

PROGRESSIVE ERA LEISURE AND CAPITALISM:  
FREEDOM, LICENSE, REFORM  
by Rebekah Barton

During the Progressive Era an unprecedented number of entertainments secured a place on the American social scene. Vaudeville, so prevalent in the 1890s, continued its popularity well into the first two decades of the twentieth century. Americans followed organized sports avidly, especially boxing and baseball. Exhibition bicycle races and a little later, motor car races, were common. Motion pictures quickly gained enormous popularity. Resorts provided centralized places for people to dance, swim, dine, attend nickel arcades, view races, hear live music, and see curiosities, all the while mingling with family and friends. In sum, play became a focused and very commercial venture that most people pursued with great enthusiasm.<sup>1</sup>

Leisure time, however, presented problems for many long comfortable with the traditional work ethic prevalent in the United States. What was considered acceptable recreation? How should society control leisure time? What were proper venues for leisure? What were acceptable interactions between men and women as they courted and what constituted courtship? One of the most popular forms of entertainment during the Progressive Era was the dance, and of the available entertainments, perhaps best reflected the struggle that society had with this modernization process. Commercialized dance allowed men and women to interact in an intimate way beyond the prying eyes of

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<sup>1</sup>See Donna R. Braden, *Leisure and Entertainment in America* (Chicago: Wicklander Printing, 1988); Ralph G. Giordano, *Fun and Games in Twentieth-Century America: A Historical Guide to Leisure* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003); John R. Kelly, *Leisure* (Englewood: Prentice-Hall, 1982); Richard Kraus, *Leisure in a Changing America: Multicultural Perspectives* (New York: Macmillan College Publishing Company, 1994); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

parents. New dances encouraged men and women to pair off and break the rules of traditional etiquette.

Concerns arising from issues such as these led many Americans to pursue social reforms in the early twentieth century. Behind the multitude of social reforms intent was varied, but efforts often focused on the preservation of moral codes in a rapidly-changing society. Many reformers pursued control and regulation of mass entertainment, successfully lobbying for and passing laws to do so. Yet social control efforts went beyond making laws to enforce behavior. Private institutions used other social control methods to influence, change, and shape behavior in their communities. Much has been written on Progressive Era entertainments, but more often than not the commercial aspects of these entertainments are given but a cursory analysis. Focus is given rather to the immigrant populations of large cities or to gender issues raised by women entering the workforce in larger numbers. Of course, it is virtually impossible to separate the different aspects of reformers' concerns regarding dancehalls. There are many concerns and they are far too intertwined. However, in this paper I propose that much of the reform efforts focused on entertainment during the Progressive Era was because of two major issues; that of the morality and benefit of entertainment as well as the commercial nature of it. Because of this specific reform focus, the distinctions between public and private began to blur.

"It has been said, with much semblance of truth, that the present age is 'amusement mad,'"<sup>2</sup> wrote one author in 1915. Apparently this was a view held in common. A visiting literary missionary from Russia expressed his view of Americans

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Young. *Character Through Recreation*, (Unknown place of publication: The American Sunday-School Union, 1915). 39.

when he said “. . . all without exception, rich and idle as well as poor and industrious, seek and demand daily amusements, gaiety, excitement, and keen impressions.”<sup>3</sup>

Federic Howe, the director the New York People’s Institute, noted that leisure pursuits had “sent the girl to the dance hall, the boy to the pool room, and the father to the saloon.”<sup>4</sup> Within these statements is a particular frenetic energy expressed by word choice. People are “amusement mad,” they “demand amusements,” and as such have been “sent” into a variety of public arenas away from their families. Americans were enjoying their new pastimes, yet there clearly were those who questioned whether this was wisdom.

This is not to suggest that leisure pursuits were condemned outright, simply that leisure was questioned on a variety of levels. Some felt that leisure was actually necessary for a properly functioning society and that play had its place in strengthening community ties, that it led to cooperation, and that to be a positive force in a community it had to be focused, moderated and controlled. This is a subject that was avidly addressed in the Progressive Era, by historians, sociologists, religious leaders and concerned citizens. It was linked to vice. “Leisure well used constitutes one of the greatest forces for human progress; misused it is the greatest menace to civilization. Most of the current problems of immorality and vice, such as intemperance, gambling, and prostitution, are essentially problems of the control of leisure.”<sup>5</sup> It was linked to the success of democracy. “The difference between virtue and vice as characteristic of a community, which means the success or failure of democracy, lies principally in the use

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Sullivan, *Our Times: The United States 1900 – 1925; The Turn of the Century*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926), 371.

<sup>4</sup> Frederic C. Howe, “Leisure,” *Survey* 31 (January 1914), 415.

<sup>5</sup> James Peyton Sizer, *The Commercialization of Leisure*, (Boston:Richard C. Badger, 1917), 79.

that the people make of their leisure.”<sup>6</sup> It was linked to personal character. “In our amusement life two ways lie before us. One is the safe path of rational recreation which we term *diversion*; the other is the path of the over-indulgence in pleasure, or *dissipation*. When dissipation takes the place of diversion, then that which was made to be a blessing becomes a curse.”<sup>7</sup> It was linked to national ethics. “The moral detriment of the unrestrained amusement life is such that those interested in the preservation of national ethics and purity cannot but declare themselves in favor of a more careful discrimination in the forms of amusement being set before the rising generation.”<sup>8</sup>

“Man reveals himself most fully in his worship and his play.”<sup>9</sup> So wrote the Secretary of The Playground Association in the early nineteen-teens, an association that would try to be the leader in defining moral amusements and acceptable venues, not the least of which was dance. The Playground Association of American published its “Constructive Creed” in 1910. In addition to addressing issues such as delinquency and health, the Creed also spoke of morality being “developed by providing good substitutes for undesirable forms of recreation,” and that “Good citizenship is promoted by forming habits of cooperation in play.”<sup>10</sup> Note that three primary points are being addressed here: First morality, second its relationship to recreation, and third the belief that guiding the first two will contribute to good citizenship. Equally as interesting is the fact that the Creed goes on to address Community spirit, which the writers maintain “is

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<sup>6</sup> Sizer, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Young, 53.

<sup>8</sup> Young, 50-51.

<sup>9</sup> Quoting Howard S. Braucher, first full time Secretary of The Playground Association of America. Hilmi Ibrahim, *Pioneers in Leisure and Recreation*, (Reston: AAHPERD, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> The Playground Association of America, “Constructive Creed.” *Playground* Vol III, No. 5 (August 1919), 89.

more easily developed through play in which all the members of the community may share.”<sup>11</sup> A fourth layer has been added, that of the idea that good citizenship is more easily created and practiced in an inclusive and intimate community setting.

Just a couple of month’s later, in October 1910, The Playground Association of America began to address the “dance problem” in its publication, “The Playground,” an issue that continued to be discussed in this medium for many years “The cry has gone up from one end of the country to the other that the girls go into the dance halls.”<sup>12</sup> From our modern perspective the fact that girls went dancing does not seem alarming, so why the “cry?” Of all the avidly pursued pastimes, dance received a surfeit of scrutiny and reform effort. “The extremes to which this pleasure mania has gone during recent months have called forth large comment from newspapers, and the pulpit and platform as well, attracting general attention to the increasing popularity of this form of amusement.”<sup>13</sup> In October 1911 another article appeared in “The Playground.” “Need I remind you that this problem of public dancing has swept all over this country and assumed a seriousness that has filled many of us with alarm,”<sup>14</sup> wrote Mrs. Charles H. Israels, Chairman of the Committee on Amusements and Vacation Resources for Working Girls in New York City. Indeed the concern over dance was prevalent at the time. “The *public dance* also, because of certain features that seem to be inherent, may undermine virtue and work serious injury to a whole neighborhood.”<sup>15</sup> Concerns about dance halls were multi-faceted, but at the core were two main issues; the types of dances being performed and the commercial nature of the venue.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> The Playground Association of America, “The Dance Problem.” *Playground* Vol IV, No. 7 (October, 1910), 241.

<sup>13</sup> Young, 44-45.

<sup>14</sup> The Playground Association of America. “Dance” *Playground* Vol. V, No 7 (October, 1911), 45.

<sup>15</sup> Young, 54.

## HISTORY OF DANCE

Dance has long been a controversial subject in America. During the colonial period some groups banned dance altogether. Many Christian sects, particularly fundamentalists, at one time or another, used Biblical verse to ban dancing, raising fears of idolatry and the power of “the flesh.”<sup>16</sup> In the nineteenth century, figure dances and promenades were, for the most part, acceptable because they were formal dances with prescribed movements, requiring little contact between male and female dancers beyond the touching of hands. Couples did pair off in promenades, which consisted of stately movement around a room, but remained side by side and part of a group. The waltz and schottische, in contrast, were significantly more controversial. These round dances, named for the enclosed circle a couple makes by linking opposite arms, resemble an embrace and were thought to be highly scandalous. By the late 1880s these dances had become generally acceptable if couples followed strict criteria in keeping a prescribed space between their bodies and did not whirl about in an unseemly manner. In general, dances were held in community groups where either religious or community ties were close, and people at the dance knew one another or could vouch for close acquaintances.<sup>17</sup>

The advent of the dance hall and a wave of new dance music changed the landscape of social dance rather abruptly at the end of the nineteenth century. In the mid-1890s a new form of music became the rage, beginning in eastern American cities and quickly spreading across the country. Ragtime, a product of urban black culture,

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<sup>16</sup> See Ann Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance: From the Puritans to the Present* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> See Carol McD. Wallace, *Dance: A Very Social History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986).

had strong syncopated rhythms, and in contrast to much of the popular sentimental music of the late nineteenth century, was intended specifically for dancing. Ragtime “not only encouraged free interpretation of broadly prescribed steps, but, above all, emphasized the importance of the individual dancing couple rather than the entire social group.”<sup>18</sup> Ragtime, with its offbeat rhythms and “intoxicating” melodies led to new dances that utilized this exciting music by incorporating original moves: swaying, grinding, and hopping were common. The popularity of Ragtime was probably facilitated by the unprecedented availability of recorded music through phonographs and other mechanical music machines.<sup>19</sup>

If round dances had stoked controversy, new and much more provocative styles of dance intensified concern. The Tango, a Latin dance that was blatantly erotic, has at one point in the dance the woman lying supine in the man’s arms. The music for the Tango was believed to incite sexual passions. Perhaps even more disturbing were Animal Dances, also known as “menagerie,” or “tough” dances. They went by the names of the “Turkey Trot,” “Grizzly Bear,” “Monkey Glide,” “Snake Dip,” “Kangaroo Dip,” “Chicken Scratch,” “Camel Walk,” “Crab Step,” “Bunny Hug,” and “Lame Duck.” First danced in 1910 or 1911, they were set to music with faster beats and initiated close contact and speling (uncontrolled whirling around the dance floor). They were athletic, bouncy, and to many, shocking. During most of these dances the man clasped the woman close to him, often having entire torsos in contact. Such dancing was said to provoke animal sensuality. A 1914 cartoonist’s rendering of one Animal Dance,

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<sup>18</sup> Braden, 159-160.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. See also Larry Star and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MTV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 36-37.

shows a woman dancing with an orangutan; their limbs intertwined and bodies close.<sup>20</sup>

Condemned by various groups, Animal Dances were considered vulgar, obscene displays.<sup>21</sup> One writer, in reporting on a dancehall she attended, wrote, “the impression [is] of one wild orgy because of the perfectly unrestrained actions of those dancing.”<sup>22</sup> Despite public outcry these dances remained popular. The Animal Dance fads, originating in San Francisco’s Barbary Coast, a noted red-light district, gained acceptance in New York City and quickly spread to Chicago and Los Angeles, as well as smaller cities. Irving Berlin, in a 1911 song reflected popularity of such dances when he mentions a dance set to “funny music” that identifies a bear dancing.<sup>23</sup> Popularity did not translate to full acceptance by society. Reformers were concerned that the new modern dances were damaging the youth. But it was not just the dances that raised concern. The venues were also called into question.

## DANCE VENUES

By 1910, big cities across the United States saw a proliferation of small neighborhood dance halls. There were more than five hundred in New York, four hundred in Chicago, three hundred in San Francisco, and one hundred and thirty in Cleveland.<sup>24</sup> A few dance halls accommodated large numbers; of note were New York’s Roseland and Terrace Gardens, Coney Island halls, and Utah’s Saltair where

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<sup>20</sup> The sited picture drawn by artist John Sloan was found in Nasaw, p. 107. It was originally published in *The Masses*, a socialist journal that was suppressed in 1917.

<sup>21</sup> Many religious groups, including the Vatican, reacted strongly to modern dances. See Wallace, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Natalie D. Sonichsen of the New York moral reform agency “Committee of Fourteen” included this in her report. As quoted in Randy D. McBee, *Dance Hall Days: Intimacy and Leisure among Working-Class Immigrants in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 64.

<sup>23</sup> Song lyrics of Irving Berlin, “Every Body’s Doin’ It Now” (New York: Ted Snyder Co, Inc., 1911).

<sup>24</sup> Giordano, 12.

one thousand couples could dance on its open, spacious dance floor, the largest in the nation.

Dance venues took many forms. Amusement parks, created just before the turn of the century, contained both open air pavilions and dance halls, large and small. The parks, located on the outskirts of cities, drew masses of people: the old and young, and upper-middle and working classes. Dance was but one activity of many. In contrast dance palaces were located in the heart of the city. These large buildings were opulent, catered to the urban masses, and dedicated solely to the dance. More popular were the simple neighborhood dance halls catering to the working class and the dance academy where instructors sold their expertise.

Cabarets combined a saloon atmosphere with stage entertainment, dining, and dancing, creating an intimate setting where rich and working class people mingled with chorus girls. Many of these cabarets incited public censure when in 1912 they provided “tango teas,” which welcomed “unescorted women and furnish[ed] gigolos as dance partners. The spread of this practice prompted *Harper’s Weekly* to ask “Where Is Your Daughter This Afternoon?”<sup>25</sup>

Even more notorious were saloons. Saloons were a fixture in neighborhood life as not just places to drink alcohol, but also to house political activities, gambling, billiards, and dancing. Long an enclave of men, women who frequented saloons were either barmaids, entertainers, or prostitutes. After 1900 many saloons opened their doors to female customers, enticing them by offering public dancing on cleared areas near the bar. But the saloons’ primary business would always be the selling of liquor.

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<sup>25</sup> Carl J. and Dorothy Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900 – 1920* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 142. On cabarets see Star, 44.

According to historian Michael Kammen, the saloon culture declined in respectability as dance halls began to gain popularity, suggesting that only women of questionable morals sought the saloon for dancing purposes. This decline in saloon respectability preceded Prohibition, and was probably due to the efforts of prohibitionist groups such as the Anti-Saloon League.<sup>26</sup>

Taxi-dance halls were an off-shoot of the saloon culture. Generally women did not go to taxi-dance halls; men went and paid female workers to dance with them. For either a nickel or a dime men were assured a dance partner for one dance, usually lasting only two minutes. Dancing was incidental to drinking, as female workers “secured their income not from dancing, but upon the amount of liquor which they could persuade the patrons to buy.”<sup>27</sup> Taxi-dance halls first appeared in large East Coast cities in the nineteen-teens, but did not gain popularity until the 1920s.

Regardless of venue, dance was a big enterprise, both for those wanting to be entertained and those wanting to make money. Dance had been commercialized, and more often than not the main commercial activity was the selling of alcohol. “The saloon keeper who runs the dance hall” complained a writer in *The Playground* “has made it a rule that the dance is used distinctly as a bait to draw customers for drinking, and orders the musicians to play three minutes for dancing, and then stop fifteen minutes for intermission. During intermission if the dancers do not sit at the table and drink they must leave.”<sup>28</sup> Alcohol was an hotly contested issue of the Progressive Era, culminating in the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment. The subject of alcohol in these venues was not

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Kammen, *American Culture American Tastes: Social Change in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1999), 79.

<sup>27</sup> McBee, 57; quoting historian Paul Cressey.

<sup>28</sup> The Playground Association of America. “The Dance Problem.” *Playground* Vol IV, No. 7 (October, 1910), 243.

simply an issue of temperance, but rather a symptom of something greater, that of the impersonal nature of the commercial market, a place where one could purchase anonymity.

## THE MARKETPLACE OF LEISURE

To understand the profound effect that commercial ventures had during the Progressive Era, one must look farther back and explore the relationship Americans traditionally had with the marketplace. Inarguably much of the settling of America was a commercial venture, from the early days of tobacco, rice, and indigo cultivation of the mid-Atlantic and southern colonies, to the harvesting of natural resources for use in European production, to the growth of mercantilism in the north. Yet despite all of this very commercial activity, there was an underlying discomfort with some aspects of the marketplace. To characterize these discomforts, let us turn to The Pilgrim's Progress which at the turn of the century "ranked with the Bible as the best-read book in America, [and was] a standard catechism and mode of instruction."<sup>29</sup> Bunyan draws his inspiration for the marketplace, or in his words, Vanity Fair, from the book of *Ecclesiastes* in the Bible. The overriding theme of *Ecclesiastes* is that "all is vanity."<sup>30</sup> In this context vanity has to do with deceit, flattery, foolishness, haughtiness, hypocrisy, and pride. A direct correlation between the marketplace and what Christians would view as aspects of sin has been made. In Pilgrim's Progress the Pilgrims must pass

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<sup>29</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 101. Chapter 4 of this work is especially pertinent to the new mass consumption of the Gilded Age which not only carried over into the new century, but increased exponentially. I owe a debt of gratitude to Trachtenberg for presenting the link of Bunyan's work with the marketplace in the Gilded Age, and I am shamelessly 'piggy-backing' on his observations by narrowing my focus to a couple of Bunyan's main points about Vanity Fair.

<sup>30</sup> Bible, book of Ecclesiastes (King James version).

through Vanity Fair on their way to the Celestial City. Vanity Fair is a market where the Devil “contrived . . .to set up a Fair; a Fair, wherein should be sold all Sorts of Vanity, and that it should last all the year long; therefore, at this Fair, are all such merchandizes sold, as houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures; and delights of all sorts.”<sup>31</sup> Quite a list, yet if we focus only on the last part of the phrase, that of “lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts,” it is easy to make a comparison of this part of the marketplace to commercial leisure. When going through the marketplace, the Pilgrims look away from the wares and “look upwards, signifying, That their trade and traffick was in Heaven,”<sup>32</sup> alternately suggesting that the wares of the marketplace were from Hell

No doubt it is an overstatement to compare feelings in the Progressive Era about the marketplace and commercial leisure to the Pilgrims feelings about Vanity Fair in Bunyan’s work. However, it does illustrate that for most American’s with their Protestant sensibilities, the marketplace was viewed with some suspicion, especially when it directly affected members of their families and communities outside the realm of making a living.

This is not to suggest that there were not some very compelling ideas associated with the marketplace outside of material comfort and wealth. Mass consumerism certainly had clear democratic traits. Birth, education, position, or merit had little import in the marketplace. Anyone who could pay the price set had access to the commodity; or in the case of leisure activities, anyone who could pay the price of a ticket could enter the entertainment venue, whether it be movie house, arcade, or dance hall. In theory

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<sup>31</sup> Bunyan, John. *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. (New York:Barnes & Noble, 200), 102.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 105.

the lowest shop girl could rub shoulders with the richest of businessmen in such places. In what historian William Leach refers to as the “democratization of desire,” “all consumers are equal in the eyes of advertisers since they all have the same ability to partake in the fruits of consumerism.”<sup>33</sup> To take this idea one step further, in the eyes of proprietors, all consumers are desirable, as long as they can pay. It is with just this idea that many Progressive had a problem.

The marketplace and its accompanying consumerism was not a new concept in the Progressive Era. Consumption of leisure, or more specifically paying for leisure, was and did not sit well with many.<sup>34</sup> In part this was due to the prevalent belief that capitalism was “producing a distinct culture, unconnected to traditional family or community values. . . a secular business and market-oriented culture.”<sup>35</sup> In What Eight Million Women Want, published in 1910, author Rheta Childe Dorr wrote that young women are destroyed, both in body and soul “because the young are irresistibly drawn toward joy, and because we, all of us, good people, are busy people, indifferent people, unseeing people, have permitted *joy to become commercialized, have turned it into a commodity to be used for money profit* by the worst elements in society.”<sup>36</sup> Dorr was not alone in her concern about the commercialized nature of play. “I consider the public dance hall one of the greatest factors in the ruination of young men and women,” wrote an un-named social worker in 1918. This article goes on to list some “objectionable”

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<sup>33</sup> Julie Malnig, “Two-Stepping to Glory: Social Dance and the Rhetoric of Social Mobility, *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 277.

<sup>34</sup> I do not mean to overstate the idea that leisure had never had a dollar cost associated with it. However, it was not until the late Gilded Age and the Progressive Era that mass leisure and the accompanying cost was common. Before this time, dances, for instance, were community efforts that did not require money. The argument here is that leisure moved from being community or church events to primarily commercial events.

<sup>35</sup> William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 3.

<sup>36</sup> Italics added. Rheta Childe Door, *What Eight Million Women Want* (Small, Maynard & Co.:Boston, 1910), 228.

characteristics of dancing, most notably “The almighty dollar is the certain badge of respectability: the dancer who has the price is welcome, although he may be the vilest wretch in the land. Money is placed ahead of character or reputation.”<sup>37</sup> The idea that those who ran establishments providing leisure activities such as dance only cared for the profit they made is compelling. After all, why should a dance hall owner take it upon himself to monitor the behavior of his clientele? What benefit was there in that? Reformers were concerned by this. Who would guide society, who would provide the social control necessary to sculpt a moral social body when the marketplace sought only to trap consumers in their own Vanity Fairs? After all, “Commerce sees its opportunity to profit . . . Needless to say it will provide the amusement which costs less and which satisfies more quickly. . . If offered meat and sugar, a child will always choose sugar because the enjoyment of it is immediate, while the benefit of the meat is deferred. People attend questionable places because they are cheap, convenient, and easily appreciated.”<sup>38</sup> How were reformers to make sure that people were strengthened upon a diet of “meat” so that they did not weaken from the consumption of too much “sugar?”

Remembering that for the most part, Progressive reforms were conservative in nature and that the bulk of Progressives made a showing from the middle class, is it any wonder that they would view with suspicion a democratic marketplace as defined above? One of beliefs about leisure was that it could be a medium that not only entertained, but also created community ties, reinforced civic duties, and offered opportunities for the young and old alike to hone a variety of skills. “The concepts of

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<sup>37</sup> “How to Lessen Contributions to Crime,” *The Improvement Era* XXI (October 1918), 1091.

<sup>38</sup> James Peyton Sizer, *The Commercialization of Leisure*, (Boston: Richard C. Badger, 1917), 74.

freedom and choice are closely associates with those of democracy and leisure. Democracy assumes freedom; freedom assumes choice. But to be able to choose, man must have a trained intellect and be disciplined in choices pertinent not only to the good of himself but to the good of all.”<sup>39</sup> Reformers believed that people needed to be guided in their leisure, and that the venues for leisure needed to be reformed.

### NATIONAL REFORM MOVEMENTS

In 1922, sociologist Weaver Pangburn evaluated the entertainment of the previous decade. “It is true that an enormous patronage is given commercial recreation, but the wholesomeness of much of it is in frequent question.”<sup>40</sup> It was a question asked often by religious authorities and social reformers during the Progressive era. Social reformers focused on dance halls and dancing because they believed that of the new leisure activities, dancing best revealed changes in social mores. There was concern, not only about the modern dances, but about the new venue of the dance hall where strangers met and danced in suggestive ways. At the heart of this concern were women. Virtue was under threat, morality was in danger. Considered by reformers “illicit” partnerings, they questioned behavior on the often poorly-lit dance floors. They were convinced that the anonymity of the situation was provocative and that salacious behavior would result.

Due to traditional gender roles, reformers’ primary efforts addressed women’s behavior and changing courtship rituals with most of the studies done by reformers

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<sup>39</sup> Jane E. Kaufman quoting Jay Bryan Nash. Hilmi Ibrahim, *Pioneers in Leisure and Recreation*, (Reston: AAHPERD, 1989).

<sup>40</sup> Weaver Pangburn, “The Worker’s Leisure and His Individuality,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 27 (January 1922), 435.

focused on immigrants or the children of immigrants. Reformers contended that immigrant working women living in crowded tenements could not take young men home, so they met on the streets, at amusement parks, and in dance halls.

Traditionally, men and women courted under the watchful eyes of parents or other relatives. Also, potential partners were introduced by relatives or friends who could vouch for their reputation. Now men and women, strangers to one another, met at dance halls and danced “immoral” dances. Parents, religious leaders, and moral reformers were concerned that the commercial nature of dance halls, where the proprietor had no interest in the customer and was intent on making money, would distort long held social values. They did not welcome this, the birth of modern dating.

The freedom of movement that working women sought in the dance halls led to changes in fashion and behavior. According to one author the “changing shape and volume of dresses were directly related to the ease with which a lady could dance” and that there were “parallel changes in fashion and dance.”<sup>41</sup> As the new Animal Dances took the floor, dress styles drastically changed as women increasingly abandoned corsets and began wearing clothing made of thinner materials and with shorter hems and lower necklines. Such styles were especially prevalent in evening and dance wear. The Flapper, commonly ascribed to the 1920s, first appeared in the mid to late nineteen-teens. This woman seemed to flaunt social decorum and defy convention.

If the Flapper drew ire, her sisters, who were coined “Charity Girls” caused greater trepidation. Charity Girls indiscriminately paired with men at dance halls and expected to be entertained with a meal and liquor. In exchange they would “owe” the

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Aldrich, *From the Ballroom to Hell: Grace and Folly in Nineteenth-Century Dance* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 30.

men favors. These favors could be as simple as a kiss, but often girls left dance floors to sit in dark alcoves or to go to nearby parks with these men. In fact, "Charity Girls" prided themselves on never taking money in exchange for their favors, only presents and pleasure."<sup>42</sup> As historian Elisabeth I. Perry put it, "The price they paid was left to the imagination."<sup>43</sup> Moral reformers claimed that dance halls, especially those that allowed Charity Girls, were dens of vice and immorality.<sup>44</sup>

One reason for this belief was the presence of alcohol at most establishments. In fact, many proprietors encouraged alcohol consumption to secure revenue. Dances would generally last from three to five minutes, with a long intermission between, sometimes as much as twenty minutes.<sup>45</sup> Tied to the powerful prohibition cause of the Progressive period, reformers claimed that the combination of alcohol and the dizzying movements of the modern dances resulted in a loss of inhibition in patrons and subsequently to unacceptable rowdy behavior and sexual license. Many also believed that prostitution and liquor were linked. The dance hall, many feared, was the "ante room to hell itself."<sup>46</sup>

Also troubling during this time period was a fear of white slave trafficking. During the first decade of the twentieth century a new literary genre appeared that told the repeated story of young girls fresh from the country falling prey to evil men in the urban

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<sup>42</sup>Schneider, 145. A recent book that goes into more depth regarding women's behavior in the public sphere is Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Elisabeth I. Perry, "The General Motherhood of the Commonwealth: Dance Hall Reform in the Progressive Era," *American Quarterly* 37 (Winter 1985), 722.

<sup>44</sup> For a more comprehensive study of working women and dance halls, see Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

<sup>45</sup> McBee, 74. This book is an excellent study of dancing, dance halls, working class women, immigrant leisure pursuits, dating and changes in familial relationships. See also Peiss.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Thomas Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 25, 37, 169-170.

center, either through force or deception. This “white slave” narrative was also presented in movies such as “Traffic in Souls” and “The Inside of the White Slave Traffic.”<sup>47</sup> Those who believed in the prevalence of white slavery were convinced that the dance hall was the obvious place to lure away young working women who often attended either unescorted or with equally vulnerable girl friends.

Thus, reformers agitated for control of dance halls. At the forefront were groups such as the “Chicago Juvenile Protective Association” which was an off-shoot of Hull-House; New York’s “Committee of Fourteen;” the “Council of Jewish Women;” and the “Committee on Amusements” as well as The Playground Association of America.<sup>48</sup> Reformers encouraged government to regulate dance halls through license fees, laws, lighting improvements, and liquor control. Occasionally there were police raids that led some owners to refuse unescorted women entry. The push for reform was especially strong from 1910 to 1913, and although modestly successful in many cities, enforcement was inconsistent, training of inspectors incomplete, and supervision not fiscally feasible.<sup>49</sup>

Reform led by religious authorities did not tend to extend beyond their own congregations or an appeal through rhetoric. Several congregations, including some Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist and Church of Christ bodies, preached against dancing, calling it a sin. Unable to form a solid front, they had little influence. Most significant was evangelist Billy Sunday who declared that dance “. . . is the most damnable, low-down institution on the face of God’s earth. . . .It causes more ruin than

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 114–127.

<sup>48</sup> See Perry.

<sup>49</sup> For a comprehensive view of dance hall reform see McBee, Peiss, Perry, and Giordano, 13-14.

anything this side of hell.”<sup>50</sup> Sunday traveled all over the country, and between 1906 and 1918, reportedly preached to an estimated eighty million people about the evils of dance.

Although some reformers, such as The Playground Association of America sought to provide alternate venues for dance and other forms of entertainment this did not stop them from trying to control private commercial ventures. Reformers of dance halls focused their efforts on passing laws controlling such things as the hours of operation, lighting requirements, the limitation of alcohol, as well as outlawing certain objectionable dances. As can be seen Progressives addressed the use, regulation and governing of public space. In fact it could be argued that the Progressive Era brought to the American experience the practice that private space in a sense could be and should be publically owned.

The notion of public space is an interesting and confusing one. It is nebulous at best. What is public space? We know that the common understanding of space is an area bounded by three dimensions. But the public aspect of space is much more difficult to define. If we turn to Webster’s we find that public is “relating to, or affecting all the people or the whole area of a nation or state” or other “organized community.” Public has to do with “government,” but at the same time it means “general” or “popular.” Perhaps Progressives would most appreciate the definitions of “relating to business or community interest as opposed to private affairs” and “accessible to or shared by all members of the community.” In the end when we contrast public space versus private, what do we mean? Is it a defined area in which the public, or people, interact? That seems much too broad a definition. Is it space not privately owned?

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<sup>50</sup>Wagner, 236.

Difficult to find such space, even in the early years of the Twentieth-century. And if this is the definition of public space, are we left only with land owned by the government, and thus the people? One thing is for certain, something changed in the Progressive Era that has arguably lead to the reality that the only true private spaces left in America is that of the individual home.

Although the commercial enterprises they targeted, such as dance halls, were privately owned, reformers viewed the activities held within as public concerns. In other words, their perception of public space included commercial venues where the public interacted. They felt justified on moral, social and political stands in not only providing alternate options, but also in controlling these venues. One thing reformers agreed upon regarding privately owned spaces used for public recreation; that public opinion could change private dance hall practices. Citing the 1912 proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, one writer argues that only through “. . . the formation of standards of public taste, public opinion, [and] greater social chaperonage” will dance halls be moral venues for amusement without the loitering, “stale tobacco smoke, [and] the reek of liquor” so prevalent.<sup>51</sup> Another writer stated that, “Amusement managers when compelled to do so by public demands will give a higher class of pastimes.”<sup>52</sup> In the December 1912 issue of “The Playground” a number of articles addressed dance. Noteworthy is a statement made by Israels, which reads, “There is a kind of regulation which never yet has been inscribed on any statue book and yet it is

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<sup>51</sup> “Parents’ Bulletin No. 1: Recreation and Play,” *The Juvenile Instructor* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1914).

<sup>52</sup> Young, 51.

the safest kind of public regulation. That is regulation by public opinion.”<sup>53</sup> It is this sort of philosophy that empowered Progressive Reformers, and supported them in stepping into what some might call private commercial spheres.

## CONCLUSION

In the decades since the frenetic heyday of increased leisure time and the variety of commercial leisure options that came upon the scene, there have been countless articles, discussions and books addressing leisure, how to define it, how to manage it, the use of which has moral and civic implications. Although the marketplace of the Progressive Era with its profusion of new products and pursuits was exciting to most people, as with any other time of rapid change, it also left people slightly uncomfortable, perhaps on a subconscious level. As James C. Charlesworth wrote in 1964, “[There is a] residual heritage in our national ethos holding that recreation for adults is a sign of a weak and improvident character.”<sup>54</sup> Mass consumption, the bounty of seemingly infinite choice, consistent spending and frequent play was, although perhaps not contrary to, at least not consistent with the common American ideology rooted in the Protestant work ethic. A new culture was emerging, overlaying itself on long held beliefs and traditions. It left many discomfited.

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<sup>53</sup> Quoting Israels, The Playground Association of America. “The Regulation of Dance Halls.” *Playground* Vol VI, No. 9 (December, 1912), 339.

<sup>54</sup> James C. Charlesworth, ed., *Leisure in America: Blessing or Curse?* (Philadelphia: The American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1964), 33.

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