

The Playful Crowd. Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century

Review Number:

536

Publish date:

Saturday, 1 July, 2006

ISBN:

0231127243

Date of Publication:

2005

Price:

£21.00

Publisher:

Columbia University Press

Place of Publication:

New York, NY

Reviewer:

Brad Beaven

The crowd as a historical social phenomenon has of late been a much-neglected subject. Modern analyses of the crowd will be for ever be associated with the 'history from below' era of the 1960s, in which historians refuted the long-held position that the crowd could foster a primeval and psychological changing influence on its participants. (1) This challenge to what was essentially the Le Bon theory of crowd psychology stressed how crowd behaviour was grounded in cultural traditions and was often restrained, targeting specific institutions or individuals that had transgressed local customs. (2) Since the 1980s, however, greater emphasis on cultural diversity, via the analysis of events through the principal categories of class, gender and generation, has led historians away from the crowd and its actions. Seen in these terms, the crowd becomes an unwieldy concept that is insensitive to the gendered and generational nuances that exist within and between social classes. The neglect of the crowd, then, has been the unfortunate by-product of recent trends in social history. Yet crowds did exist, particularly in the field of mass commercial leisure and in bucking recent historical trends Gary Cross and John Walton's ambitious study of 'playful crowds' in Britain and the United States should be wholeheartedly welcomed.

In *The Playful Crowd*, Cross and Walton have produced a fascinating account of the changing nature of the pleasure-seeking crowd in the US and Britain during the twentieth century. The book's central tenet is that broad patterns of behaviour and the contextual meanings of 'playful' crowds changed considerably during the twentieth century in both the US and Britain. To demonstrate the nature of these changes, Cross and Walton present four case studies of pleasure sites that provide an insight into the different schemes adopted by entertainment providers and the changing demands of pleasure-seekers across the twentieth century. Thus for the early twentieth century, Coney Island and Blackpool are identified as the pleasure sites that were reaching their zenith during this period only to experience a nadir after the Second World War. The pleasure crowds of the second half of the twentieth century are explored through Disneyland in Southern California and the less obvious choice of Beamish, a living museum in County Durham.

The book is broadly structured in two sections; the first focuses on the early twentieth-century crowd,

contrasting Blackpool and Coney Island, while the second investigates the modern affluent crowd at Disneyland and Beamish. In structuring the book the authors could easily have taken the less scholarly route of devoting a chapter to each pleasure site, providing a grand conclusion at the end of the study. Instead, Cross and Walton synthesise the material under key themes that identify the origins of the pleasure centres, crowd behaviour and its critics, and the decline and/or development of the resorts or theme parks. This makes for a truly comparative study and in turn advances debates on how British and North American crowds behaved and were viewed by contemporaries in the twentieth century. In selecting four pleasure sites, the authors also recognise that they are analysing a particular type of crowd that visited resorts or theme parks for experiences that would contrast, relieve and yet often confirm their ordinary work lives. Thus, as Cross and Walton state, 'this liberation from and yet reconciliation with the everyday is what made their visitors into playful crowds' (p. 5). They also note that human culture has produced numerous versions of the playful crowd such as the Roman Saturnalia, the early modern feasts and modern sporting and leisure events. While these crowds differed, all these events reveal an insight into a particular age, society and culture. For Cross and Walton the aim 'is to explore the distinctive version of the playful crowd that came to culminate in the early twentieth century – what we call the industrial saturnalia – and how it was transformed across the course of that century' (p. 5). In introducing the concept of the industrial saturnalia, the authors certainly capture the characteristics and behaviour of the playful crowd of the early twentieth century on both sides of the Atlantic. The book offers a persuasive argument that the industrial saturnalia occurred during a unique period in which maturing industrial societies offered more mechanised and mass commercial entertainment at specified resorts.

The sections on Blackpool and Coney Island are the most interesting and convincing arguments in the book. Here we learn that both pleasure sites symbolised the era combining popular modernity, mass entertainment, and mass consumption with a new collective experience. However, older strands of entertainment such as music halls, freak shows and risqué amusement still found outlets in these modern leisure resorts. Significantly, these modern crowds also behaved in a hybrid fashion, continuing to enjoy the collective participation and excitement of the throng, but replacing aggressive sports and the mocking of authority with the thrill of mechanised rides. Both resorts also reflected class and cultural divisions in British and US society. Working-class visitors on both sides of the Atlantic were attracted to the resorts both for thrill-seeking and escapism from everyday life. Indeed, the excitement and simulated danger of the resort was an antidote to modern experiences of industrial work, with its monotonous work schedules and its emphasis on strict labour discipline. Conversely, another attraction of these resorts was their physical resemblance to working-class life. The crowded streets, the industrial-like mechanised rides and, in the case of Blackpool, row upon row of lodging houses resembled the industrial urban centres they had originated from.

For the middle class, leisure took another form, accentuating the family and the desire to leave the bustling city crowds and instead enjoy the solitude of the countryside. The authors, however, are careful to nuance their findings as it is clear that the Blackpool and Coney crowds were not homogenous working-class entities but an 'expression of jumbled tastes and interests that crossed class and gender lines'. However, to assert that this was 'unusual' in a modern industrial society is questionable (p. 63). One could argue that the popular culture associated with music hall was just as jumbled in content and audience. For example, in the music hall industry, middle-class writers produced the music and sketches, often based on working-class life, that were performed by newly created national 'stars'. Indeed, like the Blackpool and Coney resorts, while there was a strong working-class attraction to the music hall, performers were watched by a mixture of classes, genders and generations.

Although the British and North American crowds shared a number of similarities, Cross and Walton also identify some important contrasts in popular tastes, demography and political contexts. In terms of popular tastes, American entertainment was often themed and illusionary, with rides that would promise to take the pleasure-goer to witness at first hand the terror of a tenement fire or even take their visitors to death and the afterlife with a tour of hell. The Pleasure Beach at Blackpool shied away from such controversies. The resort, in many respects, resembled the industrial Lancashire landscape, so reminders of disasters and death would hardly have been appropriate for the pleasure-seeking proletariat familiar with tragedies in the

workplace. Along with popular tastes, demographic differences also helped foster a divergence between the two resorts. Coney's close proximity to New York, nine miles east of Manhattan, ensured that the resort enjoyed a varied social and ethnic mix. This was in contrast to Blackpool, where the industrial population of Lancashire was less diverse. Whole communities would take advantage of the local wake weeks to make extended visits to Blackpool, giving the resort a sense of community and loyalty that perhaps did not exist in Coney. Indeed, Cross and Walton suggest that one of the principal reasons for Coney's decline and Blackpool's continuing success during the interwar period and beyond was a stable population in the region. While the American crowd in Coney was in a continuous state of change and migration, Blackpool visitors were largely drawn from a relatively homogenous northern working class, allowing holidaying traditions to filter down the generations.

Finally, an important divergence that Cross and Walton uncover is the very different critical reception the resorts received from their respective intellectual elites. Coney Island generated sustained criticism from middle-class intellectuals and reformers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Middle-class observers saw the resort as a centre of hedonism, in which workers were released from society's normal codes of conduct. At the same time, critics were concerned that the amusements would engender a passivity and apathy that did not bode well for active citizenship (p. 100). By the early twentieth century, however, British, bourgeois intellectuals were more relaxed about the pleasure-seeking crowd. The most vocal critics came from working-class organisations and left-wing commentators who saw Blackpool as a culture of consolation where workers could 'go on the loose' and escape from the everyday problems that blighted their lives. Drawing from similar sentiments expressed across the Atlantic, socialists feared that a passive leisure culture would divert working-people from the political solutions that they were offering.

While Coney and Blackpool shared many similarities, then, some of these key differences played an important role in Coney's decline and Blackpool's longevity during the first half of the twentieth century. The authors argue that in America middle-class sensibilities became more accepted and, while the crowd did not disappear, its unpredictability, dirt and hedonist quality was gradually phased out. A greater emphasis was placed on family clusters and child-centred entertainment. This proved the death knell for Coney and opened up opportunities for Disney. In Britain, Blackpool continued to hold on to its adult appeal, though alternative popular venues emerged such as stately homes and living museums that emphasised the family and educational experience.

The second half of the book shifts attention to what effectively replaced the industrial saturnalia of Coney Island and, to a lesser extent, Blackpool. Disneyland, which opened in 1955 in Southern California, has long been the centre of a debate between 'defenders of a populist commercialism and the jeremiads against consumerist modernity' (p. 168). Cross and Walton offer a more complex position arguing that while Disney rejected the seediness and chaotic crowds of Coney in favour of orderly family entertainment, he did borrow explicitly from strands of the industrial saturnalia which emphasised cultural inversion. Thus 'Disney's saturnalia was expressed not in the childlike play of young adults breaking from work and family constraints but in the child-centred play of families seeking temporary escape from a world of suburban consumerism while encountering it again in a different form' (p. 169). Disney appealed overtly to middle-class sensibilities. Instead of the risqué and exotic, he offered the cute and cartoonish; the shady staff of Coney contrasted with the 'clean cut and normal' appearance of Disney staff; in place of the seedy competition stalls Disney presented integrated, themed and meticulously planned attractions. Of course the pricing policy, which is perhaps a little underplayed in the book, also helped Disney filter out the undesirable elements of the crowd. By eliminating the 'free-loading' poor, Disney not only maximised their profits but also reassured middle-class families of their personal safety in the crowd.

While Cross and Walton argue that Disney represented a 'triumph of the genteel over the plebeian crowd', a different story emerges in Britain where Blackpool continued to attract the crowds during the second half of the twentieth century. However, the Beamish living museum, along with a number of other heritage sites, sought to challenge the pleasure-seeking ethic of traditional industrial saturnalia. Beamish, it is argued, represented the antithesis of both the hedonism of the industrial saturnalia and the fantasy world of Disney. Instead, the Beamish crowds were invited to experience reconstructions of ordinary working life in the early

1900s in order to appreciate and value their own heritage. This form of entertainment was not new and had its roots in the nineteenth century-rational recreation movement that sought to educate and elevate the working class through wholesome leisure pursuits. However, as Cross and Walton rightly argue, Beamish was far from isolated from the Disney phenomenon and became embroiled in debates about the relationship between commercialism and education and the type of 'romanticised' history it was portraying. Thus 'it became the focal point of tensions between history and nostalgia, between the museum and theme park' (p. 206). Interestingly, in 2004 (perhaps too late to include in the book) initiatives to boost visitors enraged Beamish founder Frank Atkinson who condemned plans to build a 300 room hotel at the site. Atkinson complained that 'these proposals will dilute and distort the purpose of Beamish' and 'are practically proposing to turn it into a Disney-type theme park'. (3)

There can be little doubt that Cross and Walton provide a convincing account of the aims and values that underpinned Beamish. However, one is left wondering whether a case study of a modern theme park that seriously rivalled the Blackpool phenomenon might have made their argument even more compelling. After all, Beamish and its like are fairly minor players in the leisure industries with approximately 350,000 yearly visitors compared to 6.2 million who annually visit Blackpool. (4) Alton Towers, on the other hand, transformed its site into a theme park with the latest thrill rides during the 1970s and 1980s and now attracts over 2.5 million visitors every year. (5) It would have perhaps been interesting to discover whether this relatively new leisure attraction continued to draw from an older industrial saturnalia or whether the Disney factor had a bearing on the park's ethos. To be fair, Cross and Walton justify the Beamish investigation as a study of a very different 'British' crowd that was a far cry from the football or Blackpool crowd but a 'viable, if less popular path from the world of both industrial saturnalia and the gentility of 1900' (p. 236).

There can be no doubt that Cross and Walton have produced a study that will stand the test of time providing an excellent example of how the history of leisure should be written. The book is a truly comparative work, expertly contextualised and draws from an impressive range of primary and secondary sources. *The Playful Crowd* is an invaluable contribution to the fields of leisure, popular culture and consumerism in Britain and the US in the twentieth century. Over the years, Cross and Walton have independently produced important and thought provoking studies of leisure and society; *The Playful Crowd* is no exception.

Notes

1. G. Rude. *The Crowd in History: a Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848* (1964). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. P. Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge, 1998). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *The Newcastle Journal*, 3 August 2004. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *The Guardian*, 30 April 2005. [Back to \(5\)](#)

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/536#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2953>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>