

Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain, 1850–1945

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Since the 1960s, popular leisure has been studied by successive generations of British social historians. Questions of class, of culture and of identity have been central to the development of this literature. Celebrations of distinctively plebeian customs have contended with pessimistic analyses of mass culture as a form of social control. Over the last two decades, competing interpretations of a unified working-class leisure culture have been confronted by an increasing emphasis upon the plurality of workers' worlds. Recent years have seen sharply divergent assessments of the fit between class and culture in twentieth-century Britain. The linguistic turn has led some historians to argue that 'the consciousness of a class is not the same as class consciousness' and to question the assumption that commonalities between workers necessarily constitute a specifically *class* culture, arguing that this is to assume rather than demonstrate a shared consciousness of society as divided by socio-economic class. These historiographical developments have created new challenges for historians of popular leisure to which Brad Beaven responds in his new study of leisure, citizenship and working-class culture.

Beaven's post-revisionist account accepts the existence of significant cultural divisions between British workers. First and foremost, this is a study of male workers which argues, in line with much recent writing, that leisure opportunities for working-class men were significantly more extensive than for their female counterparts. Secondly, Beaven pays particular attention to generational differences, dedicating two of his seven chapters to what he regards as the distinctive leisure culture of working-class youths. Thirdly, Beaven acknowledges the presence of income differentials between workers, though he suggests that some recent work has underestimated the participation of poorer workers in the institutions of commercial leisure.

Whilst Beaven draws upon revisionist work, he also challenges a number of its tenets. He suggests that studies of the internal anatomy of working-class culture have overstated the extent and importance of divisions between workers. His book seeks instead to investigate the interaction between working-class leisure and middle-class reformers concerned with the quality of citizenship. This perspective recalls E. P. Thompson's insistence upon class as a relationship, something that happens between people. Beaven stresses

the limited purchase of successive campaigns for rational recreation, emphasising the distinctiveness and durability of working-class leisure. He firmly rejects the view that the rise of mass culture eroded authentic working-class culture, arguing that commercial leisure succeeded through accommodating popular practices and preferences. Where some historians have discerned the demise of traditional working-class culture, whether due to late-nineteenth-century commercialisation or interwar suburbanisation, Beaven stresses continuity rather than change, participation rather than passivity. Whether charting the fervent involvement of late Victorian football crowds or the vocal reactions of early cinema audiences, Beaven's protagonists are active contributors in the creation of their own culture.

The study of British working-class leisure, like that of class more generally, has often focused upon the locality. As Beaven rightly notes in his introduction, the North of England has received particular attention. This historiographical focus traditionally reflected assumptions about the relationship between economic modernity and class formation, especially apparent in studies of Lancashire. More recent work on Lancashire has proclaimed the importance of the incidence of poverty in shaping and segmenting workers' cultural worlds. Beaven focuses instead upon the Midlands. His book, while national in its scope, draws extensively upon his earlier work on Coventry. Beaven portrays Coventry as a boomtown, transformed by the replacement of silk weaving and watch making with bicycle and car manufacturers and the resulting increase in demand for semi-skilled work. He suggests the result was the emergence of an incipient youth culture amongst Coventry's relatively affluent young workers.

Beaven's examination of the Coventry case is a welcome addition to a literature that has been overly dominated by London and Lancashire. Many local studies have been sought to argue either for the representativeness of their region or its importance as a harbinger of the future. Beaven avoids cruder forms of these claims, but does seem tempted, at times, by both. He suggests, for instance, that 'historians have continually overestimated the importance of skilled labour in the British economy between 1900 and 1914' (p. 101). The bulk of the book, though, seems inclined towards the view that trends in Coventry were a forerunner of the likely result of Fordist transformations elsewhere. It is, however, questionable whether Coventry should be seen as either typical or anticipatory.

There is considerable evidence, further extended by Broadberry's recent work on labour productivity, to support the established emphasis upon the enduring importance of skilled labour in the early twentieth-century British economy. (1) Beaven argues, on the basis of Sandler's study of Birmingham, that historians have overstated the role of skilled labour within the new industries. (2) The relative significance of flexible production in Britain, even within newer industries, suggests that Beaven may have exaggerated the extent of change in these industries. More importantly, however, industries that made extensive use of skilled labour, such as shipbuilding or engineering, continued to play an important part in the British economy. Countering this view of the Edwardian economy requires considerably more evidence than is offered here. It might be replied that Coventry's experience of the growth of semi-skilled labour anticipated rather than echoed trends elsewhere. It may, though, be unfair to identify Beaven with this view, since his book actually pays considerable attention to regional variations. Viewed in the aggregate, the main impact of recent studies of the history of work has been to render attempts to reduce the rich variations of locality to a single model unsustainable.

As its title suggests, one of the main aims of *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men* is to relate concerns about popular leisure to debates about citizenship. It is suggested that the primary source of 'middle-class' anxieties about popular leisure was fears over its consequences for the quality of citizenship. Attention is given to recurring claims that the hedonistic and unreflective character of popular leisure rendered working-class Britons unfit to play their proper part in the community. These allegations took a variety of forms, from concern over the intellectual capacity of the masses to diagnoses of physical inadequacy, and, later, to jeremiads on the atomisation attending the growth of suburban estates. The evolving nature of these critiques is in turn linked to the changing meanings of citizenship. Four phases are identified, commencing with the individualist focus on rights based on status characteristic of 'the high water mark of Victorian liberalism'. This gave way to an emphasis upon the moral bonds between the individual and the state, which came, in the Edwardian period, to focus especially upon the demands of national, rather than civic, duty. The

third phase, which Beaven locates between the wars, was allegedly distinguished by a stress on economic efficiency and the role of employers in instilling the appropriate values. During the Second World War, worries about morale and social cohesion increasingly shaped concerns over working-class leisure pursuits.

Developments in popular leisure gave rise to a considerable commentary, some of which undoubtedly recalled long-established disdain for popular pastimes. As a number of historians have shown, attitudes to working-class gambling nicely exemplify this unlovely blend of incomprehension and condescension. Other currents are, however, detectable in public discussion of popular leisure. Beaven notes the effort and skill often devoted to the cultivation of allotments and the rearing of animals; but such expertise was not invisible to contemporaries. More positive mid-Victorian evaluations of artisanal culture, particularly perhaps that of the North, endured, for instance, in Edwardian assessments of Britain's changing political culture. Late nineteenth-century observers often drew a sharp distinction between rough and respectable; and, even more sharply, between the residuum and the rest. Beaven rightly identifies a persistent strain of coercive moralising in contemporary writing about popular leisure. Greater attention, however, might have been given to other kinds of views, and to the common tendency to distinguish between different groups of workers.

Beaven connects concerns over leisure with debates over citizenship. This can prove very illuminating, as in the discussion of the organisation of and resistance to Peace Days after the First World War. On occasion, the book would benefit from further explication of the significance of 'social citizenship' to contemporaries, and of how this related to more political debates about citizenship. Beaven writes interestingly about football as a vehicle for local identities and about the autonomy of the crowd; but the relationship between questions of identity, community and citizenship demands fuller discussion. In general, the character and context of debates over citizenship might usefully have been more extensively developed. Beaven's emphasis upon atomism and rights in mid-Victorian notions of citizenship runs counter to the growing recognition of the organic individualism and focus upon 'character' central to the political thought of the period. Interwar debates about citizenship were as concerned with the value of culture, the requirements of democracy and the future of Christianity as with the demands of national efficiency. It is far from clear that economic efficiency received greater emphasis in these years than it had previously. Beaven is right to seek to locate attitudes to popular leisure in the broader context of changing conceptions of culture, community and citizenship. Much, however, of this contextualising work remains to be done.

Beaven aims to revive a view of working-class culture that, while sensitive to divergences according to generation, gender and income, identifies significant commonalities in a class-exclusive culture that proved remarkably impervious to attempts at reform and which embraced commercialism upon terms of its own making. This is, in many ways, an attractive vision, attentive to cultural resistance and aware of the pressure imposed by audience preferences and participation upon the emerging leisure industry. It does, however, raise a number of questions that merit further discussion.

The first concerns the boundaries of popular culture. Beaven portrays working-class male leisure as a class-exclusive culture with its own distinctive geography. There is a strong emphasis throughout the text on the physical separateness of working-class life, and upon the contests over space provoked by moral reformers' efforts to penetrate working-class neighbourhoods. The idea of residential segregation has long underpinned accounts of the emergence of a distinctive working-class culture in the last third of the nineteenth century. Evident in the work of Hobsbawm, it has recently been re-stated by Savage and Miles. (3) Important questions have, however, been raised about the social homogeneity of 'working-class' neighbourhoods, notably by Jon Lawrence. (4) Drawing upon the Board of Trade's 1908 inquiry into the cost of living, Lawrence argues that, outside of London, uniform single-class communities were not the norm. Coventry appears as one of a number of provincial cities in which working-class migration to the suburbs was already pronounced, and in which notable residential divides amongst manual workers were detected. This data is hard to reconcile with a monolithic view of one-class communities. It suggests both the continued existence of cross-class housing zones, and residential divisions within the manual working class. In a recent review article, Lawrence has extended his critique of arguments about rigid residential segregation into the interwar era, noting the continued existence of mixed-class communities, especially in more prosperous cities, like

Bristol, which witnessed high levels of owner-occupation by manual workers. (5)

Disagreements over residential patterns have significant implications for debates over the supposed exclusivity of 'working-class' culture. The issue is brought into sharper focus by consideration of the relationship between manual workers and the lower-middle class. Beaven notes the important role occupied in many communities by shopkeepers and publicans. More generally, he provides considerable evidence of cultural collaboration between skilled workers and the lower middle class, whether in the Scouting movement, Clarion cycling clubs or temperance campaigns. Similarly, the useful and often persuasive analysis provided of music hall attendance suggests significant divisions, which Beaven reads primarily in terms of skill and income, between workers. Beaven acknowledges and illuminates differences between workers shaped by gender, generation and poverty; but his own evidence does much to suggest the enduring importance of skill differentials throughout his period.

Beaven makes some very good use of the local press, and his analysis of Coventry trends in particular is well rooted in local archival resources. The chapter on the Second World War draws interestingly upon Mass-Observation materials to elucidate the factors determining morale in the face of bombardment, and places plausible emphasis upon the significance of continued and convenient access to leisure facilities, notably pubs, in sustaining stoicism. Many familiar but apparently irresistible sources, from the journeyman engineer Thomas Wright, (6) to *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and Robert Roberts duly appear. (7) These complex accounts have given rise to extensive discussion, which shows little sign of resolution. Here, for instance, most attention is understandably devoted to Roberts's undeniable emphasis upon the gulf between them and us, which reflects Beaven's interest in the making of cultural differences. Others, however, have focused instead upon Roberts's delineation of gradations amongst dwellers within the classic slum. Clearly, as Lawrence has noted, workers may have alternated between different perspectives depending upon context. Beaven is right to insist that we pay attention to the impact of encounters with cultural reformers in shaping workers' worlds, but this needs to be combined with sensitivity to self-understandings based upon perceived differences amongst workers.

Beaven is attentive to the accounts offered of the anatomy of the labouring classes (such as in Wright's work) and recognises the importance attributed there to skill differences. He portrays Wright's account as one in which skill, respectability and pretension are closely correlated rather than cutting across each other. There is, however, ample evidence in Wright's various and subtle writings that his vision of the working classes was a rich mosaic reflecting the complex inter-relationships between generation, politicisation, religion, culture and skill. As Reid has shown, Wright's earliest work was very much part of the debate in the 1860s about the enfranchisement of urban workers, and this political context should inflect our interpretations of his changing depictions of 'our new masters'. (8)

This is a valuable and often vivid study that challenges recent trends in the social history of leisure. It also, however, confirms some developments. Beaven argues, in line with much recent work, that contests over urban space were less pronounced by the interwar period. The emphasis of historians like Andrew Davies upon the extent of generational divides within popular culture before the 1950s and 1960s receive considerable support from Beaven's close study of the culture of young semi-skilled workers in Coventry's expanding new industries. (9) The emphasis on continuity apparent here is characteristic of Beaven's study as whole. His account of the enduring importance of clubs and work-place sociability to interwar workers on the new estates provides an important corrective to arguments about suburban atomisation, though his evidence does suggest the growing importance of home. In focusing upon male leisure, Beaven builds upon a large body of work on gender differences in access to and experience of popular culture. He suggests that new leisure activities, such as listening to the radio, while undertaken together, were performed and experienced very differently by men and women. Similarly, he suggests that tastes in film were very different, though here it is generational rather than gender differences that receive greatest support, given the importance attached to the transition from attendance with mates to attendance with women. Beaven supplies much evidence that men's and women's access to and experience of leisure were very different before 1939, but the implications of this divergence for gender relations and identities receive less development.

In the chapter on the Second World War, Beaven notes the political and patriotic significance attached to the leisure activities of both men and women. He argues, in contrast to Sonya Rose, that it was specifically working-class leisure that was subject to scrutiny. (10) This seems, though, to underestimate the level of opprobrium that could surround those of all classes not seen as making the requisite sacrifices.

This is a bold study that reviews working-class male leisure, and the concerns it gave rise to, across an extensive period. Its thematic scope and its local basis usefully complement existing work. While its focus on cultural contestation is valuable, doubts remain over some of the book's larger claims about the exclusivity and class-specificity of popular culture. The book works better as an investigation of popular leisure than as an anatomy of attitudes to it. The changing intellectual context and complex character of debates about culture and citizenship are never sufficiently articulated. Questions raised by Joyce about the basis upon which cultures and identities are regarded as distinctively 'class' cultures and identities need more explicit consideration than is afforded here. (11) Nonetheless, Beaven has produced a significant and timely contribution to our understanding of popular leisure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Notes

1. S. Broadberry, *The Productivity Race: British Manufacturing in International Perspective, 1850–1990* (Cambridge, 1997). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. C. Sandler, 'Working-class adolescents in Birmingham: a study of social Reform, 1900–14' (DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 1987). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. M. Savage and A. Miles, *The Remaking of the British Working Class, 1850–1940* (1994). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. S. Broadberry, *The Productivity Race: British Manufacturing in International Perspective, 1850–1990* (Cambridge, 1997). [Back to \(1\)](#)
5. J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998). (Cambridge, 1997). [Back to \(4\)](#)
6. J. Lawrence, 'The British sense of class', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35 (2000), 307–318. [Back to \(5\)](#)
7. Thomas Wright, *Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes. By a Journeyman Engineer* (1867). [Back to \(6\)](#)
8. Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Manchester, 1971). [Back to \(7\)](#)
9. Alastair J. Reid, 'Intelligent artisans and aristocrats of labour: the essays of Thomas Wright', in *The Working Class in Modern British History: Essays in Honour of Henry Pelling*, ed. Jay M. Winter

- (Cambridge, 1983), 171–86. [Back to \(8\)](#)
10. Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty : Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900–1939* (Buckingham and Philadelphia, 1992). [Back to \(9\)](#)
 11. Sonya O. Rose, 'Sex, citizenship, and the nation in World War II Britain', *American Historical Review*, 103 (1998), 1147–76. [Back to \(10\)](#)
 12. Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914* (Cambridge, 1991); and *Democratic subjects: the Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994). [Back to \(11\)](#)

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