

## Going with the Flow: Histories of Leisure in America

“[V]acations disclose what people choose to do rather than are required to do,” Cindy Sondik Aron argued in her 1999 *Working at Play*. Historical studies of leisure, likewise, reflect a choice on the part of the author. But just as “cultural directives and social constraints” influenced Aron’s pleasure-seekers, the times and environments in which authors of American leisure wrote have exerted similar influence over the topics selected and treatments given by those authors.<sup>1</sup>

Examining historical studies of leisure reveals that these studies have largely followed the contours of the study of history more generally. Thorstein Veblen’s biting critique of the leisure class in 1899 was a precursor to the “consensus school” of historical study that would come to dominate post-World War II historical inquiry. Seventy-five years later, Robert Caro’s seething indictment of the man who built New York’s park system coincided with a “new left” school of history eager to displace consensus with contestation and struggle. Through the 1980s and 1990s, as the cultural turn and postmodernism became central approaches to historical study, an explosion of work on leisure – depicted as a domain of contingency and contestation rather than inevitability – arrived. Finally, as historians have begun to reassert over-arching narratives and turn toward synthesis and histories of capitalism, two exciting papers from 2012 show how leisure has been integrated into this synthesis. Writers discussing leisure in America have clearly reflected the zeitgeist of the times in which they have written.

### Precursor to Consensus

First published in 1899, Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* was a seminal work. All subsequent historians discussing leisure have had to grapple with the outsized

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<sup>1</sup> Aron, Cindy Sondik. *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2

influence of this slim yet rambling work. Veblen argued that the development of the leisure class was closely tied to the division of labor in society. While most average people had to work at everyday tasks of production and sustenance (what Veblen called “industry”), the leisure class could instead occupy their time with pursuits like sports, hunting, or making war (“exploit”). In turn, the very act of engaging in productive labor became a marker of low class status, while “[conspicuous] abstention from labour [sic] . . . becomes the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement.”<sup>2</sup> Finally, consumption of goods and leisure became its own end: “Since the consumption of . . . goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit.”<sup>3</sup>

Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, it would be inaccurate to call *The Theory of the Leisure Class* a work of history in the modern sense of the word. Educated in “philosophy” and economics, Veblen completed his education and wrote this, his most influential book, at a time before the American university system was organized into the modern disciplines recognized today. Veblen did not use citations but rather relied on observation and “reasoning” to make his case. *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is not the “history of the leisure class,” it is, rather, a blend of observed and assumed history, philosophy, sociology, and economic theory.

In many ways Veblen’s work was a precursor to the consensus school of history that developed during the post-World War II years. For Veblen, different groups and societies may be at different points in their progression at any given time, but each will proceed roughly along the same path of development. Veblen’s class divisions are born of inevitability, not contingency. In a passage that reflects Veblen’s usual style, he claimed that “[the] early differentiation out of

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<sup>2</sup> Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Veblen, 36.

which the distinction between a leisure and a working class arises is a division maintained between men's and women's work in the lower stages of barbarism."<sup>4</sup> This idea of "barbarism" is part of Veblen's view of societies as part of a spectrum from primitive savagery to a "predatory" phase of life and finally to the modern, "higher" phase of life.

### **Leisure Turns (New) Left**

Arriving seventy-five years after Veblen's work, Robert Caro's *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* marked a major shift in writing about leisure spaces. *The Power Broker* was extremely influential at the time of its publication, garnering a Pulitzer Prize for literature and evoking a scathing rebuke from Moses himself. A heavily-researched account of Moses's time as New York City's "master builder" and planner, *The Power Broker* made extensive use of interviews with city officials and residents.

The new left sensibilities of *The Power Broker* reflect America's national mood around the time the book was written and published. The use of extensive interviews with people who were impacted by Moses's projects is indicative of the "people's history" approach that formed the foundation of new left scholarship. Caro sought to identify and indict the rotten core of the establishment and did so colorfully and relentlessly. Moses's buildings did not simply stand, they loomed; Moses was not simply powerful, he was an emperor; power was a drug and Moses a "user." After detailing the staggering scope of what Moses built, Caro bluntly states that "what Robert Moses built on was a lie."<sup>5</sup> Moses's position of power despite never being elected to office was precisely the type of swamp Caro was interested in exposing – and precisely the type

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<sup>4</sup> Veblen, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Caro, Robert A. *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 16.

readers were primed and ready to hear on the book's publication in 1974, the same year as Nixon's resignation as President of the United States amid the Watergate scandal. The profound mistrust in government engendered by the tumult of the Nixon administration cemented the irrelevance of the consensus school just as *The Power Broker* arrived.

Caro's contribution to the literature on leisure is his recounting of the expansion – in both scope and definition – of the parks of New York (both city and state). It was Moses with his emperor-like power who ordained that New York's parks should not be isolated islands of nature but rather a park system connected by roads – the parkways – with large, permanent facilities for recreation and sport.<sup>6</sup> With this expansion came the displacement of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers – usually poor people of color – from their homes.

Caro also contributes to the literature in his telling of the racially and economically exclusive practices of Moses and his parks. Moses segregated the lifeguards at New York's beaches to discourage African Americans from swimming in “white” areas. And by keeping parkland out of the path of public transit and charging parking fees, Moses excluded the economically vulnerable who could benefit most from a day of rest and recreation.<sup>7</sup> While Caro deploys this racial exclusion to illustrate the character of Robert Moses, Andrew Kahrl would explore similar themes of racial exclusion as part of a more synthetic history over thirty-five years later in “Sunbelt by the Sea.”

### **Leisure in the Postmodern Years**

Where Veblen had identified leisure pursuits as strictly the domain of the “leisure class,” Roy Rosenzweig in his 1983 *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an*

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<sup>6</sup> Caro, 167.

<sup>7</sup> Caro, 318, 514.

*Industrial City, 1870-1920* showed how working-class men – those engaged in what Veblen would call “industry” – in Worcester, Massachusetts fought for their own time and space to enjoy leisure. Taking its title from a well-known labor song of the time, *Eight Hours* explored the ways in which the values and beliefs of Worcester’s working class influenced their access and control over leisure time and space while highlighting their changing culture and interclass bonds over the decades straddling the turn of the century.<sup>8</sup>

Recognizing the local nature of stories told about labor and recreation during this time, Rosenzweig began his work by highlighting some of the distinguishing features of Worcester: the power of the city’s industrialists, the weakness of working-class political parties and trade unions, and the importance and cohesiveness of ethnic communities and organizations.<sup>9</sup> On the topic of leisure, Rosenzweig emphasizes the importance of the saloon as a “distinctive ethnic working-class leisure institution,” a place where workers could control their own leisure time and reject (without actively challenging) the morality of Worcester’s middle- and upper-classes.<sup>10</sup> Rosenzweig viewed “progressive” movements like the parks, temperance, and playground movements as campaigns designed to prevent efforts by working-class people to dictate their own times and spaces for leisure pursuits.<sup>11</sup> Moving forward into the twentieth century, Rosenzweig detailed the rise of the movie theater and its displacement of the saloon as the primary location of working-class leisure pursuits.

Rosenzweig’s work marks an important turning point in historians’ study of leisure. By emphasizing the people who made up the working-class and their intra- and inter-class bonds and

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<sup>8</sup> Rosenzweig, Roy. *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Rosenzweig, 4

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

conflicts, *Eight Hours* certainly contains elements of the new left school. At the same time, parts of the argument suggest the coming postmodern historiographical movement. For example, Rosenzweig's local focus on a medium-sized industrial town in Massachusetts is emblematic of the postmodern turn with its emphasis on specific times and places. Although he contends that the study of Worcester allows testing of "analytical categories . . . which may prove useful in examining other American communities," he does not argue that what was true in Worcester was necessarily true elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> Whereas for Veblen leisure was a natural and inevitable result of ever-growing divisions in society, for Rosenzweig leisure was contested, malleable, and contingent. Similarly, by focusing on the saloon – a leisure space to which firm records and figures are difficult to attach, but that carried great cultural significance for its patrons – *Eight Hours* was a precursor to history's "cultural turn" which would clearly show itself in writings about leisure in America for the next quarter-century.

As Rosenzweig broadened the construct of the "leisure class" to include working-class men in Worcester, Kathy Lee Peiss similarly expanded the scope of leisure-seekers to include New York City's working-class women in *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. Peiss in her acknowledgements thanked Rosenzweig for reading her manuscript and working with her on revisions, and the similarities in the authors' arguments are plain.<sup>13</sup> Peiss shows how a culture of amusement, centering on dance halls, amusement parks, and movie theaters sprang from the economic necessity for working-class families to send their young women to work. This work was typically sex-segregated, but unlike other "women's

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Peiss, Kathy Lee. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986)

work” (like homemaking), the employment of young women in department stores, factories, and offices tended to reinforce a firm distinction between the realms of “work” and “leisure.”<sup>14</sup>

Taken together, *Cheap Amusements* tells the story of a transition in the life of New York City’s working women from homosocial to heterosocial, from a more formalized and regimented “Old World” mentality to a new commercialized sphere of leisure.

Where Rosenzweig’s *Eight Hours* showed a measured lean into the postmodernist cultural turn, Peiss’s *Cheap Amusements* took the turn sharply and fully. Gone are Rosenzweig’s “analytical categories” and their usefulness for studying other times and places. Peiss’s study is unequivocally one of New York City, chosen for “its cosmopolitan culture and expansive leisure and entertainment industries.” Besides which, sources from the city were “rich and extensive.”<sup>15</sup> The subculture developed by the young working-class women was presented as significant in its own right; Peiss did not feel compelled to offer an explanation for focusing her study on such a particular place and time. Timothy Gilfoyle’s comment in 1998 that “[fragmentation] defines the way historians now envision the urban past” certainly applies to *Cheap Amusements* as a case study localized in time and place.<sup>16</sup> But although Peiss focused on New York City, she did not assert Gotham as “the embodiment of modernity,” a tendency in the literature that Gilfoyle identified as “unfortunate.”<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, venues like movie theaters and amusement parks were central to the story of *Cheap Amusements* not because they illustrated any larger theme in the march of human history but because they were central to the lives of the working-class women Peiss studied. No further

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<sup>14</sup>Peiss, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>16</sup> Gilfoyle, Timothy J. “White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneylands: The New Paradigms of Urban History.” *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998): 191.

<sup>17</sup> Gilfoyle, 191.

significance is needed or implied. Peiss's commitment to taking working-women's culture seriously stands in sharp contrast to the work of someone like Veblen whose instinct on encountering Peiss's "working girls" would likely have been to try to integrate them into his broad theory rather than acknowledging their circumstances and idiosyncrasies.

David Nasaw's 1993 *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* delves deeply into the popular amusements discussed by Peiss and Rosenzweig as venues for the leisure of working men and women. Nasaw argues that through the 1880 and 1890s, "nightlife" had been "the preserve of the wealthy few" – echoes of Veblen's "leisure class."<sup>18</sup> By the turn of the century, however, venues for affordable, popular amusement like baseball fields, movie theaters and amusement parks had cropped up in every city in America.<sup>19</sup> Citing Rosenzweig, Nasaw pointed to the importance of leisure to American culture: "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."<sup>20</sup>

A critical difference between Nasaw's work and that of Rosenzweig and Peiss is that, while the latter two authors focused on working-class leisure, Nasaw's work emphasizes the broad cross-section of society that enjoyed "going out." Though white-collar workers were the "most avid consumers" of the newly-developed forms of mass consumer culture, the crowds that populated American amusement parks and movie theaters in the first decades of the twentieth century were notable not just for their size but for their heterogeneity. These commercial amusements inhabited a "magical corner" of the city, where, in contrast to union halls and

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<sup>18</sup> Nasaw, David. *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1993), 2

<sup>19</sup> Nasaw, 3

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 4



Rosenzweig's saloons, different genders, ethnicities, religions, and occupations could share an experience together.<sup>21</sup> In terms of race, however, segregation of audiences was still strictly enforced. Nasaw argues that this exclusion of African Americans as patrons combined with the exploitative overrepresentation of African Americans on stage and in World's Fair exhibits actually served to downplay and deemphasize (mute) social distinctions among "whites" in the audiences.<sup>22</sup>

*Going Out* fits squarely in the cultural turn that typified historical study more broadly during this period. Amusement and recreation were taken seriously, in a nod (neither the first nor last by authors of historical studies of leisure around this time) to Rosenzweig. Likewise, race is treated not as an inherent, static category but as something actively created and fostered by the power structure (in this case the representation on-stage and admissions policies for audience members).

### **New Paradigms: A Transition**

In his 1998 essay, "White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneylands: The New Paradigms of Urban History" for *Reviews in American History*, Timothy Gilfoyle set out to describe the state of urban history. Having cited Caro, Rosenzweig, Peiss, and Nasaw, Gilfoyle moved on to celebrate the fragmentation of urban history and to warn that synthetic histories "risk imposing a new urban orthodoxy" and flattening "a contested social landscape" by emphasizing similarities over differences.<sup>23</sup> But when Gilfoyle described urban historians as "moving from subject to subject disconnected and detached... from one another," he was referring to urban historians

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Gilfoyle, 192.

broadly. Within the sub-field of leisure history in particular, there has actually been a great deal of continuity and dialog between authors.

Rosenzweig and Peiss advanced quite similar arguments in 1983 and 1986, respectively, with Peiss citing conversations with Rosenzweig as helpful and influential.<sup>24</sup> Nasaw similarly thanked Rosenzweig in his acknowledgements and referred back to both Rosenzweig and Peiss at multiple points in his narrative.<sup>25</sup>

Cindy S. Aron's 1999 *Working At Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* charted how vacationing "grew from the custom of a small elite in the early nineteenth century to a mass phenomenon by the eve of World War II."<sup>26</sup>

Aron's story of American vacations in many way parallels Nasaw's story of American public amusements. "Through the end of the nineteenth century vacations had remained primarily the preserve of the middle class and the well-to-do," Aron wrote, while Nasaw had argued that "[in] the 1870s and 1880s, 'nightlife' was still the preserve of the wealthy few."<sup>27</sup> And similarly to Nasaw, Aron's work can be read as the expansion of Veblen's leisure class, moving beyond one particular group or class of people and morphing into a commercialized, commodified good available for mass consumption.

Though Gilfoyle's essay had celebrated the fragmentation in urban history only a year before *Working At Play's* publication, there are hints in Aron of a move back toward synthesis. It is true that Aron takes the cultural facets of vacationing seriously ("at the beach house we found marriage partners, birthed children, mourned deaths, celebrated birthdays...") in their own

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<sup>24</sup> Peiss, *ix*.

<sup>25</sup> Nasaw, 4, 45, 171, 232.

<sup>26</sup> Aron, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Aron, 182; Nasaw, 2.

right.<sup>28</sup> But Aron is not content to tell the story of American vacations for its own sake. Instead, she integrates different attitudes about leisure stemming from different religious beliefs (Puritans drew a clear distinction between “recreation” and “amusement”),<sup>29</sup> different economic views and imperatives,<sup>30</sup> and class distinctions. *Working at Play* is certainly a cultural history, but it can be seen as taking steps back toward integration with larger themes and processes, rather than just an exploration of leisure for its own sake.

In terms of the detachment of urban historians from one another, Aron continued the pattern of leisure historians bucking this trend. At various points, Aron cited Rosenzweig, Peiss, and Nasaw as she constructed her argument.

Woody Register’s 2001 *The Kid of Coney Island: Fred Thompson and the Rise of American Amusements* is, at a basic level, a biography of entertainment magnate Fred Thompson. Thompson was best known for his creation of Luna Park, a fantasy landscape of façade architecture and twinkling lights that enchanted visitors to the Park in the early decades of the twentieth century. Reaching beyond the life of Thompson to explore his impact and place in the commercialization of leisure, *The Kid of Coney Island* is more than a simple biography.

Though Register describes Nasaw’s *Going Out* as an “excellent survey,” Register contends that Nasaw’s treatment of amusements “as part of a separate ‘leisure culture’ or economy” actually marginalizes these amusements. Instead, Register found these amusements important for the ways in which they signified a future that held out “the utopian promise of

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<sup>28</sup> Aron, 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

consumer abundance.”<sup>31</sup> Register also references Peiss’s *Cheap Amusements*, continuing to demonstrate how authors in this sub-field engaged in dialog with one another.

*The Kid of Coney Island* is a transitional book in terms of its place in the literature. A biography about one particular man in a particular time period might suggest that Register’s book would fit neatly into the fragmented field of urban history outlined by Timothy Gilfoyle. But Register makes significant connections to the commercialization of leisure and its marketing, particularly toward middle-class people. Register does not ask readers to care about Thompson simply as a man with a fascinating story. Instead, Register asks us to care about Thompson for what his life and work say about the nature of masculinity,<sup>32</sup> changing retail practices,<sup>33</sup> and new modes of production.<sup>34</sup>

*The Kid of Coney Island* differentiates itself from other postmodern works in that attempts to address nearly the entirety of American society and culture during Thompson’s life. Though Register is clear that Thompson’s marketing of childhood was directed primarily toward middle-class male consumers, women feature heavily throughout the work (rather than being relegated to their own chapter or section).

Register’s strained final section in which he attempted to bring the lessons of Thompson’s story into the present day is a sure sign of a desire to write more than a simple cultural history; Register was seeking integration rather than fragmentation. By stretching his narrative to encompass Tom Hanks, Robin Williams, and Steven Spielberg, Register signified that his story was not bound to a particular time and place, but rather carries universal

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<sup>31</sup> Register, Woody. *The Kid of Coney Island: Fred Thompson and the Rise of American Amusements* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.

<sup>32</sup> Register, 36, 127.

<sup>33</sup> Register, 278-284.

<sup>34</sup> Register, 30-31.

significance and speaks to ongoing and perennial problems and questions raised by American society.<sup>35</sup>

### **Return to Synthesis**

Two papers published in 2012 by Andrew Kahrl and Joshua Salzman exemplify the reemergence of the broad, synthetic narrative and the trends in historical inquiry toward studies of political economy and histories of capitalism.

Andrew Kahrl's "Sunbelt by the Sea: Governing Race and Nature in a Twentieth Century Metropolis" discusses the decline of Princess Anne County, an African-American agricultural community and the rise of Virginia Beach, a high-priced tourism center. Integrating themes of political economy and environmental history, Kahrl does not describe his work as a history of leisure. Rather, he views "leisure space and leisure-based economies" as frameworks through which changes in the political economy of the twentieth-century coastal South were mediated.<sup>36</sup>

Kahrl represents the full return of the synthetic, broad narrative that Gilfoyle warned of. Far from "sealing himself off and narrowing his discussions," Kahrl has instead brought diverse themes – municipal incorporation law, social and environmental history, race and class relations – to tell a coherent story about change over time.<sup>37</sup> Although "Sunbelt by the Sea" focused on one particular geographic corner of Virginia, Kahrl described his work as a broadly applicable "framework for analyzing the social and environmental dimensions of the Sunbelt revolution."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Register, 312-321.

<sup>36</sup> Kahrl, Andrew. "Sunbelt by the Sea: Governing Race and Nature in a Twentieth-Century Coastal Metropolis." *Journal of Urban History* 38 (2012): 488, doi: 10.1177/0096144211428769.

<sup>37</sup> Gilfoyle, 192.

<sup>38</sup> Kahrl, 488.

Despite his reference to a “Sunbelt revolution” (never clearly defined) and a subsequent description of how southern states lured industries with their “lax environmental laws” and “abundance of environmental amenities,” Kahrl described his paper as part of the work of “[dismantling] the myth of southern exceptionalism and [questioning] the utility of regionalism as a category of analysis.”<sup>39</sup> If regionalism is not a useful category of analysis, what, then, is the Sunbelt? If a state’s public policies, geography, demographics and social history are all excluded from consideration, of course there is little exceptional about the southern states – but if these are all excluded, what exactly is left? “Sunbelt by the Sea” is an effective synthesis that perhaps carries its idea of synthesis too far.

Joshua Salzmänn’s “The Creative Destruction of the Chicago River Harbor: Spatial and Environmental Dimensions of Industrial Capitalism, 1881-1909” is similar to Kahrl’s work in that it demonstrates the reappearance of synthetic meta-narrative. Salzmänn argued that the Chicago River Harbor, which in 1889 handled enough freight to make Chicago the world’s fourth-largest port in the world, was rendered obsolete in the 1890s as shipping moved from wooden sailboats to iron and steel-clad steamboats. This obsolescence precipitated an extended fight over whether to improve the port, pitting business interests reliant on shipping to and from the port (and who had invested hefty sums in the riverfront’s development) against the Army Corps of Engineers who favored improving the Calumet River Harbor to accommodate the bulkier steamboats instead. This battle over “whether to use the river as a port, sewer, or scenic landscape”<sup>40</sup> eventually culminated in the Chicago River’s transformation from an industrial port

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<sup>39</sup> Kahrl, 490-503.

<sup>40</sup> Salzmänn, J. A. T. “The Creative Destruction of the Chicago River Harbor: Spatial and Environmental Dimensions of Industrial Capitalism, 1881-1909.” *Enterprise and Society* 13 (2012): 238, doi: 10.1093/es/khr056.

into “an urban amenity,” for tourists and shoppers in the form of Wacker Drive and a raft of newly-constructed riverside skyscrapers.<sup>41</sup> As the Chicago River was converted to a “site of leisure and consumption,” the Calumet River overtook the Chicago as the area’s primary industrial port.<sup>42</sup>

Though the Chicago River Harbor and the lands surrounding it (and the bridges over it, and tunnels beneath it) were vigorously contested, Salzmann nonetheless argued that the history of the harbor’s decline “illuminates several spatial and environmental tensions inherent to urban economic development.”<sup>43</sup> This is a story about the creation of one of Chicago’s iconic leisure sites; one could argue that the riverfront is a part of Chicago’s cultural heritage. Yet for Salzmann, writing about the riverfront as a cultural phenomenon alone misses the lessons the River holds about the “tremendous dynamism of industrial capitalism.”<sup>44</sup>

Where works in the 1980s and 1990s were filled with people – Rosenzweig’s men at the saloon, Peiss’s women at the dance hall, Nasaw’s theatergoers and Aron’s vacationers – “The Creative Destruction of the Chicago River Harbor” is filled with competing interests. Individuals do exist: Major Marshall serves as the personification of the wishes of the Army Corps of Engineers, Ellis Sylvester Chesbrough makes an appearance to literally raise the city streets and reverse the flow of the river, and various shippers and businessmen chime in with statistics or observations. But for a story that culminates in the creation of a leisure zone for Chicagoans and tourists, little is said about how this leisure space might benefit or otherwise effect these Chicagoans. Commuters in Salzmann’s work grow furiously impatient (or get humorously

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<sup>41</sup> Salzmann, 271.

<sup>42</sup> Salzmann, 235.

<sup>43</sup> Salzmann, 238.

<sup>44</sup> Salzmann, 272.

stranded) when raised drawbridges impede their travels, but we learn little else about them. If there are any differences among them in terms of sex, race, social customs, or otherwise, these differences do not figure into Salzman's account. Is this the "[flattening of] a contested social landscape" that Gilfoyle warned of in 1998?<sup>45</sup> Though Salzman's integration of environmental, political, and economic histories painted a vivid picture of the Chicago River Harbor and its "creative destruction," readers seeking to understand and historians seeking to build on his work should consider what (or who) has been left out of the process.

Interestingly, although authors of leisure during the 1980s and 1990s constantly cited and referred to one another, neither Kahrl nor Salzman continued this trend. Ironically, the fragmentation of the cultural turn seems to have had the impact of drawing those within the same sub-field closer together. By turning toward synthesis and an integration of such a broad variety of sources, Salzman and Kahrl had less need to rely on and cite foundational authors in the field of leisure like Rosenzweig and Peiss.

### **Conclusion**

Historians of leisure time and spaces find themselves and the field at an inflection point. Veblen's inevitable march of human progress is long gone. Caro's scathing condemnation of an unelected public official feels dated and naïve in today's American political climate where cynicism has become further entrenched than ever. After a wealth of leisure studies that fit with the cultural turn of 1980s and 1990s historical study more broadly, authors like Kahrl and Salzman are increasingly offering a return to synthetic meta-narratives. Where the cultural turn brought case studies of localized times and places, the new synthesis brings broadly applicable

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<sup>45</sup> Gilfoyle, 192.



“frameworks.” Where postmodernism brought fragmentation and “modest chaos,” the meta-narrators “illuminate inherent tensions” with charts, tables, and maps in hand.<sup>46</sup>

While Kahrl has shown that such a synthetic approach need not preclude important discussions about race and power dynamics, it is incumbent on historians studying and writing about leisure to ensure that the field does not fall into the “flattening” that Gilfoyle warned could flow from broad, unifying narratives. Put another way, a focus on the “history of capitalism” risks relegating the very groups historically marginalized by capitalism itself back to the margins of the pages of these histories.

Kahrl and Salzman’s papers are well-researched and valuable works of history. Their emphasis on businessmen and high-level policymakers need not raise the alarm bells yet. But the individuals and subcultures absent from Veblen’s study – very much present in and celebrated by those writing during the cultural turn – seem to be at risk of vanishing once again. A turn constantly taken will eventually lead back to the same direction whence one came. Can future historians of leisure find a way to re-integrate people, contestation and contingency while continuing to bring in diverse themes of economy, environment, cultural and social history, all without flattening out the differences among the individuals and groups involved? The challenge is significant, but one that today’s budding historians must rise to in order to continue to advance the field. As they do so, their work (and its reception by readers) will no doubt continue to be shaped by the times and environments in which it is written and read.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.; Salzman, 238.

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