Chapter Fifteen

Popular Culture

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In the late 1970s and the 1980s, when a critical mass of historians began taking popular culture seriously, they wrote prodigiously about the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Thanks to Stuart Ewen's *Captains of Consciousness* (1976), Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977), John Kasson's *Amusing the Million* (1978), Lewis Erenberg's *Steppin' Out* (1981), Roy Rosenzweig's *Eight Hours for What We Will* (1983), Robert Rydell's *All the World's a Fair* (1984), Kathy Peiss's *Cheap Amusements* (1986), Elliott Gorn's *The Manly Art* (1986), and Michael Denning's *Mechanic Accents* (1987), studies of the Gilded Age and Progressive era dominated the field of popular culture. This chapter opens by investigating the reasons why historians suddenly took such an interest in popular culture, and in particular the popular culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The scholars of the 1970s and 1980s carved out pathways and precipitated debates that decisively shaped the field's future, and which influenced the study of the popular culture of other periods as well.

According to both European and American critics of the era following World War II, commercialization and mass production had corrupted—even ruined—culture. In its most harmless form, they said, mass culture flattened and cheapened experience. At its worst, it manipulated and deceived its audiences. They said that when mass culture adopted elements of high culture, as in the skilled draftsmanship of magazine cover illustrations, the result was not art but "kitsch," insipid and soulless. Whether historians and American Studies scholars encountered these attitudes in the writings of Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Clement Greenberg, or Dwight MacDonald, those interested in culture often steered clear of these discredited forms. The majority of midcentury cultural historians (mostly located in American Studies departments) focused almost exclusively on literature, and pieced together interpretations of American character with passages from Walt Whitman, Hamlin Garland, or Mark Twain.

When scholars of this generation considered popular sources, they tended to enlist them in stories of American ingenuity and distinctiveness. Henry Nash Smith (1950) cited Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show as one more example of how the westward "pull of open land" shaped the national character. David Potter (1954) integrated advertising into his study of the cultural impact of American "economic abundance." Daniel Boorstin, the midcentury scholar most immersed in and delighted by popular culture, used it to tell a triumphant national story of invention, prosperity, and growth in *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (1973)—even as he expressed some ambivalence along the way.

Narratives of Manipulation and Resistance

The generation of scholars that followed refused to frame their studies in terms of any national project or narrative of progress. The trajectory of westward expansion and economic growth through consumption seemed, by the 1970s, to have led to an ugly, even shameful, place. Many historians who had witnessed or participated in the Civil Rights or antiwar movements abandoned the study of dominant values and instead tried to uncover the autonomy, wisdom, and beauty in working people's lives. In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, for example, Lawrence Levine treated the blues as a varied and subtle form that artfully communicated individual realities but also collective feeling. Historians took an interest in culture as a means through which people formed and expressed alternatives to the dominant values of their time. In *Eight Hours for What We Will*, Roy Rosenzweig looked at the saloons and Fourth of July

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celebrations of Worcester, Massachusetts, and found that at night and on holidays, workers rebuilt the ethic of solidarity and mutuality that their workplaces broke down during the day. Many scholars also reacted against American Studies' 1950s and 1960s focus on "high" culture. Inspired in part by shifts taking place in England, between Raymond Williams declaring that "Culture is Ordinary" (1958) and E.P. Thompson celebrating *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), US historians began writing about culture as something made, enjoyed, and used not just by poets and novelists, but by the uneducated and the poor.

It makes sense that these scholars, committed to recuperating the culture of the working class, focused on the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. They needed an age of dramatic distinctions between the powerless and the powerful, and the era of robber barons, sharecropping, and industrial labor fit the bill. The Gilded Age and Progressive Era also gave historians an opportunity to study the transition from what they saw as local, relatively autonomous cultures—what Robert Wiebe called "island communities" (1967)—to more commercialized forms. Levine, Rosenzweig, and also Francis Couvares, in *The Remaking of Pittsburgh* (1984), did not celebrate these patterns of commercialization, but they did insist that their subjects were not simply being manipulated by the new "mass" culture. Couvares and Rosenzweig both recognized that young immigrant women used amusement parks and theaters to escape from their paternalistic households for an afternoon. Rosenzweig and also Robert Sklar, in *Movie-Made America* (1977), characterized nickelodeons as spaces truly expressive of working-class culture, where audiences could come and go as they pleased, share snacks, shout at the screen, and celebrate movie heroes' triumphs with stomps and whistles. In his discussion of blues records, Levine commented, "We have become so accustomed to what appears to be the imposition of culture upon passive people by modern media that is it difficult to perceive variations in the pattern. In the case of blues at least … the imposition of tastes and standards was by no means a one-way process" (Rosenzweig 1985, 228). Even within a commercializing, homogenizing culture, these historians were determined to find agency and meaning.

Levine, Rosenzweig, and Couvares all shared sympathies with the social and labor historians of their generation, and their findings generally harmonized with those historians' narratives of struggle and resistance. As the 1980s progressed, though, cultural historians' research began to tell new kinds of stories. Several scholars found social and labor historians' focus on political and cultural resistance to be too doctrinaire, a wishful view of actual working-class lives. "I will state this baldly," wrote Elliott Gorn in the introduction to *The Manly Art*, his history of prizefighting. "Most workers did not spend their free time reading the *Rights of Man*, toasting Tom Paine, and struggling to resist oppression. Probably more hours were consumed at cockfights than at union meetings during the nineteenth century" (Gorn 1986: 13). Gorn studied leisure as a means of understanding working-class lives, but he was also determined to see every facet of that leisure—not just the parts that could be interpreted as resistance. He found boxing to be a method by which ethnic communities created their own heroes, but he also noticed that by the late nineteenth century, it had become white-collar workers' antidote to their docile, paper-pushing office jobs.

Kathy Peiss and Michael Denning, rather than telling stories of autonomous culture commercialized, made working-class commercial culture their central subject. Denning's study of the dime novels of the mid- and late-nineteenth century explained how "fiction factories" employed multiple authors to write stories about popular fictional characters such as Frank Merriwell, or even to write under fictional authors' names in a designated style. But Denning did not see this system as a reason to dismiss dime novels' content, and offered up subversive interpretations of their plots. Peiss, meanwhile, considered commercial leisure—fashion, dance halls, amusement parks—as a way for working women to define themselves outside of their families, to make their own choices and pursue their own pleasures.

A different set of scholars working at the same time—the late 1970s and 1980s—found almost nothing to celebrate in the popular culture they chose to study. To them popular culture seemed a means by which elite Americans articulated, packaged, and sold their ideology to the rest of the population. Stuart Ewen, in *Captains of Consciousness*, portrayed advertisers as expert psychological manipulators, intent on creating a dependable mass of consumers. Robert Rydell's *All the World's a Fair* described expositions designed to convince visitors that businessmen, manufacturers, and city planners could lead the nation to a dazzling future, one that depended on constant consumption and imperial expansion. Ewen and Rydell focused on the Gilded Age and Progressive Era for some of the same reasons that Rosenzweig and Levine did: it was a moment in which elites were consolidating their power, making it easy for historians to distinguish between mainstream and alternative, oppressors and oppressed. World's fair displays of colonized populations such as Filipinos or Native Americans could not have been more explicit about racial hierarchy and imperial might. Yet by focusing on elites' successful construction of a consumer economy and of an economic and political empire, Ewen and Rydell portrayed popular culture as nothing but a tool of the oppressors.

These historians did not butt heads with their popular culture-celebrating counterparts. After all, no one was making the counterargument that in fact world's fairs or cornflake advertisements expressed genuine working-class desires. Yet they did make up two different and almost-clashing schools of thought. Should popular culture be studied as a bastion of authenticity or a force of manipulation?

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From American Exceptionalism to Transatlantic Modernity

A handful of scholars never took sides in this debate, since their interest in the popular culture of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era did not seem to stem from any dissection of power or struggle, but rather from questions about what it meant to be modern. Warren Susman, Gunther Barth, and John Kasson spoke explicitly about the questions that plagued them in the present day. "If the culture of abundance has become manipulative, coercive, vulgar, and intolerable in all the ways these critics would have it, why did this happen?" asked Susman in the introduction to his book of collected essays, *Culture as History*. "Were there alternatives?" (Susman 1985, xxix–xxx). In parallel, Kasson wondered whether popular and mass culture had begun to undermine democracy; Barth (1980) asked if the city was still a viable form of living. They then cast these questions backward in time, revisiting the moment when "the modern"—the cluster of behaviors and values ushered in by mechanization and urbanization—still held utopian promise. Although none of these writers mention it, it is worth noting that their books arrived right at the moment that scholars in English and Cultural Studies were defining and analyzing "postmodernism"—a word that had been floating around in architecture circles since the 1960s—as a term for defining their own era. The word raised an historical question that these scholars began to answer. If Americans were now living in the postmodern era, what characterized the modern era that came before? If modernity had an end, when was its beginning, and what did the beginning look like?

John Kasson's *Amusing the Million* grappled with these questions while acknowledging popular culture's ability to both liberate and manipulate. Kasson clearly shared 1970s social historians' desire to recover the experiences of ordinary people. In the front and end pieces of his book, he zoomed in on details of larger photographs of Coney Island crowds on the beach: a young woman leaning her elbow on her date's shoulder, a mother reclining in the sand with her child, an overdressed teenage boy squinting into the sun. Kasson seems to want his readers to recognize these people, to imagine what they were feeling in that moment. Yet he also concludes that for all of the joys Coney Island promised, it offered "fun" of a very managed, manufactured variety. "Dispensing standardized amusement," writes Kasson of Coney Island, "it demanded standardized responses. Beneath the air of liberation, its pressures were profoundly conformist, its means fundamentally manipulative" (Kasson 1978, 105).

Alan Trachtenberg, while interested in similar questions about the modern, seemed to tell a story not of fleeting promise and possibility, but of slow and inexorable defeat. He tracked the reshaping of "traditional culture" into more tightly organized, corporate-led spheres, from time zones to department stores. Where Kasson's questions about the modern led him to fuse the "democratic" and "domineering" interpretations of popular culture, Trachtenberg saw only domination. Yet his 1982 *The Incorporation of America* also provided one of the most wide-ranging and evocative portraits of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in existence, and did it by engaging with questions that neo-Romantic and Weimar German writers had asked of early twentieth-century Europe. Writers such as Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Georg Simmel had cemented certain qualities as "modern": the mediated nature of entertainment, the fraught presentation of self, the avalanche of stimuli on the city streets. Trachtenberg transposed and narrated these qualities into American history.

Trachtenberg's mirroring of European concerns points to a larger shift underway in these studies of the modern. Trachtenberg, Barth, Susman, and Kasson still told pointedly national stories. Yet they were not writing—as had the "myth and symbol" school—about what made Americans American. They wanted to see how Americans had made the transition to modernity, a transition that other peoples in other nations had clearly made as well. Because scholars such as Henry Nash Smith and Daniel Boorstin were so invested in narratives of national distinctiveness, partly for Cold War reasons, they turned instead to what seemed most distinctively American, whether that meant westward expansion or the Broadway musical. Only by the late 1970s and early 1980s did American Studies scholars prove ready to consider historical conditions—such as modernity—that the United States so obviously shared with other nations.

These books about "the modern" were already complicating the binary within the field between a popular culture that was truly "of the people" and a mass culture that only manipulated and cheated its consumers. A number of other developments in the study of popular culture—nearly all coming from scholars of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era—would combine to collapse that binary altogether by the early 1990s.

Ideology and Utopia in American Culture

Ideas from cultural studies began to filter into the US conversation. Fredric Jameson's "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" (1979) and Stuart Hall's essay "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular" (1981) together argued that popular culture did not solely exist to contain and control working people's lives, nor solely for those working people to resist domination. Instead, they saw traces of hierarchy *and* of utopian promise in all forms of popular culture. Trumpeted in US history circles by Michael Denning and Robin D.G. Kelley, Jameson's and Hall's ideas resonated among historians who had not wanted to choose between celebrating and critiquing popular culture. In 1985, T.J. Jackson Lears gave Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony a formal debut in the *American Historical Review*. Though scholars would argue over exactly how

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accurately Lears had translated the spirit of the idea, Lears lent a name and a theory to the notion that the powerful people and dominant mores of any society exerted influence on even its most marginalized or resistant populations. A handful of Gilded Age and Progressive Era historians—mostly those rooted in social or labor history and looking for populist popular culture—were already articulating such ideas. Kathy Peiss had celebrated working women's self-expression in the spaces of popular culture, but was also frank about the fact that their modes of dancing and dating reproduced and reinforced many of the gender norms of their era. Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen (1982) found that silent movies both acknowledged the indignities and injustices of poverty, and taught their poor audiences to dream of joining—rather than rebelling against—the upper class.

A roundtable on popular culture in the 1992 *American Historical Review* dramatized the generational shift. Lawrence Levine, in the centerpiece article, described the skepticism he had encountered when using popular culture sources, and he made a case for their value. Yet he also argued that historians could treat commercial popular culture as what he called "folk" culture, culture that expressed the genuine emotions and desires of everyday people. The two Americanist respondents, T.J. Jackson Lears (1992) and Robin D.G. Kelley (1992), made it clear that they found Levine's logic and his language outmoded. They saw no need for Levine to defend his choice to study popular culture, for his books (alongside many others published in the 1970s and 1980s) had proven how rich and rewarding those sources could be. Yet, stated Lears and Kelley, it would be irresponsible to ignore the unequal power dynamic between producers and audience.

Even the very notion of "folk culture," Kelley argued, was misguided. Embedded in the term was the notion that the "folk"—be they working-class or poor, black or white—made culture in more authentic, spontaneous, and instinctive (and, implicitly, less sophisticated or self-aware) ways than other groups. This search for an authentic "folk," said Kelley, was destined for failure, since no group of people lay untouched by structures of power or uninfluenced by a dominant culture. In fact, many cultural products once taken as "authentic" came into being only through imitation, recycling, and carefully crafted self-presentation: the cakewalk, ragtime music, country western yodeling (Ross 1989, 68). Levine had not been alone in his use of the term "folk"; Elliott Gorn referred to early prizefighting as folk culture, and Alan Trachtenberg and Warren Susman used the phrase "traditional culture," which portrayed that culture as unauthored and timeless. But this 1992 exchange made it clear that for a rising generation of scholars of popular culture, there was no unsullied "folk culture," no timeless tradition. Ideology was everywhere.

At this juncture, the field of popular culture history, once so densely concentrated in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, began to broaden. Allowing for the coexistence of ideology and utopia, historians found they could make meaning out of the popular culture of any era—not just the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in which, the old story went, "folk" culture gradually succumbed to "mass" culture, and in which all the promises of the modern flared up and flamed out. Scholars who had once looked for clear-cut "power" (world's fairs, advertisers) or "resistance" (rounds of whiskey at the saloon, ballads sung on the front porch) began to acknowledge that everyone could, and did, participate in systems of oppression. This set them free to dissect the entertainments of other eras. Labor-celebrating scholars of the 1970s had been hard-pressed to explain antebellum white workers' love of minstrelsy, for example, and mostly avoided the topic: by the 1990s scholars dissected minstrelsy's role in the construction of whiteness, blackness, and the working class with acuity (Saxton 1990; Roediger 1991; Lott 1993). When historians decided that mass culture could in fact be put to varied and meaningful uses by everyday people, they began studying the twentieth-century forms, such as television sitcoms, top-40 radio, and label-recorded popular music, which earlier scholars had found too manufactured.

Historians still turned out pathbreaking works on Gilded Age and Progressive Era culture, to be sure. And they benefited from the widespread acceptance of popular culture as a legitimate historical source, which rendered them freer to incorporate it into all kinds of studies. Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization* (1995) wove the Tarzan novels, the Boy Scouts, and the Jim Jeffries/Jack Johnson boxing match in among intellectual and political studies of G. Stanley Hall, Ida B. Wells, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In *Gay New York* (1994), George Chauncey looked at cabarets and fashion alongside policing tactics and court decisions. In *To 'Joy My Freedom* (1998), Tera Hunter investigated Atlanta dance halls alongside washerwomen's strikes, mutual aid societies, and streetcar boycotts to show how Atlanta's black working women negotiated the terms of their work and insisted on maintaining the rights to their own bodies. It was a sign of the triumph of cultural history that popular culture sources started popping up everywhere.

Consumer Culture in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era

In a 1990 essay "The End of Mass Culture," Michael Denning summarized the new normal for scholars of popular culture. The ideas of Stuart Hall and of Frederic Jameson had become common currency among these scholars. Power and resistance, ideology and utopia—historians expected to find these in any form of cultural expression. Denning explained the quick absorption of these ideas using the puzzling events that scholars saw unfolding around them in the 1980s. Ronald Reagan seemed to be rigging the economy against the working class, yet millions of working-class

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voters adored him. Meanwhile, although feminists had revealed the sexism embedded in women's fashion, cosmetic advertisements, and mainstream film, all of these institutions continued to thrive. Only a theory of culture that recognized the attraction of Reagan's optimistic nationalism or the fantasy of a Maybelline ad could explain these phenomena, which otherwise looked like straight manipulation.

This theory proved equally useful in explaining the consumer culture of the turn of the century. There was an explosion of studies of advertising and consumer culture in the 1990s: Jackson Lears's *Fables of Abundance* (1994), William Leach's *Land of Desire* (1993), Jennifer Scanlon's *Inarticulate Longings* (1995), Richard Ohmann's *Selling Culture* (1996), Elizabeth Gruber Garvey's *The Adman in the Parlor* (1996), and Pamela Walker Laird's *Advertising Progress* (1998). The best of them captured the allure of this new culture even as they made clear how it fell far short of its promises. This body of work on consumer culture outlined a distinctive phenomenon of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. For the first time, popular culture became a sphere in which businessmen—more than the church, the family, or the trade union—constructed appealing visions of the good life and won consumers over to their vision. Newly possessed of the ability to manufacture a seemingly bottomless supply of goods, merchants no longer tried merely to capture existing markets by making the best soap or the cheapest cloth available. Instead, they hired advertisers to create markets where none had existed before. As the *Thompson Red Book on Advertising* stated in 1901, "Advertising aims to teach people that they have wants, which they did not realize before, and where such wants can be best supplied. If the merchant were to wait nowadays for people to find out for themselves that they needed his wares he would have plenty of leisure and plenty of nothing else" (quoted in Ohmann 1996, 109).

Advertisers fit products into larger fantasies of romance, success, or family life—dreams made possible by new visual technologies. This era marks the invention of color standards, equivalents of the present-day Pantone, and of inks more brilliant than any naturally occurring color. Four-color presses turned out glossy magazines and Sunday newspapers, creating not only visual appeal but a new dimension of brand recognition, in which customers could simply remember the orange box. Lithography enabled sumptuous reproductions of illustrations; spotlights and floodlights turned display windows and fashion shows into dramatic stages. Large plate-glass windows and gleaming glass display counters let department stores artfully showcase their wares, surrounding them with luxurious materials and placing them in appealing tableaux. William Leach described advertisers' "strategies of enticement" as color, glass, and light—all, not coincidentally, borrowed from the church. These technologies allowed advertisers and retailers to attach products to feelings, to make a product much more than a physical object in customers' minds. Text advertisements of the nineteenth century had attested to the quality and utility of their goods, but turn-of-the-century illustrated ads could show viewers a person they wished to be and a world they longed to inhabit.

Magazines and newspapers, especially Sunday newspapers, became popular and effective vehicles for advertisements. Richard Ohmann argued that magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *The Century* existed solely to create harmonious surroundings for ads. Evidence from the publishing industry seemed to support his claim. "If bulk alone is considered, the title should be changed from 'news' paper to 'ad' paper," wrote circulation manager William Scott in 1915. "Laymen may assume that the Sunday newspaper has more space for advertising because it carries so much more news and feature reading. As a matter of fact, the extra news and special features really are carried because the paper has so much more advertising patronage and the displays must be sandwiched with reading matter" (Scott 1915, 36, 199). Integrating advertisements with the text, both in magazines and newspapers, forced readers to notice the ads, whether they wanted to or not. An annoyed Upton Sinclair described reading *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1919:

> You start an article or a story, and they give you one or two clean pages to lull your suspicions, and then at the bottom you read, "Continued on page 93." You turn to page 93, and biff—you are hit between the eyes by a powerful gentleman wearing a collar, or swat—you are slapped on the cheek by a lady in a union-suit. You stagger down this narrow column, as one who runs the gauntlet of a band of Indians with clubs; and then you read, "Continued on page 99." You turn to page ninety-nine, and somebody throws a handful of cigarettes into your face, or maybe a box of candy … before you get to the end of the article you have been tempted by every luxury from a diamond scarf-pin to a private yacht, and have spent in imagination more money than you will earn in the balance of your lifetime. (Sinclair 1919, 295–296)

Scholars have tended to see something democratic about the mass market and its advertisements, and they are right, of course. Advertisements subsidized the price of newspapers and magazines, so that a glossy color magazine cost an affordable ten cents. Mass-produced items allowed people living on modest incomes to own more clothing, to decorate their homes, to eat ice-cream—all privileges once reserved for the wealthy. William Leach, in *Land of Desire*, noticed that ads conveyed the idea that anybody could want anything—beauty, riches, glamour, romance—and called this a "democracy of desire." But the people who constructed this system were not concerned with democracy, nor with equality in any form. The "broker" class (as Leach dubbed them), made up of ad-agency men, interior designers, window dressers, and copywriters, was simply being paid to make products appeal to as many people as possible. Elizabeth Fogg Meade, advertising expert, wrote in 1901 that the successful merchant "must excite desire by

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appealing to imagination and emotion. Above all, he must make his goods familiar to every class in the community … We are not concerned, however, with the ability to pay," she said, "but with the ability to want and choose" (Fogg-Meade 1901, 221, 228, as quoted in Leach 1993, 37). The democratic nature of the pitch was a byproduct of mass marketing; democracy was never the goal.

Advertisers' appeals radically inverted the norms by which Americans had been taught to live, and this inversion is perhaps one of the great shifts in American culture of any era. For decades, ministers, politicians, and businessmen alike had framed work as character-building, a true end in itself. They saw thrift and saving as the morally righteous path, and believed that the men (and the nations) that produced the most would prosper the most. Yet expositions, advertisements, and department stores encouraged people to define themselves through consumption and leisure—the goods they bought, the games they played, the places they travelled. What had seemed wasteful under a producerist ethos seemed profitable under a consumerist one. The weekend, created by giving workers a half-day off on Saturday and by making entertainment options available on Sunday, became not a sign of a lazy and godless culture but a booming market for amusements. Consumer credit turned from a symbol of greed and irresponsibility into a means of greatly expanding the market for automobiles and appliances. The birth of consumer culture is by this point a well-told tale. But the Gilded Age and Progressive Era lays special claim to the ethos that became the basis of twentieth-century consumer culture and, by extension, the entire twentieth-century US economy.

Not surprisingly, the transition to a consumption-based economy led to an ever-faster churn of fashion and fads. Fashions for wealthy women had changed by the season for decades, but cheaper, mass-produced clothing allowed middle-class and working-class women and men to also buy and then retire their clothing according to the fashion calendar. "Narrow Shoulders, Tight Trousers and Plenty of Colors – He's 1915 Man," explained a cartoon in the *Milwaukee Free Press*, poking fun at the year's fashions (25 March 1915, 3). This was a new concept; fashion-wise, there had been no such thing as "1877 man." Songs that had once traveled via musicians now spread more quickly through sheet music and, eventually, phonograph records. Songwriters learned to treat their works like any other manufactured product, and to cultivate a taste for them by any possible means. David Suisman (2012) has described the elaborate ritual of pop music "plugging" born in the 1890s, in which songwriters or their agents paid performers to insert songs into their cabaret acts, and paid others to sit in the audience and applaud vigorously for those songs. Adman Truman DeWeese articulated the advertisers' project, by then well established, in 1915:

> Advertising must teach men new ways of shaving and dressing; it must teach women new ways of cleaning their teeth and preserving their complexions. Advertising must teach new ways of sweeping the carpet, new ways of furnishing the home, new ways of promoting cleanliness and health, new ways of enjoying life … (1915, 29)

It seemed no sphere of life was immune from fads: all tastes and habits were subject to change, if advertisers could only be persuasive enough.

"Plugging" and advertising cannot explain every fad, for not every fad made money. Sayings cycled in and out of Americans' vocabularies as they picked them up from their favorite newspaper columnist or comic strip. One hundred new dances swept across New York City's dance floors between 1912 and 1914 (Erenberg 1981, 150). What explains this churn? The phenomenon John Kasson noticed in Coney Island may apply here as well. "For Coney Island was necessarily an imperfect Feast of Fools," wrote Kasson, "an institutionalized bacchanal. It represented a festival that did not express joy *about* something, but offered 'fun' in a managed celebration for commercial ends" (Kasson 1978, 105). Tea dances did not celebrate any occasion or serve any obvious ritual purpose; instead patrons paid ten cents to enter a room of manufactured fun. Novelty became essential to luring them back.

Progressives and Popular Culture

The architects of consumer culture were the main, but not the only, population strategically constructing new modes of leisure in this era. Progressive reformers and civic leaders left their own stamp on popular culture, usually in an attempt to change the habits of the working class. Some of their efforts tried to conjure entirely new spaces and forms. Movements for city parks gained momentum from the middle of the nineteenth century onward. Although working-class city residents sometimes petitioned for public parks, the city commissioners who authorized them and the landscape architects who designed them usually lined up behind Frederick Law Olmsted's belief that parks would have a calming and civilizing effect on the working class (Rosenzweig 1982; Couvares 1984). The campaign for public libraries sought to get books—and the right sort of books—into working-class people's lives. In Pittsburgh, where the elaborate and extensive campaign was backed by Andrew Carnegie, reformers were so keen on readers taking away the right messages from their reading that they would send librarians to conduct book discussions in people's homes (Couvares 1984). Playground advocates envisioned spaces for young people to develop healthy bodies, to mix with children of other ethnicities, and to learn respect for the rules. The middle class did not entirely exempt their own children from these ideals; they signed them up for Boy Scouts or Camp Fire Girls, where they learned principles of fair play and

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good citizenship. The relatively new fields of child development and child psychology saw all children as harboring ancient instincts that could be productively channeled. Playground supervisors and Camp Fire Girls leaders alike taught children the "primitive" but supposedly enriching skills of basketry, storytelling, archery, and folk dancing.

Another strain of Progressive action simply sought to reshape, or shut down, the existing forms of working-class popular culture they found most objectionable. Temperance reformers, from the 1880s through Prohibition, consistently tried to revoke liquor licenses and to legislate how liquor was sold, bringing drinking out of homes and basements and into more commercial (easily regulated) spaces. Campaigns for a "Safe and Sane" Fourth turned the Fourth of July from a day of ethnic community celebrations full of alcohol and fireworks into centralized affairs with licensed vendors and businessmen speakers. In New York City, the police shut down all nickelodeons in 1908 and allowed them to reopen only when they submitted to police surveillance and agreed not to sell tickets to unaccompanied children. The New York City effort resulted in a broader movement to censor film, whether by the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, formed in 1909, or by more piecemeal snipping out of objectionable scenes by local police (Sklar 1975, 30–32).

Jane Addams, writing in *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1904), shows the scope of Progressives' concerns about popular culture but also the limitations of their vision. Addams worried that the working-class and immigrant children in her Chicago neighborhood were absorbing the nickelodeons' stories of violence and revenge: "Is it not astounding that a city allows thousands of its youth to fill their impressionable minds with these absurdities which certainly will become the foundation for their working moral codes and the data from which they will judge the proprieties of life?" (Addams 1904, 79–80). She worried not only that children would pick up criminal habits, but that they would learn to want what they could not have, eventually coming to prefer life on the screen to the real thing. "To insist that young people shall forecast their rose-colored future only in a house of dreams," she wrote, "is to deprive the real world of that warmth and reassurance which it so sorely needs and to which it is justly entitled; furthermore, we are left outside with a sense of dreariness, in company with that shadow which already lurks only around the corner for most of us—a skepticism of life's value" (Addams 1904, 103).

As a substitute, Addams suggested gymnasiums; chaperoned dance parties; folk dances; theater, which would expand children's vocabularies and fulfill their desires for beauty and order; and baseball, both good exercise and conjurer of a "common mood" between classes. Addams was unusual for her time in acknowledging that ethnic culture had value, but she was also depoliticizing these children by conceiving of them as (or trying to turn them back into) "folk" rather than a working class. Her suggestions included no ideas for actually changing children's material circumstances; they demonstrate why Progressive attempts to create or reform popular culture did not tend to stick. Reformers tried to teach the working class to behave according to middle-class values and prerogatives, but they offered no clear reward. What would children get if they followed the rules laid out by the playground supervisor or read the books that the "library hour" volunteer told them to read? Approval, perhaps a small prize, but nothing more.

In contrast to Progressives' failure to offer their working-class neighbors (and especially working-class children and teenagers) anything more than points for good behavior, consumer culture and popular amusements proved both adaptable and rewarding. Some forms of commercialized popular culture in the Progressive Era created new forums for working-class kinds of sociability—the raucous, participatory culture of the nickelodeon transferred easily to the band pavilions, bowling alleys, and penny arcades of the same moment. Other forms catered to middle-class norms and incomes, yet remained hugely appealing to the working class. Adolph Zukor, eventual founder of Paramount Pictures, imported higher-brow films from Europe and even commissioned some himself; he catered to middle-class audiences beginning to frequent the tonier "movie palaces" of the 1910s. Yet the affordable luxury of these palaces appealed just as much to working-class audiences. Department stores, advertisements, and movie palaces all invited Americans, including working-class Americans, into a world of beauty and extravagance. It was this appeal, rather than reformers' moralizing ideas about the right ways to spend one's free time, that proved most beguiling and enduring.

Cultural Reach and Homogenization

Consumer culture became so deeply embedded during the twentieth century that it has taken hard work and careful research to piece together its prehistory. The same could be said about the homogenization of culture. Historians have looked to the popular culture of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era as the precursor to the mass culture of the mid twentieth-century United States, but have had to stay attentive to the piecemeal, uneven, and ongoing nature of cultural homogenization.

Several of the technologies that created mass audiences have been amply discussed and celebrated ever since their invention: the chromo-lithograph, the phonograph, celluloid film. Yet scholars of the last several decades have investigated the impacts of less glamorous, or just plain overlooked, technologies in the creation of these large audiences. The railroad enabled traveling performances of unprecedented size to make their way from town to town and country to country, eventually reaching millions of spectators. Buffalo Bill's Wild West show is the most well-studied

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of these traveling performances, but Janet Davis's *The Circus Age* (2002) shows that the circus reached just as far, and Cara Caddoo's *Envisioning Freedom* (2014) traces the paths of film exhibitors as they rode the rails from one southern black church to another. An older book of essays on American photographs in Europe serves as a reminder that stereograph images were wildly popular ways for late nineteenth-century Americans to see the world and for Europeans to see America (Nye and Gidley 1994).

Other technologies offered audiences secondhand, mediated experiences—again extending the reach of popular entertainments farther than ever. Alan Trachtenberg, Stephen Kern (1983), and Walter Benjamin before them, spent much time contemplating the meaning of such mediated experiences in broad terms, but historians of the 1990s and 2000s investigated them in detail. Michael Oriard (1993) rightfully noted that in 1900, football was a new animal in the American entertainment universe: more people had read about it than had either played or watched it in person. Oriard dissected the stories told about football in the daily press that ranged from tales of gentlemanly good sportsmanship, to allegories of military and imperial prowess, to jeremiads of moral degeneration and impending savagery. Where Trachtenberg had seen mediated entertainment as a distancing and dulling of immediate experience, Oriard—armed with the cultural turn's emphasis on narratives and discourses—treated the media's messages as every bit as important as the athletes' and spectators' own experiences. Also in the realm of sports, Theresa Runstedtler (2012) has thought carefully about the ways audiences experienced the Vitagraph silent films of boxing matches, and how the film viewings of the match between the reigning white champion Jim Jeffries and the ultimate black victor Jack Johnson became far more politically charged than the match had been in real time.

There may yet be more to say here. Newspapers and magazines, after all, reported on nearly every kind of urban entertainment, not just football. What experiences of theater, art exhibits, parades, and sports did these publications provide? Did the media act solely as curators of acceptable middlebrow entertainments in these cases, or did they use their reporting to tell larger stories? Perhaps the availability of second-hand entertainments gave rise to a new way of inhabiting the world, one which emphasized the importance of knowing all about "the latest" but placed relatively little value on participation and presence. Too ill to leave her house, a New York City resident wrote in 1911: "As it is not possible to visit art shows, theater, opera concert, or lecture, I am able to keep informed by the criticisms of pictures, the plots of the new plays, the actors who are to appear and the famous singers. Armed with the information gleaned from the newspapers, I am prepared to discuss any of these matters intelligently" ("The American Newspaper," 1911, 22).

One of the most surprising qualities of turn-of-the-century popular culture is how homogenous independently owned enterprises could be. Residents of most major cities could spend their Sundays in an amusement park at the end of the streetcar line, where they would find roller coasters, dance floors, Ferris wheels, and dazzling electric lights. Movie palaces of the 1910s nearly all shared the same opulent aesthetic made up of rococo decorations, plaster statuettes, and electric marquees welcoming audiences inside. No matter the name of their local department store, be it Filene's in Boston, Marshall Field's in Chicago, or The Emporium in San Francisco, customers encountered glamorous scenes in display windows, marble-and-mirror ground floors, revolving doors, escalators, and multistory atriums. Whether they read the *Denver Post* or the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Americans found their news divided into the same categories: local/national/international, sports, women, business, and real estate.

Why such sameness before the era of franchises and chains? The trade press explains it, in part. Movie theater owners read *Billboard* or *Movie Picture World*, department store managers read the *Dry Goods Economist*, and newspaper publishers read *Editor & Publisher* or *Printer's Ink*. The trade press told subscribers how to replicate the most eye-catching window displays or how their newspaper, too, could boost circulation with a Christmas charity drive. The sameness can also be explained by the growth of somewhat hidden, nationwide industries that served these new entertainments. Movie theater owners chose decorations themselves, but from mail-order catalogs (Bowser 1994, 127). Editors could select from menus of syndicated features to fill out their Sunday newspapers, and advertisers could buy pre-made "cuts"—etched illustrations of elegant hats, roast chickens, or whatever suited their needs. By the 1910s, the chain and franchise models had made inroads. Gimbels department stores had expanded through the East and Midwest, Paramount was "block booking" movie theaters, and workers were lunching at Horn & Hardart automats rather than at the corner saloon. But what the studies of the last several decades have shown is that the chainstore model was only a phase, appearing decades into a longer process of homogenizing leisure in the United States.

Even as, in the early twentieth century, popular culture appealed to masses as never before, the experiences of spectators and shoppers were still not as standardized as they would become in later eras. In nickelodeons, people watched nationally distributed short films accompanied by local pianists or narrated in Yiddish. They went to their church fundraiser to watch film footage rearranged by the exhibitor to tell a story or a lesson of the exhibitor's own invention. They arrived at Buffalo Bill's encampment before the show to meet a cowboy and step inside a tepee. They watched vaudeville programs made up of performers who traveled around the country, but which the theater owner had selected and ordered to suit his particular audience's tastes. They gazed at department-store displays created by the shopgirl inside, or perhaps suggested by her

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boss, but not dictated by national headquarters. Patterned but not quite homogenized popular culture—this is a hallmark of the Progressive Era.

Perhaps the most standardized and standardizing popular culture of this era was that which arrived in Americans' mailboxes one a week or once a month. Magazines offered a complete way of life, identical in every town where they were received. The *Ladies' Home Journal* told women to aspire to "the simple life" that was, paradoxically, stocked with newfangled products (Scanlon 1995). Magazine fiction set parameters for courtship while also becoming an allegory for shopping, in which women's most important skill was that of choosing the best item (Garvey 1996). Because these magazines aimed to appeal to a national audience, they traded in broadly defined, often identical "types" that readers could both recognize and aspire to: the Gibson Girl, the New Woman, the College Man (Kitch 2001; Clark 2010). Yet even in this most national and homogenous form of media, historians have managed to uncover ways that readers put magazines to their own uses. In *Writing with Scissors* (2012), Ellen Gruber Garvey finds readers assembling feminist histories or narratives of black accomplishment out of magazine and newspaper articles that, on their own, displayed no such politics.

The scholarship of the last several decades has qualified the language of "loosening" and "fluidity" that appeared in 1960s through 1980s studies of Gilded Age and particularly of Progressive Era popular culture (Higham 1965; Erenberg 1981). Popular culture at the turn of the century was often framed as an escape from constraints, but it nearly always removed people from one set of constraints and hierarchies and put them into another. Dance halls freed young women from family obligations but cast them in fairly rigid gender roles, with sexual obligations attached. Sports like football and boxing momentarily released men from expectations of restrained and "civilized" behavior, but set new standards of physical perfection and prowess. White couples doing black-inspired dances expressed their sexuality in new ways, but the notion of "going primitive" reinforced the status of blacks at the bottom of the civilizational hierarchy. Magazines and department stores seemed to offer an escape from local, provincial society but versed readers and shoppers in new, nationally understood class norms. Consumer credit freed working-class and middle-class people to buy items that they could not otherwise afford, but, as Lendol Calder (2001) has argued, the monthly bills turned them into more diligent workers than ever before.

Future Directions

The historical approach lobbying most energetically for itself at the moment is the history of capitalism. Historians of capitalism argue the importance of studying the institutions and individuals who gradually built up the financial system of credit and risk, personal data, and profit margins. They encourage histories from multiple perspectives; rather than focusing solely on workers or on firms, they advocate "history from below, all the way to the top" ("Interchange: The History of Capitalism," 2014). However, historians of Gilded Age and Progressive Era popular culture have been doing this for years. Robert Sklar opened his 1975 book *Movie-Made America* as follows:

> In the process of expanding my approach to movies I also began to redefine my ideas of culture, shifting my focus from artists and their creations to people and their lives. … That task has led me to examine, among other topics, the invention of motion-picture technology; the nature and evolution of the motion-picture audience; the organization and business tactics of the movie trade; the design and economics of theaters; the social and professional lives of movie workers; government policies toward movies, and the attitudes and strategies of censorship groups; and the cultural influence of movies at home and overseas. (Sklar 1975, v)

This certainly sounds like a multi-perspective history of capitalism. By the 1990s and 2000s, Gilded Age and Progressive Era scholars were producing sophisticated portraits of the economic engines and tools of popular culture, from ad agencies to the analysts, hired by circuses, who used crop yields and census reports to determine the most profitable towns for performances (Ohmann 1996; Scanlon 1995; Davis 2002). Perhaps because Theodor Adorno so emphatically inveighed against "the culture industry" in the 1940s, cultural historians have rarely separated the study of culture and industry.

A more surprising new direction is the study of heterogeneity within the "mass" and "modern" culture of this era. The fact that there is still so much diversity left to uncover shows how strong a stamp midcentury critics such as Dwight MacDonald and Clement Greenberg made on the field. Even for historians who put no faith whatsoever in the categories of "mass culture," "folk culture," and "kitsch," it has taken until the 2000s and 2010s to conceive of many cultural products apart from these words. Studies of southern music had, until recently, told a story of indigenous and isolated forms that were gradually incorporated into, and changed by, a mass market. Karl Hagstrom Miller (2010) has now argued that southern musicians were in fact steeped in commercial music coming from the North. They sang Broadway hits and Tin Pan Alley melodies alongside regional tunes. It was only because talent scouts and recording agents had no interest in southern renditions of pop songs that this more polyglot and omnivorous music-making has been forgotten. Steven J. Ross's *Working-Class Hollywood* (1998) tells a forgotten story of early films that communicated pro-worker, anti-capitalist sentiments and in some cases were made by labor organizations themselves. Historians first began to question the homogenizing and hegemonizing power of film by thinking creatively about how audiences may have interpreted film messages for themselves (Hansen 1994), in tandem with literary scholars

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interested in reception history. But only later, with Ross's work and also that of Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, in *Migrating to the Movies* (2005), did they also investigate film as a genre in which working-class and minority voices may have actually come through.

Miller, Ross, and Stewart are entering into a broader, ongoing conversation in the field about the modern—who participated in it, where it spread, and what it looked like. Because the combined Gilded Age and Progressive Era has been labeled (correctly) as America's great age of urbanization, historians of popular culture have looked to that era's cities almost by default. Yet a handful of scholars are calling into question the notion that modern entertainments spread from cities outwards. Janet Davis (2002) argues that circus performances, though crafted with small-town audiences in mind, forged a modern kind of entertainment, making a spectacle of the world's diversity. Cara Caddoo (2014) shows how African Americans created their own film entertainments in the rural South in the early twentieth century. To an earlier generation of historians, modern popular culture seemed synonymous with urban popular culture. But innovative research is turning up sophisticated popular culture in places—mining towns, circus tents, church fundraisers—where no one had previously thought to look.

On a different front, a new wave of historians has been investigating culture that was not intended to be political, but nonetheless made certain political changes possible. In a model cast decades ago by Lizabeth Cohen's *Making a New Deal* (1990), historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era are asking: how did popular culture realign populations, teach them new ideas, and enable changes beyond the realm of culture? In *Stories of the South* (2014), K. Stephen Prince looks to magazine fiction, travel writing, minstrelsy, and film to investigate the political and cultural retreat from Reconstruction. Narratives within popular culture cast the South as a distinctive region that had developed racial expertise; this helped to win consent among northerners for the southern system of Jim Crow. In *Staging Race* (2006), Karen Sotiropoulos finds black performers of the early twentieth century not only sending guarded messages of solidarity to black theater patrons relegated to the balconies; she also discovers them forming professional organizations to position themselves as leading "race men," although activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois did not necessarily want to call them that. Susan A. Glenn, in *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (2000), is interested in the ways that popular culture performed or displayed modes of being female that overlapped with suffragist causes. While this kind of work has its frustrations—it can never be definitively proven that vaudeville made feminists or hastened women's suffrage—the resonances and parallels are important, and they help to explain both the momentum for political change and the potency of popular culture in its own day.

Two books published in 1999 wove popular culture and politics even more tightly together as they thought through the political meanings and uses of consumer culture among women of the early twentieth century. Margaret Finnegan's *Selling Suffrage* (1999) sees suffragists using consumer-culture strategies to pitch their cause to the American public and to portray themselves as modern, fun, likeable women. While the pitch worked, Finnegan argues that selling preserves, printing suffrage-sloganed aprons, and comparing the woman voter to the woman shopper actually weakened the feminist movement more broadly, for it continued to associate women with the domestic sphere. While Nan Enstad (1999) studies a different population, her premise contrasts sharply with Finnegan's. Imagining a labor movement among young urban immigrant women *without* consumer culture, writes Enstad, is to ignore the very sphere in which those women conceived of better lives. Enstad carefully reconstructs the meanings of flower-laden hats and French heels, and parses the plots of the dime novels and movies that working women enjoyed. She argues persuasively that consumer culture helps explain their political actions rather than serving as a distraction. There are many more possible ways that Gilded Age and Progressive Era scholars might investigate the political uses and meanings of consumer products, from the goods the Sears catalog offered to Populist rural families to the material worlds of W.E.B. DuBois's "talented tenth."

A final area just unfolding in this field is the global nature of Gilded Age and Progressive Era popular culture. The appearance and justification of empire in US popular culture may be the richest vein mined so far, with Robert Rydell and Gail Bederman now joined by Kristin Hoganson's *Consumers' Imperium* (2007). Hoganson examines the way that middle-class women participated in and enjoyed the United States' rising global power within their own homes, whether through lantern-slide travel, middle eastern-inspired living-room décor, or orientalist fashion by way of Europe. Somewhat less is known about what the United States was sending out into the world at this moment in time. American performers made remarkable careers for themselves abroad in this era; James Cook's forthcoming project, *Colored Men Heard 'Round the World: A Global History of Black Celebrity, 1770–1950*, promises to tell us more. Theresa Runstedtler's (2012) global history of Jack Johnson probes the meaning that different countries—Australia, France, England, South Africa—assigned to the boxer, depending on the racial hierarchies that governed their own societies.

Meanwhile, commodity history, which has so effectively knit together national histories in studies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, has yet to really make inroads in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Robert Bruce Davies's (1976) global history of the Singer sewing machine tracks a phenomenally influential American invention around the world, and there is still more to be said about how that technology changed fashion, labor, and gender roles in other

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societies. A 1990s compilation on American photographs abroad began to investigate the way that the Kodak quickly created and then dominated the market for snapshot cameras; but again, there is much more to this story (Nye and Gidley 1994). Madame C.J. Walker had thousands of agents selling her beauty products around the world by 1916 (Baldwin 2008, 64), but as yet, little has been written about her global business. A glib observation by a London journalist in 1902 shows just how many possible avenues there are for such histories:

> The average citizen wakes in the morning at the sound of an American alarum clock; rises from his New England sheets, and shaves with his New York soap, and a Yankee safety razor. He pulls on a pair of Boston boots over his socks from West Carolina, fastens his Connecticut braces, slips his Waterbury watch into his pocket and sits down to breakfast. Then he congratulates his wife on the way her Illinois straight-front corset sets off her Massachusetts blouse, and begins to tackle his breakfast, at which he eats bread made from prairie flour (possibly doctored at the special establishment on the Lakes), tinned oysters from Baltimore and a little Kansas City bacon, while his wife plays with a slice of Chicago ox-tongue. The children are given Quaker oats. Concurrently he reads his morning paper, set up by American machines, printed with American ink, by American presses, on American paper, edited possibly by a smart journalist from New York City, and sub-edited with as close an approach to American brevity and verve as English pressmen can achieve …. (Mackenzie 1902, 142–143)

Every commodity here does not need its own book, but the categories are rich. Did American firms create fashions that they intended specifically for foreign markets, or did people around the world simply start dressing like Americans? Did an American-made conception of childhood and health sell Quaker Oats abroad, or did the company need new advertising strategies? What effect did multinational media conglomerates have on day-to-day news and entertainment?

In 1925, Stefan Zweig denounced "The Monotonization of the World" in the *Berliner-Börsen Courier*. He noticed that across the European and colonial world, people danced the same dances, sported the same hairstyles, wore the same dresses, and enjoyed the same formulaic movie styles. "What is the source of this terrible wave threatening to wash all the color, everything particular out of life?" he asked. "Everyone who has ever been there knows: America. … America is the source of that terrible wave of uniformity that gives everyone the same overalls on the skin, the same book in the hand, the same pen between the fingers, the same conversation on the lips, and the same automobile instead of feet" (Zweig 1925). Whatever scholars think of Zweig's judgments, surely this process must have been underway in the Progressive Era for him to declare it so complete by 1925. Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era have their work cut out for them.

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