

## Book Reviews

Click, Patricia C. *The Spirit of the Times. Amusements in Nineteenth-Century Baltimore, Norfolk, and Richmond*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989. Pp. x, 144. Illustrations note, \$25.00.

A particular and perhaps peculiarly American "spirit" enlivened the nineteenth century, according to Patricia Click. It was not the "democratic" spirit that most historians associate with early national and antebellum American society, but the one captured by William Porter in his journal *The Spirit of the Times*. This was the "amusement spirit," which became more evident via increasing numbers and kinds of amusements as the century progressed; and it is this spirit, rather than the amusements themselves or the social reality in which they existed, that is the subject of Click's own *Spirit of the Times*. To relate the evolution of this spirit, the author, who is an associate professor in the Humanities Division of the School of Engineering at the University of Virginia, focuses on the attitudes held by particular people in three southern urban centers between 1800 and the post-Civil War era. Each of these cities—Baltimore, Maryland and Richmond and Norfolk in Virginia—had an expansive, and expanding, menu of amusements, including theater, museums, resorts, clubs, and sports. Each had, as well, an educated, influential citizenry who initially opposed and eventually embraced most amusements.

As the nineteenth century dawned, ministers, other middle-class conservators of public morality, and the traditional southern elites were overtly suspicious of amusements. This negative view was not to last. By mid-century, and even more so after the Civil War, not only were amusements no longer objectionable but they were also accepted entertainments. By the 1870s, as well, many people even believed that a city without entertaining amusements was more than just a dark horse in the arena of inter-urban competition; it was actually in the dark ages of civilization. What underlay this stunning reversal of attitudes, Click argues, was the reconciliation, though not quite the resolution, of two "tensions," or intellectual dilemmas. The first problem involved the nature of amusements: did such activities have to serve some useful purpose or could they just be entertaining? The second issue involved the relationship between the organization of society and the place of amusements therein. How could amusements proliferate and entertain, especially among laborers and immigrants, without upsetting the social order and destabilizing society?

By and large, what spurred this middle and upper class attitudinal odyssey along were the owners and promoters of amusements and the industrial revolution. Early in the century, when polite society was most opposed to amusements, the proprietors of public exhibits, museums, and theater events seized

upon a particular distinction embedded in the views of respectable people: entertaining amusements were anathema, but pleasurable activities that offered instruction or refreshment were not. Consequently, the organizers advertised their fare as restorative amusements, or recreations. Click concludes that their scheme worked to expand both the definition and the content of amusement. By the 1820s edification, enlightenment, and practical utility had become the by-words of the growing numbers of acceptable amusements. Thereafter, as the processes of industrialization and secularization propelled Baltimore, Richmond, and Norfolk ever farther from their pre-industrial pasts, promoters identified more benefits for amusements. By the 1840s, Click maintains, the effect was two-fold: the once strident voices of the critics had become mere whispers, and more amusements had become respectable. The day when some amusements became acceptable as entertainments and when entertainments became the pride rather than the bane of cities was just around the corner.

To reach this point, however, respectable urbanites also had to come to grips with how democracy and hierarchy would be related in a society with an amusement spirit. In effect, and in two stages, a hierarchically-organized democracy replaced the original, and simpler, hierarchy. Before the 1830s theater managers and exhibition organizers managed to keep crowds sufficiently small and prices sufficiently high to deter massive and mass attendance. In the case of other public amusements, particularly horse racing, the prestige of the elites persisted, and so, by Click's reckoning, did the deference of the commoners who came to watch. During and after the 1840s, different mechanisms prevented the feared total democratization of amusements and the equally feared condition in which amusement begot license. Clubs with membership restrictions and dues, for example, effectively reinforced social stratification, as did the popularly understood distinction between legitimate and illegitimate entertainments. In all, Click claims, the redefinition of amusement as entertainment did exist within, and perhaps led to, a more open society. Southern urban society was never totally open, however.

Much of the story that Click tells is believable. Most historians would agree that amusements proliferated and that attitudes toward amusements did change. But Click produces a number of unsubstantiated claims and problematic conceptualizations that diminish the impact of her book. For example, she accepts Fritz Redlich's (1965) argument that "secularization led to the commercialization of leisure" without testing it against her data (p. 31). This point becomes a convenience for explaining away the apparent decline in the influence of the clergy and a barricade to examining what, if any, role the clergy maintained. A second conceptual problem involves the industrial revolution. Click apparently assumes (she certainly provides neither evidence nor discussion) that the work-leisure dichotomy, produced by the industrial revolution, was an intellectual scheme circulating widely among her respectable classes by 1800. Indeed, she believes that the early distrust of amusement was also a distrust of leisure. Other effects of the industrial revolution, however, lay far in the future. One must, then, wonder about her conception of the process and its timing, especially

insofar as she is certain that it was not until the 1840s that the movement produced pro-entertainment attitudes and even later when those entertainments occurred in non-work times.

Particular assumptions are also disturbing. One involves the matter of American uniqueness. Click assumes that her citizens made their amusements “anew,” although she never engages in a comparison with those in England or anywhere else. Another matter involves social class. In the pages of *The Spirit of the Times*, social class is a given, an unchanging, status-defined entity. It is not malleable or constructed by human beings, nor is there any room for people to change classes. Amusements have virtually no place in the shaping of class, although they are class-based. Moreover, and in the worst case scenario, once an amusement like gambling loses the support of a particular class, it inevitably and invariably suffers a “decline” (p. 63) as a public form. What might she have concluded had she looked beyond the pages of her literati?

This last question leads us to what may be the most critical author-induced tension in *The Spirit of the Times*. It is a history of attitudes, which draws upon very few sources about behaviors. Consequently, when Click finds that an attitude does not “reflect” the actual behaviors or account for the actual behavior, she resorts to pseudo-rationalizations. Her discussion of gambling suffers from just such a construction, and so do her efforts to deal with large crowds. Given her sources, she cannot explain the popularity of theater, or any other public amusement, in the face of negative attitudes. Consequently, she resorts to the convenient, but not at all compelling, device of a paradox: “Paradoxically, the tension between competing definitions of amusements was not always reflected in amusement attendance” (p. 4).

In the end, *The Spirit of the Times* itself stands as something of a paradox. It offers any number of interesting, even intriguing ideas, but too many of them end up awry. Perhaps this is merely the result of Click’s efforts to relate attitudes and behaviors, when she has no evidence of the latter. Perhaps, too, it suggests that a topic like amusements can not be approached just from the perspective of attitudes, particularly a narrow range of attitudes in what was a very vital society.

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