so. Except in some retail shops where long hours made this separation of work and leisure impossible, the home was increasingly a retreat from the market, not its center. It became a haven for a small circle of family members, opened on special events to a few friends and distant relatives. In the domestic space, new family traditions were created. And, to some extent, older community traditions were forgotten. As in many things, the middle-class rather than the rich or the masses were to dominate this domestication of leisure.²

The shock troops of "fire-side" happiness were mostly women in the rather distinct and new role of homemaker. Industrialization meant the removal of affluent married women at least from the workforce, and changes in the household and childrearing work of wives cleared the way for female leadership in the creating a new domestic leisure.
Middle-class women succeeded in shifting some of the arduous labor of cleaning, cooking, and childcare to servants. For example, in Britain, the number of domestics had increased from about 100,000 in 1801 to 2 million by 1881. Still, probably no more than 11 percent of homes in relatively well-to-do London had servants in the 1890s. Servants enabled the privileged—but by no means aristocratic—homemaker to redirect her time and energy to the esthetics of Home Sweet Home.3

The 19th century also saw a dramatic reduction in the number of children that mothers bore. In America, white mothers in 1800 gave birth to an average of 7.04 children. That number was reduced by 1851 to 5.42 and, by 1900, to merely 3.56. The British pattern was roughly similar. Middle-class child-bearing strategies changed for a complex of reasons. The drift from the farm meant, of course, less need for children as laborers. Increased educational standards, required in a commercial world, meant that children cost more to raise and only later, if at all, did they contribute to the family’s income. Thus, middle-class parents had an economic incentive to reduce family size (mostly through sexual abstinence or coitus interruptus). This decline occurred later in the lower classes. It remained respectable, even necessary, for poorer parents to realize a return on their investment in a child in the earnings of teenage off-spring. The diminution of the middle-class family, of course, meant more time for mothers to devote to the now smaller brood. Child-rearing could be less harsh, more permissive, and more infused with play. Moreover, the mother’s career became more concentrated in a relatively short period of child-bearing, reducing the span of married life when child rearing dominated women’s concerns. The result was time available for women’s personal leisure and in organizing it for the wider family.

Because the husband’s life became more specialized as a bread-winner, wives probably saw less of their husbands than they did in the old domestic economy. More important, married women were able to develop an autonomous culture built around domestic management and child rearing. Unlike the more disciplined work that was emerging in the 19th century office or factory, women’s labor was still interspersed with leisure.

Finally, reformers recognized that mothers could play a pivotal role in refining the recreational lives of husbands and children. Temperance advocates frequently contrasted the hearth and saloon and saw the angel in the parlour as their principal ally against drink and public rowdiness. The so-called “cult of domesticity,” for which the Victorian era is famous, can be understood as a coalition of clergymen, educators, advice manual writers, and married women who attempted to privatize life in leisure.4

The middle-class Victorian home was both a refuge from the unsettling change that surrounded it and a center for a more refined leisure style. This double function is most clearly identifiable in the new organization of domestic space. As early as the 1790s, merchant families withdrew from the townhouses of London to create more spacious, but also more socially segregated neighborhoods, free from both the rowdy poor and self-indulgent aristocrat. Evangelical families built weekend villas on large private lots in a picturesque village setting around a common at Clapham. In the “library,” which opened out onto the rear garden, the family gathered for singing, playing the piano, and serious conversation. It was the “Evangelical substitute for all the plays, balls, visits, and coffee houses of London.” Here, children were safe from the influence of the street and genteel family life could flourish.5

On a less grand scale, the upper middle class of Manchester, New York, and Chicago retreated in the 19th century to their rustic suburbs. Unlike the rich of Paris and other European cities, who built a leisure style around the restaurant, theater, and gallery from bases in luxurious apartments along tree-lined boulevards, the Anglo-American rich gradually abandoned the inner city to the poor and to business.

By the 1870s, the affluent American family fled the row house in the crowded city streets for the detached suburban home with its surrounding yard built along winding lanes. Mid-19th-century model suburbs like New Jersey’s Llewellyn Park and Chicago’s Riverside set the pace. Wealthy districts in Westchester County, New York, and Chestnut Hill near Philadelphia radiated from train stations, protected in their isolation by open country. They were supplied with elite amenities like Chestnut Hill’s country club located adjacent to the Episcopal Church and a luxurious hotel.6

The ideal was a setting that was pastoral but not wild. The home should be set back but visible from the street. “The lawn, as a totally unproductive expanse, succinctly communicated the leisurely nature of the home. The home was to be a place of relaxation, recreation, and reflection.” The park-like landscaping in the front both displayed taste and provided privacy. The back and side lawns, accessible to porch and veranda, offered ideal settings for informal games and sports for all ages. In the more congested setting of England, walls, wrought-iron gates, and well-designed gardens served similar functions. The suburb was not divorced from the city, however. Because of their railroad access, these suburbs were tied closely to the city, not only for the business of males, but for the leisure and pleasure shopping of women.8

The Victorian suburban home, totally bereft of economic purpose, was transformed into a multipurpose leisure center. This, of course, was only to follow the model of the “great halls” of the aristocracy, which since the late 17th century had been refurbished to privatize and specialize domestic space.
Victorian homes were designed to reflect a clear separation between the formal and private, male and female, adult and child. Often replacing the simple layout of two rooms to a floor was the formal parlor and family sitting room on one side of the entry and a dining room and kitchen on the other. The entry way was also broadened by the creation of a hall for the receiving of guests. It was there that calling cards were deposited on ornate hallstands, essential furniture in the affluent Victorian home. Additional wealth allowed for still more differentiation.

Rooms were decorated to reflect the gender of their space: the male’s library walls, with dark oak and leather chairs, and the lady’s upstairs boudoir, with chintz and delicate colors. An upstairs nursery for the children allowed room for play away from parents. Housework was separated from diversion (aided by back stairways to hide servants); guests could be entertained in specialized space apart from the privacy of family. Even in the 18th century, wealthy American and British homes featured the parlor as the “best room,” dramatically situated in a wing protruding in the front of the house and featuring the best family furnitur; it was reserved for visits from clergy, weddings, funerals, and formal teas. The back sitting room was less formal, often containing a piano or parlor organ.

A well-appointed parlor was thought to have a positive influence on the character of those who entered. It was displays of female accomplishment in handcrafts and the site for “uplifting” parlor games. Mother’s standards of speech and manners were to be strictly observed by all who entered. “Here husband and children do not corrupt, here household cares do notbreak through.” This room was the site for the custom of “paying calls” in the “walking city” of the early 19th century; yet it separated the outside world from the privacy of the back rooms. The middle-class nursery allowed for not only the withdrawal of the very young from the leisure of parents but created an environment that could be devoted especially to children’s needs including toys and play.

Victorians looked upon the home as a sacred space, a private sanctuary, where the rites of passage and of “right relations” were to be carried out. Unlike the church (especially in America) which was fragmented into warring denominations, the home provided a harmonious “spiritual” space—where the “three great mysteries” of “Birth, of growth, of death” were given meaning. Home decoration had not merely an aesthetic worth but provided a morally-uplifting environment. House designs, which were widely published in books and even women’s magazines in the 19th century, show how central the woman’s role in organizing domestic/leisure space was. As Colleen McDannel writes, homes “expressed the character of the family and they shaped that character.”

Even the respectable working class devoted a large share of scarce living space to dining room and parlor, often never used except for the formal visit of guests. Francis Couvares finds, in his study of Pittsburgh culture in the late 19th century, a preoccupation of the upper working class with domesticity. In the 1870s, Pittsburgh’s People’s Monthly, published articles calling for more home ownership. “We hold that no man occupies a truly independent position, nor can he or his family enjoy life until he owns his own home...” Labor support for temperance was often related to this desire to secure a stable home life. And, union balls and outings deliberately promoted familialism as a replacement for the trade-union meeting in the saloon. The development of savings and loans after 1860 contributed to the spread of home ownership in America and the electric street car after 1890 sparked the suburbanization of the artisan and clerk (Chapter 12). English working-class walls were covered with paper strips emblazoned with mottos attesting to domestic joys: “East, west, home’s best; Bless our home; God is master of this house.” Music hall reperitory was full of sentimental songs about home sweet home. Even the factory worker of Lancashire, for example, was famous for his privacy. The wife would carefully wash and clean with pumice stone the white and yellow steps of their modest row houses. But often none but close relatives ever entered the front door; even old drinking chums and workmates were excluded.

The familial trend was evident also in a reorganization of holidays. The idea of the family Christmas with yule log, tree, songs, and the exchange of gifts in England on “boxing day” (December 26) was part of this Victorian stress on family recreation. Americans, who in the early 19th century, had celebrated July 4th with the bacchanalian abandon of a village mardi gras, were to turn to family picnics by the 1850s. And later in the 20th century, the American Thanksgiving became a tradition of family reunion. Public walkways in parks were designed for family strolls. The same was true of the vacation—no longer just a lark for the aristocratic youth or the taking of the cure for the besotted middle-aged gentleman; rather, from the 1840s, tour organizers like Thomas Cook deliberately appealed to family groups.

A barrage of new magazines reinforced familialism. Made possible by high-speed printing and cheaper paper and by the general increase in literacy, English and American publishers flooded the market with family-oriented periodicals. For example, the London Journal (1845-1912) and the Family Herald (1842-1939) reached about 750,000 homes by the 1850s. Such magazines included a mixture of serialized adventure and romance—often read to families gathered in the parlor. Domestic tranquility was frequently the happy ending of romantic stories. Other items were character-building stories of a famous man, as well as household hints, riddles, and puzzles. These magazines taught the families of aspiring clerical and skilled workers “proper” etiquette and dress. Matrimonial advertisements offered an alternative to the tawdry courtship provided in dance halls and pubs.

Married women were believed to be the ideal organizers of familial recreation. As the American Victorian Mary Dodge wrote, women were “divinely designed” for a “state of repose, ease, leisure.” Both industrializa-
tion and the ideology of the woman’s sphere encouraged the married women to focus on family leisure. As A.J. Graves wrote in *Women in America* (1841):

“If man’s duties lie abroad, woman’s duties are within the quiet seclusion of home. If his greatness and power are most strikingly exhibited in associated action upon associated masses, her true greatness and her highest efficiency consist in individual efforts upon individual beings. In this age of excitement, it is especially incumbent upon woman to exert her utmost influence, to maintain unimpaired the sacredness and the power of the family institution.”

Only “fireside happiness” assured the male’s sanity: “Should [the husband] meet dark clouds and storms abroad, yet sunshine and peace await him at home.” Mothers were to provide the moral ballast to counter the harm of peer pressure and to reinforce habits of restraint and temperance among the boys.

Nineteenth-century female education, of course, prepared women for these roles. It offered training in the domestic crafts. Although no longer of much economic value, Victorian middle-class girls were still taught the arts of hand sewing, crochet, and lace-work. Such tasks occupied women in an era when business was valued for its own sake; these handicrafts were decorative or were given to the poor. Education in private girls “dame” schools stressed husband-capturing skills: coiffure, fashion, singing, and piano-playing for decorous courtship recitals in parental parlors. This education designed for leisure was a great cause for complaint by the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft; it also displeased the conservative Mother of home economics, the American Catherine Beecher. Still, Beecher advocated an education for women that stressed domestic improvements—practical but decorous comforts for the American home.

Private constraint against public excess was the guiding principle. Yet domesticity meant more than avoidance. It encompassed also a panoply of family activities—board games, reading of fiction, piano-playing and singing, and lawn games like croquet. Domesticity probably contributed to a considerable softening of family life and the development of deep emotional attachments between adult women and between mothers and their children. Carol Smith-Rosenberg describes “that endless trooping of women to each others’ home for social purposes... Rural women developed a pattern of more extended visits that lasted weeks and sometimes months, at times even dislodging husbands from their beds and bedrooms so that dear friends might spend every hour of every day together.” Married women with children sometimes arranged summer holidays to meet childhood friends at spas or even to share country homes. Leonore Davidoff describes an even more elaborate social “season” that women of affluence organized in Victorian Britain. And women’s rites of passage, especially the birth of the first child, were often shared by all female family members and old friends. The ritual of “paying calls” was often an elaborate ritual involving leaving calling cards “with the right-hand top corner turned down.” A daughter’s “coming out” was signified by her obtaining her own cards.

Through periodicals like the American *Ladies Magazine* and the *Godley’s Lady’s Book*, these values were propagated in essays and fiction surrounded by fashion plates, dress and crochet patterns, recipes, and model cottages. The English Victorian housewife had the advice manuals of Sarah Strickney Ellis to turn to (*The Mothers of England and The Daughters of England*, e.g.).

But the Victorian housewife had duties beyond family and home. Especially in America, she was to play an active part in Protestant church life—not only in the fund-raising efforts or charity but also in evangelical work. Women were to be missionaries of familial culture. For example, middle-class wives in New York “adopted” poor families and offered advice to wives on domestic management and “higher” cultural standards. The Englishwoman, Octavia Hill, and the American, Josephine Shaw, in the 1860s and 1870s, set the standard of voluntary charity in the cities. Their “friendly visitors” encouraged working-class wives to withdraw from the labor force and to lead their families to temperance and genteel manners. The settlement house movement (founded first in England and imported to the U.S. in 1886) was similar. It consisted of young volunteers (mostly women) who took up residence in poor (in America, immigrant) neighborhoods. They attempted to recreate a model household of orderly, culturally refined, and restrained life, which, they hoped, the poor would imitate.

**Play and the New Childrearing**

At the heart of this domestic ideal was a new attitude toward childrearing and children’s play. Family historians have long stressed the impact of the Enlightenment on the treatment of children. John Locke’s view of man (1690) as a pure product of the environment without any innate propensity toward evil fundamentally undermined the view that children were little devils or animals who had to be broken. The notion that children reflected their surroundings made parents increasingly sensitive to the protection of children from harmful influences. The 18th century views of Jean-Jacques Rousseau that small children were innocents whose naive simplicity was a virtue and whose spontaneity should be guarded by an education that encouraged individual expression had an even deeper impact. Accordingly, children were increasingly seen as unique, not as miniature adults; they should be allowed a long childhood spent with those in their own age group.

This was a revolutionary change. The earlier view—concretely displayed in a child prodigy like Mozart—was that the young should be introduced to adult life as soon as possible. Instead, the affluent Victorian parents
gradually withdrew their children not only from the experience of early work but from adult society. Precocity was now harmful. As Rousseau put it, "Nature wants children to be children before they are men. If we deliberately pervert this order, we shall get premature fruits which are neither ripe nor well-flavoured, and which soon decay." Similarly, Bronson Alcott, a New England moralist wrote: "Play is the appointed dispensation of childhood."

It was women's duty to provide a proper childlike environment for the young person. As Catherine Beecher put the problem in 1847: "The success of democratic institutions, as is conceded by all, depends upon the intellectual and moral character of the mass of the people. The formation of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand. The mother was to select the games and activities appropriate for the child's age. The Mother's Magazine repeatedly warned women to guard their children from the "contamination of the streets." Mothers attempted to shape the playtime of children to inculcate skill and moral values. Children were not only to be protected from the rough games and talk of adults but were to be isolated from older children who might introduce them to bad habits. Thus, schools gradually eliminated the one-room schoolhouse, which mixed students of all ages. The same separation took place in children's literature: separate magazines for children, adolescents, and young adults all appeared in the 19th century. In the early part of the 19th century, children's games and toys were increasingly in demand. New manufacturing techniques allowed for the inexpensive production of dolls. By 1850, dolls portrayed not only adults but babies and children—a change that reflected a recognition of the child's separate imaginative world. Factory production of dolls, developed first in Germany, led to their mass distribution. Toys took on a new purpose. In the home, bereft of productive tasks and sometimes even baby siblings, toys became a means of simulating adult roles. The American Monthly Mother's Magazine in the 1830s advocated "hammers and hatchets" for boys and "dressing dolls" and "mimicry of housekeeping" for girls.

Advice manuals insisted that young children learn checkers, for this game "calls forth the resources of the mind in the most gentle, as well as the most successful manner." In America, games like "Pilgrim's Progress" and "The Mansion of Happiness" were sold to instill Protestant moral themes. In the latter game, children advanced a piece on a board by way of squares marked with character traits (Piety and Honesty, for example) moving toward the goal of "Happiness." Landing, however, on "Passion" meant that you lost a turn.

Children's books also often had an educational message. Stories discouraged cruelty to animals; authors presumed that this would reduce the chance that the child would become a violent adult. This approach corresponded with changing child-rearing methods that stressed parental example, encouragement, and the cultivation of the child's conscience rather than strict rules, mere deference, and punishment. Kindly and obedient children were sometimes rewarded with a toy whistle with the inscription, "For a Good Child."

Finally, the attempt to moralize children's play gradually gave way to a greater openness to the imagination and free activity. An American physician in 1868 could write:

[Children] should be allowed to run, leap, hallor [sic] and be happy in the open air just as instinct teaches them in common with the young throughout the animal kingdom... Then let them feel that during play hours they are unrestrained and unwatched and...they will be stronger and more happy and, in consequence, wiser and better.

The ideal of self-discipline, which had sometimes defined the early Victorian successful man, gave way to a new ideal of instincts and spontaneity, which could be fostered only in play. And, if the 19th-century adult felt uneasy about such pleasures, he could enjoy them through the children. The old custom of carting young children on mother's social visits and attending adult pleasures like hunting was abandoned. At the same time, middle-class homes provided increasing space for nurseries and playrooms.

Children's literature in the 19th century, in particular reveals, this trend. By midcentury, the piety of the early Victorian period had given way to literature that stressed secular virtues, like thrift and kindness. And the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen from the late 1840s began to supplant the moralistic tales of Puritan writers. Still later, celebration of the spontaneity of youth appeared in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and Thomas Aldrich's The Story of a Bad Boy. The amusements and literary fantasies that had traditionally been enjoyed by adults were increasingly shifted to children. Thus, medieval tales of adventure and romance like Robin Hood and St. George became the preserve of children, and hoop and ball games, which had been traditional enjoyed by all ages, were increasingly seen as "childish."

New attitudes toward play were largely restricted to the middle classes. Working-class childhood in the 19th century frequently ended by age nine. Most children, especially in rural areas, enjoyed relatively unorganized play with few toys, books, or other manufactured or commercial amusements. Cans were used for "footballs;" hopscotch was played on the street. Despite the short life of a child's play, children have been extraordinarily conservative, preserving with little change traditional games and songs for generations. The young played hiding and chasing games like Fox and Hounds and Sheep Come Home. They also imitated adult rituals in play-acting weddings and "Indians and Squaws."
Leisure and Youth: Dilemmas of Industrial Society

The Victorian ideal was domestic recreation focused on the mother and child. Yet, there were constant threats to this fire-side ideal. Principal among them was the problem of teenage youth. Those years between dependence upon one's first family and the creation of the second family had perhaps always been a time of ambiguity. Yet this age—which in the 20th century was endowed with the somewhat pejorative label, adolescence—posed particular problems for Victorians. The women's influence over the child hardly extended beyond the age of 10. Older children, especially sons, were ideally the father's responsibility. But in both the households of the laborer and middle-class, fathers had decreasing roles to play. As early as the 1830s, reformers had identified a youth problem and that problem focused on play.

Industrialization reduced the number of middle-class lads who worked with their fathers (or masters). Increasingly, the transition between childhood and "manhood" was controlled by professional educators. Many aspiring parents recognized that their sons would have to be educated for new commercial occupations in skills that their parents were incapable of teaching. Intent upon preparing their offspring for appropriate positions in adult life, middle-class parents wanted not only formal education but the formation of "character." This elusive term had an array of meanings, including competitiveness and a cooperative spirit, steadfastness to principle but also group loyalty. The school, then, had to be transformed into a "character factory" and had to be broadened to include the reformation of youth recreation.

The problem was somewhat different for youth in the laboring classes. Those teenage children, whose economic opportunities or aspirations were limited in adulthood, found that their liberty expanded during this period of their lives. Industrialization meant that they were less frequently supervised by parents at work. Rather, these youth were hired for a wage by an unrelated employer with few paternalistic concerns. They increasingly were cut off from the constraints (as well as opportunities) of the apprenticeship system when the need for the traditional artisan declined. "Father and son can seldom work together" complained a Briton in 1907.

The typical working-class youth was increasingly employed in odd-jobs or factories. Social mobility was surely limited and wages often were low, but the youth frequently had his own pay envelope. Parents, who had traditionally expected their children to work along side them for the good of the family economy, continued to expect their teenagers to contribute to the household wage pool; yet youths found ways of negotiating a share of their wages for pocket money. And even working daughters were sometimes able to parlay their economic power into exemption from some household duties. The result was money and time for leisure.

Moreover, working-class youths left school far earlier than did their middle-class counterparts. As a British observer wrote, "leaving school is his emancipation. His mother anticipates and grants his demands...In short, wage-earning boys and girls assume economic and social independence and responsibility earlier than youths who remain on dependent on their parents." This youthful autonomy was, of course, only relative. Parents were able to coax obedience out of their teenagers by many means, both subtle and crude. Mothers were especially skilled in tugging on the emotional leading strings that they had spun during childhood to instill the loyalty of their older offspring. Moreover, because the working-class family was slower to reduce family size, the leisure of the first children was often sacrificed for the sake of the feeding of the younger ones. And, of course, parents knew, often from their own bitter experience, the price of a carefree youth. They were strict with their daughters and monitored their contact with suitors for fear of the shame and economic catastrophe of premature pregnancy. While boys were less controlled (and perhaps less controllable), the mark of a "respectable" working class family was its ability to control the teenager's leisure. Referring to England in the 1900s, Robert Roberts writes,

"Put that book down!" a mother would command her child, even in his free time, 'and do something useful.' Teenagers, especially girls, were kept on a very tight rein. Fathers fixed the number of evenings on which they could go out and required to know precisely where and with whom they had spent their leisure... Control could go on in some families for years after daughters had come of age.

Parents believed that their offspring should compensate them for years of upkeep as children. Shotgun marriages of daughters were understood as robbery by aggrieved parents.

Still, 19th-century working-class youth had both freedom from direct parental supervision during working hours and money in their pockets, creating a powerful combination for an autonomous leisure culture among the young of the laboring classes. This culture was not necessarily more rebellious or disorderly than it had been before the 19th century, but it surely was more detached from custom and parental control. The upshot was a "youth problem" which was often identified with juvenile crime. Yet, more fundamentally, the free time of youth was less delinquent than it was generational and open to change and manipulation. Reformers naturally sought to shape it even if they fought an uphill battle against the commercial ventured of saloons, dance halls, cheap theaters, (and later) film exhibitioners, and amusement parks.

Youth had perhaps always been a period of psychological stress, rebellion, experimentation, and disorder. Liberated from direct dependence on parents, yet still free from family obligations, male youth throughout the ages...
had been able to perpetuate distinct leisure cultures, as was evident, for example, in the Middle Ages among apprentices or school boys.40

Yet the 19th century brought a new face to this ageless phenomenon. Whereas youth leisure had previously been largely bound to tradition in the ritualized celebrations of the trade or of the charivari and festival, the newly urbanized youth of the 19th century were largely cut adrift from time-honored codes of behavior. And, while playful traditions often had a broader utilitarian purpose, for example the enforcement of community sexual standards in the charivari or courtship procedures in the festival, the free time of the youth of the industrial city was less clearly functional. Leisure was increasingly expressive and influenced by commercial amusements. The tradition-fixed rules of the charivari were replaced by the youth social club, the gang, the life of the street, St. John’s Eve folk dance by the weekend dance-hall; and the spring fair by the amusement park.41

These changes were as frightening to working-class parents as they were to middle-class moralists. Urban youths were frequently employed as errand boys and casual laborers, which gave them much freedom on the streets. In mid-century New York City, many children earned income and freedom by huckstering or street vending of snacks and household supplies. While a truancy law in 1853 was designed to banish school-age children from the street, neither the authorities nor their parents were able to eliminate this threat to public order.42 The street was the playground of children in every city, an unsupervised space that parents often unwillingly allowed their offspring to enter. In America, the anxiety of the immigrant parent was compounded by fears of the Americanization of their teenage children through leisure activities that they did not understand or control. Cramped tenements meant that parents were obliged to tolerate the late evening street play of their older children. By 1850, youth formed a street-corner society built around “social clubs” or gangs in most American and British cities. As in the 20th century, these young people defended their “territory” against outside clubs and drifted into petty vandalism and theft (Chapter 7).

Gangs like the Hooligans of London and the Ikes of Manchester were distinctive for their bell-bottom trousers and heavy buckled belts. Their girl friends often wore clogs, shawls and skirts with vertical stripes. They were beyond the control of parents and policemen hardly contained them. When bored, they engaged in bloody battles with neighboring blocks of 40 or so youths with belt and clog. More importantly, when English street youths graduated from school, they spent their evenings playing “pitch and toss” (a form of gambling) while one member watched for police. Leisure was at the core of generational conflict and of moralist’s fear of working-class independence and precocity.43

The problem was predominately male. Although Victorian-era American girls might have “climbed trees, fell into rain barrels, fished in the horse troughs,” by the age of 13 or 15, the girl’s life of play had ended.

Until marriage it was her fate to be mother’s helper. One turn-of-the-century English woman remembers: “From six onwards I used to scrub and clean the potatoes and...do all the washing-up. I started from six o’clock onwards doing the cooking. There was no nonsense in those days. You had to learn these rough jobs and get on with them.”44 Still, for the working-class male, the teenage years were a period of play, a brief time when lifetime friends would be made and habits of leisure established.

How different it was for the middle-class youth! Business and professional parents expected their offspring to prepare for an individualistic, rationalistic, and competitive business world. Youth from wealthier families obviously were more dependent upon parental aid than were the working poor. Parents or relatives were often the ticket to entry into the right schools or lawyer’s or merchant’s offices. Middle-class parents were also able to isolate their youths from the grog shop culture of the young errant boy or mechanics’ helper. Moreover, unlike the working parent, the rich found a surrogate for the father in the youth association and school.

In the American northeast in the 1840s, there was a proliferation of middle-class teenage clubs devoted to temperance, debating, and even publishing “boy’s newspapers.” These imitations of adult social associations were possible because parents were able to withhold their offspring from the workforce into late teenage. Native-born boys in one New York town at midcentury were nearly twice as likely to invite immigrants to be still outside the workforce in their late teens.45

The middle-class ideal was to isolate the boy in school until age 16 or 17. The English “public school” (really a private boarding school) was the incubator of not only elite education but also of new forms of leisure. In the 1830s, Thomas Arnold’s Rugby School and others reformed the traditional aristocratic boarding school. Before reform, student disorder (where the older scholars terrorized the younger and both participated in periodic riots) had been combined with harsh discipline and rote learning meted out by schoolmasters. In an effort both to instill discipline and to build “character,” headmasters integrated sport fully into the English public-school curriculum. The traditionally rough and chaotic rural game of football was taken over by the elite schools and converted into a very different sport. Individual skill with the feet, teamwork, and regulated contact replaced the free-for-all of the traditional Shrove Tuesday village match (Chapter 10).

In Britain, sport served in the transition from childhood to adulthood by separating male youths from the increasingly “effeminate” domestic world. Boys were expected to be toughened up, to fight fair but not shed tears. Boy play was to be the opposite of female domesticity. A Spartan model was cultivated by pseudo-military training. Rifle clubs, drilling, and uniforms permeated the free time of the mid-Victorian middle-class boy. The threat of
precocious sexuality was displaced by vigorous activity. This same sports mentality trickled down into the working classes through football teams sponsored by former public-school men (Chapter 10).

In America, sports played a somewhat different role. Although the English school had its American admirers, athletics came late to the state-supported public schools. The initiative was taken by private organizations such as the YMCA. By 1870, the American "Y" had lost much of its early stress on moral refinement. It had become a sports and physical fitness center for the urban middle class. Under Luther Gulick's influence in the 1890s, the "Y" developed a philosophy of manliness based less on moral rectitude than on physical conditioning and team sports. Recurrent anxiety about national security (especially in England) stirred concern with fitness. The Crimean War of 1854-1856 sparked the formation of the Voluntary Force, a citizen's militia that trained for potential military service. Later, the boys' brigades were formed (1883), which were organized to instill parade-ground discipline in working-class boys. Many Englishmen were shocked by the number of British recruits in the Boer War (1899-1902) who failed their physical examinations. Britain was producing physical misfits. National "efficiency" required not only the discipline of military training in the schools and brigades but team sports and athletic training. While athleticism and even militarism increasingly dominated leisure reform, character building was not neglected. If I may extend this chapter slightly beyond the 14th century, the Boy Scouts are a good example of both trends. Founded officially in 1908 by the English general and hero of the Boer War, Robert Baden-Powell, the scouting movement quickly passed to America under the leadership of Ernest Thompson Seton in 1910. Baden-Powell attempted to create a "character factory." Through organized recreation the virtues of patriotism, chivalry, woodcraft (nature study), and self-sacrifice were to be instilled. The scouts promised both the adventure that ran through youth literature of the period and the discipline of merit badges and rank. Baden-Powell and Thompson-Seton, however, opposed military drills for scouts (favored by the British boys' brigades, e.g.). Troops were organized mostly for the middle classes and were designed to fill the vacuum in the 12-18 year group in which the discipline of home, school, and work were weak and declining. In America, the scouts filled a need for recreation, which schools only began to provide in the 1920s. The early boy scouts were to provide an antidote to effeminacy and social "deterioration." The scouts took the boy from the "excessive" influence of women: "The REAL Boy Scout is not a 'sissy.' [He] adores his mother [but] is not hitched to [her] apron strings." Fathers holding white-collar jobs feared

that men were getting soft and that the "natural" distinction between the sexes was being blurred. They sought to restore their own and their son's "masculinity" by becoming scout masters. The scout movement also provided an alternative to street play: Scouts were "no longer loafing in billiard parlors or among boys that tend to exercise a harmful influence over them." Historian David MacLean finds that the scouts targeted middle-class boys in an attempt to isolate them from the precocious independence and immorality of urban poor boys. Other accounts stress that the scouts also focused on those working-class families who strove for "respectability" and were eager to break from the rougher elements in their neighborhoods.

Given the threats posed by the free time of working-class youth to the social order, it is not surprising that middle-class reformers targeted this section of urban society for reform. From the 1880s, groups like the Boys' Brigades in England and the Boy's Clubs in both countries sought a working-class clientele. Both tended to stress discipline and authority far more than did the more middle-class boy scouts. Less authoritarian, if perhaps equally paternalistic, was the American playground movement. Beginning modestly, when the public schools of Boston in 1885 provided sandboxes for poor children, it expanded in the late 90s with neighborhood parks in immigrant areas of Chicago and other American cities. It culminated in the influential Playground Association (founded in 1906, which later become the National Recreation Association) led by Luther Gulick and Joseph Lee. By 1915, 430 American municipalities had park programs and thousands more followed. Other cities attached the playground to the school system for more efficient use and lower costs. Settlement houses like Hull House in Chicago in 1894 built playgrounds complete with a sand pile, swings, and building blocks, as well as a building for indoor baseball.

The concept of the playground movement was quite simple: alternatives to the street and degrading commercial leisure must be provided by the government in safe, regulated fun. Not only should cities build neighborhood playgrounds, as opposed to downtown "promenade parks," but they should offer programs. Henry Curtis, another leader of the Playground Association, advocated that cities take over dance halls and "sooner or later...also take over the moving picture." According to the philosophy of the playground movement, games and play areas should be age-graded and sex-differentiated. This would prevent the older from corrupting the younger child (creating the damage of premature maturity) and allow play to train the sexes for their "appropriate" roles. The Playground Association encouraged the training of playground workers. By 1918, about 50 teacher's colleges offered recreation courses and even the University of California provided summer classes in parks and recreation subjects.

This movement was influenced by the prevailing fear of the social disorder of immigrant life and the belief that commercial leisure was contributing to delinquency. As Curtis noted, "It is not the play but the idleness of the
street that is morally dangerous. It is then that the children watch the drunken people, listen to the leader of the gang, hear the shabby story, smoke cigarettes... The recreation movement reflected a positive assessment of the need of youth for playful expression. As the Playground Association stated:

Delinquency is reduced by providing a wholesome outlet for youthful energy. Industrial efficiency is increased by giving individuals a play life which will develop greater resourcefulness and adaptability. Good citizenship is promoted by forming habits of co-operation in play.... Democracy rests on the most firm basis when a community has formed the habit of playing together.55

The so-called recapitulation theory of American psychologist G. Stanley Hall (ca. 1900) was immensely influential among recreation reformers. It held that each child relived in his own development the evolution of humanity. Teenage gang behavior was little more than the re-experience of man's savage stage. The objective of the play movement was not to suppress this stage—for children were essentially immune to rational persuasion—but to guide the youth through it. Indeed, morality and masculinity or physical action were united in the child. This stage of life should not be skipped but rather channeled into organized activity under the firm, but understanding, hand of the scout master, coach, or youth worker.56 Joseph Lee put the matter similarly. The "play instinct," the love of adventure, tribalism, and physical activity, was the source of the creative impulse essential in adult life. The famous Settlement House activist, Jane Addams, stressed that the petty vandalism of slum youth was the inevitable expression of the "instinct" for "adventure" which should be redirected in organized play.57

The youth camp movement, which was popular on both sides of the Atlantic, shared these goals. The pioneer in camping perhaps was the St. Andrew's Home and Club for Working Boys in London (1866), which took its charges on weekends up the Thames for camping trips. Americans also promoted the idea of liberation from the degradation of the city in the New York Tribune's Fresh Air Fund (1877). Both the Boys' Brigades and Boy Scouts organized camping excursions early in the century. The American, Ernest Thompson Seton, who (in addition to the scouts) founded the Woodcraft League in 1902, rejected the military and patriotic trappings of the brigades for the pure romance of sleeping in tents, tramping, and songs around the fire. The moral objective was still apparent. Its purpose, he argued, was:

To give pioneers a well-organized communal life, to provide them with opportunities for healthy outdoor activity; to train them in self-reliance and communal responsibility; and to counterbalance the monotony of factory and school life and the complexity of an industrial civilization with a life that is simpler, freer, and more spontaneous.

The permanent summer camp for youth was unique in America. By 1929 there were 7,000 such camps, which reached a million children. The scouts and YMCA were especially prominent in providing children contact with nature as well as a sheltered moral environment. "Roughing it," was low priority.58

These reformers were, however, relatively indifferent to organizing the leisure of girls. Not only were there few efforts to organize girls' clubs or to introduce physical fitness into girls' education in the 19th century, but the female equivalents of the Boy Scouts were rather afterthoughts. When a group of girls in khaki shirts appeared at the first official rally of the Boy Scouts at the Crystal Palace in 1909, Baden-Powell enlisted his sister to organize a separate organization to prevent the corruption of the "manliness" of the scouts. They were called Girl Guides; Agnes Baden-Powell's goal was definitely "feminine." "you do not want to make tomboys of refined girls, yet you want to attract, and thus raise, the slum girl from the gutter. The main object is to give them all the ability to be better mothers and Guides to the next generation." Activities stressed the "womanly arts" of sewing, decoration, and cooking. By 1912, however, hikes and other outdoor activities were added to help the girls become more resourceful and self-reliant. Whereas boys were trained to be loyal and competitive, the girls were supposed to learn domestic skills and to inculcate attitudes of harmony and "happiness."59

Limits of Reform:
Youth and the Power of Commercial Leisure

The cult of "fireside happiness" went far to redefine traditional leisure in the industrial era. Built around the home and the homemaking mother, it showed a fresh side of the reforming spirit so powerfully expressed in rational recreation. Rather restrictive attitudes toward play and its use in moral training gradually gave way to greater tolerance of the child's pleasures. This attitude reflects the loosening of the work ethic among adults as prosperity and mechanization reduced the necessity of being "severely workful." Yet anxiety that the adolescent was losing the values of rural life and work discipline and was drifting away from the influence of parent and adult authorities led to a serious effort to reestablish adult control. Increased sophistication in child rearing, perhaps, led to more indirect methods. However the objects of the various youth recreational movements remained character building and social control.

Those sports developed in the British and American schools in the 19th century, of course, remain at the core of the leisure calendar of many American and British males today, a point we will explore further in Chapter 10. The scouts became a mass movement and, with summer camps, introduced millions to the pleasures of hiking, camping, and general outdoor activities. Doubles, these movements sustained loyalty and patriotism (ideals that inspired men to go "over the top" in the trenches of World War I). The early Victorian presumption
scouts became a mass movement and, with summer camps, introduced millions to the pleasures of hiking, camping, and general outdoor activities. Doubtless, these movements sustained loyalty and patriotism (ideals that inspired men to go "over the top" in the trenches of World War I). The early Victorian presumption that moral uplift, if adapted by the working class, would end not only poverty but also but social division was equally applied to the later ideal of public-school athleticism and to nature study.60

Yet we still must ask how successful were these efforts. Historian Dom Cavallo doubts that more than 10-20 percent of immigrant youth visited urban playgrounds in the period between 1900 and 1920. And increasingly from the 1920s, play programs were integrated into the schools and recess.61 As we have seen before, high-minded reformers often found their innovations turned to new purposes by their working-class clients. To take just the most obvious examples, the amateur ideal of public-school football in Britain was turned into a professional sport because of the successful infiltration of the northern industrial worker; and the playground movement, which hoped to break down ethnic identities in America, found that the group loyalties of the street were simply transferred to the playing field and field houses.

Most important, the informal, often rough, but autonomous life of the street survived the reformers. Especially in the neighborhoods of the poor, the Playground Association, boy’s clubs, and scouts could not penetrate. Finally, the commercial entertainments of the city were hardly replaced by the reformers’ clubs. Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, they grew with technology. They offered unalloyed fun, often recreating those traditional pleasures that had long attracted people of all ages. The attempt to break down the difference in the generations was hardly successful; indeed, leisure increasingly became a site for conflict between parent and child.
Leisure for the Masses:
The Commercialization of Entertainment in the 19th Century

So far we have concentrated on traditional and reforming leisure. Now we must consider more fully a third, and perhaps the most significant, expression of society's quest for play, commercial entertainment. The business of providing pleasure is surely one of the oldest occupations. What goes by the name of traditional leisure in the seasonal and religious festivals of 17th-century Europe or even colonial and frontier America often centered on the Punch and Judy show or traveling menagerie.

Still, industrialization in the 19th century produced new types of leisure industry. First, the creation of new wealth and technology gave birth to a taste for novelty. The pleasures of the aristocratic spa trickled down to the family fun of the popular resort reached by the railroad. The tradition-bound jugglers and pantomime artists were gradually displaced by the new and more thrilling technological wonder of the amusement park.

Second, leisure was transformed by a new sense of time, pleasure by the hour, weekend, and summer holiday, not the traditional festival or irregular leisure moments of preindustrial society. The institution of the Saturday half-holiday, for example, created a time slot ideal for the emergence of English football and baseball as popular spectator sports. In England, the 1871 Bank Holidays Act not only added Easter Monday, Boxing Day (the day after Christmas), and Whit Monday to the legal holiday calendar of Christmas and Good Friday, but created a new secular summer holiday on the first Monday in August. The gradual emergence of vacation with pay also allowed the democratization of tourism.

Third, capitalist business practices—especially profit maximization, based not on a luxury market but on a mass market with unfettered competition—had a revolutionary impact on leisure services; they created a mass entertainment industry centralized in the hands of relatively few triumphant corporations of national and even international influence.
Many commentators have lamented the coming of mass leisure, just as
they have found wanting the era of consumerism in general. It is easy to argue
that the entertainment industry has eclipsed traditional popular leisure and
subverted the ideals of the play movement and other forms of rational recreation.
Critics find in consumer leisure the manipulation of the capitalist-impresario
who has created a passive, if easily satiated, crowd of pleasure-seekers, deprived of
playing any active role in history or even personal development. Pleasure
entrepreneurs have created a modern version of “bread and circuses.” Traditionalists
lament the passing of the old folklore in the modern culture of rootless
ignorance of the past; communities formed and refreshed in traditional play
have been supplanted by a “lonely crowd” ever seeking new thrills in the glitzy
world of superficial fads and the rise and fall of “stars.”

These characteristics may ring true; the reader should decide. But
we should keep in mind that this commercialization often had origins that were
both traditional and reformist. Historically, people’s tastes in fun have remained
extraordinarily conservative even when repackaged in modern forms, and many
have insisted that their pleasures somehow be “improving.” Moreover, if such
leisure tended toward national and even international uniformity, it also
produced a vast variety of alternatives; it had meanings and uses that were not
always passive and depersonalizing. Most important perhaps, whatever we
think of the entertainment industry in all of its manifestations, a study of its
historical origins is helpful for understanding why it generally has triumphed
over traditional popular and rational recreation.

This chapter will be the first installment in an exploration of the
problem of the history of mass-market leisure. It will cover the nineteenth
century through World War I and will lay the foundation for an understanding of
the twentieth-century entertainment industry.

Industrialization and Mass Leisure

Leisure did not become a business in the 19th century, but the industrial econ-
omy made entertainment a more thorough and different sort of business.
Viewed first from the demand side, the key was the growth in personal income
and later its fairly wide distribution. The first classes to enjoy and lead the
commercialization of leisure were, of course, aristocratic and landed elites.
Possessing both income and a culture that valued pleasure more than productivity,
the aristocratic residents of London and plantations of the American South
created such characteristically modern leisure forms as tourism, urban entertain-
ment districts, and a taste for various fads and fashion (Chapter 4).

By the mid-century, this leisure style penetrated the hard-working and
newly rich middle class, who were breaking away from the strictures against
pleasure seeking. In both America and Britain, they aped the old landed elite
seeking, in part, validation of their new-found status. The children of Puritan
protestant business men of the midcentury had embraced “The Gospel of Re-
creation” by the 1850s. The upper middle class joined the aristocracy and
royalty in the fashionable “season” at Brighton and other resorts; they modeled
their new homes on a similar domestic opulence and elegant dining. American
industrialists gathered at the track of Saratoga Springs and the shore at Newport
to see and be seen.

The desire for leisure trickled down to skilled and commercial workers,
who began to define their status as much by the quality of leisure as by the
character of their work. Their early demand for vacations with pay and
willingness to make sacrifices for middle-class domestic luxuries is evidence of
trend. The gradual increase in real wages of working people after about
1860 also democratized access to purchased leisure, partly as a function of
“Engel’s Curve,” which describes the tendency of the proportion of family
budgets required for necessities to decrease with rising income. The increased
share of the pay packet available for pleasure was spent in many ways. For
example, in England, the consumption of tea (and sugar) spread broadly to the
working classes between 1850 and 1900 (increasing three fold in annual
consumption). From the 1860s, the tea shops, which were often first opened by
temperance activists, gradually were transformed into commercial chains.
Increased opportunity to purchase excursion tickets or admission to music halls
reduced the reliance of many working-class people upon alcohol for pleasure.
Even beer consumption in Britain dropped from 34 gallons per head in 1875 to
27 gallons by 1914. Other less healthful pleasures like smoking increased by
300 percent in the second half of the century in Britain, especially with the re-
placement of the pipe with the cigarette after the 1860s.

The revolution in transportation and communications resulted both
in new leisure opportunities and in a homogenization of its experience. From the
1830s, the railroad began to conquer time and space. It made distant travel
assessable to the middle class and, with the gradual reduction in prices, to time-
starved workers. Escape from the city became possible. The steam tram (or
streetcar), developed first in America, was brought to England in 1860 by
George F. Train, and improved in the mid-1880s with electrification. This
vastly eased the movement of workers around the now-sprawling conurbations
of London, New York, and many other cities. The tram freed them from
exclusive reliance on the neighborhood pub or ethnic fraternal society for leisure
and opened their lives to the football or baseball game, the amusement park,
and the dance-hall and theater district. The streetcar dominated urban travel until it
was replaced by the bus and car in the 1920s.

At the same time, the railroad led to the decline of smaller local fairs.
Rural people increasingly traveled to regional urban centers for larger and more
diverse entertainment. The train also made it possible for larger, more commer-
cialized amusements to spread costs over a wider market. The traditional troupe
of actors or animal acts were able to extend their circuit; but competition for
audiences also intensified. Their reliance on agents, impresarios, and owners of chains of music halls naturally increased. Audiences enjoyed more diverse and probably superior entertainment, but local traditions began to die out. Cheaper communications via the steam press and newspaper allowed for rapid and mass dissemination of leisure reading and reinforced the trend toward uniformity.

Perhaps the most complex trend was the influence of capitalist business methods. Most fundamentally, the supply of entertainment reflected the common denominator—the market. Often, a leisure business began by offering a locality a traditional entertainment like a menagerie. Then, with success, it expanded its program to accommodate a wider market. This process took many forms: for example, popular amusements such as the circus were reformed to appeal to a middle-class audience of "rational recreationists." By contrast, an originally uplifting leisure activity like the railroad excursion or holiday camp was born of its moralizing lectures and austerity to appeal to a wider, more popular market on a strictly commercial basis.

Competition and cost-cutting pressures also transformed the entertainment industry. Vertical and horizontal integration, well known to historians of the corporation, were equally common to the pleasure industry. From the 1820s British breweries acquired pubs in order to guarantee retail markets, and chains of music halls reduced overhead costs. Important also was the development of advertising from the "ballyhoos" of the carnival "spieler" to the elaborate publicity stunts of P.T. Barnum.4

The leisure industry was among the first to adopt new technological and business practices such as the installation of the first British electric streetcars in the resort of Blackpool and the rapid diffusion of new building techniques to the Ferris Wheel. Impresarios were often pure entrepreneurs—quick to find and serve a market, sensitive to the fickle amusement seeker, and eager to beat the less-responsive competitor with a new gimmick or new way of cutting costs. Investors in established leisure industries, such as music halls or vaudeville, were the first to feature films in their houses and to abandon the old entertainment when the market warranted it. Even leisure organizations that began as nonprofit were forced to adopt modern business practices in order to provide the range of services demanded by their patrons. This happened to organizers of railroad excursions (for example, Thomas Cook) and to holiday camps.

During the 19th century, leisure industries entered an international market. By the 1860s, organized railroad tours from England to Paris had become possible. And by the end of the century, Americans traveled on fast steamers and trains to London and even to Paris for several weeks of shopping and theater-going. Improved transatlantic communications created an increasingly common Anglo-American leisure world—with exchanges of popular music-hall artists as well as circus and carnival acts. Fads like roller skating and cycling swept both countries almost simultaneously. The birth of the modern electrified amusement park in the late 1890s was scarcely different on either side of the ocean and the movie industry, when it blossomed after 1896, was closely integrated. If America came to dominate the English-speaking leisure industry by World War I, this dominance only paralleled her economic ascendancy in other fields. This "cultural imperialism" was the result of economic dynamics driven by the sheer size of the American market and corporation and the unfettered business civilization that prevailed in the United States. Increasing cultural uniformity and ever-quickening adaptation to technological and market change was the inevitable result of this process. Leisure was torn from its traditional roots in community and history.

The lives of two pioneers of mass-market leisure, the American P. T. Barnum and the Englishman Thomas Cook, may help to illustrate these points. P.T. Barnum was a impresario of amusement in the growing city of New York in the mid-19th century. In his "Museum," he appealed both to the tradition of the rural fair in his display of curiosities and to the quest for respectability in lectures on new scientific invention and wax works of Biblical characters. He tapped the American longing both for culture and for voyeurism in his anatomically-correct statue of Venus. He was an extraordinary promoter. In 1850, Barnum organized a nine-month tour of the "Swedish Nightingale," Jenny Lynd. Through advance publicity and promotional products (Lynd cigars and coats, e.g.), he created a veritable "Lyndomania" that would have made the ad managers behind George Lucas' "Star Wars" films proud. Thomas Cook was a young wood turner and secretary of the South Midland Temperance Association when he decided to organize a railroad excursion from Leicester to a temperance demonstration in Loughborough in the summer of 1841. Unlike the standard third-class ticket, he offered a bargain at one shilling per round trip. Soon he arranged these trips commercially. Cook rented a special train, assumed all the risk, and sold tickets at substantial reductions, making a profit on the volume and low overhead. Gradually his business turned to international tourism.5

These leisure impresarios may have encouraged the homogenization of leisure, but age, class, and cultural differences prevailed to assure a diversity of leisure markets. Middle-class reformers persisted in opposing profitable entertainment industries—even if the source of their own wealth was in commercial profit. Higher-class pleasure seekers balked at the invasion of the excursionist or rowdy crowd on a limited budget. And the resort towns, hotels, concert halls, and other businesses dependent upon their trade did their utmost to assure their exclusivity. Most importantly different groups responded to the allure of commercial pleasure in different ways. Perhaps most enthusiastic were youth who found in mass entertainment an escape from parental control and tradition and who were drawn to a setting often deliberately designed for romance and youthful sociability.
Mass leisure in the 19th century was snatched in those moments free from work and bought with the odd nickels and pence left from the weekly pay packet. Although literacy was an imperfect skill for many before the 1870s when universal elementary education expanded considerably, the demand for accessible pleasure reading was great throughout the century. The cheap popular press was facilitated by technology (steam press and mechanized bookbinding in the 1840s) and by public policy (e.g., the abolition of taxes on newspapers in England in 1855 and 1861).

In England, popular weekly newspapers by midcentury offered an odd mix of democratic politics and sensational crime news. Especially popular from midcentury were the Sunday papers or weeklies (especially Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper and the News of the World) read by workers on Saturday afternoon after dinner or at the barber’s on Sundays. Chamber’s Journal (1832) and George Newnes’s Tit-Bits (1881) offered a compendium of facts to artisans eager to supplement their sporadic education. As Alfred Harmsworth, publisher of Answers (1888) put it, “We are a sort of Universal Information provider. Anyone who reads our paper for a year will be able to converse on many subjects on which he was entirely ignorant. He will have a good stock of anecdotes and jokes and will indeed be a pleasant companion.”

The taste for fiction was nearly inexhaustible in England as women and men consumed huge quantities of “chapbooks.” These were:

Paper-covered booklets...embellished with a crude and highly coloured woodcut as a frontispiece. The contents were either lurid, violent, and morbid, or sentimental and spicily. The ‘last dying words and confessions’ of culprits hung at York, lives of infamous highwaymen and murders, and garbled versions of traditional stories of the Seven Champions of Christendom or Friar Bacon and Dr. Faustus.”

Chapbooks represented the remnants of traditional peasant culture that survived until midcentury in urban England. By 1850 they were replaced by the “penny dreadfuls” of Edward Lloyd’s Weekly Miscellany of Romance and General Interest and George Reynolds’s Miscellany, which dealt in mysteries and scandals in court and high society. The western made a cult figure out of Kit Carson in America, and Europeans who never traveled to America wrote hundreds of westerns with formula stories of cowboys and Indians.

From the 1830s, William Milder offered cheap reprints of classics by Burns, Byron, and Milton. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin swept not only America but Britain in the 1850s. In 1848, George Routledge started the Railway Library in London offering, over the next 50 years, 1300 titles, mostly cheap reprints of Jane Austen and other contemporary novelists. The market for books, however, remained socially upscale. Even in the early 20th century, the poor in England seldom owned any books except perhaps Old Moore’s Almanack; and fathers sometimes prohibited book reading as a snare of bad habits and laziness.

What attracted the masses was, of course, the popular newspaper. Although many “respectable Englishmen” feared that the removal of the newspaper stamp in 1855 would open the gates to a flood of lurid dailies, most newspapers retained the dullness of The Times. Only with the appearance of the Evening News (1881) the Star (1888) and especially the Daily Mail (1896), was the English tabloid press born. In many ways, it was an imitation of the American “yellow press” with its chauvinism mixed with gossip, sports, and crime news.

Soon English publishers discovered the specialty youth and women’s market. The respectable Family Herald had a circulation of 125,000 by 1849 and offered romantic short stories. We have already encountered the rise of the women’s magazine. But pulp fiction for boys, (ancestors of the 20th-century comic book) spread from the 1860s. Edwin Brett led a troupe of popular authors that offered up stories of highwaymen, pirates, and crime to British youth. They were sold in penny weekly installments of eight pages of text illustrated with lurid drawings. Although magazines like The Boys of England were full of crude youthful heroes, the Religious Tract Society felt obliged in 1879 to counter them with The Boy’s Own Paper, which included hobbyist, sport, and nature features. Alfred Harmsworth, the newspaper publisher, branched out into half-penny boy’s weeklies featuring “daring deeds set against an imperial backcloth.” His weeklies, The Gem (1907) and The Magazine (1908), made heroes of public-school boys among slum dwellers. The girl’s literary market was somewhat late to develop, perhaps because, unlike their brothers, girls were burdened with housework and lacked pocket money.

The growth of American popular literature was, if anything, even more rapid. If in 1825 there were no more than 100 magazines in the United States, by 1850, there were about 600; the country witnessed the publication of about 5,000 during that generation. In addition to cheap miscellanies from the 1820s like the Casket: Flowers of Literature, Wit and Sentiment and knowledge magazines like The Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge (1831), a vast specialized press emerged in Godsey’s Lady’s Book and its many imitators. An adolescent and working-class press had much in common with its English counterparts. The production of cheap adventure and romantic “dime novels” was a veritable industry. By 1886, The New York Tribune’s sports page revolutionized newspapers. William Randolph Hearst did the same in his string of papers a decade later.

In both countries, the demand for indoor music and “variety” was also insatiable. The variety show had its roots in the informal and often disreputable singing saloons or “free and easy,” where drink mixed with singing and
rough male fellowship. Successful publicans or tavern keepers, like Charles Morton of London in 1851, expanded the entertainment part of the business. Still, the admission fee was not for the show but for a drink voucher. In the 1850s, the interior of Morton's Canterbury Hall (London) sat 1,500 and was well lighted with chandeliers. Thomas Wright, a “Journey Man Engineer” from London, noted that the music hall was a:

Popular place of Saturday night resort with working men, as at them they can combine the drinking of the Saturday night glass and the smoking of the Saturday night pipe, with the seeing and hearing of a variety of entertainments, ranging from magnificent ballets and marvelous scenic illusions to inferior tumbling, and from well-given operatic selections to the most idiotic of the so-called comic songs of the Jolly Dogs Class.14

By the 1860s, American entrepreneurs like the New Yorker, Tony Pastor, found that a more respectable audience, including women and family, could be enticed to his “Opera House” on the Bowery by a program of well-known (and publicized) singers, comedians, and animal and acrobatic acts. Sentimental songs about motherhood and rural nostalgia predominated, though the old raucous tradition survived in the double meanings in comedy and the American affection for sharpshooters. In American vaudeville, impresarios at first were willing to hire semi-amateurs who (depending on audience reception) could be signed for lengthy tours or “given the hook.” Popular demand for a variety of acts and the development of fast rail and steamboat lines allowed the spread of a number of entertainment circuits so Jenny Lynd would be widely seen in 19th-century America and Britain. Gradually, music halls replaced tables with stalls and eliminated drinking in the hall. Typical was the London Pavilion and other halls built in the new Piccadilly Circus in the 1870s. New regulations, like those imposed by the London County Council in 1889, forced music halls to eliminate offensive gags and songs. By the 1890s, theater owners like B. F. Keith removed the saloon from his New York establishment and successfully controlled his own booking agency complete with a hierarchy of stars. English syndicates bought or built chains of “Empires,” “Palaces,” and “Hippodromes,” “resplendent in red plush, girt adorned with the bottomy plaster cherubs and busty nymphs, which today epitomize the glories of the late Victorian and Edwardian Music Hall.”15 The historian, Peter Bailey, describes the process:

As the simple platform of the singing saloons was gradually superseded by the full theatrical apparatus of a stage and proscenium arch, the big halls were encouraged to introduce greater show and theatricality into their programmes—lavish tableaux of famous battle scenes, hundred-strong corps de ballet, troupes of Can-Can dancers from Paris and Blondin cooking omelettes on the high wire.

By the 1890s star singers made phonograph records and Dan Leno, the British comedian, even published a weekly Comic Journal.16 The public amusements offered to the young were as important. Penny or “gaff” theatres in London flourished between 1830 and 1880. They attracted apprentices, unskilled porters, and office boys, in the odd hour when they could get away from work, with melodramas concerning the latest murder or the execution of the infamous criminal. Because of British laws that controlled popular theater by outlawing dialogue, gaff theatre relied on pantomime, explanatory placards (anticipating silent films), singing, and dancing. Also popular were tight-rope walkers, magicians, and demonstrations of Galvanism (use of electric current to shock a volunteer from the audience).17 Later in the century, youth in Chicago attended five-cents theaters, which projected slides to tell popular stories of murder and revenge.18

A similar crowd was drawn to the dime museums in New York City with their sideshow-like exhibitions of freaks (the dwarf Tom Thumb, a Bearded Lady), panoramas or huge paintings depicting well-known dramatic events, and wax works depicting famous and infamous biblical and historical figures. Incidental to this appeal to the fantastic were moral messages that warned of the errors of intemperance or the price of crime. Barnum mixed the fake (such as the supposed black nurse of George Washington) with the real (a gallery of giants and dwarfs). His Museum in New York also included the traditional tight-rope walkers, pantomimes, and tumblers. An English equivalent in the 1840s was the Bianchi’s Waxworks of Liverpool and the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, which offered sights of two-headed cows and other freaks. Museums and plebian theatres might also offer “cut-throat dramas,” which stressed action, special effects (e.g., railroad collisions) and “women in unmentionables.”19

By the turn of the century, the dance hall was sweeping American and English towns. By 1910, there were at least 500 public dance halls in New York and many saloons offered floors for dancing. One hundred dance academies provided classes to about 100,000 students a year. They attracted especially the young and, to allure males, they offered women cut-price entry. What most impressed observers was the charged sexual atmosphere. “Tough dancing,” with origins in San Francisco brothels, was widely popular from 1905. Couples, dancing the “lovers’ two-step,” “turkey trot,” and “bunny hug,” “stand very close together, the girl with her hands around the man’s neck, the man with both his arms around the girl or on her hips; their cheeks are pressed close together; their bodies touch each other.”20 This behavior, of course, shocked the Victorian and at least suggests the sexual activism of the 1960s. The flashy dance hall dress of working-class females had striking parallels with the fashion of prostitutes. And the “treatting” system, made necessary by the lower wages paid young working women, gave males sexual leverage over females. Some became “charity girls” who traded sexual favors for “treats” of drinks, jewelry, and clothes. Still, these young women often were skilled at coaxing men with money into contributing to their costly pleasures without compromise.21
New technology in the 1880s and 1890s changed the form but not always the content of such catch-as-catch-can pleasures. Mechanical games and gramophones, offered in penny arcades, hotel lobbies, and amusement parks, were often little different from the pleasures of the museum or penny theater. The peep show or Kentiscope, introduced by Thomas Edison in 1894, offered the viewer a short show of acrobatics, mock executions, or a lady taking a bath. The emergence of the projected film in 1896 was first just another act in the music hall or vaudeville, not much different from the decades-old arts of pantomime, shadowgraph, puppetry, and magic lanternry. It featured the curiosity of movement, water splashing on a beach or an oncoming train. Some early films offered an improvement on the realism of the panorama, with moving pictures of royally other famous people or crude news programs with footage, for example, from the Boar War. The American nickelodeons (specialized movie house first appearing in Pittsburgh in 1905) and English penny cinema offered short programs of 5 to 10-minute films in the back of cigar stores or abandoned shops. Within two years, there were perhaps 10,000 of them in America alone. Often much cheaper than Vaudeville, they attracted the less affluent with action films like the famous *Great Train Robbery*. In America, many appeared in immigrant working class districts where the silent film could be appreciated by non-English-speaking men on their way to or from work. Others appeared along commercial streets or near public transportation, seeking to attract not only single men but also women on shopping trips.

There was no clearer case of the commercialization of leisure than the early development of the film. In its first decade, American producers and distributors were locked in bitter competition. Like the steel and automobile industries of the time, the movie industry sought economic relief in the merger of the largest companies (headed by Thomas Edison and the Biograph Company). They formed the Motion Picture Patent Association and shared rights to film technology in an attempt to create a vertical monopoly, controlling the industry from film stock to projection. A number of independent producers and distributors survived, however, to lead the industry into a new type of entertainment.

In its first decade, the cinema, like the penny gaff or dime museum, was associated with the poor and working classes. Yet again, exhibitors attempted to widen the market. As early as 1907, independent film producers and movie-house owners sought to transform the experience of film by making it more "respectable." They provided, for example, half-price tickets for women and built movie palaces that were plush auditoriums complete with orchestras and uniformed ushers to maintain order. The picture palace drove the nickelodeons and penny cinemas out of business by 1910.

Independents also offered status-conscious audiences "feature-length" films showing, for example, Sarah Bernhardt in the play *Queen Elizabeth* in 1913. Cinema was to be more like the legitimate theater and exhibitors often charged near theater prices for a seat. In 1912, New York businessman Adolph Zukor organized the Famous Players Film Company (later part of Paramount) to produce feature-length screen plays, like the *Count of Monte Cristo*. In order to attract audiences, independent filmmakers publicized the leading actors, creating the *star*—something Biograph had steadfastly refused to do. The Motion Picture Patents Company was finally declared illegal in 1918, but it had long slipped from prominence because of its unwillingness to adapt to the broadening demand for respectable films. A very similar process occurred in England. By 1914 there were 14 Picturedromes in Birmingham, England, with a capacity of almost 33,000.22 The film industry became a sort of melange of popular curiosity with roots in the carnival and burlesque and the high-mindedness of the Victorian theater (Chapter 12).

Despite the importance of commercialized public pleasures, the home remained an important focus of leisure and merchants knew it. From mid-century, piano and sheet music trickled down to the artisan class. By 1910, Britons owned two million pianos and supported 47,000 piano teachers. The cult of domesticity, which pervaded Victorian society on both sides of the Atlantic, was commercialized in the "restoration" of Christmas. A long list of industries were practically created by the mid-19th century celebration of Christmas, including greeting cards and Christmas trees (and decorations). The new custom of showering children with manufactured toys was a commercial boom. By the 1890s, the British had imported Santa Claus from the United States where, since the 1870s, the bearded man had been enthroned in department stores as an inducement to sales.23 The late Victorian suburb used its lawns to play croquet and its front and backyard gardens to cultivate the hobby of gardening.24 There emerged a vast market for domestic-centered leisure goods from the camera (advanced in 1888 with the marketing of the Kodak) and phonograph to the table settings for the increasingly more elegant dinner parties of the middle class.25 Even the respectable worker's Sunday featured an elaborate midday meal.26

The Commercial Festival and Tourism

Mass-market leisure offered daily and weekly doses of fun for a routinized world of industrial society; yet the traditional saturnalia of the seasonal fair and festival did not disappear. Rather, these carnivals were transformed by new business methods and technology. For example, ancient fairs like that of St. Giles near Oxford witnessed a tremendous growth in the 19th century. Vendors offered an increased variety of exotic foods and souvenirs, and entertainment and rail services brought throngs in from the countryside.27 The one-wagon menagerie of colonial America with its "Lyon of Barbary," polar bear, or elephant, and the English circus of Philip Astley with its equestrian acts, gradually gave way to the zoological exhibition and the three-ring circus.28 This process was the product of steam transportation and the merger. The small
family circuses of America, for example, which emerged in the early 19th century from small towns in New York and New England, gradually gave way to the extravagant boat circuses that plied their trade on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. In the 1850s, the Floating Palace, a sumptuously decorated barge pulled by steam boats, seated 1,800 and offered a standard circus ring. By the 1860s, the wagon menagerie began to be replaced by the railroad circus, which could make transcontinental tours. P.T. Barnum lent his name, made famous by his "Museum" in New York City, to a circus train in 1872. It toured 16 states with its 61 cars. Its official name reveals the scope of its offerings (or claims): "P.T. Barnum's Great Traveling World's Fair Consisting of Museum, Menagerie, Caravan, Hippodrome, Gallery of Statuary and Fine Arts, Polytechnic Institute, Zoological Garden, and 100,000 Curiosities, Combined with Dan Castello's, Sig. Sebastien's and Mr. D'Atie's Grand Triple Equestrian and Hippodromatic Exhibition." Barnum's show merged with its major competitor, Cooper and Bailey, in 1881.  

The circus, often suspect to respectable crowds, adopted the language of learning. For example, the English horseman John Ricketts, on a tour in New England in 1795, lent dignity and an aura of culture to his act of tumbling, tightrope walking, and clowning by referring to recent Egyptian expeditions and giving his acts imaginative and "edifying" names like the Egyptian Pyramids or Roman Monuments. The carnival or fun fair was likewise made respectable and expanded in the 19th century.  

Perhaps the most dramatic change in the fair occurred in the 1893 Columbia Exposition in Chicago. Its "Midway," a colorful amusement side-show, stole the crowds from the White City, a Neo-Renaissance complex of educational exhibits. Almost 21.5 million visited the Exposition and most favored the Midway, with its chaotic display of "mosques and pagodas, Venetian streets and Turkish bazaars, South Sea island huts, Irish and German castles, and Indian tepees." The exotica of the four corners of the world were offered to visitors arriving by streetcar. Advertising stressed the educational: foreigners on display "bring their manners, customs, dress, religions, legends, amusements, that we might know them the better." Yet what attracted the throngs was "Little Egypt" dancing the hootchy-kootchy. Dominating the Midway was the Ferris Wheel, a steam-powered disc some 264 feet high that took 20 minutes for one revolution and cost the hefty price of 50 cents a ticket for 2,160 passengers. The Ferris Wheel was quickly imitated in amusement parks from San Francisco to Vienna. The extravagance of pseudo-oriental and Venetian themes were widely copied in amusement centers like Coney Island, Blackpool, England, and San Francisco's "The Chutes." At the same period, electric-powered rides like the switchback (or rollercoaster) and loop the loop attracted the young thrill-seeker.  

The amusement park was often located in a seaside or lake setting accessible by train or streetcar from the city. Coney Island was a mere eight miles from Manhattan, and Blackpool was within a short train ride from a number of English mill towns. The amusement parks provided a magical setting free from the watchful eyes of parents and neighbors. It offered the opportunity for audience and entertainment to merge. Coney Island is a good example. As early as the 1820s, this island south of Brooklyn, New York, had been the location of both an exclusive resort area (Manhattan Beach) and, from the 1860s, a haven for gamblers and swindlers (Norton's Point, on the opposite end of the Island). By the 1890s dance halls and vaudeville, as well as sideshows and penny arcades, attracted a diverse crowd to Central Beach. George Tilyou, among others, attempted to create a more respectable but also popular image at the central beach of the Island. Tilyou's Steeplechase Park (1897), followed by Luna Park (1903), and Dreamworld (1904) offered self-contained amusement centers designed to reassure the respectable but also to offer excitement at five or ten cents a ride. The quest for greater legitimacy led the organizers of Dreamworld to feature "The Creation" and "The End of the Earth" to graphically remind visitors of their Bible lessons. Significantly, Dreamworld was the first park to fail. The picture postcard, just then legalized, became part of the ritual of the visit and a great form of publicity. Coney Island allowed people to subtly break moral codes. The "Barrel of Fun" threw young men and women together; air jets lifted women's skirts; and post cards offered slightly risque themes. Rides were often reminiscent of the new urban elevated trains or electric minecars; but rides like the "Flip-Flap" parodied them with its 25-foot vertical loop.  

As the historian John Kasson notes:

Coney Island located its festivity not in time as a special moment on the calendar but in space as a special place on the map. By creating its own version of carnival, Coney Island tested and transformed accustomed social roles and values. It attracted people because of the way in which it mocked the established social order. Coney Island in effect declared a moral holiday for all who entered its gates. Against the values of thrift, sobriety, industry, and ambition, it encouraged extravagance, gaiety, abandon, revelry. Coney Island signaled the rise of a new mass culture no longer deferential to genteel tastes and values, which demanded a democratic resort of its own. It served as a Feast of Fools of an urban-industrial society.

The episodic escape to the amusement park did not satisfy the crowd's taste for novelty. By the end of the century, guided tours of unfamiliar places attracted millions. Yet again, the rich set the pace and, as the masses joined them, conflicts inevitably emerged. In England, the resort and tourism began as aristocratic diversions. The seaside resorts of Brighton, Blackpool, Torquay, and Scarborough attracted the leisure class for lengthy fall and winter seasons. The rich were attracted as much to the assembly hall, where masters of ceremonies organized formal balls and arranged social introductions, as they were
drawn to the health-giving sea. Brighton’s early success was due to the patronage of the Prince of Wales, who first arrived in 1783 and graced it with subsequent royal visits, culminating in the building of the Royal Pavilion. In the 1820s, the promenade on the chain pier, the theater, and the Oriental baths were very fashionable even if the royal family gradually lost interest. As an American described the Brighton “season”:

The modes of getting rid of time, which seemed to be the great end and object of all, were various. Some lounged into reading-rooms; some sat down deliberately in shops, to make the most of the little business they were blessed with. In the afternoon all repaired, by common consent, to walk, ride, or drive along the ramparts by the seaside.

The early-19th century resort in America was not much different. As early as 1825, a booklet, “The Fashionable Tour,” identified the passion for travel among the new rich of the American East. Added to the colonial resort of Newport was the spa and racing center at Saratoga Springs, New York. Not only were urban merchants attracted to these resorts, but so were southern planters, at least until sectional conflicts by midcentury caused southern status seekers to find an alternative pecking order in southern resorts like White Sulphur Springs. Besides the snob appeal of just being there and the allure of the race track, Saratoga Springs provided a courting yard for debutantes and eligible bachelors. “The gentlemen whiled away long hours in smoke-filled bar-rooms over their gin slings, sangarees, sherry cobbler’s, and wine juleps. The ladies were relegated to the piazza, or possibly allowed an afternoon carriage drive.” Inland along the Mississippi River, the steam boat provided a similar lethargic leisure, spiced by the risk of playing with the thousands of professional gamblers at the card table.

Following the laying of rail track, such seaside resorts became accessible to the less affluent, eager for diversion from the cares of trade but unable or unwilling to devote weeks to leisure. The promised benefit of sea air “ozone” on the sooty lungs of the city-dweller, attracted thousands to the ocean coast.

The threat to upper-class exclusivity by the 1860s produced a variety of responses. Some English resorts like Southport and Eastbourne retained their elite status, owing to the control of the beach by two families who keep out panders to the masses. In resorts like Blackpool and Margate, land holding was fragmented and was thus open to a diverse market. They were abandoned by the classes for new watering holes in Scotland, Ireland and the Continent. Some resorts found that differing “seasons” suited various social strata. And in some resorts, developers assured that portions of the shore were reserved for elite clientele for whom they provided expensive hotels and furnished apartments.

Despite reformers’ interest in the wholesome recreation of the popular excursion, middle-class opinion was often more negative, as seen in the following description of day-trippers from London to Hastings in 1857:

[They] swarm upon the beach, wandering listlessly about with apparently no other aim than to get a mouthful of fresh air. You may see them in groups of three or four: the husband—a pale, over-wrought man, dressed in black frock-coat, figured waistcoat and bright blue tie—carried the baby; the wife, equally pale and thin, decked out in her best, labours after with a basket of ‘progs’ [food]. And then there is generally another child... wandering aimlessly behind. She must bear the burden until church-time is over; and the public houses will be open and a quart of porter in the pewter will be forthcoming and the family will dine al fresco on the beach.

Resort town governments attempted to regulate the access of rough trade or gypsy beach vendors and to build family-oriented entertainment centers. The scale of enterprise grew with the size of the entertainment. The pier played a major role in this process. Originally merely a facility for docking steamships full of excursionists, the pier gradually became the site of the family promenade and inevitably a market of food, drink, and entertainment. Ever sensitive to the pleasure-seeker’s quest for novelty, Blackpool made “progress” its motto and rapidly introduced the latest technological wonders. The Blackpool Tower was built in 1894, a publicity symbol and multipurpose entertainment center designed on the model of the Eiffel Tower. Blackpool introduced electric lighting for its famous Illuminations in the fall and was among the first towns in Britain to have a cinema.

Another development was mass tourism. Educational and pleasure traveling, of course, had been a part of aristocratic life since Elizabethan times. The tutored tour of Italy and France was de rigueur for the English gentleman. And, of course, the annual migration between city and countryside was part of the aristocratic cycle of “seasons.” Still, poor and crime-ridden roads impeded English tourism except along well-worn paths to Bath or Brighton, and these trips took two or three days each way by coach. By 1815, steamboats were available for rides on the Clyde and Thames river. Only in the 1840s did this ritual broaden with the railway excursion.

As we have seen with Thomas Cook, the popular English excursion began as the paternalism of the “improving” business class. Soon it became a commercial venture offering guided tours to busy middle-class and clerical workers who had neither the time nor knowledge to plan educational trips. From 1844, the British government encouraged railway companies to provide cheap third-class tickets, although only in the 1870s did the rails seriously exploit this mass market. Still, from the 1840s, companies provided excursion
rates for weekends and bank holidays. The London Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace attracted six million, many through excursion trains, and it continued for years to be a center for shows and exhibitions. By 1867, Cook was organizing tours to Paris (for an international exhibition) as well as to the Holy Land; and by the 1880s, Britons of means began to visit Switzerland in the winter (for skiing). Even the British factory worker was taking long weekend holidays aided by savings clubs from the 1870s.40

In America also, the railroad revolutionized tourism. The late-19th century resort was also an extension of the railroad. This was true of eastern seaside spots like Atlantic City (a product of a line from Philadelphia in 1852); even the western American National Park was an outgrowth of the railroad. From 1872, tourists entered Yellowstone Park by train and many stayed at the "Old Faithful," a private railroad hotel near the famous geyser. The train created an enforced community of fellow travelers, although railcars, separated by class and purpose, precluded unwanted social contact. Linked by ownership to the railroads were large hotels located near train stations. Featuring large formal lobbies (often decorated in pseudo-Renaissance or Oriental themes) and numerous personal services, these hotels were designed for the middle-aged and affluent traveler.41

Meanings and Significance of Mass Leisure

Since the early 19th-century, writers have found mass entertainment wanting. Instead of the simplicity of nature, commercial leisure was said to feature shallow showy amusement, mere opportunities to separate customers from their money. Commercial amusements allowed the masses to abandon self-control and the intellect and to surrender to fleeting passion.42 From Simon Patten to Herbert Marcuse, many critics have claimed that mass leisure only lessens the worker more firmly to the wheel of labor in order to earn the means of further satisfying his craving. Commercial pleasure was the best form of social control.43 The crowd created by the purveyors of spectator sports, others have argued, only defused social solidarity and created artificial interregional conflicts. The music hall often encouraged crude chauvinism with its jingoistic songs and perpetuated racism with its "nigger minstrels." Professionalization of sport (as we shall see in Chapter 10) led to the downfall of amateur traditions of the early Football Association and baseball. In sum, commercial leisure may be said to have destroyed traditional popular and rational recreation, which became victims of the profit motive and the quest for the lowest common denominator.

There are, however, alternative interpretations of commercialization. For example, we have found that, in many instances, mass leisure was a democratizing of aristocratic play traditions. Merchandisers like Thomas Cook made travel available to the middle-classes in forms fitting their lack of time and experience. Even the imitation exotica of the amusement park afforded the masses a substitute for the adventure of foreign travel. It is not accidental that many impersonators of fun were democrats and were opposed by snobbish elites.44 Mass-market leisure was far more than commercial manipulation. Despite the cynicism of pleasure entrepreneurs like P.T. Barnum, the "masses" had their own leisure agenda when they visited seaside resorts and amusement parks. Blackpool attracted not merely an awed crowd passively lured into a variety of purchased thrills and entertainments. The resort was used by Lancashire families for reunions and the meeting of friends and neighbors.45 Coney Island provided more than the cheap thrills of electric technology. It offered an opportunity for youthful expression, public affection, the Americanization of immigrant children, a carnival release from the conformity and restraint of the late Victorian society, and just plain fun. Even penny dreadfuls were a manifestation of working-class aspirations, even if expressed often in vicious and escapist contexts.

Commercial leisure was not always a sharp break from traditional popular or rational leisure. Barnum blended aspects of all three forms of leisure in his museums, musical shows, and circus. The simple desire to seek as wide an aspect as possible assured an appeal to the reform-minded respectable family. It also meant satisfaction of a lingering affection for traditional anarchism of popular leisure. Blackpool retained its donkey rides and gypsy fortune-tellers along with its pier, music halls, and orderly pleasure parks. Even the technological wonder of the Illuminations, with their electric tableaux of exotic images, was a modern adaptation of the colored lanterns of the gardens of 18th-century Vauxhall. Remember, too, the traditional content of the early movies, a more lifelike but no less conservative entertainment than appeared in the penny gaffs and dime museums. Often, leisure entrepreneurs simply borrowed common elements from traditional entertainment and rational recreation and packaged them in profitable businesses.46 These facts may explain the ultimate dominance of commercial play over the best hopes of the leaders of rational recreation. Entrepreneurs responded quickly to consumer wants even when these desires were sometimes torn from their community roots or their uplifting origins.

This complex relationship between commercial, reforming, and traditional leisure can be further explored in a brief analysis of the emergence of organized sport in the industrializing societies of England and America in the nineteenth century.