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A PUBLIC REVOLT AGAINST SPITTING: EDUCATION AND POLITICS IN THE
PROGRESSIVE ERA

By

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Professional Paper

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A Public Revolt against Spitting: Education and Politics in the Progressive Era

Chairperson: Kyle G. Volk

During the early twentieth century, hundreds of American cities, along with more than a dozen states, outlawed public spitting. While such a vigorous effort may seem peculiar to contemporary sensibilities, spitting was actually an issue of great controversy at the turn of the century. Among American men, spitting was a ubiquitous habit tied to the mass consumption of chewing tobacco. For health professionals and reformers inspired by recent advances in germ theory, however, spitting was a key cause of tuberculosis, pneumonia, influenza, and various other deadly maladies. In an effort to improve public health, these reformers pushed for legal restrictions against public spitting. Despite the moral fervor and legal powers arrayed against the habit, however, public spitting continued to proliferate during the first decade of the twentieth century. Frustrated by the limitations of police regulation, reformers developed a slew of educational strategies to influence public sentiment against spitting. This paper examines those strategies, which included publishing explanations of germ theory in newspapers and on widely distributed leaflets; holding dramatic “anti-spitting” demonstrations, such as mass meetings and parades; and placing anti-spitting messages into everything from union agendas to grade school curricula. Drawing on a range of sources, including the publications of both public and private health organizations, magazines, and newspapers, this paper argues that the educational component of anti-spitting campaigns not only spread awareness about germ theory and hygienic habits, but also allowed politically marginal groups that were not associated with spitting, most notably women, to assert significant claims over public space and transform urban culture in the United States.

The Rochester, New York Public Health Association (RPHA) had been busy during the first months of 1910. Beginning that winter, the association launched a campaign of tuberculosis education by publishing 47 brief “talkettes” in the city’s local newspapers. The talkettes covered the basics of tuberculosis prevention, including home disinfection, sterilization of milk, and most conspicuously, the dangers of spitting. Indeed, throughout that winter and into the spring, the so-called “spitting evil” assumed a position of prominence within the campaign as the RPHA inundated residents with messages detailing the dangers of expectoration. On city streetcars, signs appeared “with simple, straight-to-the-point appeals to the people to rise against the spitting evil.” Posters covered the sides of buildings while “hundreds of thousands of small slips...bearing a warning against promiscuous spitting” seemed to appear everywhere. Local physicians visited the city’s factories, classrooms, trade union meetings, and fraternal organizations to lecture about the hazards of expectoration.¹

The months of activism culminated on April 22 with an “Anti-Spitting Crusade Mass Meeting” held in the city’s Convention Hall. The meeting included a full band concert, vocal solos, and a concluding benediction. Between the entertainments, notable physicians, including Adolphus Knopf and Livingston Farrand of New York City, addressed the audience on topics such as “Civic Duty in the Prevention of Tuberculosis.” The speakers implored their audience to take control of Rochester by culling the pernicious spitting habit from their streets. Indeed, every time spitting came up, speakers connected both its proliferation and potential eradication to the theme of civic duty. Although the municipal government had passed an official anti-spitting ordinance ten years earlier, speakers urged attendees against passively relinquishing authority for sanitary regulation to city officials, urging them to enforce clean habits themselves. “Present day citizenship demands something more than a promise,” the meeting’s program urged. “Have YOU been doing your share in the work for the betterment of humanity?” it asked. To reinforce the stakes of anti-spitting, the program also reminded readers

¹ Rochester Public Health Association, *Book of Tuberculosis Talkettes & Programme for Anti-Spitting Crusade Mass Meeting of the Rochester Public Health Association* (Rochester: 1910).

that “If, as a result of this crusade against the spitting evil, Rochester has been made cleanly, healthful and decent, things will have been “DONE.”²

While the Rochester Public Health Association organized the 1910 meeting, more than 100 local civic, voluntary, and religious organizations lent their support to the event. Among these were various women’s groups, including the Susan B. Anthony Club, the Council of Jewish Women, and three branches of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. Representatives from dozens of companies, including small businesses and larger manufacturers, attended along with members of trade unions such as the United Brotherhood of Carpenters & Joiners and the Cigar Makers’ Union. Baptist, Methodist, and Universalist churches sent delegates who shared the convention hall with veterans, art enthusiasts, education reformers, and many others representing Rochester’s dozens of active voluntary societies. Each delegate promised “to act as permanent representatives in promoting the work of the association.”³

The Rochester meeting came during a period of passionate reform in American public health. Spurred by advances in bacteriology and Progressive reform politics, hundreds of professional and voluntary organizations like the RPHA popped up across the country and petitioned municipal and state governments for the augmentation of health-focused regulatory powers. For several reasons, tuberculosis proved to be among health reformers’ primary focuses. First, tuberculosis was the leading cause of death in the turn of the century United States, claiming thousands of lives each year and costing the nation as much as \$33,000,000 annually.⁴ However, unlike other dread diseases of the nineteenth century, such as cholera and smallpox, by the first years of the twentieth century no cure for tuberculosis had emerged. Thus, physicians, boards of health, and their reform-minded allies turned to prevention methods such as anti-spitting to limit the spread of infection. In other

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jeanne Abrams, “‘Spitting Is Dangerous, Indecent, and against the Law!’ Legislating Health Behavior during the American Tuberculosis Crusade,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 68, 3 (Jan. 2013), 417.

words, they argued that the nation's deadliest disease could be controlled if Americans educated themselves in proper behavior and self-regulated their communities.

During the fin-de-siècle period, that impulse led health boards and reformers to support the passage of anti-spitting ordinances. By 1910, at least 147 American cities, along with thirteen states, had outlawed spitting in some form.⁵ Yet despite the effort, public spitting continued as tobacco-chewing and phlegm-congested men relieved their oral burdens on sidewalks, in streetcars, and in public buildings. That persistence forced Progressive health reformers to reconsider the strategy of simply passing laws against spitting. As one frustrated medical professional put it, "The mere act of writing on the statute books the law representing the will of the majority seems to satisfy the people, who then serenely continue about their usual business or vocation, content in the knowledge that the law forbids or commands certain things which they contended for or against."⁶ In light of this frustration with the effects of legislation, the Rochester mass meeting makes sense: after nearly fifteen years of successfully passing anti-spitting ordinances throughout the country, and ten years after Rochester's health board had passed its own, reformers in that community recognized that their anti-spitting mission lacked broad, popular support. Like reform groups throughout the United States, they threw their energies into manufacturing an anti-spitting majority whose spirits were lifted by a vigorous and enthusiastic campaign, replete with full bands, prayers, and propaganda galore. These efforts represented a new phase of Progressivism, in which reformers concentrated on advancing their agenda through an educational campaign that would manufacture broadly based majoritarian support from the community.

⁵ Philip P. Jacobs, ed., *A Tuberculosis Directory* (New York: 1911). Jacobs's data covers cities with populations over 30,000. As I have discussed in a paper focusing on ordinances in particular, numerous small communities throughout the country passed ordinances but were not counted in Jacobs's survey.

⁶ Robert Newton, "The Enforcement of Anti-Spitting Laws," *The Transactions of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis* (Philadelphia: Wm. F. Fell Company, 1910), 109.

This paper explores the various ways the anti-spitting educational enterprise manifested itself. In its most conspicuous form, a vast propaganda campaign of posters, postcards, op-eds, and other media supported the anti-spitting crusade. The first portion of this paper examines the different propagandistic methods adopted by anti-spitters in their attempts to reach the broadest audiences possible. In the second section, I analyze two groups of traditionally disenfranchised citizens who found political identities through anti-spitting: women and children. Women were particularly active in the anti-spitting crusade, which they used to advance their political voice. Children were more often passive actors, serving as symbols of the innocent victims of intransigent spitters. Nonetheless, the depiction of children during the anti-spitting campaign promoted wider concerns about children's health while seeking to create safer communities for young people.

The question of anti-spitting reveals a number of key points about the politics of reform during the Progressive Era. For one, anti-spitting ordinances were at best moderately successful as punitive measures. Frustrated by what they saw as the lack of enforcement, organizations like the RPHA rallied communities to support anti-spitting as a matter of public health, civic pride, and democratic engagement. As the RPHA's mass meeting program noted, it was up to "YOU" – the average citizen – to bring "health, happiness, and comfort" to the city, to better others' lives, and to manage those vile neighbors who insisted on spitting their way through town.⁷ Anti-spitting education programs were meant to stop spitting through the efforts of an organized and engaged popular majority inspired by, and in support of, state authority.

The stakes of this argument contribute to our understanding of Progressive politics. First, my paper examines anti-spitting on its own terms. While a number of historians have analyzed anti-spitting, they have generally subsumed it within greater studies of tuberculosis and other communicable diseases. Only Jeanne Abrams has published a journal length article on the topic. Abrams's skillfully analyzes anti-spitting within its public health context, but she touches only briefly on questions of majority power, state authority, and personal

⁷ Rochester Public Health Association, *Book of Tuberculosis Talkettes & Programme for Anti-Spitting Crusade Mass Meeting of the Rochester Public Health Association* (Rochester: 1910).

liberty. My paper attempts to move away from the strict association of anti-spitting with tuberculosis by pointing out the ways propaganda and educational tactics, as Abrams argues for legislation, “reflected...the highly complex underpinning of interwoven medical, biological, social, cultural, and psychological issues in America in the nineteenth century.”⁸ Further, my work reveals the ways various groups, and particularly women and businesses, adopted the anti-spitting message to establish their political identities.

More significantly, I argue that the anti-spitting movement alters previous understandings of Progressive reform. While experts and bureaucrats certainly influenced anti-spitting campaigns, they also recognized the necessity of popular support for their messages. Tactics such as the mass-meeting reflect this recognition. A number of historians have downplayed any notion of popular Progressivism. Charles Postel saw the rise of Progressivism as a decline in popular reform, referring to the “callused-handed Populist” giving way to “university-groomed” Progressives by the turn-of-the-century.⁹ Robert Wiebe similarly saw “the expert” as the primary beneficiary of Progressivism. The history of anti-spitting complicates those arguments by revealing the unstable position experts served in the Progressive state. Of course they could influence the passage of legislation and led reform campaigns, but these efforts relied on popular support for their success. As Michael Willrich has argued, “The turn of the century is remembered today as the advent of the modern expert, when university-trained professionals in medicine, the sciences, and law acquired new authority in American life.” Despite their rising status, however, “many citizens saw no reason to elevate the medical opinion of a public health official above their own.”¹⁰ The overt application of unilateral authority, such as early anti-spitting ordinances or the state-mandated vaccinations detailed by Willrich invariably led to “social conflict...and

⁸ Jeanne Abrams, “‘Spitting is Dangerous, Indecent, and Against the Law!’ Legislating Health Behavior during the American Tuberculosis Crusade,” *Journal of the History of Medicine* 68, 3 (July 2013), 418.

⁹ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

¹⁰ Michael Willrich, *Pox: An American History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 106.

political contention.”¹¹ That said, the focus of this paper is not the social conflict and political contention aroused by anti-spitting so much as the coalition-building reaction of Progressive reformers to such conflicts.

Of course, not all anti-spitting efforts were equally organized and influential. The Rochester meeting, for example, stands out for its scope and ambition. Nonetheless, the same drive for popular support motivated anti-spitting campaigns big and small throughout the United States during the late Progressive period. This does not imply a distinct connection between democracy and “progress”: historians of the Populist and Progressive movements have clearly debunked any such connection. Yet I argue that associations between health reformers and centralized, anti-democratic authority are also flawed. As the popular anti-spitting movement reveals, voluntary civic and professional associations throughout the country used anti-spitting as a means of building majoritarian will along with establishing their health agenda.

This paper also explores the political opportunities anti-spitting provided, most specifically for women. Both Morton Keller and Barbara Young Welke have noted the ways Progressive Era women used courts to protect their public rights. In *Recasting American Liberty*, her study of railroads and personal injury law, Welke notes that “legal recognition of rights to integrity in body, mind, and status was fundamentally shaped by women.”¹² In case after case, “the feminine face of injury” influenced “the ways Americans adapted to the vulnerability and lack of control that...became mainstays of modern life.”¹³ This paper adds to Welke’s contributions by noting the ways women took advantage of prescribed notions of gender to shape public space and health outside of the courts, taking their efforts onto the very streets of their communities. Spitting was most often depicted as a male habit that, through transmitting disease, turned women into innocent victims. Capitalizing on that depiction, women used anti-spitting as a medium through which they could organize and engage in local politics.

¹¹ Ibid, 14.

¹² Barbara Young Welke, *Recasting American Liberty: Gender, Race, Law, and the Railroad Revolution, 1865 – 1920* (New York: 2001) xi.

¹³ Ibid, xii.

As if to compound the innocent victim narrative, campaigns continuously referenced children along with women as the beneficiaries of anti-spitting. As Robert Wiebe has noted, children acted as a sort of unifying theme for Progressivism, bringing together “the campaigns for health, education, and a richer city environment.” Indeed, “The child was the carrier of tomorrow’s hope whose innocence and freedom made him singularly receptive to education in rational, humane behavior.”¹⁴ As this paper notes, anti-spitting was not short on child-based imagery. Yet while concern about children’s futures motivated anti-spitting campaigns, exactly how to use children proved a contentious topic.

In early May of 1910, a prominent St. Louis physician named Robert Newton addressed a gathering of his colleagues from the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis (NASPT). Asked to speak about the “Enforcement of Anti-Spitting Laws,” Newton admitted that a more appropriate subject would have been “The *Lack* of Enforcement of Anti-Spitting Laws.” Indeed, Newton’s evidence revealed that while nearly 25,000,000 Americans lived under some form of spitting regulation, fewer than 3,500 had been arrested or fined since regulation began in 1896. Further, 2,513 of those punishments were doled out in New York; a paltry 908 in the rest of the country represented, according to Newton, “a failure to enforce the laws.”¹⁵

Newton’s report achieved a great deal of attention. In the weeks preceding the conference, the NASPT had his thesis published in newspapers as varied as the *Los Angeles Herald*, the *Custer County, Nebraska Republican*, and the *Eagle Valley, Colorado Enterprise*. After the conference, more detailed coverage of Newton’s argument appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* and *New York Times*. In each case, reports followed Newton’s lead by blaming lax enforcement on unengaged police officers and careless individuals. In addition to calling for stricter enforcement, Newton also supported expanding public notices of anti-spitting authority with

¹⁴ Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 169

¹⁵ Robert Newton, “The Enforcement of Anti-Spitting Laws,” *The Transactions of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis* (Philadelphia: Wm. F. Fell Company, 1910), 109 – 112.

newspaper publicity, as well as through “posters on billboards, by cards in pay envelopes, notices on the backs of street-car transfers, tin signs, advertisements in theater programs, slides in moving picture theaters, in all antituberculosis literature, and by lectures.” (114) Indeed, Newton’s contempt for spitting inspired a seemingly boundless advertising ambition.

In addition to his ambition, Newton’s report also revealed a narrow understanding of success for the anti-spitting “crusade.”¹⁶ Only through arrests and fines, he argued, could anti-spitters truly measure progress. He failed to note the impact of the very publicity he prescribed at the end of his report. In the fourteen years after New York passed the nation’s first anti-spitting ordinance, anti-spitters had carried out a creative and rigorous campaign of public education. While that campaign led to no arrests or fines, it fundamentally altered the meaning and stakes of spitting in American communities. Rather than relying on the unilateral authority of sanitary or municipal police, in the years following Newton’s speech it became common knowledge that anti-spitting worked best when at least appearing to emanate from a mass movement. Perhaps no organization better exemplified this strategy than the National Tuberculosis Association (NTA).¹⁷ Following decades of anti-spitting work, in 1926 the NTA published a handbook called *A Public Revolt Against Spitting*, which outlined the methods anti-spitters should undertake if their movement was to “appear to proceed from the public itself.”¹⁸

A Public Revolt Against Spitting is a strikingly transparent document. Its authors vacillate between the desire for a genuine mass movement and the maintenance of expert control. They suggest that “no organized

¹⁶ Newton, “The Enforcement of Anti-Spitting Laws,” 110.

¹⁷ The National Tuberculosis Association was formed in 1904 in an effort to coordinate the strategies of hundreds of local TB organizations. At its founding, the NTA was called the National Society for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis, but changed the name soon after. As Nancy Tomes has noted, “At the peak of its influence in the late 1910s, the NTA and its approximately thirteen hundred affiliates enlisted thousands of American men, women, and children in the work of preventing tuberculosis.” Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American History* (New York: 1998), 114.

¹⁸ National Tuberculosis Association, *A Public Revolt Against Spitting to be Fostered by Means of Community Activities, Newspaper Publicity, and Stunts* (New York: 1926), 7.

‘Crusade’ or ‘Campaign’ will have much effect if in any degree it has the appearance of being inspired by a body of reformers, setting out to impose their will on the people,” and later note that a national organization like their own could have only a limited effect on public opinion. At the same time, they also argue that “a tuberculosis association will have to take the lead, first in stimulating interest, and next in promoting the activities,” albeit “without inviting responsibility publicity.”¹⁹ In other words, the experts and professional reformers of the NTA recognized the necessity of mass-support for anti-spitting while also maintaining a belief in their own leadership role. Thus, *A Public Revolt Against Spitting* essentially self-promotes the National Tuberculosis Association as the central source of anti-spitting propaganda. Despite the NTA’s promotional stake, however, the handbook catalogs strategies that various organizations had employed used since even before Robert Newton’s 1910 speech.

Among the significant strategies noted in *A Public Revolt Against Spitting* were the publication and dissemination of circulars, posters, and cards that warned spitters against their habit and often explained why spitting was so dangerous. Circulars in particular had been common anti-spitting tools since the earliest years of the century. Seeking to educate residents of his city about the communicability of tuberculosis, New York’s General Medical Officer Herman Biggs contended that “an educational campaign through the use of specially prepared circulars” would enable “different classes of the population” to learn the basics of bacteriology along with the dangers of spitting.²⁰ While Biggs was known widely as the architect of the nation’s first anti-spitting ordinance, his influence on health education was equally significant. Under his aegis, the New York Department of Health published numerous circulars aimed at the city’s diverse audiences. For example, in 1908 they published an anti-spitting pamphlet in English, German, Czech, Yiddish, Italian, and Swedish. In bold letters it proclaimed “Don’t Spit” because the dreaded tuberculosis was “chiefly caused by the Filthy Habit of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Herman Biggs, “A Brief History of the Campaign Against Tuberculosis in New York City,” *How the Department of Health of the City of New York is Fighting Tuberculosis*, ed. New York City Board of Health (New York: 1908), 6.

Spitting.”²¹ During the same year, the Department of Health also published “Do Not Spit: A Catechism and Primer for School Children.” Like the circular aimed at adults, the catechism reinforced the moral weight of spitting by noting that “Tuberculosis kills more people than any other disease” and that, by spitting on the “sidewalks, playgrounds, or on the floors or hallways of your home or school,” children were threatening their schoolmates and families. To bolster that claim, the catechism concluded by proclaiming, “Spitting is Dangerous, Indecent, and Against the Law.”²² While we cannot know how New York’s public received such documents, it is clear that early health officials interpreted their educational goals as opportunities to project authority. Indeed, for recent immigrants and young children in particular, the threat of legal sanction forced a reevaluation of a habit that had previously seemed common in the city’s streets.

Not all anti-spitters employing the circular strategy used such overt threats of state force, however. For example, when the National Tuberculosis Association published *A Public Revolt Against Spitting*, they emphasized challenging spitters’ personalities rather than threatening state force. Unlike the New York circulars, the NTA publication was light on detail and opted for striking images and slogans. A drawing of a massive llama showering spit upon a man’s umbrella graced its cover, which read “When a Llama Gets Sore He Spits!...but Who Wants to be a Llama?”²³ The difference in strategies makes sense when one considers the organizations producing each document: the National Tuberculosis Association of course lacked the punitive authority of New York City’s Department of Health, and thus levying a similar threat would make little sense. But the NTA’s challenge to personalities was more than circumstantial: its effect was to depict spitting less as a public health threat and more like a grotesque, even inhuman behavior. It played to individuals’ self-perceptions and public images rather than the health of the community. Further, while the New York Department of Health

²¹ Thomas Darlington, “Don’t Spit,” *How the Department of Health of the City of New York is Fighting Tuberculosis*, ed. New York City Board of Health (New York: 1908).

²² Thomas Darlington, “Do Not Spit: A Tuberculosis (Consumption) Catechism and Primer for School Children,” *How the Department of Health of the City of New York is Fighting Tuberculosis*, ed. New York City Board of Health (New York: 1908).

²³ *A Public Revolt Against Spitting*, 6.

sought to reach wide audiences by publishing in multiple languages, the image of a deranged spitting llama communicated anti-spitting to an equally broad audience.

The emphasis on an arresting image and pithy slogan exposed the limitations of earlier circulars, which relied on an acceptance of germ theory. Whether one believed that spitting bred disease became irrelevant when confronted with something like the embarrassing llama association. Earlier slogans also demanded at least some reading to get the overall message, a limitation that gave rise to more widespread use of posters instead of circulars. As *A Public Revolt Against Spitting* pointed out, for posters to be effective, “judicious ‘sniping’ in districts where many people gather, around taxicab stands, hotels, stations, and other public places would be valuable.”²⁴ For decades, anti-spitters did just that as they plastered cities with an array of posters and signs that warned of spitting dangers. In 1907, the Yonkers, New York Sanitary League placed signs upon every telephone pole in the city urging residents to not “give disease to others by careless spitting; Don’t let others give it to you by careless spitting.”²⁵

Posters and signs such as those in Yonkers served several functions. For one, they informed everyone about local anti-spitting ordinances and the dangers of the habit. The mayor of Fremont, Nebraska defended his decision to place signs throughout the city by arguing that “when a fellow is tempted to spit he will have fronting him a warning to aim toward the gutter and not spatter on the walks.”²⁶ But anti-spitting posters and signs also informed the non-spitting members of the community that the habit was unacceptable and dangerous. By doing so, they armed non-spitters with a sense of legitimacy for their disgust and encouraged others to feel disgusted when they previously may have not. Thus, the proliferation of posters aimed to build local anti-spitting majorities by rallying individuals against the habit.

²⁴ Ibid, 12.

²⁵ “Spitting and Consumption,” Massena, New York *Observer*, Jun. 20, 1907.

²⁶ No title, Norfolk, Nebraska *Weekly News-Journal*, May 5, 1905.

A more conspicuous method of majority building was inviting community participation in the creation and distribution of anti-spitting posters, signs, or cards. During the fall of 1911, the Fayetteville, New York anti-tuberculosis committee employed this tactic by announcing a community-wide contest for the best anti-spitting sign. Organizers encouraged slogans that were brief and easily read and gave the winning artist a \$3.00 prize.²⁷ When the 1911 signs began to fade a few years later, the committee organized a second contest and asked artists to contribute work that would, in fewer than twenty words, “arrest attention and produce results.”²⁸ The Fayetteville contest revealed a local health reform organization building popular support through both pithy, arresting slogans and community engagement. Competing artists had to spend at least some time contemplating why they found spitting objectionable; before submitting their work, they likely showed it to friends, family, or teachers; and they may have spent time learning about germ theory and the spread of disease during their creative process. All of these actions further propagated anti-spitting ideology while also making it seem as if health experts had taken a back seat.

Anti-spitting posters eventually became so common that at least one company saw them as an opportunity. The Domino Card Company of St. Louis marketed decorations, greeting cards, and games to a national market during the early twentieth century. In 1908, the company latched onto the anti-spitting movement by marketing an “attractive, unique, hanger card which warn[ed] against spitting nuisances.” Customers could mail the company a two-cent stamp and get the card in return; the company promised “People will take notice of this card and once seen, never forgotten.” Perhaps the most impressive facet of Domino’s anti-spitting campaign was its extent; ads showing up under the headline “The Anti-Spitting Crusade” appeared in newspapers throughout the country, from Colorado to Kentucky. One Kentucky newspaper, the *Clay City Times*, featured Domino’s ad nearly every week for six months. Of course, it is possible that the Domino Company had a relationship with a local or national health organization and was encouraged by them to

²⁷ No title, Fayetteville, New York *Bulletin*, Nov. 10, 1911.

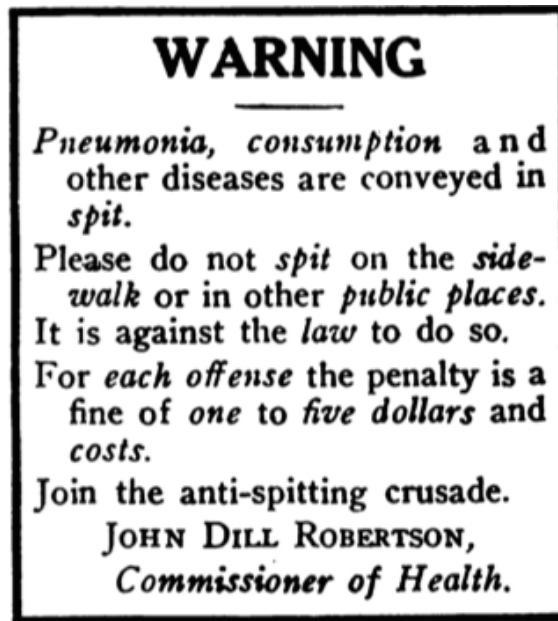
²⁸ “Prize Offered for Best Anti-Spitting Sign,” Fayetteville, New York *Bulletin*, Feb. 20, 1914.

produce the cards, but that is not apparent in extent information about the company. Instead, it seems most likely that someone at Domino saw the proliferation of anti-spitting material through posters and other means as a business opportunity. And while a lack of company information precludes an estimate of sales, we can assume at least some people purchased the cards. Again, therefore, the Domino campaign reveals the spread of a reform-based, “expert” idea into mass society. Indeed, as health departments continue to push anti-spitting messages and the general public and private companies joined up, it seemed more and more that anti-spitting was a popular ideal.²⁹

Despite anti-spitters’ majority building emphasis, however, a primary object of anti-spitting propaganda remained direct confrontation of public expectorators. Hoping to emphasize the confrontation without necessarily wielding state force through arrest, a number of anti-spitting advocates supported using volunteers to hand anti-spitting cards to spitters immediately following their offense. While a number of cities adopted this strategy, the most vociferous proponent of it was Chicago’s Commissioner of Health, John Dill Robertson. Robertson was something of an anti-spitting fanatic. In one publication he fulminated, “Indiscriminate spitting is an inexcusable, vicious habit. It is a dirty, disgusting habit. Most people have it.” Frustrated with years of sporadic enforcement of Chicago’s anti-spitting ordinance, Robertson complained that “people continue[d] to spit and thereby spread contagious diseases.” He subsequently devised a tactic in which employees of the Department of Health would patrol the streets of Chicago; when an employee saw someone spit, he or she would spray the sidewalk with a “disinfecting apparatus” and hand the offender a card explaining the dangers of public spitting. Robertson was clearly excited that his plan would finally solve the persistent public spitting issue. “Just as a starter,” he wrote, “one hundred thousand of these cards were printed for distribution.”

²⁹ “The Anti-Spitting Crusade,” Wray, *Colorado Rattler*, Jun. 26, 1908; “The Anti-Spitting Crusade,” Clay City, *Kentucky Times*, May 7, 1908.

Department of Health employees were also instructed to hand cards to spectators whenever they noticed an offense.³⁰



During the spring of 1918, employees of Chicago's Department of Health handed out 100,000 of these cards to spitters and those bystanders of a spitting offense.³¹

Of course, John Dill Robertson did not represent any kind of mass movement. He was a significantly influential figure in Chicago's government and directed one of the largest public health departments in the United States for seven years.³² His strategy, however, reinforced the conception that municipal governments had to do more than simply exert their will through arrests and fines. By handing cards to offenders and making a great scene of spraying spit from the sidewalk, Robertson's employees forced the public to take note of a spitter. Like circulars and posters, the strategy relied on education but also on shame and embarrassment. In other words, seemingly educational tactics like Robertson's were still punishments, but they publically punished individuals' egos more than privately punishing their bodies and wallets in a court or police station.

³⁰ John Dill Robertson, "An Anti-Spitting Crusade," *The American City* XVIII, 3 (Mar. 1918), 237.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² "Robertson and Keith Quit Jobs in City Cabinet," *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 2, 1922.

Further, the messages circulated through health departments' publications constantly called for mass support. To better understand how they did that, an examination of several consistent themes in anti-spitting messages is necessary. Not surprisingly, one of those themes was health as the ultimate stake of anti-spitting. One poster produced by the NTA graphically detailed the dangers of spitting: in it, a man spits onto a sidewalk and unwittingly unleashes a massive, dark cloud into the sky as a family cowers. "Protect Your Family," says the poster, "Spitting Spreads Disease."³³ Another simply depicts a glob on spit and commands its viewers, "Stop – Don't Spit on the Floor."³⁴ Some organizations used spitting's relationship to the spread of disease as a way of making the habit seem like a relic of ancient, backward times. The authors of *A Public Revolt Against Spitting* wrote that "Promiscuous spitting is as bad for a town as an ancient market-place wherein a leper sat and sold fruits to his neighbors." As if to compound the depiction of spitters as anti-modern disease carriers, the authors wrote that spitting was actually worse than leper fruit dealers, as "neighbors could refuse to buy from the leper," but nobody can avoid the effects of promiscuous spitting.³⁵

Others in this mold more dramatically emphasized the stakes of public health. Posters throughout Walla Walla, Washington stated that "A world without careless spitters would soon be a world without consumption," while the Virginia Anti-Tuberculosis Association distributed posters stating that "Hundreds Die of Consumption Because Spitting Spreads Disease."³⁶ Perhaps the most poignant use of this tactic came from the Michigan Association for the Prevention and Relief of Tuberculosis. Throughout the organization's 1910 annual report, members fulminated over the persistence of spitting in their state. In their frustration, they preached devotion to education in all matters of public health, particularly regarding health conscious behaviors like

³³ *A Public Revolt Against Spitting*, 32.

³⁴ *Bulletin of the National Tuberculosis Association* VIII, 7 (Jul. 1922), 47.

³⁵ *A Public Revolt Against Spitting*, 17.

³⁶ "Anti-Spitting Ordinances to be Rigidly Enforced," Quincy, Illinois *Daily Journal*, Feb. 2, 1911; "Spitting Spreads Disease: Hundreds Die From Consumption Because Spitting Spreads Disease," Box 36, Folder 32, American Lung Association of Virginia Records, Claude Moore Health Sciences Library, University of Virginia.

refraining from spitting. “Education is the chief thing,” the group’s physician members wrote, “education is the knowledge of disease and its prevention, but still more necessary is the moral education to offset and replace the selfishness, lethargy and apathy that make tuberculosis possible when the facts concerning its prevention are known.” And while education in the basics of bacteriology was significant, little compared to testifying to “one of the new commandments”: that was, of course, “Thou shalt not spit.” In light of bacteriology, the physicians argued, spitting “may mean murder.”³⁷

The effect of health-minded messages was to alter the stakes of what many had considered a benign, if annoying, habit. They forced spitters to take responsibility for the entire community’s health and thus reconfigured anti-spitting as a question of citizenship. Other posters did this more overtly. The theme of communal responsibility dominated among the nearly two dozen anti-spitting slogans used by the Marion County, Indiana Tuberculosis Association. These included calls to action such as the rather passionless, “Help make spitting unpopular in Indianapolis,” or the more direct “Keep the city clean – Don’t spit.”³⁸ The aforementioned Rochester Public Health Association mastered the citizenship technique in its mass meeting program, which asked readers, “Do you know your personal responsibility” for public health?³⁹ The RPHA also distributed cards to spitters on public transit, sidewalks, and in buildings that explained how spitting spread disease and noted, “Every gentleman will obey the law and respect the rights of the other.” Members of the RPHA saw it as their duty to hand cards to spitters so as to inform each man “of his duty to his fellow citizens.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Michigan Society for the Prevention and Relief of Tuberculosis, *Third Annual Report of the Michigan Association for the Prevention and Relief of Tuberculosis* (Ann Arbor: 1910), 209, 179.

³⁸ “Slogans for Anti-Spitting Campaign,” Marion County Tuberculosis Association (April, 1925) Collection no. MO910, Indiana Historical Society.

³⁹ Rochester Public Health Association, *Book of Tuberculosis Talkettes & Programme for Anti-Spitting Crusade Mass Meeting of the Rochester Public Health Association* (Rochester: 1910), 2.

⁴⁰ “Anti-spitting Law,” Watertown, New York *Re-Union*, Jan. 22, 1910.

The RPHA's use of gendered language on its spitting cards pointed to another important trend in anti-spitting propaganda. Although of course anyone could spit, the habit was most commonly associated with men. Time after time, anti-spitters attempted to frame spitting as a habit of uncouth, ignorant, or disrespectful men; those who refrained earned the title of "gentleman." In *A Public Revolt Against Spitting*, a section recommending strategies for speaking to friends and neighbors about spitting urged readers to repeat, "So long as men like you and I think we are perfectly well, and licensed to do as we please, will these diseases continue to keep the undertaker busy."⁴¹ Several pages later, the authors noted that "self-respecting men...believe [spitting] is a vile and unlovely habit."⁴² In a move reminiscent of the Domino Card Company's anti-spitting cards, the Electro Mechanical Company of Cleveland produced slides for movie theaters with the slogan, "If you expect to rate as a gentleman, you will not expectorate on the floor."⁴³ The Denver Tuberculosis Society attempted to reach a broader audience by driving a truck through the streets that brandished a large sign reading "Be a Good Fellow, Don't Spit on the Streets."⁴⁴ Finally, an internal memo between chairmen of the National Tuberculosis Association suggested getting "some man to address the men's organizations" on the topic of anti-spitting, which was a "man-sized job among men."⁴⁵

The collective message of these strategies was that respectable gentleman cared for their communities, took pride in their public deportment, and always tempered their habits. Those who would not, or could not, control themselves in such a way were inferior: they were not gentlemen, they were not contributors to the public good. Even ancient lepers would struggle to relate to their injurious practices. By deploying such rhetoric

⁴¹ *A Public Revolt Against Spitting*, 13.

⁴² *Ibid*, 18.

⁴³ Electro Mechanical Company, "If You Expect to Rate as a Gentleman, you will not expectorate on the floor." Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division; <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a14314/>; accessed July 22, 2013.

⁴⁴ *Bulletin of the National Tuberculosis Association*, n.a., n.d., Box 303, Folder 11, American Lung Association of Virginia Records, Claude Moore Health Sciences Library, University of Virginia.

⁴⁵ "A Public Revolt Against Spitting," n.a., n.d., Box 305, Folder 25, American Lung Association of Virginia Records, Claude Moore Health Science Library, University of Virginia.

and reason, anti-spitters proved themselves to be well versed in the concept majority power. Indeed, they wielded their power in ways that would have seemed familiar to Alexis de Tocqueville eighty years earlier. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville's personified majority told its dissenters, "You are free not to think as I do; your life, your goods, everything remains to you; but from this day on, you are a stranger among us."⁴⁶ Spitters in communities saturated by posters, circulars, and seemingly endless other forms of anti-spitting messages understood what their habit (putatively) did to the community; to continue doing it, in the minds of anti-spitters and their expanding roster of supporters, precluded their enjoyment of communal acceptance. As the Marion County, Indiana Tuberculosis Association put it on one poster, "Away with the Careless Spitter."⁴⁷ The Chicago Tuberculosis Institute favored a more dehumanizing approach. They produced a postcard that showed "a swaggering boy" – showing all the potential of becoming a lifelong spitter – "spitting on the floor much to the horror of two little girls." More piercing than the girls' horror, however, was the caption, which read, "On the floor a dog doesn't spit...And people who know more than dogs – *they shouldn't – they shouldn't!*"⁴⁸

Public health, care for the community, and the affirmation of men's public roles: these were the stakes of anti-spitting propaganda. They were also the points around which anti-spitters rallied support. Most of the examples above come from state, county, or municipal organizations that distributed materials throughout their respective communities. While early attempts to educate communities, such as the New York Department of Health's multilingual circulars, were often loaded with information about the spread of disease, the three points examined here reveal a more pointed attack on public spitting. At stake was not simply the spread of germs, but the future of the community, the responsibilities of citizens, and manhood. These were themes that people outside of the medical community could understand and they pressured spitters to conform or be cast aside as parasites.

⁴⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago, 2000), 244.

⁴⁷ "Slogans for Anti-Spitting Campaign," Marion County Tuberculosis Association (April, 1925) Collection no. MO910, Indiana Historical Society.

⁴⁸ *A Public Revolt Against Spitting*, 12.

Perhaps the most common theme of all anti-spitting propaganda, however, was children. Because children represented the community at its most vulnerable as well as the very future of American society, they encapsulated all of the ideas inherent in other propagandistic messages. It became easy for anti-spitters to depict their nemeses as undeserving of consideration when displaying pictures of or explaining the vulnerabilities of children. For that reason, anti-spitting literature and propaganda is rife with depictions of vulnerable and innocent children. Some groups, like Indiana's Marion County Tuberculosis Association, used simple but penetrating slogans such as "Save the Children – Don't Spit."⁴⁹ In a postcard the was distributed in the pay envelopes of 25,000 industrial workers in Syracuse, New York, the city's health commissioner asked if citizens would not "Help protect the children" by spitting into toilets, rather than on sidewalks. Others relied on images of children, such as a National Tuberculosis Association poster that featured a small boy walking along the sidewalk and the slogan, "For my sake – Don't Spit!"⁵⁰ Another NTA poster carried the same slogan but included a picture of an infant innocently playing with a ball.



A poster produced by the National Tuberculosis Association depicted vulnerable children as the ultimate victims of spitting.⁵¹

⁴⁹ "Slogans for Anti-Spitting Campaign," Marion County Tuberculosis Association (April, 1925) Collection no. MO910, Indiana Historical Society.

⁵⁰ *A Public Revolt Against Spitting*, 31.

⁵¹ "For My Sake, Don't Spit," National Tuberculosis Association, Box 306, Folder 004, American Lung Association of Virginia Records, Claude Moore Health Sciences Library, University of Virginia.

Viewers familiar with the tropes of anti-spitting would recognize the dangers depicted in each poster. In the first, the small boy walks along a sidewalk where globs of thick tobacco spit could subsume his tiny shoes. In the second, the baby rolls a ball across a floor. Not only could the ball pick up the endless germs covering the floor, but at any second the precarious child could slip into a potentially spit-covered floor and quickly contract tuberculosis. To refrain from spitting, as these posters depicted it, was to promote public and private spaces where children could happily flourish. To spit, of course, was to poison those same spaces and endanger their innocent inhabitants.

Child-centered anti-spitting also targeted children themselves. The most convenient place to do this was in schools, where teachers in the early twentieth century were including lessons in bacteriology and health-conscious behaviors. In a piece for the tuberculosis-themed *Journal of the Outdoor Life*, a doctor named W.B. Stanton argued that all teachers should have a basic knowledge of bacteriology and must recognize that “most important in the prevention of tuberculosis as well as many other diseases, is thorough instruction in regard to spitting.” Stanton argued that teachers should especially take note of boys, “who soon learn the habit” of spitting upon entering school. He also reinforced the notion that “There is no necessity for a healthy person to spit,” and spitting children should immediately be examined for illnesses.⁵² If we accept the example of a group of school children in Fall River, Massachusetts, then Stanton’s message seems to have had at least some effect. One child there pointed out in a school report that “A careful person will never spit carelessly,” while another reported that one should “Never spit on the floors in the home, workshop, store or mill.”⁵³ A memo circulated among the chairmen of the National Tuberculosis Association recommended asking teachers “to have children write essays, have debates and make posters setting forth how diseases are spread by spitting,” while also handing out a tuberculosis pamphlet and emphasizing “the paragraphs dealing with the spitting evil.” In these

⁵² W.B. Stanton, “Tuberculosis and the School,” *Journal of the Outdoor Life* III, 3 (Apr. 1906), 119.

⁵³ John B. Hawes, “Educational Methods in the Anti-Tuberculosis Campaign,” *Massachusetts Medical Society Medical Communications* 21 (Jan. 1, 1908), 924.

examples, children's health lessons focused on a habit many of them had likely seen in their homes and communities. Thus, while teachers sought to instruct students out of the habit, their lessons also had the effect of using children to spread anti-spitting messages into homes.

To reinforce that practice, tuberculosis organizations recommended sending children home with anti-spitting literature. A number of organizations printed hundreds of thousands of flyers, circulars, and other documents that not only explained to children why spitting was bad, but also urged them to give the documents to parents and other family members. As one Brooklyn doctor explained, "little hand-bills are given to the children to take home, and they are urged to tell their parents what they have learned."⁵⁴ This tactic was especially important for children whose parents did not reach English and who may not have had access to other forms of anti-spitting literature.

Yet another method of using children for the dissemination of anti-spitting material turned out to be a good deal more controversial than sending children home with circulars. In 1904, Dr. Thomas Darlington, New York City's Health Commissioner, proposed using children to enforce the city's anti-spitting ordinance. Under his plan, approximately 500,000 children would carry cards that read: "Pupils warning card. You are violating the law against spitting. You are subject to imprisonment or fine, or both. By order of the Board of health."⁵⁵ Any time a child saw someone spit in public, they were to hand the offender the card. Darlington argued that his plan would succeed for two reasons. First, he believed the experience of being scolded by a child would be "more impressive" for the average spitter than the lessons "of any police magistrate." But his plan also recognized that each child was a potential spitter. "If we only succeed in getting children imbued with the necessity of obeying [anti-spitting]," said Darlington's secretary Harold Murray, "we have done something valuable." In other words, children acting as sanitary police would not only shock and embarrass spitters but

⁵⁴ Hester D. Jenkins, "Educational Work of the Brooklyn Anti-Tuberculosis Committee," *American Journal of Public Health* 7, 2 (Feb. 1917), 187 – 189.

⁵⁵ "Anti-Spitting Crusade," Geneva, New York *Daily Times*, Mar. 30, 1904.

also teach children the dangers and shame of spitting. Darlington intentionally targeted New York's east side, which would allow the Board of Health to use the neighborhood's half million children in the project of improving "sanitary conditions among the ignorant immigrants" there.⁵⁶

While Darlington's proposal had the support of New York's Board of Education, resistance was otherwise quite strong. One New Yorker opined that acting as state agents was "entirely without the province of school children," and would likely "be attended with most distressing results."⁵⁷ By sending children into the streets as agents of the health board, the city's government was subjecting them to "harsh reproof" as well as "certain insult...and to possible injury." While Darlington tried to refute such arguments by noting that children on Manhattan's east side were especially "sharp and keen," children's parents openly challenged the proposal.⁵⁸ Bowing to the pressure, Henry Rodgers, the president of the city's Board of Education and an early supporter of the proposal, changed his mind. While Rodgers was "heartily in favor" of Darlington's "efforts to end a dangerous nuisance," he finally concluded that it would not be "advisable to ask school children to approach strangers whom they saw spitting in public places and hand them the warning cards."⁵⁹ New York's *Evening Telegram* picked up on the dangers of children acting as anti-spitting police; in its March 24 edition, the newspaper ran a cartoon depicting possible outcomes of the "sanitary tots" plan. In the cartoon, a matronly teacher hands a smiling young boy a packet of anti-spitting cards and sends him to his fate. The boy approaches a series of men spitting long trails of black juice, and in each case attempts to hand the offender a card. Rather than taking the cards or ignoring the boy, however, each man assaults him. One boots him into the horizon; another picks him up and shakes the anti-spitting cards from his coat; a third swats him with an umbrella. In

⁵⁶ "Won't Let Tots Be Sanitary Police," *New York Evening Telegram*, Mar. 23, 1904.

⁵⁷ "Not the Child's Province," *New York Evening Telegram*, Mar. 24, 1904.

⁵⁸ "Won't Let Tots Be Sanitary Police," *New York Evening Telegram*, Mar. 23, 1904.

⁵⁹ "President Rogers and Club Women Against Tots as 'Sanitary Police,'" *New York Evening Telegram*, Mar. 24, 1904.

each case a great puddle of spit remains and the boy is finally left tearful, beaten, and bloodied, with a pile of anti-spitting cards by his feet.⁶⁰



A cartoon in New York's Evening Telegram illustrated the potential dangers of children's enforcing anti-spitting ordinances.⁶¹

In the face of such pressure, Darlington's plan fizzled. Nonetheless, in the years to come other cities experimented with slightly modified versions of the strategy. During the 1925 Cortland County, New York fair, young children "dressed to represent health crusaders" patrolled the fairgrounds and handed out anti-spitting cards.⁶² Earlier that year, Cortland's Boy Scouts assisted the city's anti-spitting campaign by patrolling downtown "with mops and pails [and] cleaning up the places where careless persons [had] expectorated on the walks and streets."⁶³ One year later, Syracuse health commissioner Thomas Farmer gave "Five pretty Junior League girls" badges that authorized them to "warn people on the streets not to spit." Farmer also went on the radio to let the people of Syracuse know that the Boy Scouts would be distributing 400 anti-spitting posters throughout the city; "I want to ask everyone to whom those boys appeal," Farmer said, "to permit them post up

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² "Aug. 13, 1925," Cortland, New York *Standard*, Aug. 13, 1925.

⁶³ "Public Health Demonstration," Cortland, New York *Standard*, May 6, 1925.

one of these posters in their places of business or their factory.”⁶⁴ Indeed, even in the wake of Darlington’s 1904 plan, cities continued to see children as not only symbols, but also actors in their anti-spitting campaigns. In some cases, children were still encouraged to approach spitters and put themselves at risk for public health. For the most part, however, even as they entered the public, children’s roles were not quite so confrontational. As with the Boy Scouts in Syracuse, they were used to distribute materials, to put an innocent public face on the anti-spitting campaign, and in the process to educate themselves about the dangers of spitting.

One rather elaborate example of those tactics came in Hartford, Connecticut during the fall of 1921. In the weeks before initiating his city’s anti-spitting campaign, Edward Hooker, president of the Hartford Society for the Prevention of Tuberculosis, told reporters that he wanted to “bring home to everyone” the importance of challenging “a habit that, unfortunately, is indulged in by many persons.”⁶⁵ In order to do just that, Hooker organized an anti-spitting parade that marched through downtown Hartford. A marching band provided music while representatives from various city health organizations walked along with the city’s Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and dozens of floats projected anti-spitting and related health messages. If the parade had gone off with the health organization members marching but without the company of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the effect would have been a good deal less impressive. But as in so many other cases, the children of Hartford marching in an anti-spitting parade represented the good will, innocence, and compassion that anti-spitters hoped would define their movement. Further, it would show the broad public support they enjoyed and further alienate the spitting public.

By this point, it is likely clear that reformers experimented with a number of strategies in their efforts to build popular support for anti-spitting. In many cases, reform organizations used designated days or weeks to saturate communities in anti-spitting propaganda. During the average anti-spitting day or week, communities would be flooded with posters and circulars, editorials, and speeches explaining the dangers of spitting. Buffalo,

⁶⁴ *A Public Revolt Against Spitting*, 28, 14.

⁶⁵ “The Anti-Spitting Campaign,” *The Hartford Courant*, Nov. 26, 1921.

New York was an early example when it hosted an anti-spitting day in 1916.⁶⁶ In 1920, Syracuse promoted a twist on the week idea with its “Spot the Spitter Week,” which adopted many of the strategies discussed in this paper: the posting of thousands of posters throughout the city; school children sent home with directions for how they can “spot the spitter,” and how harmful his presence is to the community; and the distribution of pertinent materials in the city’s “factories, public buildings, and stores.”⁶⁷

By 1925, the “week” idea had become so popular that the National Tuberculosis Association organized a “National Anti-Spitting Week.” The NTA planned to work through local branches to encourage the spread of anti-spitting information and increased enforcement of ordinances. Unfortunately, the NTA’s plan followed soon after the publication of Sinclair Lewis’s novel of Progressive medicine, *Arrowsmith*. In the book, Lewis lampooned anti-spitting weeks as part of a broader trend in which a “church or chamber of commerce or charity,” seeking “to improve itself, which means to get more money,” gathers the collective forces of municipal authority to do just that, all under the guise of charity or community.⁶⁸ Dr. Arrowsmith’s fictional town of Nautilus hosted themed weeks such as “a Write to Mother Week, a We Want Your Factory in Nautilus Week, an Eat More Corn Week, a Go to Church Week...and an Own Your Own Auto Week.” And, of course, prominent among all of those weeks came “Stop the Spitter Week.”⁶⁹ In Lewis’s telling, organized anti-spitting campaigns were ridiculous at best, and at worst served to further the careers of vapid, power hungry fools like Dr. Arrowsmith’s boss, Almus Pickerbaugh.

Lewis was not wrong. Organizations such as the National Tuberculosis Association and their associated branches clearly enjoyed the influence, attention, and financial support anti-spitting brought them. For example, to support the NTA’s Public Revolt Against Spitting campaign in 1926, health authorities in Syracuse paid the

⁶⁶ “Anti-Spitting Campaign,” *Buffalo Evening News*, Feb. 1, 1916.

⁶⁷ “Anti-Spitting Drive Begins in Syracuse,” *Syracuse Daily Journal*, Nov. 21, 1920.

⁶⁸ Sinclair Lewis, *Arrowsmith* (New York: 1925, 2008), 221.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 222.

NTA \$223.52 for items such as posters, circulars, and a “paint-pail with skull and cross-bones.”⁷⁰ That total did not include other expenses, such as paying for two NTA representatives to travel to Syracuse and supervise the entire campaign. In other words, anti-spitting campaigns relied on a perception of mass support while garnering attention for the few organizations that put them together. Whether they were spreading a gospel of germ theory in multiple languages, shaping expectations of men in the public sphere, or assembling armies of children to reprimand spitters, expert-led organizations seemed to benefit most from popular support of anti-spitting.

Nonetheless, if we look at the case of women within anti-spitting campaigns, it becomes apparent that they were able to use the topic as a means of gaining a political foothold in communities throughout the United States. From the outset, the question of spitting seemed like an issue of particular importance for women. For one, as discussed earlier, the habit was strongly associated with men; they were the ones who enjoyed spitting, while others, particularly women, had to suffer its effects. One Lincoln, Nebraska writer pointed out the potential political problems with this imbalance in 1900: frustrated by the city’s “idle dirty men” and “tobacco chewers” for whom life seemed like “one long loaf, and chew,” the writer pointed out that “Women are large taxpayers in Lincoln and there is a great injustice in allowing a few hundred men to make the walks impassable for them.” However, despite paying taxes and contributing to the city’s industry and economy, women were forced to walk “through filth, that if men wore skirts, would be cleaned off the walks and stay cleaned off.”⁷¹ The writer’s argument evinced an important fact of life in the new American century that few could ignore: despite the persistence of separate sphere ideology, women were unquestionably assuming public roles. They paid taxes to cities and states; they earned wages; and they contributed to burgeoning consumer economies. Yet the spit-stained sidewalks of American cities revealed that despite their public roles, governments struggled, or simply refused, to protect an interest as basic as women’s health. Because men enjoyed spitting, the Nebraska writer argued, it continued.

⁷⁰ *A Public Revolt Against Spitting*, 30.

⁷¹ “Cleanliness,” *The Courier* (Lincoln, NE), Oct. 27, 1900.

Yet because it continued, women also were able to use spitting as an opportunity to shape municipal and state politics during the Progressive Era as well as the very nature of cities in the new century. As Sarah Deutsch has argued, “Women did more than respond to shifts in urban geography....They took a hand in altering the map of the city and in defining its meaning.”⁷² Indeed, women during the early twentieth century disputed the “dominant, idealized sexual division of urban space” in part because that division led to conditions such as spit-soaked sidewalks that were at best disgusting, and at worst breeders of tuberculosis. Moreover, much of their work was carried out in the years before suffrage; thus, women used anti-spitting to hone democratic strategies beyond party association and voting.

One way women did this was by organizing anti-spitting campaigns as part of broad reform strategies. Groups such as the branches of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the Sorosis Society, or the Women’s Health Protective League petitioned governments for the passage of anti-spitting ordinances, designed campaign posters and circulars, and ensured public knowledge of anti-spitting. And while women’s organizations were extremely active regarding a variety of issues, anti-spitting proved to be a particularly cohesive issue for reform-minded women with otherwise differing interests. For example, the Cook County, Illinois League of Women’s Clubs, which brought together reformers of various stripes, organized a Chicago “anti-spitting war” in 1904. Although this “war” took place a decade before Illinois women won the right to vote, it revealed a number of methods of participation that women throughout the country adopted. Aside from broad organization, the League used city newspapers to publicize their mission; they sent letters to railway and municipal officials; and they charged municipal authorities with a challenge to “Shame [men] out of the habit” by handing them rebuking cards after they spat. The war displayed women’s political clout as well, as both Chicago’s mayor and police chief promised a prompt reassertion of anti-spitting.⁷³ In part, this reaction came

⁷² Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870 – 1940* (New York: 2000), 4.

⁷³ “Open Anti-Spitting War,” *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 28, 1904.

after women's organizations made sure to publicize their activities in the city's newspapers. In a similar effort, the Klamath Falls, Oregon Women's Christian Temperance Union turned to the newspapers where they publically declared the city's public walks "revolting." In the face of such complaints, inaction of the part of public officials would have appeared unresponsive, sluggish, and irresponsible.⁷⁴ Indeed, when women reminded the public of the stakes of anti-spitting, particularly regarding children's health, inaction became even more reprehensible.

As anti-spitting ideology became more pervasive, women supporting it continued to hone their use of the public forum to motivate change. In Quincy, Illinois, the local Woman's League placed signs and posters in the various locales "where men congregate and make a nuisance of themselves by spitting on the walks." Before doing so, however, the League made a show of asking the city's mayor for permission; that tactic made the entire operation seem civil and within the boundaries of prescribed medical authority, but it also forced the mayor to publically support anti-spitting. Perhaps even more than his personal support, however, was the mayor's suggestion that the women be sure "to first secure permission from the property owners in front of whose property the signs are to be placed." That suggestion essentially forced a coalition of business owners to fall in line behind the women's anti-spitting efforts or seem in opposition to public health. Thus, although the city's Woman's League had formed only a year earlier, anti-spitting and a simple plan to support it through a poster campaign led to the development of an ad hoc anti-spitting coalition.⁷⁵ In the following weeks, an editorial in the city's newspaper praised the women's efforts. "If the Woman's League never does anything else in Quincy except to cure the spitting evil," the author wrote, "its existence is amply justified." Looking forward, he concluded that women's efforts had raised public expectations and that "women must see to it that [spitting] has no resurrection." In other words, the women of Quincy, Illinois had succeeded in shaping the spaces and politics of their city while also securing responsibilities within those fields.

⁷⁴ "Declare War on Spitting," *The Klamath Falls Evening Herald*, Dec. 14, 1914.

⁷⁵ "Women to Help Enforce Law," *Quincy, Illinois Daily Journal*, Mar. 2, 1907.

In fact, one of the most significant points about women's political engagement through anti-spitting was the expectations and responsibilities public officials placed on women's groups. As early as 1902, Ernst J. Lederle, the president of New York City's Board of Health, argued that "the abolition of the spitting habit indulged in by so many men...rest[ed] in a large extent with the women of the city."⁷⁶ Lederle suggested that women inform streetcar conductors or police officers when they saw a spitting offense; if the official failed to respond, he suggested women write letters to the officers' supervisors. Lederle's suggestion presented a rather complex notion of women's responsibilities. On the one hand, the entire abolition of the habit was up to them, but on the other hand they had to turn to men for recourse.

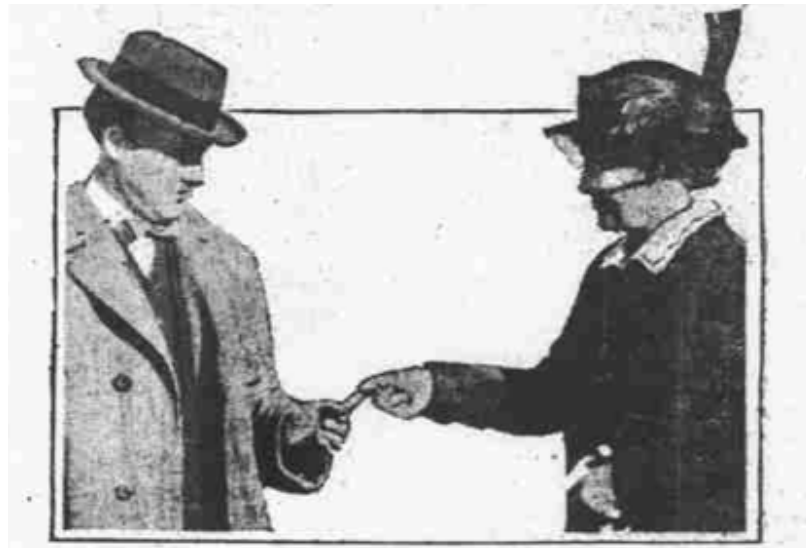
Recognizing such an inconsistency, a number of women's groups throughout the United States opted for a more direct solution in which women openly challenged spitters by handing them cards detailing the dangers of public spitting. Like the New York City plan to have children distribute anti-spitting cards, the strategy was not without controversy. One Chicago reporter, writing in the *Tribune's* "Society" section, noted that "zealous" Women's City Club had "asked a member – a prominent, delicately natured social leader – to make it her business to go up and down the land in the west side street cars and, whenever she saw a man spit...to inquire his name and address, inscribing the same in a book." The writer described such a task as "voluntary martyrdom" and concluded that the woman rightly abandoned reform work rather than risk her safety or reputation in so brazenly confronting the male spitting public.⁷⁷

Yet such complaints were actually quite rare. In Chicago, Indianapolis, Omaha, New York, Syracuse, and countless other cities women took to streetcars and sidewalks to reprimand male spitters. Chicago's police chief designed proclaimed anti-spitters as an "auxiliary to the regular force" after the city's Federation of Women's Clubs petitioned him for the right to enforce the anti-spitting ordinance. During the spring and

⁷⁶ "It Rests with Women," *New York Daily-Tribune*, Jun. 4, 1902.

⁷⁷ Mme. X, "Events in Society Circles," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 29, 1911.

summer of 1910, women in Chicago handed out 10,000 anti-spitting cards as the city's auxiliary police force.⁷⁸ In fact, even in 1910 the idea of female enforcement of anti-spitting was not new. In 1904, a group of women in the city's Ravenswood neighborhood sought to support police enforcement of anti-spitting by wearing bells that identified them as anti-spitting crusaders. Anytime "a violation of the law [was] threatened" on the streetcars or sidewalks, the women would ring the bell and alert spectators, as well as nearby police, that someone had spit.⁷⁹ Handing out anti-spitting cards or ringing bells upon witnessing violations illustrated the striking public presence and authority that anti-spitting women claimed. Not only were they taking responsibility for public health, but they were also reprimanding men for their behavior. Few examples of Progressive Era women's reform efforts so clearly illustrate the ways women during the period established a public presence and exerted political authority before earning the right to vote.



A woman in Omaha, Nebraska reprimanded a spitter by handing him a card detailing the dangers of spitting. During 1916, Omaha women handed out nearly 100,000 such cards.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ "Chicago Women Police," *The Evening Statesman* (Walla Walla, Washington), Mar. 10, 1910.

⁷⁹ "Make First Six Arrests in Anti-Spitting Crusade," *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 3, 1904.

⁸⁰ "Omaha Woman Launches Campaign to Cure Danger-Spreading Spitting Habit," *The Day Book* (Chicago, IL), February 26, 1916.

When the right to vote came, however, anti-spitting continued to influence women's political presences. During the first election after Illinois women won suffrage, for example, seven women vied for seats on the Chicago Board of Aldermen. Reporters around the nation covered the race, but as one noted, "the suffrage vote played an even more important part in the...wards that offered no women candidates." That was because male candidates for office who had once "discarded quids of tobacco and squirted streams of juice recklessly" quickly recognized that the expanded electorate had redefined the standards of deportment for elected officials. No longer did women just patrol the streets; the vote gave them a type of authority by which elected officials would have to listen or risk their jobs. Apparently even Mayor Carter Harrison was not immune: as one newspaper put it, when "[t]he official word that 158,026 women had registered at their first opportunity had scarcely been given out" Harrison ordered the city's police to begin "making wholesale arrests of persons who expectorated on the sidewalk."⁸¹

Women were thus able to use anti-spitting for more than the prohibition of a single act. While organizations such as the National Tuberculosis Association pumped resources into anti-spitting and used strategies such as mass-meetings, propaganda campaigns, and childhood education to build majority support, women capitalized on the momentum and claimed positions of authority within their communities. At the same time, anti-spitting was one of many issues that helped women forge organizational structures that became essential upon winning suffrage.

On March 13, 1926, a writer for the Syracuse, New York Journal opined, "When everybody believes that spitting spreads disease – that well people can spread it – there will be a public revolt against it. So popular was that phrase, "a public revolt," that the city's local health agency adopted it as the title for the Syracuse anti-spitting campaign. And while the Syracuse campaign seemed to emanate from rousing, organic public support,

⁸¹ "Chicago Women to Polls for First Time in History," *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 24, 1914.

the directors of the National Tuberculosis Association knew differently. “Nowhere along the route did a guiding hand appear in the Syracuse demonstration,” they wrote; “The representatives of the National Tuberculosis Association were not known even to the newspaper editors – all publicity copy passing through the regular channels effectively established by [the] publicity director of the Syracuse Health Demonstration.” In other words, the Syracuse campaign had been orchestrated by an influential national organization while seeming to rise out of the community. “The importance of having such a ‘revolt’ appear from a gesture by the local health agency can not be overestimated,” wrote a member of the NTA. “Thus,” he continued, “public opinion on the subject may be crystallized, so that later activities by unofficial organizations seem to have justification in an act of the lawfully constituted authorities.”⁸²

The NTA and similar organizations represented the “expert” led Progressive society that so many historians have depicted. And while they recognized the need for public support, their Syracuse strategy seems to belie a desire for control. The conclusion that experts cemented that control through anti-spitting, however, fails to take note of the political actors the campaigns inspired. Parents became frustrated with a Board of Health that would make their children police city streets and rebuffed the proposal; women took anti-spitting to a more active level and used it to establish new public roles; and the average people reading thousands of posters and circulars became empowered to take a stand in their communities. With those points in mind, the Progressive Era appears as a time of popular politics. Of course people without medical degrees were not experts in bacteriology, but they were able to draw on medical authority to cement their own political identities; they used expert knowledge to shape cities in ways that suited them.

⁸² *A Public Revolt Against Spitting*, 31.