

Review Essay

The Class Divide in American Culture in the Early Twentieth Century

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HOUSEHOLD ACCOUNTS: Working Class Family Economies in the Interwar United States. By Susan Porter Benson. Afterword by David Montgomery. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2007.

STANDARD OF LIVING: The Measure of the Middle Class in Modern America. By Marina Moskowitz. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2004.

THE MARCH OF SPARE TIME: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression. By Susan Currell. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2005.

Recent polling generally reports nearly universal individual self-reporting as “middle class,” even though the U.S. economy is in a recession and the rate of housing foreclosures is nearing depression levels. These circumstances are wreaking destruction in vulnerable neighborhoods across the country, with consequences falling most heavily on black and Latina female borrowers, who join countless other American workers facing insecure employment and rising health care costs. The economist Paul Krugman has resurrected the label of the Gilded Age to name the increasingly accepted standard of widening inequality and concentration of wealth at the top which characterizes contemporary U.S. society. In this context, the pervasive use of the term “middle class” as a form of self-categorization suggests that by the twenty-first century, the language of class has itself been emptied of meaning because the cultural and rhetorical claims of

the label “middle class” far outweigh any vestiges of descriptive or comparative measurement.

Each of the books under review here offers a historical study with the potential to illuminate the interactions through which rhetorical languages of class interact with the social and economic forces changing American culture in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Susan Porter Benson’s book *Household Accounts: Working Class Family Economies in the Interwar United States* relies on an analysis of family budget studies to explore the dissonance between a national culture of mass consumption and working-class cultures of family consumption, showcasing the negotiations between wage earning, household production, market-replacement, reciprocity, and market activity in reconciling family subsistence and individual goals and desires (7-8). Marina Moskowitz’s *Standard of Living: The Measure of the Middle Class in Modern America* spotlights the role of new national distribution systems in four carefully chosen case studies to ask how “certain objects, structures and landscapes became ‘standard’ possessions” for Americans by the 1920s, possessions which then served to identify the growing middle class “both to themselves, and to others, on a national scale” (2). Susan Currell’s *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression* analyzes commentary by various social reformers, social scientists, educators, artists, and writers in an attempt to determine “How, during a period of mass unemployment, leisure came to feature as a central problem of culture,” and “Why did leisure—both proper and improper—become such an intense object of interest, concern, and surveillance by national policy makers, experts, and intellectuals alike in the 1930s?” (3).

Susan Porter Benson’s *Household Accounts* provides an extraordinarily revelatory portrayal of what Benson argued consistently we must learn to see as “the work of consumption.” Benson has done more than any other scholar to identify the everyday dynamic interrelationships between wage-earning, reproduction, and consumption through a combination of broad-based and finely tuned analysis of working class family economies. Benson’s chapters explore working-class family economies by paying attention to the gendered expectations and experiences of confronting everyday circumstances of scarcity and insecurity with improvisation, ingenuity, resilience, disappointment, conflict, and loss.

Benson’s primary sources are the reports on home-visit interviews with women wage earners conducted by field agents for the Women’s Bureau of the U.S. Labor department in the 1920s and 1930s, and the published studies of families confronting unemployment assembled by academic social scientists and settlement workers during the late 1920s and 1930s. Imaginatively and with great precision and sophistication, *Household Accounts* aggregates the results of these studies in order to make sense of the overall patterns of their findings, revealing the overwhelming scarcity and insecurity of household economies in this period, the lesser importance of ethnicity and the greater importance of gender dynamics in shaping class-based and constrained interactions with consumption and the

market. At the same time, Benson's brilliant critical attention to the language and authorship of these sources enables us, as she wrote, to get "as close as we are likely to get to the voices of the working-class women themselves" (9). Poring over these interview schedules and reports, Benson was able to excavate the shaping perspective of the investigators and their sometimes cryptic categorization as well as to interpret traces of the points of view of the investigated.

Benson's inventive reading of these sources enabled her account to probe far deeper than the published conclusions of even the intentionally sympathetic middle-class "maternalist" interviewers and social reformer/investigators. She decoded the assessments of male breadwinning to uncover the costs of irregular and unreliable employment, to suggest how "fair-weather breadwinners" (20) might be rebelling against the unrelenting demands of hard and dangerous physical labor and industrial discipline, and to note the shame and guilt of men who could no longer contribute to supporting their families and who themselves fell into dependency. In some cases, Benson uncovered wives' more nuanced assessments of husbands dismissed by the interviewers as "n.g" [no good]. Similarly she revealed the pressures and demands on women identified with the highest praise as "good managers," attempting to secure family welfare without real control or authority over needed material resources, uncovering complex and multiple dimensions to a female breadwinner ethos which the interviewers' stock phrases cloaked. In this process, *Household Accounts* breathes life into the rich and varied experiences of a broad swath of working people. The interview schedules and studies report on working-class families from a wide range of backgrounds including African American and Latino, native born white as well as many European ethnicities (Italian, Croatian, Polish, eastern European Jewish). Readers can understand more about male typographers in San Francisco, street laborers and textile workers in Philadelphia, union railroad shopmen in Memphis, plumbers in Boston, and sausage makers in St. Louis when they also can see them as insecurely employed and vulnerable husbands and fathers. Female lace homeworkers in Rhode Island, meatpackers in Kansas City and Omaha, factory press operators in Newark, laundry workers in Muskogee, Oklahoma, and candy workers in Memphis take distinct shape as inventive if harried wives and mothers.

Benson's first chapter on family economic survival strategies argues for understanding working-class marriages as "partnership" marriages, with this term defining a distinct alternative to the "companionate" mode characteristic of the new middle-class ideal extolled by prescriptive literature and widely represented in advertising and popular film. Her conception of partnership marriages also presents a sharp contrast to the fiercely oppositional battle of the sexes stereotypically associated with working-class life in cartoons and early film. Benson's meticulous reading of the accounts of these working-class "partnership" marriages enabled her to identify a previously unacknowledged form of gender transgression, with partial breaching of the boundaries between male breadwinning and female household management in response to insecure and

inadequately compensated employment. In Benson's account, women cryptically but repeatedly indicated their sense of obligation to help out by earning some or all of family support; some men signaled that they saw housework as part of their responsibilities, perhaps as a way to compensate for irregular work and hence lowered contributions to family upkeep. These efforts were often disappointing and also frequently misinterpreted. Men's and women's efforts at being reliable breadwinners and good managers were thwarted by insecurity, producing misery and anger as well as mutual support and satisfaction. Still, most men claimed a modicum of independence as consumers, which few women could.

Collective family economies became a more elusive and aspirational ideal in the negotiations between working-class parents and their children living at home. *Household Accounts* conceptualizes these relationships as "cooperative conflict," characterized by "pervasive confusion" about generational roles (59). During the 1920s and 1930s, child labor and compulsory education laws operated in an environment of expanded advertising, mass production, and commercialization of leisure. Parents and children contentiously negotiated the multiple terms of "help," balancing parents' desires to "make something" of their children by providing spending money and by supporting education and delayed wage earning, with children's obligations, especially those of daughters, to contribute, usually, "not enough to mother." The children's contribution spanned a spectrum from delivering unopened pay envelopes to paying a specified amount for board to contributing a varying "something." Benson's sources surveyed many fewer sons than daughters, already indicating an important differential in social expectations. She also pointed out that one result of the lower wages women's work could command was that, whatever they put in, daughters contributed larger portion of their own incomes than sons and were left with much less in terms of money they might spend on themselves. Benson's calculations also suggest that even contributing daughters' low wages "all to mother" may have been a net loss for the family, leading her to speculate that wage earning daughters placed themselves in this situation not out of filial duty but to gain benefits from their mothers' abilities to manage scarce resources (64). Attention to gendered expectations here yields Benson's insight that family discourse around both wage earning and consumption cast men as individuals, and women as relational and dependent.

In the remaining chapters, *Household Accounts* analyzes the complicated dynamics of mutuality and reciprocity, exploring when and how working class families used home ownership and shared housing, exchanges of household work, childcare, food, assistance, the second hand market in clothes, furniture and tools, as critical resources to compensate for irregular wages and insecure employment, to mediate the demands of the market, and to stretch what they had to manage within scarcity. *Household Accounts* distinguishes "mutuality" as the sharing of resources from "reciprocity" as the exchange of goods and services, and is careful to show the fragile and easily crossed boundary between mutual benefit and mutual recrimination, disappointment, and bitterness. Nonetheless, Benson assessed the realm of mutual support as the "broadest, deepest, and most

flexible resource that working class people had to draw on,” also noting that it provided an opportunity for personal agency, “the arena where they engaged in a level of self-activity often denied them on the job” (78).

When Benson turned in her final chapter to explore the actual participation of working-class families in the marketplace, the choices families made to purchase goods and services outright or on credit, she found less the presence of what historians have called “consumer culture” or the presence of consumer desire than a focus on using cash purchases to replace arduous tasks assumed to be women’s household labor, buying rather than baking, sewing, and doing laundry. Similarly, working-class family economic calculations dictated the purchase of second-hand clothing, of second-hand furniture as a kind of investment resource with good potential for pawn or resale, and second-hand tools that could aid the search to make a living. Benson found that, rather than serving as a means of facilitating access to the world of goods, credit loomed as a danger to be avoided if at all possible. Working-class families understood the additional costs and risks of buying on credit. The steady burden of interest made home ownership and installment buying risky and vulnerable in the face of insecure employment and women’s low wages; indebtedness was as likely to lead to foreclosure and dispossession as it was to consumer satisfaction. When they had to, working class families cultivated relationships with local storekeepers and landlords that enabled them to buy food “on the book” and to juggle late payments. Benson’s sources suggested that the marketplace, and especially debt, was often a place of “misery and defeat for many” (163).

Benson hoped that *Household Accounts* could mount a powerful challenge to a set of assumptions pervasive in much of the literature on consumption and consumer culture, as Benson identified these in the introduction, “that the middle class was ubiquitous if amorphous, and that the focus of American life has shifted decisively from production to mass consumption” (11). As she argued, “people do not function in the marketplace as autonomous individuals solely in response to marketing and desire but as part of families in which consumption is an object both of struggle and of shared aspirations” (10, 11). Importantly, the world of economic constraints and uncertainty conveyed so powerfully by Benson’s study by and large left working class people marginal to the emerging world of mass consumption. This marginality was the majority experience of Americans before WWII. As she notes, working class customers were not even imagined as a target market for advertisers, for department stores, for consumer credit. Benson’s vivid depictions of working class family economies, mutual support and reciprocity in these chapters make palpable the ways that class and gender indelibly marked the intertwined relationships of production and consumption, abundance and scarcity within the boom economy of the 1920s and the economic collapse of the 1930s. Future historical accounts of consumer culture will need to engage and integrate Benson’s profound insights.

Household Accounts ends somewhat abruptly, without a formal conclusion, as did Susan Porter Benson’s life, before she was able to bring this book

to completion. But, as Benson titled one of her chapters on reciprocity, “what goes around comes around.” Benson’s own powerful intellectual engagement, deeply-felt political commitments, and profound personal generosity as a scholar, colleague and teacher inspired the collective of scholars who were able to promise her before her untimely death that they would do the final work to move her manuscript from her computer to publication. Benson’s scholarly insights and strong voice shape every page of *Household Accounts*; Benson’s colleagues David Roediger, Jean Allman, Sharon Hartmann Strom, and Nancy Hewitt, her colleague and student Charles McGraw, and her colleague and husband Ed Benson worked together in the loving labor to turn Benson’s pages into this book. The eminent labor historian David Montgomery wrote the afterword, arguing for the significance of Benson’s scholarship in *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* and in *Household Accounts* to the field of American social history.

Marina Moscovitz’s *Standard of Living* presents a sharp contrast to *Household Accounts*, as a hybrid business history and cultural history, focused almost entirely on the contributions of the creation of national networks of distribution through which standardization of material culture, domestic space, and urban landscapes identified the measure of material well-being associated with middle-class identity. Moscovitz argues that the “standardization of everyday environments,” itself a “byproduct of new large scale distribution systems,” was promoted through marketing strategies that emphasized values of etiquette, standards of hygiene, language of business, and rhetoric of family domesticity as public measures of middle-class status. Her central claim is that “from this nexus of exchange, and the cultural ideals and marketing practices that informed it, the standard of living arose” (2, 3).

Moscovitz defines the admittedly slippery term “standard of living” as a measure for a “quality of life,” and argues that “rather than a level of earnings, the standard of living became increasingly defined through consumer goods and the spaces established and maintained to contain these goods” (3, 4). She dates the concept of standard of living as emerging between the 1870s and the 1920s, and sees its usage as indicating the shift from income to purchasing power as the measure “by which Americans evaluated their status,” a shift made possible by the widespread acceptance of credit, and relying on the technological, economic and cultural factors creating a national market and a national culture. Moscovitz defines her primary task as showing not why but *how* standard of living emerged on a national scale, focusing her explanation on the distribution mechanisms for standardized products as well as for ideas about design and standardization. She examines advertising campaigns, catalogues, the construction of window displays and showrooms, and popular women’s magazines and middlebrow fiction as venues for this diffusion (8, 10).

Standard of Living’s arguments rely on four well-developed case studies of particular companies’ distribution of goods and services that also promoted

these as cultural models: Reed and Barton's silverplate flatware, associated with etiquette for dining; Kohler bathroom fixtures, promoting the specialized designation of domestic space they required; the Aladdin Company's mail-order architecture and kit-houses, marketing middle-class home building and home ownership as a business investment; and Harland Bartholomew and Associates' zoning plans, formulated to protect single-family home ownership through municipal regulation that cordoned off residential from commercial and industrial land use. Moskowitz argues that "the specific objects or spaces and their cultural associations reinforced one another, and were encompassed by the standard of living at the turn of the twentieth century" (15). She creatively casts a wide net to find traces of the new conceptions of these objects and spaces, circulating in advertisements and illustrations in new national magazines like *Good Housekeeping*, more specialized publications like *American City*, in social science surveys like the Lynds' studies of Middletown, and in widely-read fiction, most notably in Sinclair Lewis's representations of middle-class confrontation with modernity in *Babbitt* (1922). Moskowitz's creative mining of Lewis' papers yielded plans and maps prepared by Lewis for Babbitt's house and Zenith's neighborhoods (reproduced as particularly illuminating illustrations in *Standard of Living*), documenting Lewis' own research in the process of standardization of domestic and neighborhood space.

The chapters developing these studies are deeply researched and engagingly written. Together they constitute an original and powerful argument explaining the centrality of mechanisms of distribution in popularizing the standardization of goods and services for a national market, and in establishing the connections between standardization, modernity, and material well-being. Moskowitz points out that standardized production of goods could even be linked with encouraging individual expression, as "any consumer could form a unique combination of standardized elements" (235). Moskowitz makes a convincing case that standardization and specialization were part of measurements of standard of living, and that the measures associated here with standard of living were carefully marketed, distributed, and popularized as public signifiers defining middle-class cultural aspirations.

Where Moskowitz's argument falters is in its claims that standard of living "was a measure of how people wanted to live, according to shared cultural minima," (5) that there was "a broad agreement about how they hoped to live," that the opposing sides in "large scale labor uprisings or conflicts over Jim Crow laws . . . had in common a core belief that an American standard of living did exist" (11). I don't think that the body of Moskowitz's research can support these arguments, reliant as it is on the rhetoric of a set of claims made by marketers, distributors, advertisers, and customers willing to participate in advertising and marketing. There may have been broad assent as to the content of the middle-class ideal, and surely that ideal was enhanced and circulated by the means Moskowitz describes. But a publicly proclaimed ideal does not constitute evidence of shared core beliefs. Middle-class lived experience was considerably more varied and

itself unstable than the standardized ideal; various middle classes, African American, Latino, Euro-American may have had middle-class incomes and may have embraced certain standards of respectability but may have differed considerably in their core beliefs of how they hoped to live.

The alternatives against which the middle-class ideals Moskowitz identifies as constructing the standard of living do not emerge clearly in this account. In one example, Moskowitz writes that “it was deemed a ‘comfort’ to own one’s home, not a luxury, and thus this common aspiration stood at the center of the standard of living” (176). But home ownership was not a prerequisite for middle-class respectability nor did it become a universal measure of middle-class status until after WWII. And home ownership offered widely different kinds of benefits for those families who invested in it. The values of domesticity, privacy, specialization, and business the Aladdin company used to promote home ownership in new planned single family subdivisions varied considerably from values of mutuality, economic utility, and non-specialized use of space related to living above family businesses, keeping boarders and doubling up with extended networks of kin associated with home ownership in urban multi-family neighborhoods. And it was the values of economic self-sufficiency expressed by growing food and keeping small livestock, as well as the flexibility for housing extended kin who might help with child care, that were associated with home ownership in outlying black and working-class suburbs.¹

In another example, Moskowitz positions zoning’s efforts to organize urban growth to preserve family homes while allowing for economic growth as “primarily a middle class vision” (183). But zoning’s middle-class vision was unlikely to be shared by the opposing sides in “large scale labor uprisings or conflicts over Jim Crow laws” because the opposing sides were likely to have been quite aware of zoning’s strategic implications (11). Relying primarily on the records of proponents of zoning and their business allies, Moskowitz notes that zoning drew on the corporate language of scientific management, but she doesn’t explore the overlap between scientific management’s strategic efforts to curtail workers’ control and the related use of zoning to ratify corporate decisions to relocate factories in independent suburbs to avoid urban political jurisdiction. Similarly, planners’ interventions to elude more representative if contentious political processes with supposedly expert business-like administrative structures effectively removed these structures from political oversight. Moskowitz notes that zoning replaced restrictive covenants as a means for “private citizens to regulate one another ... through private agreements” (210). Restrictive covenants were precisely the means through which the real estate industry sharpened the lines of racial segregation from the 1920s on, tightly confining Mexicans, Asians, African Americans, and Jews to sharply bound over-crowded neighborhoods. Zoning’s impact in ratifying corporate power, substituting experts and planners as an alternative to representative political processes, and institutionalizing powerful mechanisms of racial and ethnic exclusions through municipal regulations expose the clear and consequential limits of its “middle class vision.”

Moscowitz chooses to conclude her study in the realm of cultural production, contrasting two forms of best selling writing, Lewis' fictional study, *Babbitt*, and the Lynds' social science study, *Middletown*, as circulating popular accounts which interrogated the effects of standardized goods in democratizing material well-being. Moscovitz calls attention to the active participation of the authors in the promotion and marketing of their books, arguing that their behavior serves to underscore her most important theme: "that the commercial processes of distribution paralleled the cultural processes of establishing a standard of living" (238). I agree with Moscovitz that "both processes linked the production and consumption of American material life, and both supported the flourishing of the middle class" (238). I would want to qualify this only slightly, to say that she has argued most convincingly that both supported the flourishing of the middle-class ideal. There is still room for additional historical work to excavate the space between the widespread circulation of this middle-class ideal beautifully explicated by Moscovitz, and the varied self-conceptions and lived experience of the majority of American families, like those studied by Benson, for whom income "remained a brake" on the achievement of a middle-class life.

Projecting past the period of her study, Moskovitz suggests that by 1930s, the language of standard of living fell out of usage, to be replaced by what she refers to, but does not really make an effort to define, as "The American Dream." In contrast, Susan Currell's *March of Spare Time* argues for "leisure" as the focus of broad discussion during the 1930s, as both a problem and a solution to social and cultural recovery during the Depression (2). Currell seems fascinated by the wide-ranging discussion she uncovers from a survey of writings by a group of "professionals across the political spectrum—from reformers, social scientists and doctors to educators, novelists and artists" (3). Her research method for producing this cultural history of leisure is to identify broad patterns expressing cultural concerns about leisure—worrying over improper uses of leisure as socially destructive, proposing supervised recreation in response to unemployment's creation of sudden and unwanted excess leisure, and confidently proposing various visions of what seemed like proper or restorative leisure as a powerful panacea for Depression ills. Another of Currell's intentions is to show "how discussions about leisure were very often a subterfuge for dominant opinions to be expressed on class and gender roles" (11). Currell argues that "perceptions of the way leisure functioned to define the past, present, and future of American culture provide an interesting paradigm for understanding wider issues at stake during the period" (11). By the end of the 1930s, Currell argues that, "in contrast to totalitarian leisure in Europe," referring to Italian and German programs claiming athletic training for inculcating fascist ideas of nationalism, leisure in American culture had become a symbol of democracy and hope for the future. She sees a stated commitment to a "notion of self and society defined not only by work but also through leisure" as a way that "leisure became reinvigorated with social and political significance" (11).

March of Time is careful to delineate its topic as the “study of the cultural products of concerns surrounding leisure use, not a social history of leisure” (10). Currell casts her net widely to embrace many different usages under the rubric of leisure, producing a broad survey of forums where the topic of leisure emerged, rather than closely-argued case studies interrogating specific forms of discourse produced within different genres of cultural production. In two chapters, “The Promise and the Problem” and “Preparing for Spare Time,” Currell includes sections on “Background to Leisure,” “Welfare Capitalism,” and “European Models for New Deal Leisure,” the latter section grouping state-sponsored variations on welfare capitalism, fascist interest in socialization through leisure, and expansion of public support for socialized leisure and recreation in Italy, Germany, the USSR, and Britain. A section on “The New Problem of Depression Leisure” surveys social workers and social scientific studies that discuss leisure, without identifying authors’ particular social or economic point of view or middle-class specific angle of vision that might help twenty-first century readers sort through what might be inflated rhetorical claims of crisis related to leisure practices.

In these early chapters, Currell’s broad sweep approach has the effect of undermining the case for particularity of 1930s discourse. Employers and middle-class moralists’ concern about leisure as driven by their perceptions of a declining work ethic inspired considerable hand-wringing beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The formulation that leisure could provide revitalization for work was a repeated theme in Henry Ward Beecher’s sermons at the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn in the 1870s. Economists and social scientists began to argue for consumption rather than production for economic recovery beginning after the depression of 1893. Workers’ claims for “Eight Hours for What We Will” fall somewhat awkwardly into a discussion of leisure, because they were much more centrally directed toward demanding the right to collectively limit the hours of labor than to engaging the disposition of non-work time. Similarly, corporate welfare plans, such as Henry Ford’s creation of a Sociology Department, were much more concerned with expanding corporate control and corporate surveillance beyond the work day than with recreation or leisure per se. The broadly circulating rhetorical association of women with consumption, in visual displays and advertising as well as in widespread prescriptive literature proclaiming womanhood to be contaminated or corrupted by this relationship, has been identified well before the 1930s. Historical studies of popular literature and popular culture identified the intense battles to categorize and draw boundaries around leisure practices as wholesome or unwholesome, proper and improper, as central to the history of middle-class formation from the nineteenth through the early decades of the twentieth centuries.

What were people talking about when they worried about leisure in the 1930s, and what was particularly distinctive about the debates over leisure in this time period? The most significant 1930s product of these debates was the funding of what Currell terms a “first ever federal recreation policy.” Currell explores this “policy” in greater detail in her third chapter titled “National Recovery of

Recreation,” as the recreation programs funded through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). These included the building of public recreation facilities, including pools, parks, and fairgrounds, and organizing hiking, arts and crafts, folk dancing, singing, dramatics, and sports, as supervised recreational programs within the WPA, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the National Youth Administration (NYA). The interest in promoting what was seen as “folk” culture to compete with the powerful pull of the new culture industries of radio and sound film and the pleasures of jazz, swing music, and dance in clubs and ballrooms, and the insistence on an important role for experts, technology, and time management, appear to be common threads throughout various New Deal initiatives, rather than distinctive aspects of leisure discourse.

The next four chapters explore what Currell identifies as the “cultural” use of leisure, and constitute her analysis of the “class, race, and gender discourses” contained within the narratives of crisis she locates in debates over leisure (3). In “The March of Culture,” Currell asks how writers and artists proposed to help rebuild “forgotten men.” She groups writings by Michael Gold, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, William Saroyan, and Albert Halper as formulations which signalled “concerns with mass culture, commercialization, capitalism, and working-class and bourgeois leisure” (77). Currell defines various images of the Forgotten Man as centrally conveying impotence, emphasizing concerns about endangered masculinity over the rhetorical political claims of underrecognized citizenship embodied in the figure of the patriotic veteran who fought for his country but now faced unemployment. She analyzes writers as “effeminized and emasculated by mass-produced, syndicated art,” who “could fight against the new leisure that threatened to reduce them to bourgeois lap-dogs” (81). In “Shopping for Leisure,” Currell turns to proposals to reconstruct women’s leisure as means to restore patriarchal authority unsettled by male unemployment, and to identifying repeated representations of women as acquisitive and consuming. In “Motion Pictures and Dance Halls,” Currell reads social reform commentary on movies and dance halls as these “responded to and fueled concerns surrounding leisure and its particularly vexed relationship to women throughout the decade” (125). A final chapter, “Mate Selection,” attempts to identify eugenics thinking as a “central underlying feature of the newly leisured modern state” (158).

Currell’s interest in interpreting 1930s sources primarily as representing shared and repeating concerns under the broad rubric of leisure rather than as located in historically and politically specific contexts leads her to assert cultural associations which sometimes cannot be convincingly supported by her evidence. For example, she states that “the pivotal choice at the American Writers’ Congress in 1935 to change radical rhetoric about ‘the worker’ to the less class-based ‘the people’ also signified a shifting concern from production to consumption, and thus from work to leisure” (89). But Michael Denning’s work has shown us that locating this “choice” as articulated in a particular speech by Kenneth Burke

identifies it as part of rich and multivocal debates about how to represent labor which have little to do with consumption or leisure. On the basis of research locating this “choice” in the context of Communist community activism in the early 1930s, Van Gosse argues it represents a turn from representing radicalism as emerging from a narrower conception of workplace militance to a more broad-based framework of family and community militance associated with fighting evictions and demanding unemployment relief.²

Similarly, the chapter on film and dance halls claims that “social studies . . . focused on specific leisure pursuits such as movie going and dancing . . . affected the perceptions and practices of leisure in the dance halls and movie palaces” (125). As readers, we have to ask, whose perceptions, and whose practices? Reformers’ concerns about film, as represented in the Payne Fund studies, or observations about dance halls, can, with careful analysis, constitute only limited evidence for varied expressions of middle-class anxieties about popular practices outside their control. As well, the Payne Fund studies were only one of the elements in the new efforts to draw new boundaries between urban ethnic sexual and cultural cosmopolitanism and a revived notion of public Main Street respectability which shaped post-Prohibition liquor licensing, policing, and the enforcement of the film production code after 1934. The chapter on eugenics is also compromised by Currell’s interest in identifying broad patterns rather than locating cultural representations in specific contexts. Currell’s research on New Deal reformers’ concerns to revitalize heterosexual marriage and family formation importantly identifies how they may have accepted and circulated racist and eugenicist language and goals. But describing Busby Berkeley’s filmed chorus lines as populated by “cloned maidens” (172) does not convincingly argue for his spectacular displays of standardization and synchronization as conveying eugenicist themes, any more than does a single *New Yorker* cartoon promising to turn a “hopelessly fat girl” into a “slim beauty” (180), or the reference to Darwinian evolution as producing “physical perfection” in the first Superman comic book (181). It is hard to argue with Currell’s conclusion that 1930s discourses freighted leisure with social and political significance, but there is considerable room for further analysis of the particular content of social and political disagreements animating the diverse expressions grouped here as concerns over leisure.

Reading these three books together emphasizes the interdisciplinary imperative to use literary and cultural analysis to critically interrogate historical sources, like the family budget studies in *Household Accounts*, the business history records in *Standard of Living*, and the debates over leisure in *March of Time*. Setting cultural formulations and lived experience in dialogue offers the greatest promise for being able to understand how class functions in American culture not as a structure but as a relationship which takes shape precisely from the interaction between production, reproduction and consumption; from the ways the oppositions between middle-class and working-class, high and low, work and leisure function to define each other; from the multiple ways gender and race inflect expectations and experience. Arguing from the limitations as well

as the revelations of the sources, and foregrounding these multiple relationships constructing class divisions, will result in richer, deeper studies of American cultural history which an assessment of these books helps us to envision.

Notes

1. Andrew Wiese, *Places of Our Own: African American Suburbanization Since 1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1964* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

2. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996), 123-136, 441-445; Van Gosse, "'To Organize in Every Neighborhood, In Every Home': The Gender Politics of American Communists Between the Wars," *Radical History Review* 50 (Spring 1991): 109-141.