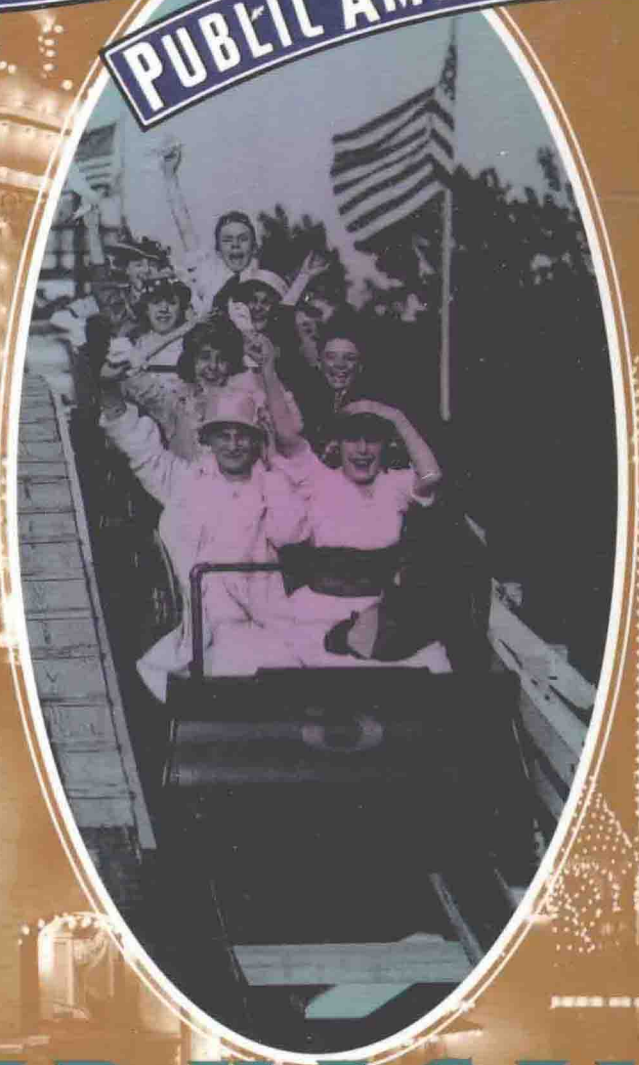
GOING OUT

THE RISE AND FALL OF PUBLIC AMUSEMENTS



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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

THEY ARE ALL GONE NOW: THE MOVIE PALACES with their majestic marquees climbing five stories high; the amusement parks with their acres of roller coasters, tilt-a-whirls, chutes, and carousels; the stately asymmetrical ballparks squeezed into residential neighborhoods. Once, these amusement spaces defined the city as a place of glamour and glitter, of fun and sociability. But they have vanished forever. The spectacular yet tawdry, wild, and wonderful Dreamlands only a subway ride away have been replaced by theme parks surrounded by parking lots. The inner-city baseball parks, accessible by mass transit, have been covered over by housing projects or industrial parks. The movie palaces have been torn down or multiplexed into oblivion. And the huge and heterogeneous crowds that gathered there have been dispersed. The audience at a shopping center theater; the spectators at suburban ballparks; and the visitors to theme parks, festival marketplaces, and enclosed shopping malls are, by comparison, frighteningly homogeneous.

The era of public amusements that was born in the latter decades of the nineteenth century has come to an end. We have lost not simply buildings and parks but also the sense of civic sociability they nourished and sustained. In the early twentieth-century American city, residents were segregated from one another at work and at home, by income, ethnicity, gender, and social class. But they were also, I will

argue, beginning to share a common commercial culture and public amusement sites, where social solidarities were emphasized and distinctions muted. The world of "public" amusements was, in its "publicity," its accessibility, and its "wide-openness," as the *New York Times* characterized it in an 1899 editorial, a world like no other, situated in a magical corner of the city, where the city's peoples came together to have a good time in public.[1] There were no restrictions as to gender, ethnicity, religion, residence, or occupation in the new amusement spaces. Unlike the landsmen's lodges and union halls; the saloons and church socials; and the front stoops, parlors, and kitchens, the new entertainment centers held more strangers than friends. "Going out" meant laughing, dancing, cheering, and weeping with strangers with whom one might—or might not—have anything in common. The "crowd" replaced the select circle of acquaintances as the setting in which one sought and found amusement.

Only persons of color were excluded or segregated from these audiences, although they were overrepresented on stage—as darkies, strutters, and shouters in vaudeville and musical theater; as coons in popular song; as savages in world's fair exhibits; as buffoons in amusement park concessions; as mascots in baseball parks; as dim-witted children in the early silent movies; as rapists and beasts in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. As I will argue throughout this book, neither the segregation of African Americans in the commercial amusement audiences nor their overrepresentation in parodic form were coincidental. To the extent that racial distinctions were exaggerated on stage, social distinctions among "whites" in the audience could be muted.

This is a book about the rise of public amusements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and their decline and fall in the post–World War II decades. It is the story of the vanished world of phonograph and kinetoscope parlors; of vaudeville halls and ten-twenty-thirty-cent melodrama theaters; of world's fair midways; of amusement parks, ballparks, dance halls, and picture palaces.

In the 1870s and 1880s, "nightlife" was still the preserve of the wealthy few who patronized the first-class playhouses and of the "sporting" crowd that spent its evenings in "concert" saloons with live entertainment. Within only a few decades, however, the landscape of amusements—and their place in the everyday life of the city—changed dramatically. The city's muddied streets and gray edifices receded into

the background, overwhelmed by the "Great White Ways" that studded the central business districts with their flashing lights advertising the newest, the most spectacular, the biggest shows in town. By 1900, New York City had more theaters than any city in the world. By 1910, the seating capacity of its playhouses and movie theaters approached two million. (In 1869, average daily attendance had been estimated at a little more than 25,000.) San Francisco in 1912 had five playhouses, eleven vaudeville houses, and sixty-nine moving-picture theaters with an estimated weekly attendance of more than half a million. (In 1870, there had been two playhouses and one opera house.) The increase in the number of theaters and seating capacities was just as great in other American cities, east and west.[2]

When we add to these numbers the world's fair, amusement park, and ballpark visitors, the enormity of the twentieth-century entertainment revolution becomes even clearer. The only world's fair held in the United States after the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia was the 1885 New Orleans World's Industrial and Cotton Exposition. Then, with dizzying regularity, the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 drew 14 million visitors; the Atlanta exposition in 1895, 1.3 million; Nashville in 1897, 1.8 million; Omaha in 1898, 1.5 million; Buffalo in 1901, 4 million; and St. Louis in 1904, 10 million. In 1870, there had been no amusement parks or baseball parks and only a handful of accessible picnic groves and beer gardens on the cities' outskirts. By the early twentieth century, there were enclosed baseball and amusement parks in every city and town in the nation, with visitors numbering in the tens of millions. Over twenty million men, women, and children visited Coney Island alone during the 1909 season, a number that, adjusted for population increases, is about 20 percent greater than the total number of visitors to Disney's Orlando and Anaheim amusement parks in 1989.[3]

The rise of public amusements was a by-product of the enormous expansion of the cities. Commercial entertainments were, in this period at least, an urban phenomenon. Their rise and fall were inevitably and inextricably linked to the fortunes of the cities that sustained them.

Between 1870 and 1920, American cities flourished as never before. The urban population of the nation increased from under ten to over fifty-four million people. Per capita income and free time expanded as

well. Between 1870 and 1900, real income for nonfarm employees increased by more than 50 percent, while the cost of living, as measured by the consumer price index, decreased by 50 percent. This increase in wages was accompanied by a steady decrease in work hours. The average manufacturing worker worked three and a half hours less in 1910 than in 1890; for many blue-collar workers, unionized employees, and white-collar workers, the decrease in the workweek was even more dramatic. It also was in this period that the Saturday half-holiday and the "vacation habit" arrived in the American city. Although, as we will see in chapter 6, most workers still had to finance their own vacations, increasing numbers of white-collar employees were beginning to take days, even a week or more, off during the warm-weather months.[4]

As Roy Rosenzweig and a generation of labor and social historians have argued, the quest for leisure time "reverberated through the labor struggles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a compositor told the U.S. Senate Committee on Relations Between Labor and Capital in 1883: 'A workingman wants something besides food and clothes in this country. . . . He wants recreation.'" "Going out" was more than an escape from the tedium of work, it was the gateway into a privileged sphere of everyday life. The ability to take time out from work for recreation and public sociability was the dividing line between old worlds and new. Peasants and beasts of burden spent their lives at work; American workers and citizens went out at night and took days off in the summer.[5]

Recreation and play were not luxuries but necessities in the modern city. As Daniel Rodgers has noted, the workday had been shortened by "squeezing periods of relaxation and amusement out of working hours, by trading long hours of casual work for shorter, more concentrated workdays." Instead of the older "interfusion of free and work time," there was now "an increasing segregation of work and play into distinct categories." The fear of idle time as the devil's workshop gave way to a reverence for play, promoted alike by middle-class reformers and working-class organizers. As the Yiddish *Tageblatt* advised its Jewish readers in the spring of 1907, "He who can enjoy and does not enjoy commits a sin."[6]

While all the city's workers, even its most recent immigrants, joined the assembling public for commercial amusements, it was the workers in white collars who constituted the critical element in the construction of the new "nightlife." As the white-collar sector of the work force

increased in size in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so did the potential audience for the new public amusements. In 1880, there had been 5,000 typists and stenographers in the nation. By 1910, the number had increased sixtyfold to 300,000, while the overall clerical work force had risen from 160,000 to more than 1.7 million. From a negligible 2.4 percent of the total work force in 1870, the number of clerical and sales workers grew to a substantial 11 percent by 1920. In the big cities, the percentage of white-collar workers was even greater: 24 percent of the Chicago work force in 1920 were white-collar workers, a large number of them women.[7]

The city's white-collar workers were the most avid consumers of the commercial pleasures. Their work was increasingly regimented, concentrated, and tedious, creating a need for recreation. And, compared to that of blue-collar workers, it provided them with sufficient time, resources, and energy to go out at night. For factory, mill, and manual workers who had to get up at five in the morning to be at work by six, the consequences of a night "out" were considerable. Clerical and sales workers could, on the other hand, stay out late, get a good night's sleep, and still get to work on time.[8]

The new amusements were "public" and "commercial" as well as urban. The terms, in this period at least, became almost interchangeable, as the city's showmen, learning the new calculus of public entertainments, lowered prices to welcome the largest possible audience to their establishments. Although in the long run, it was growth in the demand, not the supply, side that would prompt the expansion of commercial entertainments, the showmen played a considerable role in assembling the new urban public. To succeed in the show business (as it was called throughout this period), the amusement entrepreneurs had to do more than build theaters; they had to provide commercial amusements and amusement sites that were public in the sense that they belonged to no particular social groups, exciting enough to appeal to the millions, and respectable enough to offend no one.

Leisure time remained a contested terrain, an arena of social life of such critical importance that the city's social, political, cultural, and religious elites dared not abandon it to the whims of consumers and the marketplace. To keep their critics at bay and attract an audience from the diverse social groups in the city, the show businessmen had to mold and maintain a revised moral taxonomy of shows and audiences.

Vaudeville had to be certified as a decent entertainment for mixed audiences, with no relation to the male-only variety show that had preceded it; the amusement parks had to be promoted as "clean" outdoor shows for the whole family; the moving-picture theaters had to be distinguished from the penny arcades and peep shows. The envelope in which it was delivered mattered as much as the content of the show. An otherwise "indecent" act became "decent" when presented in an amusement site certified as "respectable." It was permissible to stare at gyrating belly dancers on the world's fair midways, if the dancers in question were performing "authentic" foreign dances; women in tights or tight-fitting bathing suits could appear on the vaudeville stage, if they were billed as acrobats or championship swimmers; holding onto a member of the opposite sex was acceptable at the amusement park, if it happened "accidentally" on the cyclone.

No matter how hungry city folk might have been for cheap amusements or how eager the show businessmen were to provide them, the expansion in commercial amusements could not have occurred without accompanying advances in technology, in particular the electrification of the metropolis. In the chapters to come, we will follow the "invention" of new electric amusement machines that spoke, sang, showed moving pictures, and told stories. We begin, however, not with these scientific wonders but with the lighting of the city by electricity, the sine qua non for the expansion of urban "nightlife" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Incandescent lighting transformed the city from a dark and treacherous netherworld into a glittering multicolored wonderland. Nineteenth-century authors had described city streets after dark as sinister and filled with danger. The gas lamps did not "light" up the night as much as cast into shadow the disreputable doings and personages of slum, tenderloin, and levee. In *New York by Gas-Light*, first published in 1850, George Foster, the *New-York Tribune* reporter and best-selling author, described in lurid detail "the fearful mysteries of darkness in the metropolis—the festivities of prostitution, the orgies of pauperism, the haunts of theft and murder, the scenes of drunkenness and beastly debauch, and all the sad realities that go to make up the lower stratum—the under-ground story—of life in New York!"[9]

Fifty years after Foster wrote his account, Theodore Dreiser published *Sister Carrie*, an account of city life that turned upside down the

sunshine/shadow, light/dark, day/night tropes used by Foster and other nineteenth-century authors. For Dreiser, it was in daylight, not after dark, that the city was at its grayest, cruelest, and most distressing. The coming of the night was a sign of promise, not depravity. "Ah, the promise of the night. . . . What old illusion of hope is not here forever repeated! Says the soul of the toiler to itself, 'I shall soon be free. I shall be in the ways and the hosts of the merry. The streets, the lamp, the lighted chamber set for dining are for me. The theatres, the halls, the parties, the ways of rest and the paths of song—these are mine in the night.'" Only after dark, when the "street lamps" shone brightly with their "merry twinkle," did joy return to the city as the "artificial fires of merriment" dispelled the gloom and chill, providing "light and warmth."[10]

The sparkling city that Sister Carrie traveled to was Chicago in 1900, when electric lighting was still new and wondrous. A Chicago journalist, writing in 1900, declared that "he had witnessed a profound change in the city's lighting, a revolution 'little short of marvelous. The field where but yesterday the flickering gas flame held full sway now blazes nightly in the glow of myriads of electric lamps, aggregating in intensity the illuminating power of 15,000,000 candles.'" By 1903, the new Commonwealth Edison of Chicago turbogenerator was producing over 5,000 times more energy than the dynamos that had powered Edison's 1882 Pearl Street station. Electricity had, in the words of the historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch, "begun to permeate modern, urban life."[11]

Unlike gas lamps, which were highly flammable, electric lamps could be kept on all night. The street lamps illuminated not simply the lamppost beneath but both sides of the street with a clear, bright white light, not the sooty gray of the gas lamps. The commercial lights of restaurants, shops, and theaters added the merry twinkle that gave the "nocturnal round of business, pleasure and illumination . . . we think of as night life . . . its own special atmosphere."[12]

The artificially illuminated streets provided city residents with an added incentive to leave their darkened or gas-lit flats to go out at night "when all the shop fronts are lighted, and the entrances to the theaters blaze out on the sidewalk like open fireplaces." As the journalist Richard Harding Davis wrote of Broadway in 1892, "It is at this hour that the clerk appears, dressed in his other suit, the one which he keeps for the evening, and the girl bachelor, who . . . has found her hall bedroom cold and lonely after the long working day behind a counter or at a loom and the loneliness tends to homesickness . . . puts on her hat

and steps down a side-street and loses herself in the unending processions on Broadway, where, though she knows no one, and no one wants to know her, there is light and color, and she is at least not alone."[13]

Earlier in the nineteenth century, young people who walked the streets after dark would have been admonished for placing themselves in mortal danger of moral contamination. But the electric street lights had gone a long way toward purging "nightlife" of its aura of licentiousness. Although there were no accurate statistics to prove the case, it was taken for granted that the electric street lamps were removing much of the danger that had lurked in the dark. A 1912 article in *The American City* listed first among "the advantages accruing from ornamental street lighting [a decrease in] lawlessness and crime . . . 'A light is as good as a policeman.'. . . A criminologist of world-wide fame, and one who is considered an authority, says that he would rather have plenty of electric lights and clean streets than all the law and order societies in existence."[14]

Electricity was not simply providing power to light the urban landscape but was reconfiguring it into a fairyland of illuminated shapes, signs, and brightly colored, sometimes animated, messages and images—forty-foot green pickles, gigantic pieces of chewing gum, Roman chariots racing on top of a hotel. The lights of the city created "a new kind of visual text," a new landscape of modernity. They foregrounded the city's illuminated messages, its theaters, tall buildings, hotels, restaurants, department stores, and "Great White Ways," while erasing its "unattractive areas and cast[ing] everything unsightly into an impenetrable darkness. If by day poor or unsightly sections called out for social reform, by night the city was a purified world of light, simplified into a spectacular pattern, interspersed with now-unimportant blanks."[15]

The lights "marked" the city as a "sight" worthy of respect, even admiration. But they also focused attention on the city as a source of amusement. The lighting of the lights signaled that the workday was over and the time for play at hand. As the editorial in the February 1904 issue of *The Four-Track News* declared, "It is an old, old theme, and an oft told tale—but when the lights are on, and the season is in full swing, as it is now, any evening, that great thoroughfare, with its business activity, its wonderful social life, its rialto with its tragic comedians and its comic tragedians . . . when Broadway is really itself, it is a continuous vaudeville that is worth many times the 'price of admission'—especially as no admission price is asked. Where else is there

such a free performance—such a festive panorama of gay life as Broadway 'puts up' when the lights are on."[16]

Electrification made going out at night not only safer and more exciting but easier and cheaper than ever before. The dynamos and generators that lit the street lamps also powered the trolleys that tied together the city and its neighborhoods. Between 1890 and 1902, investment in electric and cable cars quadrupled, track mileage tripled, and fare passengers doubled. In 1890, only 15 percent of all American streetcars had been electrified, and the remainder were connected to horses. By 1902, 94 percent were electric. The flat nickel fare and free transfers between lines made streetcar travel accessible to more city residents and workers.[17]

In connecting the city's business and residential districts, the electric streetcars fostered the growth—and transformation—of "downtown" into a central shopping and entertainment district. In Chicago, as Sam Bass Warner has written, the Loop, tied by electric streetcar to outlying neighborhoods, prospered as never before. "The downtown district became *the* city for Chicagoans. It was a place of work for tens of thousands, a market for hundreds of thousands, a theater for thousands more."[18]

The new "downtowns" were defined geographically by the convergence of the railroad and trolley lines and framed architecturally by the mammoth new terminals that welcomed out-of-towners into the heart of the city. The majority of those who resided temporarily in the nearby hotels had come for business purposes: to buy, sell, insure, inspect, or display their goods. Before, after, and sometimes even during business hours, however, they expected to be entertained. They were joined in this pursuit by white-collar workers who stayed "downtown" after work; by city residents who worked and lived in outlying residential neighborhoods but rode the streetcar to the theater district; and by suburbanites who were linked by electric "interurban" to the city and its nighttime pleasures. For all of them, the city was becoming as much a place of play as a place of work.[19]