

the perils of pleasure

**commercial recreation,
social disorder
and moral reform
in the progressive era**

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To social justice reformers at the turn of the century it seemed that everything about American cities was wrong. There was too much poverty, too much congestion, too much disease, too much crime and immorality and family breakdown. The reformers set out from their bases in the settlement houses to identify the causes of these problems in the social environment, and in the process established the profession of social work to put things right in the cities. All things.

For many years the conventional wisdom of historians bathed these early social workers in a highly flattering light. They were, so the argument ran, benign and unselfish individuals whose work for the urban poor helped to humanize capitalism and point it toward the modern welfare state. That interpretation was seriously undermined in the 1960s, first by Roy Lubove, and then emphatically by Robert Wiebe, who suggested that social workers had become so taken with bureaucratic procedures by the end of the Progressive era that they began to lose touch with the moral impulse that had animated them in the first place.¹

More than a decade later Wiebe's synthesis of the era still dwarfs its competitors, but it is time now to reconsider some of its more slippery conclusions. For example, while the professionalization of reform was indeed accompanied by an increasingly "bureaucratic orientation," there is reason to doubt that this process was characterized by any loss of moral vision. Perhaps the appropriate question to ask here is not whether social reform was drained of moral substance, but what the

implications were of the moral energy that continued to direct it throughout the era. We can begin to answer this question by narrowing our attention down to the role assumed by the reformers as moral tutors of the poor. A case in point is the concern they felt for the moral and social (they would not have made that distinction) consequences of commercial recreation, and the efforts they made to set that, too, straight.

The reformers viewed the commercialization of recreation as a major factor in the collapse of family life in the new industrial cities. There had been a time, they believed, when life had been of one piece, with recreation a vital force in shaping strong family relationships and closely-integrated communities. George Bellamy, a Cleveland settlement worker, spoke in those terms when he said that “the children of the last generation were close to nature—hunting, fishing, swimming, nutting, learning nature and her ways.” Their recreation, he continued, was exciting and fruitful because it engaged them in productive physical, mental and moral activities. Meals, prayers, home industries and story telling around the hearth were daily communal affairs. The family in that society was strong and unified, with “common interests and common understandings, because of common associations.”²

That sense of unity was lost in the whirl of the modern city, where tenements blended families into masses, with neither occupation, nor recreation, nor even common meeting grounds to define and integrate them as coherent social units. Girls found it impossible to entertain friends in privacy; boys found it impossible to release their energy in tenement cubicles; men found it impossible to relax from factory labor in the midst of family clatter. And so they all fled out onto the streets, leaving behind harried mothers with bawling babies as they escaped into their separate worlds.³ Alienated finally from one another, they no longer existed as families in the eyes of the reformers, but only as relatives.

The real trouble began out in the neighborhoods, where the recreational activities available to the poor were systematically corrupted by commercial considerations. George Bellamy’s account of the corner candy store as a form of commercial recreation for youngsters illustrated the problem at hand. He warned that boys who lounged around such places, gorging themselves on the sweets sold by unconcerned proprietors were heading for muscular atrophy and chronic indigestion as young men. Moreover, their introduction to suggestive talk, petty gambling and smoking in these places could only degrade them morally. Thus schooled in aimless loafing and thriftlessness, the graduates of candy stores stood ready to matriculate in the pool rooms at the age of eighteen, and the saloons at twenty-one.⁴ Other reformers were worried that street play and cheap theaters would inflame young boys to break “free from all restraint.” Images of gambling, of

“wanderlust,” and of generally stunted moral growth filled these cautionary writings, and reminded the social workers how rapidly the values of village America were deteriorating in the industrial cities.

The nocturnal outings of adolescent girls and young women drew the attention of reformers to an even more insidious menace—the modern dance hall—and they were scandalized by what they saw. Louise Bowen, a Chicagoan who specialized in juvenile problems, was one of many who pondered this problem, and her comments were typical. After long hours at monotonous jobs every day, she said, young girls desperately needed some sort of recreational release, but when they went out in search of it they could find no wholesome alternative to the “lurid and dangerous pleasures” of the new dance palaces. Committed to the passion for statistical research into social questions that characterized the reformers, Mrs. Bowen’s Juvenile Protective Association sent two married couples out for an entire winter to investigate the situation in dance halls all over Chicago. Amid the jumble of statistics on everything from the quality of lighting in the hallways to the quantity of spittle on the floors, what stood out most clearly in the final report was that owners and managers condoned and often encouraged sexual promiscuity in their establishments. Most of the halls served liquor, and the owners made no effort to prevent boys from deliberately getting adolescent girls drunk. Small wonder that in over half the places observed “immoral dancing and open embracing were indulged in.” Even those dance halls that did not serve alcohol were usually adjacent to saloons, and many were conveniently close to disreputable lodging houses where young couples could play out the final tragic act.⁵

The new ragtime music, and the dances tailored to it, contributed to the sleazy atmosphere of the dance hall and to the problems of the girls who frequented them. Before a session on “Housing and Recreation” at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, Belle Israels spoke despairingly about girls who fell victim night after night to the new “dancing mania” in places where liquor, throbbing music and lewd dancing conspired to break through even their stoutest defenses.⁶ The next speaker addressed the problem of sexuality in young women directly. While women were as capable of reason and objectivity as men, she said, there was still a sense in which they were the more emotional sex, because “by their very physiological structure they have a more massive sex organization which finds direct expression through feeling and sentiment.” Until recently, she said, girls had been completely sheltered, and had had no outlet for these seething feelings, “except in harmless forms of poetry or music or the explosive form of hysteria.” Nowadays, however, with increasing freedom from parental control, more and more girls were exposing those feelings, without sufficient maturity, in the shoddy surroundings of commercial dance halls. “The intensity of emotion in girls is justified by its great

biological purposes” of reproducing the race, she conceded. The challenge was to contain it for the appropriate time and circumstances.⁷

Modern social dancing was the most frequently-cited example of misguided recreational endeavors among the young, but there were others scarcely less demeaning. The new amusement parks, such as Chicago’s Riverview, were offensive because they tolerated open gambling, drinking, embracing and other forms of objectionable public behavior which often led to sexual adventures in the nearby prairies. The proliferation of cabarets was also a matter of growing concern. As the reformers described it, the new cabaret was simply the old saloon with entertainment added. The performers were usually country girls who had come to the city to seek their fortunes, who sang with more ambition than talent, who often found themselves forced to double as “hostesses,” and who found it only a short plunge from there into prostitution.⁸

Most disturbing of all was the cheap theater, a new form of indoor diversion that was spreading rapidly throughout the working-class and entertainment districts of the cities. Unlike most other forms of commercial recreation, the cheap theater made no distinctions of age or sex, but threatened the morals of everyone equally. Early in the era discussions of this phenomenon commonly dealt with such varieties of showmanship as vaudeville, melodrama and burlesque. Thus when Sherman Kingsley looked into the matter in 1907, he reserved his heaviest ammunition for the low melodramas of the ten-cent theater, where young boys were allowed to watch sensational plays about robberies and hold-ups, and for the slightly more expensive houses where anyone with the price of admission could witness lewd scenes that reached “the limit of indecency.”⁹ Another critic attributed the rise of the cheap theater to “the whole dreary standard of American industrial and middle class life,” which was the legacy of Puritan and pioneer. The trouble with cheap theater as an alternative, she said, was that it offered emotion without idealism. It was dominated by sex and crime, and made no attempt at all “to transmute feeling into social values.”¹⁰ All of the attacks on live theater echoed this judgment.

Before long this interest in cheap theater began to turn to motion pictures, and with good reason. By 1909, when reformers first began to sound the alarm, four million Americans were going to the movies every day. Three years later daily attendance reached seven million, although films had scarcely yet ventured beyond the unsophisticated two-reel comedy or melodrama. Here obviously was a force for good or evil that reformers would have to reckon with.¹¹

In 1909 the *Survey* consecrated movies as a reform issue by publishing its first serious essay on the subject. The author, Lewis Palmer, was impressed by the universal appeal of this “world in mo-

anti-social behavior

Does television **cause** children to commit crimes? The debate over that question is as old as television itself. In fact, more broadly stated the question is much older. Early in the century Sherman Kingsley, who later became president of the National Conference of Social Work, expressed no doubts about the relationship between mass entertainment and anti-social behavior:

The rapid increase of five cent theaters and penny arcades in Chicago and other cities large and small, is a matter of common observation. Evil consequences have demanded the attention of juvenile and municipal courts, probation officers and social service workers along all lines. Aroused by hold-up scenes, shoplifting episodes, or fascinated by stage life and the influence of unscrupulous actors and actresses, children get into trouble. Even more frequently the desire to witness these shows leads boys and girls to steal.

"The Penny Arcade and the Cheap Theater," **Charity and The Commons** (June 8, 1907).

tion," but he was particularly intrigued by the special appeal it had in America for the poor. He noted that

certain houses have become genuine social centers where neighborhood groups may be found any evening of the week; where the 'regulars' stroll up and down the aisles between acts and visit friends, and where the farsighted proprietor has learned the names of the children and remembers them with a friendly pat on the head.

This suggested to Palmer that the movies had a mission, as a true "people's theater," to reunite the family and reintegrate the neighborhood.¹² Many of the reformers repeated this theme in the years that followed. Orrin Cocks even paid homage to the film on those terms as a "great silent social worker" in fostering neighborhood spirit.¹³ From a pre-war reformer that was the ultimate accolade.

Unfortunately that silent social worker had a tendency from time to time to project material which the reformers found morally objectionable, and in that assessment they had company from watchdog organizations all over the country. Resentment had begun to press on the nerve centers of government early in the century, resulting in a wave of censorship laws that empowered local authorities to review and suppress films prior to any public exhibition. By 1915 cities from Atlanta to Seattle, as well as the states of Ohio and Pennsylvania, had passed such laws, and the Supreme Court had recently upheld them as a legitimate exercise of the police power to protect the morals of the public.¹⁴

Though not from any lack of concern with the morals of the public, the reformers had little use for these laws, and looked instead for a way to refine the movies without resorting to formal censorship. They found it in the National Board of Censorship, which was established in 1909 by the People's Institute of New York to act for an informal and unlikely coalition of movie exhibitors, producers and reform-minded civic and religious bodies. The film exhibitors wished to placate local authorities in New York who, in a fit of righteousness, had recently tried to close down all the nickelodeons in the city. The producers were interested in protecting themselves from the whims of public censors, who stood as a constant threat to confiscate their costly products. The civic and religious organizations wanted to influence the substance of films without opening up the Pandora's box of constitutional and ethical issues that lurked in public censorship. On the common grounds of expediency these groups joined forces to support the Board.

public morals

Generally the National Board of Censorship confined itself to matters of what it called "public morals." The furor over D. W. Griffith's film, "The Birth of a Nation," however, forced it to confront a different question: Should the Board take a stand on controversial social issues? At first the Board recommended only that a few scenes of sex and violence be toned down. Griffith made the suggested cuts, but instead of approving the film at that point the Board split bitterly over its social content, with several members determined to condemn it outright because of its sectional bias and blatant racism. Finally, by a vote of 15 to 8 the general committee allowed the film to pass (without the standard form of approval), insisting that the Board had no business making judgments on social or political issues.

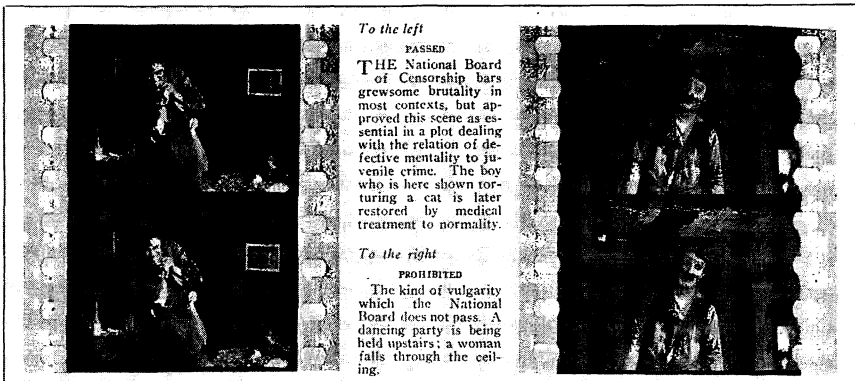
"Films and Births and Censorship," **Survey** (April 3, 1915).

The National Board of Censorship consisted of representatives from several reform organizations, and was served by dozens of volunteers who screened thousands of films annually, passing most of them without change, recommending deletions from some, and condemning a few outright. But it had absolutely no legal standing, nor power of any sort to prevent movies from being shown. Instead it mailed out a weekly bulletin of its recommendations to hundreds of individuals and agencies in the nation, and relied upon the fact that it was the only clearing house that acted on a national basis to pass moral judgments on films. Because local authorities were likely to act upon the information in these bulletins by using their licensing power to close a theater *after* it showed a condemned film, the movie producers usually made an effort to comply with the Board's standards and decisions.¹⁵ The object was to force the industry to censor itself, a "subtly

compulsory” technique, noted John Collier, that was more effective than legislated pre-censorship. (Collier’s emphasis.)

Nevertheless there was a persistent tension between film producers and the Board over what was suitable for public viewing. On the one hand, the Board was eager to press forward the frontiers of morality, and sought to suppress sensational material; on the other, the producers were eager to press forward the frontiers of profit, and sought to exploit it. Then, as now, sensationalism was defined by sex and violence, and that is where the Board chose to draw the line.

Summarizing the Board’s policies in 1914, Orrin Cocks reported that it opposed “close dancing,” suggestive clothing and (quoting from a Board statement) “ ‘prolonged love scenes which are ardent beyond the strict requirements of the dramatic situation.’ ” It was permissible to portray prostitution as a loathesome institution, but not as a mode of sexual gratification or a path to easy money. Where it was integral to the story line, violence was acceptable, but the less detail, the better. Similarly, crime was a legitimate subject if it was followed by punishment, and if it avoided “gruesome and suggestive details.”¹⁶



ILLUSTRATIONS and captions from John Collier’s “Censorship; and the National Board,” *The Survey*, October 2, 1915, p. 12.

In practice it was not easy to apply these standards, because the Board was made up of people with different levels of tolerance for sex and violence, as well as different religious, social and esthetic commitments. The result was a series of erratic compromises that never reached the level of predictability desired by the producers. Many of the reformers, however, were quite content with this situation. John Collier, a co-founder of the Board, argued that inconsistency was actually a blessing, since the unbending application of rules in these cases almost always led to over-censorship. In fact, he continued, the flexibility of the Board was its most attractive feature. Since it could only inform and advise, it provided the widest possible scope for the application of local standards. A French love triangle that might seem perfectly innocent in New York might be totally unacceptable in a North Carolina village. Thanks to the Board’s bulletins, he said, the

film could be seen in New York and banned in North Carolina without flouting local norms in either case. Thus while the Board's list of standards ran on for twenty-three pages, it was intended more as a statement of loose policy guidelines than a set of commandments. According to Collier, that was why the Board was almost always less restrictive than state and local censorship authorities.¹⁷

crime and punishment

According to John Collier it was not possible under existing laws to restrict movie audiences in any way. A major problem for the National Board of Censorship, then, was to set guidelines for viewers who ranged from toddlers to dodderers. The standards cited by Collier clearly foreshadowed the movie industry's own Production Code in the era of sound. Some examples:

Section 39. 'As a general rule it is preferable to have retribution come through the hands of authorized officers of the law, rather than through revenge or other unlawful or extra-legal means.'

Section 41. 'An adequate motive for committing a crime is always necessary to warrant picturing it. . . . It is desirable that the criminal be punished in some way, but the board does not always insist on this. . . . The results of the crime should be in the long run disastrous to the criminal so that the impression is that crime will inevitably find one out. The result (punishment) should always take a reasonable proportion of the film.'

Unlike the later, more rigid Production Code, the wording here obviously left plenty of room for negotiation between producers and the Board, and for the discretionary application of local norms throughout the nation.

"Censorship; and the National Board," **Survey** (October 2, 1915).

The reformers were appalled that so vital a public function as recreation should have been left to private interests. From classical antiquity through the Middle Ages, Jane Addams noted, societies had provided recreation for their citizens, yet "we seem to have decided that no provision for public recreation is necessary" in our modern industrial cities.¹⁸ A growing body of specialists in recreational activities stood ready to correct that deficiency at all age levels.

For the youngest there were the play reformers, who were guided by the simple axiom that the child is father to the man, and therefore that any serious attempt to reform American society for the long haul must begin just out of the cradle. The leading figure in this movement was Joseph Lee, a proper Bostonian with wide-ranging reform interests and a gift for extravagant historical generalizations.

Lee discerned three stages in the socialization of boys. In the first, from ages two to six, they learned to relate to one another as individu-

als and as a group through such games as “ring around a rosy.” At the same time they learned about family relationships by imitating the activities of their parents. In this way they absorbed “the two great sources of the civic sense, the two forerunners of the State—the family and the group of equals, the paternal and the democratic social organization. . . .” The second stage, from about six to eleven, was the “big injun period.” Lee characterized this as an age of self assertion, when the boy learned to become a “single, confident, aggressive, and wholly self-satisfied and self-sufficient atom in the animal world.” The competitive impulse to win emerged strongly during these years, but was tempered by a survival of the cooperative spirit from the earlier period. The child was now beginning to perceive his personal interests in relation to a larger social unit. In the third stage, beginning around age eleven, the boy began to join with others in team sports, where he discovered that his individual abilities contributed to a sense of common purpose, and that he must adapt continuously with his teammates to the flow of the game. For Lee this represented a maturing of the “team instinct,” and was proof that man was indeed a political animal. Therefore proper training in games was essential to prepare the child for participation in government as an adult.¹⁹

Luther Gulick, at the time president of the Playground Association of America, shared Lee’s views. In learning about mutual rights and relationships on the playground, he said, children soon discovered that “the social unit is larger than the individual unit . . . and that the most perfect self-realization is won by the most perfect sinking of one’s self in the welfare of the larger unit—the team.” The need to impose controls on the playground did not inhibit democratic tendencies because it was “control by opinion, rather than control by either force or fear.” If the child did not like it, he was always free to leave. If he decided to stay and play according to the rules, he was exercising self-control, which, in its deeper meaning, was really an expression of freedom. Gulick called this “self-control of (the) higher type.”²⁰ Like John Collier’s wish for self-censorship by movie producers, Gulick’s conception of self-discipline was meant to be a “subtly compulsory” method of exercising social control without force.

Lee and Gulick reflected some of the major impulses of the Progressive years in their thinking about the meaning of play. Both of them were trying to reconcile the competitive individualism of the nineteenth century with the emerging collectivist tendencies of the twentieth. Both were wrestling with the primal American problem of balancing freedom with social control. Even the era’s growing emphasis on specialization had its analog in team sports, where, according to Lee, the team was defined by “differentiation of function, each boy being assigned to his own particular job and trained for it.” For both of these men play was a serious matter designed to train children for a

style of democracy that was appropriate to the needs of modern urban life.

Just as the problem with children was to give proper direction to the “play instinct,” so the problem with adolescents and young adults was to give proper direction to the “rhythmic instinct.” Joseph Lee again supplied the framework for discussing the situation.

Like most of the reformers, Lee was both fascinated and disturbed by the craze for the new social dancing that was sweeping across the country. As an expression of the rhythmic instinct it pleased him, but modern social dancing had an explicit sexuality about it that troubled him and colored his thinking about the problem. As usual, he devised an elaborate historical metaphor to make his point. He recounted the tale of Bacchus, “the god of the great primal forces that well up in us,” who avenged his imprisonment in Thebes by driving his captors mad when they released him. Lee perceived this as the mythic statement of a cyclical pattern of history in which human behavior swung back and forth between self-denial and sensualism, between puritanism and license. Just now, he said, after long years of confinement by the forces of puritanism, Bacchus was once again breaking free in his “cruder form” and threatening to avenge himself by driving Americans as mad as the Thebans.²¹

This Bacchus was a troublesome god for the Progressive social reformers. They suspected that it was unwise to suppress him completely, yet imprudent to release him outright. For Lee the solution was to strike a balance between puritanism and license—Bacchus in moderation, as it were. His aim was to encourage rhythmic creativity without triggering an erotic response. The newer forms of social dancing did just the opposite, he felt, with their elemental, pulsing rhythms that narrowed one’s consciousness down “to a pinpoint of attention, while the emotion generated keeps piling up until it reaches the bursting point or overflows.” Yet within even the simplest rhythms, he said, there lay the potential for infinite expression, like the complex variations on a single theme. Both moral safety and human enrichment depended upon developing this rhythmic potential in its most intricate forms, and not in succumbing to it in its simplest.

Lee felt that something like a sprightly Irish dance would serve his purpose admirably. Addressing herself to the same problem, Jane Addams described a recent festival in Chicago where various immigrant groups had delighted “the more stolid Americans” with their national dances in traditional costumes. These forms of folk dancing, she said, “are indeed those which lie at the basis of all good breeding, forms which at once express and restrain, urge forward and set limits.” She had found in the coquetry of these dances Lee’s happy medium between puritanism and license, and suggested that it had a positive contribution to make in the struggle against the “coarse and illicit merrymakings” of commercial recreation.²²

Lee was convinced that the rhythmic instinct could be cultivated to serve civic purposes as well. He pointed out that dance and song had been instrumental in the growth of social consciousness through the ages, and saw no reason why rhythm should not still perform that service. What he had in mind specifically was crew rowing, which he described as the perfect blend of rhythm and sport in team play, and therefore an ideal activity for training in democracy. It was no accident, he said with his customary historical sweep, that the Greeks, the Saxons, the Danes and the Norsemen — “the great rowing nations . . . with their training in rhythmic cooperation, have been the great democratic nations of the world.”²³

The reformers had even more grandiose dreams for the movies. Sniffing at the crudeness of a Charlie Chaplin, they aimed to have the entire industry overhaul itself to produce “worthwhile” films that educated as they entertained. Many of the reformers discussed this point, but John Collier developed it best in a remarkable series that he wrote for the *Survey* in 1915-1916. Although several of these essays centered on live theater, he made it clear that he perceived motion pictures to be only “the newest mechanics of drama,” a marriage of pantomime and technology that would eventually perform the same functions as theater.²⁴

Collier’s esthetic required that true theater be “a means for advancing social action and social consciousness” at the same time that it put people of limited experience in touch with “the wellsprings of life.” In other words, theater should be both a broadly humanizing and a more narrowly socializing agency. In a few strikingly compressed pages he sketched the development of drama through the ages in order to demonstrate that theater had always flourished on those terms in coherent cultures. The impact of industrialism, however, had torn countless millions of people loose from their moorings and deposited them in the turbulent new nineteenth-century cities, which did not even permit “the spontaneous formation of new nuclei of social life.” Heretofore, industrial society had had no coherence and therefore, not surprisingly, no decent theater either. But that was finally beginning to change. Collier detected the emergence of a new theater in the Western world as “a trumpet of social unrest, an instrument of change” to wield against the bastions of privilege. Unfortunately that impulse had been stymied so far in the United States by the enormous cost of producing a single play or movie. In the face of this hard commercial reality, theatrical and movie producers had chosen to play it safe by cranking out mass products for a mass audience.

For Collier the relationship between the theater and its audience was crucial. Broadway producers, he said, catered to an amorphous crowd of tourists and tired businessmen with a gruel of musical comedy, inane farce and trifling melodrama. What went on before the

footlights was not theater, and what sat down behind them was not an audience. Genuine theater, he insisted, could only thrive in harmony with “a coherent, continuous public,” and had to engage the services of a certain number of non-professionals from its public to cement this organic bond. As an example, he cited the folk theater of Ireland, a mixture of amateurs and professionals that had produced, in Synge, a genius who wove the humble folk materials of his native Aran into plays that spoke simultaneously to the local community and the whole world beyond it—the narrowly social and the broadly humanistic.

The United States had not produced its Synge yet, but Collier saw promising signs of true indigenous theater springing up in everything from ethnic productions on Manhattan’s East Side to repertory companies on the Great Plains. A man of considerable culture and erudition, he nevertheless explicitly rejected the idea that theater had to be cultured or erudite in order to be good. He was enthusiastic, for instance, about a five-hour pageant produced recently by the Polish Alliance in New York for Polish victims of the Great War:

Its author might as well be nameless. It was made in New York’s East Side. It is costumed by the hands of Polish women, produced by a barber who works by daytime in the Hudson Terminal building. Its theme is the flight out of Egypt . . . the dream of group autonomy, of nationalism.

Here were all the elements of vibrant theater for Collier. It established an intimate relationship with its audience; it enlisted talented amateurs in the project; and it addressed an immediate social issue in timeless terms.

Movies presented him with a somewhat different problem. Made for a mass audience to turn a large profit in a short period, they had a life expectancy of no more than six months, during which time they passed from theater to theater, and then on to oblivion. That annoyed Collier. Books were not printed to circulate and disappear in six months, he pointed out, nor phonograph records to fall silent after one hearing. Why should movies not be made for the ages as well? His answer was to propose a network of film rental libraries to be set up in cities and towns all over the nation. The existence of these repositories would permit producers to make movies for specific audiences instead of for a faceless mass, and even to make their customary profit, though in smaller amounts over a longer span of time. Eventually, he predicted, these libraries would build up special collections for discrete audiences in schools, clubs, churches and community centers, would elevate public taste, and would obviate the need for any controls at all over movie content. In this way movies would join with theater to create and animate different audiences, and to serve society and humanity through art.²⁵

The trouble was that candy-store owners were not peddling creative play, and dance-hall proprietors were not sponsoring folk festivals, and movie exhibitors were not promoting art. How then did the reformers expect to carry out their projects in constructive recreation? Fortunately they had a plan for that too. They believed that recreation was a public responsibility, and therefore that it ought to be carried on in public or quasi-public facilities. Some of them looked to local churches, others to settlement houses, but most of them found the ideal setting in the neighborhood school, transformed at night into a center of community activities for the entire public.

The full significance to the reformers of the community center, and of constructive recreation in general, stands out more sharply alongside their attitudes toward the saloon. Unlike the leaders of the Anti-Saloon League, who tended to articulate the anxieties of village America, most of the social reformers were in frequent contact with the urban poor, and perceived implications in the problem that eluded the dry crusaders altogether. That is not to say that they wasted any sympathy on the saloon, for if they were less single-minded than the temperance forces on the use of alcohol, they were in complete accord with them on the need to abolish the saloon as a place to drink it. But their proximity to the poor led them to ask a question that rarely occurred to the prohibitionists. If the saloon was so evil, then why did the poor patronize it at all? The charity workers of an earlier day might have waved the question off with a reference to personal depravity, but that answer was plainly not congenial to the environmental assumptions of the new social workers. Instead they argued that the saloon served a very real social function in the absence of attractive alternatives for recreation and conviviality.

That point was sympathetically made by Frank Laubach. If men wanted only to quench their thirst or get drunk, he said, they could do it easily enough by drinking their fill at home. The reason they went to the saloon instead was because they were drawn there "by one of the finest cravings of the soul, the craving for human fellowship." The saloon welcomed them with cheerful informality at almost any hour. It had pool tables and card games, and for the price of a beer it offered a free lunch that would cost up to a quarter in many restaurants. "In a word," he said, "the saloon is the poor man's club. To him it seems the purest form of democracy in America" No one had to preach piously to him about the evils of alcohol, because he saw its effects all about him. What he needed was a substitute for the saloon that would satisfy his perfectly normal need for discourse and relaxation. When such an institution appeared, "the backbone of the saloon's power (would) be broken, and not until then."²⁶ For Laubach that institution was the church-sponsored club house. For a rapidly growing number of reformers it was the community center.

The recent innovation of designing schools with gymnasiums, play-

grounds and auditoriums made it possible for the reformers to visualize the community center as a kind of department store of constructive recreation. Games and sports for the children, wholesome music and social dancing for adolescents, lectures and discussions for adults, movies for the entire family, theater for the entire neighborhood—the community center had something for everyone as an alternative to commercial recreation.²⁷ With proper supervision it had the potential to bring out all of the latent cultural resources in the immigrant slums.

But what was proper supervision? For a few of the reformers it was enough simply to let the poor supervise themselves. In that spirit, Frederic Howe thought of the community center as a “people’s clubhouse,” and suggested that “autonomous neighborhood administration . . . be developed, through which the people will work out their own recreational and cultural desires.”²⁸ In fact, the urban poor had already been organizing their own recreational activities for some years in coffee houses, lodges, dances and literary clubs, as the reformers must have known.²⁹ Perhaps Howe intended only to centralize these activities in the community center. For most of the social workers, however, such doings had an air of café camaraderie about them that smacked more of “lazy lounging” than constructive recreation. In any case, the reformers were less interested in neighborhood control than in control of the neighborhoods. They were willing to give local residents a voice in limited committee decisions, or to have them schedule the next dance or basketball game, but control over broad policy questions was another matter. George Bellamy spoke out for “self-improvement” of the poor in community centers, but only “under proper leadership.” To accomplish that he advised the city to “hire a wide-awake man to organize the recreational affairs of the community.”³⁰ Mary McDowell saw great possibilities for community development through recreation and culture in Chicago’s field houses, but insisted that they be run by trained social workers.³¹ On those terms most of the reformers were willing to endorse Lee Hanmer’s definition of the community center as “an organizing center for the life of the neighborhood.”³²

In 1914, Frederic Howe, reflecting upon the trend toward reduced hours for the labor force, observed that “leisure for the millions is a new factor in the world. It is one of the most significant facts of present-day democracy.”³³ It was also one of the great ironies of the Progressive era. For years the reformers had worked to relieve the poor from working long hours under cruel conditions. Now, when relief was in sight at last, they discovered that leisure itself was becoming a social problem.

The new social workers were especially upset by the way that eco-

conomic privatism was working to draw leisure activities toward the mass consumption of sex. In the pre-industrial past, hedonistic excesses had generally been segregated in space (the brothel outside town) or time (the seasonal binge) from family life, or at least locked inside the house, away from public scrutiny. Now, in fact and fantasy — in dance hall and movie hall — such outrages were becoming an integral and open part of daily urban life.³⁴ For the reformers this changing moral climate was as much an expression of the blight that had fallen on cities as congested housing and sweat-shop labor.

It was their anxiety over these changes that set them out to reform recreation in the Progressive era. Centered around a nucleus of settlement workers, the movement attracted men and women from the whole range of urban reform efforts at the time — Social Gospelers and playground specialists, single taxers and child welfare specialists, city planners and the irrepressible gadflies who moved easily from cause to cause throughout the era. Together they aimed not only to provide respectable outlets for leisure, but more broadly to help build cities along what they called “more rational lines.” Characteristically they researched the problem of commercial recreation to a fare-thee-well, and then proposed to plan and control the use of leisure in what *they* felt would be constructive ways. Some of them calculated precisely how many square feet of play space per child were necessary to prepare children for useful citizenship, which they defined as democratic action that subordinated individual desires to collective needs. Others labored to steer theater, movies and even the “rhythmic instinct” into the same channels. Their approach to recreation was relentlessly, almost grimly, reformist. Not a rhythmic twitch without social purpose; not a frame of film without social content; not a moment of play for the sake of playfulness. Gradually they fashioned the public recreation movement into a loose field of specialization in the new profession of social work.

On those terms the recreation reformers addressed the social consequences of modernization in the cities. By employing the techniques of professionalism they hoped to reconcile the old society with the new, to adapt the ethos of a fading village culture to the technological and organizational imperatives of urban life. With the recreation center replacing the hearth in their vision, and the neighborhood replacing the village, they were intent upon exploiting their new expertise to give democracy an urban meaning, to revive family values, and to restore a lost sense of community. Throughout the Progressive era they held firm to these moral guidelines in their own search for order.

notes

1. Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965) and Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order* (New York, 1967).

2. George A. Bellamy, "Recreation and Social Progress: The Settlement," National Conference of Charities and Corrections, *Proceedings* (1914), 375-382 (hereafter abbreviated simply as *Proceedings*), and "The Culture of the Family From the Standpoint of Recreation," *Ibid.*, 103-107. At the beginning of the century the National Conference of Charities and Corrections was a melange of correctional officials and charity reformers, with a leavening of settlement workers. By the end of the Progressive era it provided the institutional framework for the development of social work as a profession. In 1917 it changed its name to the National Conference of Social Work.

3. *Ibid.* See also Lee F. Hanmer, "Organizing the Neighborhood for Recreation," *Ibid.* (1915), 70-75.

4. Bellamy, "Recreation and Social Progress"

5. Louise De Koven Bowen, "Dance Halls," *Survey* (June 3, 1911), 383-387.

6. Belle Lindner Israels, "The Way of the Girl," *Charities and The Commons* (July 3, 1909), 486-497, and "The Dance Problem," *Proceedings* (1912), 140-146.

7. Beulah Kennard, "Emotional Life of Girls," *Ibid.*, 146-148.

8. *Survey* (May 6, 1916), 163-164, and *Ibid.* (May 27, 1916), 218.

9. Sherman C. Kingsley, "The Penny Arcade and the Cheap Theater," *Charities and The Commons* (June 8, 1907), 295-297.

10. Mrs. W. I. Thomas, "The Five Cent Theater," *Proceedings*, (1910), 145-149.

11. Some of the social implications of the movies in these years are discussed in Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York, 1975).

12. Lewis E. Palmer, "The World in Motion," *Survey* (June 5, 1909), 355-365.

13. Orrin G. Cocks, "Moving Pictures as a Factor in Municipal Life," *National Municipal Review* (October, 1914), 708-712.

14. A brief summary of some of the early censorship laws, and of the efforts to enforce them, may be found in John Collier, "Censorship in Action," *Survey* (August 7, 1915), 423-427.

15. Information about the structure and methods of the Board was drawn from Orrin G. Cocks, "Applying Standards to Motion Picture Films," *Ibid.* (June 27, 1914), 337-338, and John Collier, "Censorship: and the National Board," *Ibid.* (October 2, 1915), 9-14.

16. Cocks, "Applying Standards"

17. Collier, "Censorship; and the National Board." Still, Collier was disturbed by a growing rigidity of outlook on the Board "that may ultimately limit (its) own freedom of action and even of debate and may discourage the creative producer of films."

18. Jane Addams, "Public Recreation and Social Morality," *Charities and The Commons* (August 3, 1907), 492-494. See also Addams, "Some Reflections on the Failure of the Modern City to Provide Recreation for Young Girls," *Ibid.* (December 5, 1908), 365-368.

19. Joseph Lee, "Play as a School of the Citizen," *Ibid.* (August 3, 1907), 486-491.

20. Luther Halsey Gulick, "Play and Democracy," *Ibid.* See also Henry S. Curtis, "The Playground," *Proceedings* (1907), 278-286.

21. Joseph Lee, "Rhythm and Recreation," *Ibid.* (1912), 126-139.

22. Addams, "Some Reflections" See also Clarence Arthur Perry, "Why Recreation in the Schoolhouse?" *Proceedings* (1914), 382-385.

23. Lee, "Rhythm" and "Play"

24. The series was comprised of nine articles. I have based this discussion of Collier's ideas upon the following of those essays: "Back of Our Footlights," *Survey* (June 5, 1915), 213-217; "Before Our Footlights," *Ibid.* (July 3, 1915), 315-317; "The Theater of Tomorrow," *Ibid.* (January 1, 1916), 381-385; and "For a New Drama," *Ibid.* (May 6, 1916), 137-141.

25. John Collier, "A Film Library," *Ibid.* (March 4, 1916), 663-668.

26. Frank Charles Laubach, "What the Church May Learn from the Saloon," *Ibid.* (September 27, 1913), 751-753.

27. On the role of the community center see Jens Jensen, "Regulating City Building," *Ibid.* (November 18, 1911), 1203-1205; Henry S. Curtis, "The Neighborhood Center," *American City* (July, 1912), 14-17; Perry, "Why Recreation"; and Hanmer, "Organizing the Neighborhood"

28. Frederic C. Howe, "Leisure," *Survey* (January 3, 1914), 415-416.

29. The reform journal, *Charities*, had run a series on ethnic groups early in the century, and many of the essays had included accounts of such activities. See, for instance, Alice G. Masaryk, "The Bohemians in Chicago," *Charities* (December 3, 1904), 206-210; Louis Pink, "The Magyar in New York," *Ibid.*, 262-263; Fannie Barrier Williams, "Social Problems in the 'Black Belt' of Chicago," *Ibid.* (October 7, 1905), 40-44.

30. Bellamy, "The Culture of the Family"

31. Mary McDowell, "The Field Houses of Chicago and Their Possibilities," *Charities and The Commons* (August 3, 1907), 535-538.

32. Hanmer, "Organizing the Neighborhood"

33. Howe, "Leisure."

34. One is tempted to suggest that the "flaming youth" of the 1920s did not foment a sexual revolution as much as they legitimized and perhaps extended for the middle classes a revolution that had already begun in the urban slums before the war.