

Book Reviews

*The ability to analyze reality is
the key to all historical thinking.*

Wilhelm Dilthey

Goodman, Gary. *Choosing Sides: Playground and Street Life On the Lower East Side*. New York: Schocken Books, 1979. Pp. xxiv, 200. Foreword by Stanley Aronowitz, index, bibliography, notes, \$12.95.

This book, a revised version of Gary Goodman's dissertation at Union Graduate School, more than repays the reader for a modest investment in time and purchase price. *Choosing Sides* is important both for what it does and does not accomplish, both for its successes and failures.

Goodman has a clear thesis, stated early and often. In the late nineteenth century, the Lower East Side of New York City swelled with a burgeoning community of Jewish immigrants who fashioned an enclave of mutual aid societies, Yiddish theaters and newspapers, candy stores, and street activities which all stood in stark contrast to the surrounding "American way." In the author's words (p. xi), "their world was a counter-world within which they controlled meaning, mores, and tempo. The center of this counterworld was the streets." Depending on age, young and old mingled, kibitzed, listened to radical soapboxers, played ball, paraded in support of workers' strikes, or ran in local gangs. "Street life was where tag and one-'o-cat lived with pickle salesmen. Street life *was* life" (p. 3).

Precisely because this vibrant street life succeeded in nurturing an alien, sometimes radical subculture, it became a focus of concern for the ruling class, who depended on atomized, Americanized workers to turn the wheels of industrial capitalism. In Goodman's view, reformers, who "operated with and on behalf of the upper class" (p. 15), devised a system of organized play, and imposed it on Lower East Side youth for the calculated purpose of destroying immigrant street culture. He further claims that by 1914 they had succeeded, partly by the harsh enforcement of laws designed to sweep the streets clear, and partly by erecting tightly-controlled play and recreation spaces as "wholesome alternatives. In short, the work of Luther Gulick, Lee F. Hammer, Jacob Riis, the Playground Association of America, and the New York Public School Athletic League was less philanthropic reform and more groundwork for capitalists like Andrew Carnegie, Abraham Hewitt, and John D. Rockefeller.

Goodman is not the first to turn the “progressive” view of parks and playgrounds on its head. His reasoning follows lines suggested by Dom Cavallo, Lawrence Finfer, and Joel Spring, among others. Nonetheless, Goodman’s work is a definite contribution to a school of thought which categorizes the organized play movement as social control rather than social uplift. His emphasis on the struggle over urban space and time merits attention by sport historians. His examinations of the use of play to inculcate capitalist values of masculinity, femininity, property, cooperation, and fiscal responsibility are detailed and imaginative. Further, he has attempted to uncover the *immigrants’* side of the story, largely through radical journals and interviews with old residents. He recognizes and underscores the need to account for class interests in any analysis of both the creation or imposition of reform, and its subsequent acceptance or opposition. He writes in a lively and direct style, the result of his experience as a journalist.

But there are a number of loose ends by which the apparently tight-knit work begins to unravel. Goodman concludes that the reformers *succeeded* in clearing the streets and imposing, through organized play, a new value system on immigrant children. Unfortunately, the bulk of his evidence comes from the reformers themselves—articles by Joseph Lee, G. Stanley Hall, or Gulick; directives from the Playground Association of America (PAA) to field representatives; annual reports or proceedings from the PAA or the New York Park Department. While these sources tell us what “normal courses of play” or “model” playgrounds or play instructors were *intended*, they hardly tell us what actually occurred. This is especially true with regard to Goodman’s focus, the Lower East Side of New York. Thus the book, purportedly describing “The Decline of Jewish Immigrant Street Life,” is more an overview of a national lobby, the PAA, and the suggested strategies it offered to colleagues around the country. Goodman is, I think, correct in representing much of the play movement’s thrust as a concern to control space, time, and behavior. But he is not persuasive that Lee, Gulick, or their ilk ever succeeded on their own terms. He is not convincing that street life dissolved in the Lower East Side. More evidence from *local* sources might have helped. (The author claims, p. xiv, he gained “valuable insights” from Yiddish sources, but cites barely a handful).

Another problem lies in the author’s tendency to characterize the process of assimilation as something of a conspiracy, coolly designed by capitalists and their lackeys, in this case the playground reformers. Street life is romanticized—there were pickpockets, there was some violence, “. . . but the streets were essentially crime free, comfortable places” (p. 13). The children who attended the playground were either forced (by police repression) or duped into surrendering their autonomy. Couldn’t one argue just as strongly, however, that street life also demanded a great deal of conformity; to family, to

gang, to “turf.” Playgrounds housed simply a different *type* of conformity. Similarly, Goodman is at pains to uncover examples of resistance to capitulation. But pulling the trousers of dignitaries at park dedications or pulling up shrubs, seem more like youthful pranks (the author’s arguments, p. 45, notwithstanding). Finally, was the genuine desire to become “Americans,” by playing baseball or football, necessarily a submission to “false promises?” Did attendance at supervised playgrounds really result in a severance of the old ties? Or were second generation immigrants able, in effect, to “choose *both sides*.” Indeed, assimilation involved a greater and more gradual give and take than is suggested in this book.

Goodman’s eye for conspiracy also leads him to couch the play movement in a rather constricted notion of “hegemony,” which he defines (p. 23) as “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the majority (the working class regardless of ethnicity) to the general direction imposed on social life by the ruling minority,” and which “derives from the position and power of that class.” The emphasis here is on conscious manipulation or indoctrination (by the rulers) and unconscious betrayal (by the ruled). As Raymond Williams has explained, however, (*Marxism and Literature*, p.110), hegemony is a much broader (and more powerful) process than manipulation or indoctrination. Rather, in Williams’ words, “it is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, or shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world.” Although certainly operating within a framework of domination and subordination, the hegemonic goes well beyond the *conscious* imposition of values or behavior. Surely the reformers had nobler intentions than is suggested here. That the results of their efforts supported industrial capitalism is an indication that they *also* were “victims.” Finally, Williams (p. 113) has cautioned that no hegemony is ever “total or exclusive,” something Goodman implies when he talks about the *destruction* of street life.

Even if this book fails to support its central thesis, it is no less an important contribution. For Goodman is correct, I think, that the logic of industrial capitalism incorporated the play movement and, beyond that, much of organized sport as we know it. His work emphasizes the need to examine more thoroughly the *process* by which this occurred. *Choosing Sides* challenges historians to dig deeper into *local* sources in order to illuminate the ways in which differing groups and classes lived-out this process of struggle over space and time. Cary Goodman is to be credited for prodding us on.