

REVIEW FORUM

***Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, by Peter Bailey.
Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.**

Social History's Half Holiday: Peter Bailey on Victorian Leisure

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Champagne Charlie, Ally Sloper, and other swells, toffs, shoppers, barmaids, snobs, prostitutes, chorus girls, and cads populate *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*. Peter Bailey even calls himself, in his professional guise as social historian, a "cad" (*OED* definition: "a low, vulgar fellow; a driver of an omnibus"). "Flâneur" would be more like it. Just as Walter Benjamin enjoyed imagining himself in the shoes of nineteenth-century urban types, so Bailey enjoys recreating the behaviours and significance of these characters. Reading his essays is therefore like taking a half-holiday into areas of leisure where earlier social historians rarely ventured.

Certainly the urban types—or, better, *roles* (cads etc.)—that Bailey privileges were of little importance to social history's first major incarnation, Marxist labour history. As told by E.P. Thompson and others, the forging of working-class solidarity and radicalism from the French Revolution through the Chartist decade of the hungry forties gets derailed, it seems, by the story of its unmaking in the second half of the century. As Bailey contends, this standard, decline-and-fall narrative is simplistic for several reasons. In what Bailey identifies as "the most influential account of this dilution of class consciousness" (130), Gareth Stedman Jones sees mass militancy transmogrifying into popular "escapism," or the commodified attractions of the music hall, the sports arena, and the seaside holiday. So did capitalism bribe or "distract" working-class radicalism into the twin cages of "respectability" and apolitical vulgarity? Or did it provide new forms of culture, entertainment, value, and even identity that put class conflict on the back burner, so to speak?

The Victorian city offered a rapidly expanding scene for leisure pursuits, for mass or popular culture, and many of these pursuits, as Bailey makes clear, emphasised role-playing: strolling and shopping, music hall, theatre, and Ally Sloper's con games and womanising among them. From the Great Exhibition of 1851 on, the symptoms of an emergent "consumer society" proliferated: mass daily journalism, the first department stores, the first advertising agencies, mass tourism, and the advent of marginalist economics. (This revision of orthodox, capitalist economics, exemplified in Britain by W.S. Jevons's 1871 *Theory of Political Economy*, scrapped the old labour theory of value, as in both Adam Smith and Marx, in favour of a consumption theory; utility defined as consumer desire became the sole measure of value.) And consumerism means that more and more individuals of all classes begin to be able to buy what they want, everything from food to clothes to entertainment.

As Bailey notes, the older social-labour history accounts of the Victorian era made a big deal out of working-class "respectability." After the hungry forties, as Victorians themselves often pointed out, trade unionism became respectable, inclined to work within the political and legal system rather than against it. Working-men

presumably also began imitating their betters (despite Arnold's characterisation of the "populace" as drinkers, brawlers, and smashers). However, in his "role-analysis" of "working-class respectability" Bailey contends that any self-respecting worker with enough cultural "knowingness" could slip into and out of a variety of roles, some respectable, some not so respectable. This is a perfectly commonsensical observation, yet one that social historians have not always observed. The earlier tendency, seconding Marx and Engels, was to identify a factory worker as just that and no more: a beaten, exploited, underpaid, alienated, but hopefully increasingly angry prole who would one day, butterfly-like, turn into a revolutionary of the right sort. Even the very first factory workers, however, were only factory workers part of the time. The "performance" aspect of social history that Bailey emphasises involves the fact that all of us play many roles every day of our lives. For better or worse, class is only one role or aspect of identity among many. And insofar as class identity is determined by work or occupation, it is qualified by or comes into conflict with the various roles that people adopt when they are not at work, when they are at play. From mid-century on consumerism in Britain's urban spaces meant in part new opportunities to play an ever-growing number of after-work roles.

Further, many city-dwellers at least express their identities as much or more through consumption and their leisure activities as through their work. Bailey has taken some clues in this regard from cultural studies (but even very recent versions of cultural studies persist in trying to find moments of supposedly political "resistance" in for example women's consumption of soap operas). For many Victorians what Marx called "the idiocy of rural life" had been abandoned for the "glamour," "knowingness," and flexible nomadism or transience of urban life. What urban role-playing involved was a sort of social liberation based on an at least transient social mobility (a shop clerk didn't have to inherit £10,000 a year to become a swell during his off-hours). "Glamour" and "knowingness" moreover are both important albeit kinky categories in Bailey's account of the advent of modern consumer society. Even more so is what Bailey calls "parasexuality," by which he means the increasing, tolerated or "licit," commercialised employment and display of attractive young women—barmaids and chorus girls for example. His studies of both of these perhaps minor but nevertheless characteristic occupations for women strike me as highly interesting additions to Martha Vicinus's account of both vocations and avocations open to "independent women" in mid- and late-Victorian Britain. And "parasexuality" is a very suggestive category in helping to understand how the erotic machinery of much mass culture works.

Bailey's social history of the emergence of commercialised leisure and consumer society shows that "knowing" actors and actresses of all classes on the urban stage were increasingly able to play and enjoy the roles they wanted to play—both during their leisure time and as occupations in the "leisure industries." A shop clerk or an omnibus driver could become a swell, a theatre-goer, or even a music-hall performer. A chorus girl could become a prostitute or a shopper or a watcher of other chorus girls or even the wife of an aristocrat. In modern urban history work routines, occupations, and social classes all begin to lose some of their rigidity. Leisure expands, popular culture expands, the mass media come on stage. Desire and pleasure become categories to reckon with for historians, sociologists, and economists.

Aware of Bakhtin's notion about writing a history of laughter, Bailey in his last chapter sketches a potential history of noise. He is certainly right that twentieth-century historians have privileged the visual while neglecting the auditory. And noise from music hall to the roar of traffic in the streets is a key aspect of urban experience. I get the impression, however, that Bailey wants mainly to suggest, as in various ways he does in all his chapters, how many aspects of experience social history has so far failed to encompass. And after noise . . . ? But there seems plenty still to do in relation to analysing the history of leisure and popular culture in Victorian Britain. One rather surprising omission from Bailey's account is advertising. He mentions it in passing and in his footnotes—he cites for instance Thomas Richards's *Commodity Culture of Victorian Britain*—but advertising was even then, between 1837 and 1901, becoming the leading, most pervasive, most characteristic form of capitalist modern and now postmodern culture. And it is advertising as a cultural category that was and remains the key site for any theory of ideology (or more generally for any version of cultural studies) “knowing” enough to want to understand how desire, distraction, “parasexuality,” and capitalist mystification all help to support enough versions of individual liberty and the pursuit of happiness to keep the entire ramshackle but effervescent system spinning on into the post-postmodern future.

From Coffee and from Supper Rooms,
From Poplar to Pall Mall,
The girls, on seeing me, exclaim,
“Oh, what a Champagne Swell!”

If the self-respecting social historian can't account for Champagne Charlie, he don't amount to much.

Veronica Kelly

Bailey's book is an excellent read. With its stylistic clarity and tactful deployment of a wide range of empirical and theoretical influences, the engagement value of this writing is—to quote sports commentators—awesome. The 1994 essay “Music Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture” is an inspiring piece of bold speculative investigation backed up by extensive knowledge, which identifies the really productive questions the evidence might yield: what did the popular reader or audience “know” and why did they seek to assemble this “knowingness” into a cultural code? This is how popular cultural studies should be written, one feels, with self-awareness about the author's historical speaking position, his class and gender experiences and especially his libidinal investments in the study. After all, if these debates and investigations didn't afford definite pleasures to the scholar, they wouldn't be occurring.

British social history, Bailey states, is preoccupied with class since it is the product of class at a culture-specific historical moment (5), or so it turned out for this author. But as the date spread of essays in this collection demonstrates this central hunger persistently fuels Bailey's writing long after the initial impulses of the class-driven post-war “lumpenpolytechnic” (6) male scholars had spent or diversified their energies in theoretically problematising discourses of ludic identity and competing