

# INTRODUCTION

Just now her search is translated very lightly and gaily into the demand for “a good time” and a keen interest in the other sex.<sup>1</sup>

I was a lively girl, a devil, I was healthy, young and all that, and they used to say I was very pretty also, and I was all over, you know, I wasn't sleeping like other girls.<sup>2</sup>

This book is a study of young working women's culture in turn-of-the-century New York City—the customs, values, public styles, and ritualized interactions—expressed in leisure time. Wandering through the dance halls, streets, nickelodeons, and amusement parks of the metropolis, I explore the trivia of social experience for clues to the ways working women constructed and gave meaning to their lives in the period from 1880 to 1920. Until recently, the historical record silenced those who left few written accounts and committed no “great” deeds. The flowering of feminist scholarship has at last begun to restore working-class women to history, establishing the significance of their activities in the household, workplace, and political arena. But leisure?—a minor pursuit, if not an outright contradiction; as one Polish immigrant remarked, “Who had leisure time?”<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, many working women carved out of daily life a sphere of pleasure that belied the harsh realities of the shop floor and tenement. Their activities, moreover, offer a window into social

practices often obscured in other areas of human experience, opening to view the central concern of this book, the cultural handling of gender among working-class people. Public halls, picnic grounds, pleasure clubs, and street corners were social spaces in which gender relations were "played out," where notions of sexuality, courtship, male power, female dependency, and autonomy were expressed and legitimated.

At the same time, leisure is not simply a vessel whose contents reveal a unified culture, nor is its relationship to other spheres of life such as work and family one-dimensional. Leisure activities may affirm the cultural patterns embedded in other institutions, but they may also offer an arena for the articulation of different values and behaviors. The working-class construction of gender was influenced by the changing organization and meaning of leisure itself, particularly the effects of ongoing capitalist development on the organization of work and time, and the intensive commercialization of leisure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Under industrial capitalism, leisure has come to be perceived as a realm of autonomy and choice, a sphere of life separate from the obligations of the workplace. As E. P. Thompson and others have argued, the development of wage labor, imposition of time discipline by employers, and rationalization of the work process resulted in a new sense of the rhythms of time and cognitively sundered "work" from "life."<sup>4</sup> Workers who sold their time and labor and submitted to the bosses' control could daily assert a sense of independence in the public spaces of the saloon or lodge. This was linked to the notion of reciprocity among one's working-class peers, both institutionally, in such organizations as mutual aid societies, and interpersonally, in such common practices as treating rounds of beer. Working-class leisure thus offered a refuge from the dominant value system of competitive individualism, as Roy Rosenzweig has argued, and provided an arena in which class consciousness and conflict could be articulated, along with ethnic, religious, and other divisions."

Yet this conception of leisure did not develop historically in the same way for both sexes. Women's leisure does not fit neatly into a framework that ignores the ways patriarchal relations within the working class divided women and men's lives and consciousness.

The public culture of workingmen was not only a potential bulwark of solidarity against the ravages of capitalism; it was also a system of male privilege in which workers' self-determination, solidarity, and mutual assistance were understood as "manliness." Shaped by the sexual divisions that structured work, access to resources, and participation in public life, women's time differed from men's. Their leisure—at least that of married women—tended to be segregated from the public realm and was not sharply differentiated from work, but was sinuously intertwined with the rhythms of household labor and the relations of kinship.

Women's life cycle and the family economy, however, shaped the ways different women experienced the sexual division of leisure. During this period, the working-class family's strategy for survival in an industrial, waged-based economy commonly meant sending daughters and sons into the labor force to supplement the earnings of the father, while the mother cooked, cleaned, cared for children, and often manufactured goods in the home. Consequently, although there were many exceptions to this model, the typical wage-earning woman of 1900 (outside home production) was young and single.

For them, leisure as a separate sphere of autonomy was problematic. Cultural ideologies about women's roles and the material conditions of daily life did not readily support this conception of leisure. In the immigrant cultures that dominated the urban working class at this time, young women were to be dutiful daughters who helped with the housework after their day of wage labor, turned over their pay envelopes unopened, and followed Old World traditions about women's social participation that, in some cases, were highly restrictive. At the same time, other dynamics in young women's lives encouraged an orientation toward leisure. As wage-earners, they experienced rhythms of time and labor more similar to men's than married women's, and shopfloor cultures reinforced the notion that leisure was a distinct realm of activity to which working women could demand access. However, young women's pursuit of pleasure did not lead them to the traditional domain of workingmen, but to emergent forms of commercialized recreation, such as dance halls, amusement parks, and movie theaters.

The rapid expansion and commercialization of leisure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries altered the traditional

structure of such popular working-class activities as dancing and excursion-going. Loosening the ties between leisure, mutual aid, and male culture, commercialized recreation fostered a youth-oriented, mixed-sex world of pleasure, where female participation was profitable and encouraged. Many young women, particularly the daughters of immigrants, came to identify "cheap amusements" as the embodiment of American urban culture, particularly its individualism, ideology of consumption, and affirmation of dating and courtship outside parental control.

In these commercial amusement places, as the following chapters explore in detail, young women experimented with new cultural forms that articulated gender in terms of sexual expressiveness and social interaction with men, linking heterosocial culture to a sense of modernity, individuality, and personal style. Creating this style was an assertion of self, a working-class variant of the "New Woman." This is not to claim that the social and sexual freedom expressed in working women's leisure constituted a form of liberation; as Leslie Tentler and others have observed, without economic independence, such freedoms were ultimately hollow.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one could argue that this culture was primarily a product of the leisure industry's efforts to market entertainment and consumption to working-class women, who were lulled into a state of false consciousness. Without denying the importance of these points, I think it is necessary to understand how women pushed at the boundaries of constrained lives and shaped cultural forms for their own purposes. In essence, understanding working women's culture calls for a doubled vision, to see that women's embrace of style, fashion, romance, and mixed-sex fun could be a source of autonomy and pleasure as well as a cause of their continuing oppression.

Delineating young working women's leisure not only opens to view the dynamics of gender and generation within working-class life; it illuminates aspects of a larger cultural process, what John Higham calls the "reorientation of American culture" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>7</sup> The complex passage from Victorian culture to modernism involved, among many other changes, a redefinition of gender relations, what might be termed the shift from homosocial to heterosocial culture. This book examines this cultural

transformation from a new standpoint, focusing on the role of young white working women in fostering these changes.

Scholars of women's history have documented the cultural elaboration of "women's sphere" in the nineteenth century, as an emergent market economy and industrialization heightened the sexual division of labor. Affirming segregated spatial and social worlds for bourgeois women and men, the ideology of true womanhood, with its precepts of domesticity, moral guardianship, and sexual purity, made a moral and social duty out of the traditional tasks of housework and child care. Historians have examined the multidimensional power of this ideology both to enforce women's subordination and to open possibilities for female influence and assertion in and out of the home. Moreover, it enhanced a rich female culture that engendered passionate same-sex friendships, female self-awareness, and activism. As middle-class women internalized this homosocial ordering of their world, defining their status and character in terms of it, they also sought to spread these ideals, particularly domesticity, to women of the laboring classes.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the century, this dominant cultural construct was under strain, buffeted by the changing realities of women's lives. Women's movement into employment, higher education, and political activism expanded the notion of women's place. While few were ready to abandon the notion of sexual difference, the force of feminist demands for greater political rights and economic opportunities challenged the division of power in American society. In popular culture, the emergent ideal of the "New Woman" imbued women's activity in the public domain with a new sense of female self, a woman who was independent, athletic, sexual, and modern.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to the Victorian ideology of spatial and psychological separation, a cultural preoccupation with the emotional and sexual bonds between women and men developed in the early decades of the twentieth century. From New York City to Middletown, the affirmation of heterosociality was pervasive, particularly in new forms of commercial entertainment. Urban nightclubs and amusement parks legitimated interaction between the sexes in such practices as dating and close dancing, while films in the teens and twenties offered visual models of heterosocial modernity. Social scientists, advertisers, and journalists too promoted the importance of mutual

attraction, good sexual relations, and friendship in matrimony. Yet the public discourse affirming enlightened companionship between modern women and men obscured the ways in which the new culture reformulated women's subordination. Women's self-definition remained bound up in heterosexual and marital relationships; close friendships and intimacy between women were increasingly labelled deviant; and women's sexuality, freed from the strictures of passionlessness, became increasingly commodified, an instrument of a nascent consumer culture.<sup>10</sup>

In seeking to explain this transformation in the construction of gender, historians have looked at groups within the middle and upper classes as the catalysts of cultural change. Generally, a "trickle down" model is assumed in these interpretations: bohemian intellectuals, college students, or an elite urban vanguard develop new social forms, which are then diffused downward, via institutions of mass culture, to the broader middle class and, ultimately, to the working class. Models of cultural hegemony and social control often reinforce this view of the working class as passive recipients of cultural messages, whether these come from factory owners and reformers seeking to create a disciplined labor force or from mass entertainment moguls coopting the traditional pursuits of the masses.<sup>11</sup> Recently scholars have come to question this view, offering a much richer and more complex picture of cultural change as a multidimensional set of interactions, in which hegemonic intentions are accommodated, resisted, and reshaped in a variety of ways.<sup>12</sup>

In line with this approach, this book argues that, to explain changes in the construction of gender in these years fully, it is necessary to understand that in many ways, rather than being bystanders in the process of cultural change, working women pioneered new manners and mores. Some groups within the middle class, notably reformers, sought to repress or at least contain the heterosocial, sexually expressive culture of these working women, but they met with limited success. In contrast, an emergent group of leisure entrepreneurs encouraged that culture, played with its forms, and ultimately popularized it for a broad mass audience. I am not arguing for a "trickle up" theory, but rather suggesting that the lines of cultural transmission travel in both directions.

The exploration of gender relations and cultural change in this book is based upon research into the experiences of white working-class women in Manhattan. Of all the large industrial cities in the United States, New York—particularly Manhattan Island—seemed the most likely foundry of an emergent culture, given its cosmopolitan character and expansive leisure and entertainment industries. Moreover, sources on working-class life in New York are rich and extensive, ranging from the records of a virtual army of reformers to the oral testimony of immigrant women. As is the case today, turn-of-the-century New Yorkers were remarkably self-conscious about their city's life, to the delight of historians.

In determining who fell into the category of “working-class women,” I have considered an individual's structural relationship to the means of production as the primary determinant of class, but not the only one. As feminist scholars have observed, women's class position is often problematic under this traditional Marxist definition, and like other social historians, I have paid attention to the larger web of social relationships within which women labored and lived. The working-class women discussed in the following pages typically were immigrants or daughters of immigrants, lived in well-defined tenement districts, and labored for wages while unmarried, usually in factories, homes, and sales and service jobs. This description of working-class women is, of course, historically circumscribed, emerging out of a specific social and economic context in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The first three chapters of the book place young women's leisure in the larger milieu of working-class social life. The sexual division of leisure for married men and women is examined in Chapter One, which considers the segregated pattern of social participation in terms of differing work rhythms, access to income, and organizational life. Chapter Two explores the relationship between young women's wage-earning and their definition of leisure as mixed-sex fun and freedom; it focuses not only upon the material conditions of the workplace, such as wages, hours, and work processes, but also upon the work cultures young women created on the shop floor. The “style” young women created in clubs and the streets is discussed in Chapter Three, in terms of the conflicts between family and autono-

my. The next three chapters are case studies of dance halls, excursions and amusement parks, and the movies. These examine in detail the commercialization of working-class amusements and how they articulated and popularized working-class youth's cultural practices. These studies suggest that working women had an impact on the evolution of popular amusements toward "mass leisure" and the new cultural attitudes toward gender and sexuality embedded in them. Finally, Chapter Seven looks at cultural transmission in the other direction, examining the efforts by middle-class reformers to impose their Victorian notions of wholesome leisure on working girls and their failure to forestall the commercial and heterosocial culture.