

**ARTICLES****MORALITY, SOCIAL DISORDER, AND THE WORKING CLASS  
IN TIMES SQUARE, 1892 – 1954**

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*ABSTRACT: This article examines efforts to order Times Square during the first five decades of its existence as a high profile commercial centre. Between 1892 and 1954, New York City powerholders launched a number of clean up campaigns that sought to minimize the working class attributes of the district and to transform it into a mainstream consumption space. These campaigns targeted commercial sex, gay nightclubs, burlesque theatres, street vendors, 'disorderly' people, and honky tonks. The strategies used to order Times Square included exclusionary zoning, moral campaigns and restrictive licensing, as well as the enforcement of curfews, building codes, anti-loitering legislation, and indecency statutes. Despite these efforts, the working class character of Times Square persisted, even though the operation of many working class establishments was disrupted and the freedom of ordinary people to frequent the district was compromised.*

New York City's Times Square is one of the most well known commercial districts in the world. It is also one of the most contested high profile spaces in the world. In recent years, numerous social scientists, historians, and other observers have criticized the late twentieth century remaking of Times Square, pointing out that a vibrant multiracial and mixed class district was replaced by a sanitized consumption space that seeks to attract affluent New Yorkers and visitors. Most of these criticisms are leveled against the city and state governments of New York, which used methods such as targeted redevelopment, exclusionary zoning, and aggressive policing in order to displace non-mainstream commercial establishments and their patrons.<sup>1</sup>

While these critiques have their merits and discuss the displacement of an alternative culture that dominated Times Square since the 1950s, they seldom examine efforts by New York's power-holders to order Times Square during the first five decades of its existence as a high profile commercial centre. The city-government, along with Times Square business interests, have been trying to anticipate, regulate, and transform the entertainment nature of the district since 1892. This paper examines efforts by city power-holders to produce an orderly commercial space in Times Square between 1892 and 1954. During this period, Times Square matured

into New York City's most popular entertainment district, but not in ways that mainstream business interests and public officials envisioned.

In their efforts to make Times Square orderly, holders of power relied on assumptions that can be summarized under the concept of urban disorder. Social scientists have argued that a disorderly space has the potential of attracting unsavory characters, including serious criminals, while dissuading businesspeople from investing in the area and middle class people from frequenting it. The concept of urban disorder comprises two sub-concepts, those of physical and social disorder. Physical disorder concerns the blighted condition of the built environment. Social disorder concerns the congregation and activities of 'objectionable' people. For most of the twentieth century, public officials and business interests were mostly satisfied with the physical condition of Times Square, but dissatisfied with the socioeconomic makeup of its visitors and the commercial establishments that catered to them. Although power-holders also pursued the people who frequented Times Square and made its space 'disorderly,' they usually targeted the commercial establishments that attracted them, since their replacement by mainstream businesses would also change the socioeconomic status of the district's visitors. Business interests expected property values and mainstream investment to increase in Times Square once social disorder was eliminated. Public officials agreed with these assumptions and regardless were not satisfied with the disorderly image that such a high profile city space projected to the rest of the nation.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Making of Times Square into a Mainstream Consumption Space**

From its very beginning as the greatest entertainment district in the nation, Times Square had problems with commercialized sex and morally questionable entertainment. In the latter part of the nineteenth-century, Longacre Square (the name of Times Square before 1904) acquired the nickname 'Thieves Lair' because of its honky tonk atmosphere and its proximity to the red light district. After 1883, the opening of the Metropolitan Opera there attracted theatres, hotels, and even more prostitution establishments. In fact, in 1901, houses of prostitution grossly outnumbered theatres and any other types of businesses in Longacre Square.<sup>3</sup>

This growth of Longacre Square as an entertainment district coincided with the greatest moral and government reform movement in New York's history. In 1892, the Presbyterian Pastor Charles H. Parkhurst inaugurated an anti-prostitution campaign that contributed to an electoral defeat for Tammany Hall. This campaign also instigated the investigation by state representatives of the police department because of its ties to establishments

of commercialized sex. Businesspeople, intellectuals, and other reformers organized the Committee of Fifteen (1900-1902), which lobbied for the passage of the Tenement House Law (1901), and the Committee of Fourteen (1905-1932), which lobbied for the establishment of a women's night court and anti-prostitution legislation. More than this, the Committee of Fourteen, allied with the Anti-Saloon League and other moral organizations, represented efforts by the city's elites to arrogate regulatory power from New York's corrupt public authorities, so that they could attack the degradation of values brought by immigrant populations. Theatre and other business owners, hoping to attract a regular middle and upper class clientele to Times Square, welcomed efforts to eliminate commercial sex from the area.<sup>4</sup>

In Times Square, the Committee of Fourteen implemented a comprehensive regulatory policy that encompassed hotels, theatres, cabarets, advertising signs, restaurants, and massage parlours. In the first decade of the century, the Committee successfully closed brothels and hotels along West 40th and 41st streets. In 1910, the Committee convinced District Attorney Charles Whitman to convene a special grand jury chaired by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., in order to investigate remaining vice establishments that had gone underground. During World War I, it was the Committee rather than the police department which placed undercover detectives near military training camps and in Times Square, in order to investigate allegations of prostitution. But the greatest success of the Committee during that period concerned the elimination of Raines Law hotels and legislation that held landlords accountable for illegal activities of their tenants in their properties.<sup>5</sup>

At the turn of the century, Raines Law hotels began to replace prostitution houses. Although not exclusively places of prostitution, these hotels maintained a saloon on their first floor, enabling the socialization of prostitutes and clients. The saloons provided an excellent cover for solicitation since the authorities could not easily determine what interactions involved the exchange of money, and could not continuously station police officers in the premises of a hotel. In some cases, the police department assigned officers in the entrance of a Raines Law hotel, warning people who were entering that they considered the place to be disorderly and that it would be subject to a raid. However, even this approach had questionable results, because of the difficulty of proving who frequented such a hotel and for what purposes. In addition, owners could pay the officers to look the other way and the authorities could not establish for certain that prostitutes habitually frequented a particular establishment, or that its employees knew about the prostitution activity that occurred. Thus, by the turn of the twentieth century, the Raines Law hotel became the leading institution of

prostitution because of the difficulty that the authorities faced in controlling it.<sup>6</sup>

Unable to shut down Raines Law hotels on the basis of suspicion that they harboured prostitutes, the Committee of Fourteen, along with the city government, attacked them for building violations. In 1905, the Ambler Law ordered that hotels which were built after 1891 and over thirty-five feet high should have rooms that were not smaller than thirty square feet with doors that opened to the hallway. The Ambler Law also required the existence of fireproof walls, something that required the extensive reconstruction of hotel interiors. The Committee of Fourteen performed inspections of such hotels and pressured real estate interests and the city to shut down violators. Enforcement of the Ambler Law effectively eliminated Raines Law hotels, many of which had provided inexpensive rooms in and around Times Square.<sup>7</sup>

After the elimination of Raines Law hotels, the Committee of Fourteen targeted real estate owners. Recognizing that much commercialized sex occurred in private residences and rooming houses, the 1913 amendments to the Tenement House Law applied stiff penalties against landlords who did not immediately evict tenants engaged in prostitution. A year later, the state assembly passed the Injunction and Abatement Law, which held real estate owners accountable for illegal uses of their property; violators were barred from renting their property for a period of up to a year. Because of these laws and their enforcement, furnished rooming houses between West 37th and 42nd streets and between Seventh and Eighth avenues closed their quarters to prostitutes, making the area less of a red light district and more of a mainstream consumption space. After this period, most of the remaining Times Square prostitutes operated individually and increasingly relied on pimps, bell boys, restaurant personnel, taxi drivers, and telephones in order to find customers. Many of them walked the streets and solicited under the cover of window shopping. Broadway became notorious for having the most expensive streetwalkers. Despite investigations, the Committee of Fourteen could only effectively pursue establishments that tolerated prostitution rather than individual prostitutes. In addition, police officers cooperated more often with pimps than with the Committee, further hindering morality campaigns.<sup>8</sup>

As it turned out, the moral order that the Committee of Fourteen and its supporters so desired in Times Square was supplanted by a consumerist order based on secularism, modernity, sexual experimentation, and corporate supremacy. According to William Leach, activities that in the nineteenth-century seemed to be morally in the margins of American culture began to define the new order that Times Square promoted. Thus, 'carnival

color, wishing, desiring, dreaming, spending and speculation, theatricality, luxury, and unmitigated pursuit of personal pleasure and gain' became the main characteristics of Times Square.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, cultural impresarios sought audiences interested in alternatives to traditional Victorian values by promoting sexual interactions across previously forbidden barriers. As long as the economy held well, this mainstreaming of alternative culture could be accepted in New York's commercial centre, despite its questionable moral and cultural value. However, the decline of the nation's economic fortunes during the Depression, along with the wholesale appropriation of consumer culture by working class people, annihilated this acceptability.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, despite the morality campaigns, Times Square became the nation's premier marketplace for secular commerce, advertising, and culture between 1900 and 1929. During this period, a new transportation system made Times Square the most accessible area in New York City. Retail stores, theatres, and restaurants attracted unusually large crowds. The entertainment industry, recognizing the potential of Times Square, made the area its home. With the encouragement of *The New York Times* and other local entities, large crowds used Times Square to celebrate the coming of the New Year, wait for election results, and rally for national causes. The 1916 zoning resolution of New York City allowed the construction of giant billboards in Times Square, making it 'America's Mecca of light and color,' according to William Leach. Times Square's huge illuminated and electrical signs generated a sensational spectacle of national corporate culture. The tourist industry used this spectacle-like atmosphere to attract visitors from around the world. By the 1920s, Times Square had become synonymous with consumer capitalism and functioned as the principal symbol of New York City to the rest of the nation.<sup>11</sup>

The ascent of Times Square coincided with the rise of urban tourism and the relocation of the city's well-to-do to upper Manhattan. According to Catherine Cocks, by the early part of the twentieth century, urban tourism impelled the adaptation of urban spaces for the middle and upper classes. Times Square with its celebration of consumerism, its abundance of respectable but not too conservative entertainment, and its accessibility, became one of the favorite destinations for such tourists. Furthermore, businesses that served the wealthy flourished in Times Square since the city's elites, as they withdrew from downtown, made the area their leisure home. This middle and upper class identity of Times Square, when combined with its ascent as the nation's premier commercial and entertainment center, became symbolic of the affluence that preceded 1929.<sup>12</sup>

By the 1920s, despite the diversity of its users, many considered Times Square to be a middle and upper class entertainment space, especially when

compared to Greenwich Village and Harlem, which were spaces surrendered to the working classes. Although this identity of Times Square cohered with the abandonment of the downtown by affluent residents and their residential relocation northward in Manhattan, it stood in contrast to what actually happened in Times Square. As Betsy Blackmar has argued, planners and proprietors sought an 'unobstructed flow of traffic' in Times Square that encouraged mixed-class crowds and welcomed wage workers when they were willing to spend money. At the same time, the treatment of working class people as consumers in establishments that enjoyed mainstream respectability ensured the invisibility of spatial disorder. But as the character of businesses in Times Square changed, the tolerance of working class visitors and their activities also disappeared.<sup>13</sup>

During the Great Depression, Times Square acquired a more open working class character that persisted in spite of efforts by public and private interests to contain it. This shift in the identity of Times Square coincided with major government crackdowns in the area, some of which resembled the moral regulation of the Committee of Fourteen. The difference was that the city government targeted working class people and the establishments that they frequented, regardless of the incidence of commercialized sex.

### **The Working Class Takeover of Times Square during the Great Depression**

In the beginning of 1931, a highly publicized stabbing and shootout at the Club Abbey in Times Square challenged Prohibition's atmosphere of permissiveness. Mayor Jimmy Walker, an ardent supporter of and participant in New York's night scene, lashed out against night clubs in order to divert attention from a major anti-corruption investigation that threatened him and his administration. Police action against establishments that featured gay, burlesque and other performances associated with sex seemed the most efficient way to show that the Walker Administration was determined to clean up New York. These raids were intended to appease the mainstream press and concerned citizens, to minimize the impact of a war of rival gangs that sought to dominate the shrinking profits of night clubs, and to establish an order that would make the most objectionable aspects of nightlife less visible.<sup>14</sup>

Besides signaling Walker's declining political fortunes, the crackdown was symptomatic of the disrepute into which New York's nightlife had fallen during the Great Depression. By then, New Yorkers had started to question the decadence of the 1920s symbolized by relentless consumption, sexual licentiousness, jazz music, out of control speakeasies, and an irresponsible leisure class. As George Chauncey has noted, night clubs that featured

'pansy acts' and gay clientele became the crackdown's most obvious targets. The authorities charged them with liquor violations even though they had stopped enforcing the Volstead Act since at least 1925. In addition, they made them close at 3 A.M. (a curfew that had previously been ignored), and threatened to impose a new 1 A.M. curfew. A few months after the 1931 Club Abbey incidents, the police targeted the city's drag balls as well. Although the authorities eventually allowed the resumption of drag balls in Harlem, they made the midtown area an out-of-limits realm for such performances. *Variety* magazine reported that 'if the cops have their way, the effeminate clan will hereafter confine its activities to the Village and Harlem.'<sup>15</sup>

A year later, an unsettling atmosphere continued to prevail in Times Square. It seemed that the Depression had devastated the entertainment world of Times Square. Theatre receipts had fallen, criminal warfare for nightclub control intensified, and establishments that catered to ordinary people multiplied. The police department organized a special squad of twenty patrolmen whose goal was to campaign against speakeasy steerers, urchins who danced for pennies, men and boys who requested tips from automobile drivers to watch their cars, and beggars. By June of 1932, to the delight of the Broadway Association and the Forty-Second Street Property Owners' and Merchants' Association, the police had made about 3,000 arrests. Despite these crackdowns, the redefinition of the district into a working class entertainment area continued. Burlesque operators from other parts of the city, sensing that the ticket prices of legitimate theatre were too expensive, and that working class audiences would flock to their productions, bought or rented theatres on Broadway. In response, the Forty-Second Street Property Owners' and Merchants' Association laid plans to clean up Times Square. Its secretary, Edward W. Forrest, said that his organization objected, not only to honky tonk establishments that 'brought the Bowery and Coney Island to Times Square', but also to sidewalk peddlers, sightseeing buses, illegal signs, auction rooms, and 'all the unethical and disreputable businesses that are bringing the greatest cross-town artery of the city into disrepute.'<sup>16</sup> Lewis Nichols deplored the existence of 'huge signs containing spitting and smoking volcanoes and stuffed tigers fighting to the death stuffed pythons.'<sup>17</sup> J. Brooks Atkinson complained about sexual innuendo all over Times Square and contended that 'even in the flea circus sex is the basic hokum for the yokels who prowl mournfully through the dingy walls of this dingy museum.'<sup>18</sup> But most of the anger of newspapers and business associations was directed against burlesque performances, perhaps because they represented an easy target.<sup>19</sup>

It was, then, not a surprise that the Forty-Second Street Property Owners' and Merchants' Association blamed burlesque theatres for the decline of

Times Square, and initiated litigation against them. The Association argued that burlesque theatres generated a disorderly atmosphere in Time Square, not only because of their indecent productions, but also because of their posters of half-nude women in front of the theatres, their use of barkers in the sidewalks to solicit audiences, and the large number of 'undesirables' who loitered in front of the theatres. These perceptions culminated in a Section 1140a complaint against Eltingue Theater, that it allowed indecent performances. The complaint led to the conviction of a barker for unlicensed street hawking. But it failed to shut down Eltingue or any other theatres on the basis of indecency.<sup>20</sup>

Unable to make its case in court, the Forty-Second Street Property Owners' and Merchants' Association brought its complaint in front of James Geraghty, the Commissioner of Licenses. Since the license of every burlesque theatre in the city would expire on April 30, 1932, the Association exerted public and private pressure on Geraghty and, by default, the mayor. Geraghty called hearings on burlesque performances and the Association paraded the affidavits and testimonies of dozens of religious and civic groups against burlesque. Burlesque operators countered these charges by trying to make the case that burlesque was the poor person's theatre, and by claiming that other theatre operators wanted to close them only because they attracted customers away from their productions. Four months later, Geraghty, carrying out the orders of Acting Mayor Joseph McKee who had succeeded scandal-stricken Walker, refused to renew the licenses of the Republic and Eltingue Theaters.<sup>21</sup>

In justifying the refusal to renew theatre licenses, the authorities and the mass media defined the problem as the congregation of 'objectionable characters', the destruction of property values, and, finally, a harm to morality. Geraghty claimed that burlesque performances tended to:

*create disorder and to destroy the neighborhood and property values, to cause objectionable characters to congregate in and about the theatre and in the streets in the vicinity thereof, to the detriment of the property and the destruction of the morals and character of the locality and the community in general.*<sup>22</sup>

*The New York Times* echoed this conclusion. Although its editors initially applauded McKee's actions against 'pornographic exhibitions,' they later admitted that the issue was not really moral:

*The issue is, actually, not so much moral as economic, and, possibly political. The alleged obscenity of the burlesque*



*shows is exceeded by their external frownsiness. The neighborhood of such theatres takes on the character of a slum. It thus may well be that the renewed drive against the nude shows is one more sign of better business conditions. Merchants in the vicinity are growing more restive than ever about their surroundings.*<sup>23</sup>

In this passage, the editors of *The New York Times* articulated what became perceived as Times Square's greatest problem for the sixty years that followed: the idea that certain commercial establishments attracted 'disorderly' people that damaged the image of the city, property values in Times Square, and the values of the community.

The issue of morality in theatrical productions would perhaps have faded away if it had not been for the election of Fiorello La Guardia in 1934. La Guardia relished high publicity campaigns against what he characterized as 'incorporated filth,' and instructed his commissioners to conduct such campaigns. He set the reformist tone early on in his administration when he personally participated in raids against illegal gambling operations, and used a sledge hammer to smash slot machines. Some of his early targets included organ grinders, loud radios, and loudspeakers outside stores, auto horn-blowers, and Christmas carolers. But soon burlesque, which had already functioned as a high profile crackdown object, made it onto the list of La Guardia's targets.<sup>24</sup>

Encouraged by his victory against gambling both on the street and in the courts, in 1935, the Commissioner of Licenses, Paul Moss, embarked on his campaign against burlesque. He suspended the license of Republic Theater because of obscene performances. The New York Supreme Court, citing a 1922 precedent, decided that Moss did not have the authority to suspend a theatre's license unless its operators were convicted of indecency. However, the court hinted that the commissioner could refuse to renew a theatre's license, and in response, Moss made the licenses for burlesque theatres effective for ninety days rather than one year. In April 1937, Moss successfully prosecuted five performers and the stage manager of Gotham Theater on 125th Street for violating Section 1140a that prohibited obscene performances. This conviction offered Moss the necessary ammunition to go after theatres in Times Square. With all theatre licenses expiring on April 30, Moss called hearings on burlesque theaters and conveniently linked to burlesque some prostitution houses and a series of sex crimes that had occurred in Times Square. On May 2, Moss refused to renew the licenses of fourteen burlesque theatres throughout the city. Those theatres remained closed for thirteen weeks and reopened only after they had eliminated both the word 'burlesque' and the performance associated with it, from their

repertoires. Subsequent court challenges failed. In fact, as late as 1955, the courts refused to allow the opening of a theatre that used the word 'burlesque' to describe its performances.<sup>25</sup>

Morality issues aside, the cumulative effects of Prohibition and the Depression altered the dynamics of entertainment in Times Square. Rising production costs, declining attendance, and competition from motion pictures and other cheaper forms of entertainment, changed many Broadway theatres into radio studios, movie theatres or burlesque houses. After burlesque, many of the playhouses became 'grinders' featuring continuous showings of second rate movies. Luxury hotels either went out of business or reduced their rates. First class restaurants also closed and became replaced by cheap lunch counters. All kinds of establishments either reduced their prices to accommodate lower income mass clientele, or shut down. But despite the gloomy accounts of the period, as Brooks McNamara has argued, Times Square 'was not in decline but in the process of redefinition.' The mass audience approach, transformed Times Square into an amusement park kind of space not much different from Coney Island.<sup>26</sup>

By the 1930s, it was firmly believed that Times Square was such a high profile area that any problems associated with it could damage the image of New York City. According to Victor Bernstein, the city administration recognized that to 'permit this area to deteriorate . . . would be to commit a kind of municipal *kara-kiri*. It would be as if Paris tore down the Eiffel Tower and replaced it with a hot-dog stand, or Egypt dynamited the Sphinx and the Pyramids to make room for a couple of moving-picture houses.'<sup>27</sup> Bernstein has argued that, despite this recognition, conditions in Times Square reflected precisely such a destructive process. In his article, Bernstein mimicked the surprise of a tourist who encountered disorderly elements in Times Square:

*He had not expected to see humble sandwich men strolling along a thoroughfare lit by the genius of Thomas Edison and Claude Neon. He had not expected to be able to buy penny chocolate bars from a pushcart on Times Square. Certainly he had not expected to see so many nickel drink stands, some of them garlanded with fake tropical flora in the approved midway manner. Neither was he very pleased, Mr. Babbit will tell his folks back home, to have had his pictures taken three times in two blocks. The first time was an adventure, the second a bore, the third a nuisance. In a gesture of impatience he threw away the third photographer's receipt and noted how littered was the*

*sidewalk. Back on Main Street his comment will probably be terse: 'Never saw such a dirty city in my life!'*<sup>28</sup>

For the first time ever, street vendors were characterized as the most intractable problem of Times Square, perhaps because burlesque had been eliminated. As it turned out, with the encouragement of business interests, street vendors became the next target of the city administration.

Although the campaign against street vendors took place all over the city, it started in Times Square in 1937, when the Broadway Association and the city administration associated street peddlers with dirt and sought to remove them from the area. The police cracked down on sandwich men, pushcart peddlers, panhandlers, and street photographers. By 1938, the crackdowns had reached the judiciary, which did not cooperate with the city. The Supreme Court of New York refused to equate selling from permanent stands with peddling, decided that the Commissioner of Public Markets could not refuse licenses to pushcart vendors because they had no fixed place of business, and ordered the Commissioner to issue licenses to peddlers regardless of their ownership of a vehicle to conduct their business. Moreover, the City Magistrates' Court of New York declared that a law which required peddlers who sold pamphlets to be licensed was clearly in violation of the First and Fourteenth Amendments. La Guardia condemned the courts as obstructionist, decried their issuance of mandamus orders on licenses, and threatened to 'put those pushcarts in front of the Supreme Court and the Appellate Division.'<sup>29</sup>

Drives against street vendors merged with those against 'undesirables.' In 1937, the police and the Broadway Association sought to minimize the honky tonk atmosphere in preparation to the celebration for the New Year; they pursued people whose appearance was found to be objectionable. In 1939, in anticipation of the World's Fair, the police went after panhandlers and street performers. Among others, the police arrested the sixty year old tap dancer Bill (Bojangles) Robinson for not moving along when ordered to do so in Times Square, and charged him with disorderly conduct. In general, the police acted at the behest of business associations that complained about conditions on Times Square.<sup>30</sup>

The campaign against street vendors continued in the years that followed. After various setbacks in the courts, the LaGuardia Administration used business associations to pressure members of the City Council to pass an anti-peddling ordinance. In addition, the Commissioner of Markets, William Fellows Morgan, Jr., who had invested seven years in the war against street vendors, organized the Citizens' Committee to Eliminate Itinerant Street Peddling, and lobbied the City Council publicly through the pages of *The*

*New York Times*. In a letter to the editor written in 1941, Morgan argued that the 'streets of New York are no place for the transaction of business and should be reserved exclusively for vehicular traffic', that itinerant peddlers threatened the health of the public, and that they unfairly competed with legitimate businesses. He also reminded the City Council that the votes of peddlers could not match those of 70,000 independent storekeepers. That same year, the City Council and the Board of Estimate voted to largely eliminate street peddling in New York City.<sup>31</sup>

The war against street vendors ended in 1942, when one court after another found the city ordinance to be unconstitutional. The courts decided that the city had no authority to prohibit the use of public streets for private gain and that only the state had such regulatory power. They also ruled that the enforcement of the law constituted an improper and discriminatory exercise of police power. Finally, they determined that the city could not eliminate competition by merchants who paid no taxes or rent. At the same time, the courts found to be dubious many of the city's contentions, such as the assertions that street peddlers contributed to unsanitary conditions, created traffic jams, and unfairly competed with store owners. For Times Square, this meant that all kinds of people would be able to frequent its public spaces and sell their goods and services.<sup>32</sup>

The preoccupation with civil defense during World War II reduced the frequency of disciplinary projects in Times Square, including its campaign against street vendors. Fearing air raids, the city administration dictated a general dimming of lights throughout the city and mechanisms that would allow a complete blackout in the case of emergency. Government officials and utility operators paid special attention to Times Square, whose advertising signs made it the most illuminated spot of New York City. In 1942, the government ordered the rewiring of all advertising signs in Times Square, so that they could be completely blacked out in two seconds in the case of an attack. After the rewiring, dim-outs became common in Times Square and the area experienced many lightless nights in the period 1942-45.<sup>33</sup>

The irony of La Guardia's campaigns is that the mayor respected working class people whenever they made labor claims, but frequently attacked them when they appeared as consumers or producers in public space. Early on in his administration, La Guardia ordered the police department not to interfere with peaceful picketing. During the 1934 taxi drivers' strike, La Guardia even took away police Billy clubs to prevent abuses that had routinely occurred in previous labor mobilizations. On one occasion, La Guardia told the police commissioner John O'Ryan that he 'felt very strongly in principle as to the right of assemblage and as to the right of speech.' But the mayor

never felt strongly about the right of working class people, characterized as 'undesirables' by business interests, to use the public space of Times Square. Moreover, his efforts to eliminate street peddlers, shoeshine boys, sidewalk entertainers, and hawkers from public space ran against La Guardia's sympathy for labor. The same person who in 1933 stated that 'if the right to live interferes with profits, profits must necessarily give way to that right,' attacked street vendors with a relentlessness never seen in the city's history.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Remaking of Times Square in the Immediate Postwar Period**

In the immediate post-World War II period, working class New Yorkers guarded their interests as workers, but not as consumers. Although they found it necessary to confront employers for benefits and pay raises, they shied away from defending many of the everyday forms of working class culture when these were exhibited in locations outside their neighborhoods. Although many people lamented the decline of entertainment spots such as Coney Island and even Times Square, the distance of these spaces from their everyday lives made them more dispensable than one might have expected.

The dispensability of many working class commercial institutions and spaces was indicative of a redefinition of New York City culture. Suburbanization and automobile ownership allowed many working class people to move elsewhere, and to spend their leisure time differently. As a result, in the 1950s, both the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers moved to California, partly because they could no longer attract large crowds in New York. New seaside resorts such as Jones Beach rendered Coney Island a necessity of the past. Television directly competed with public spaces for people's leisure time. Shopping malls, with their concentration of stores and parking lots, reduced the reliance of New Yorkers on neighborhood commercial strips. Gradually, many members of white ethnic groups developed an apathy toward public spaces they had previously found essential. At the same time, their withdrawal from prized public spaces reflected their antipathy toward African Americans and Latinos who, by the 1940s, were increasingly predominant.

Efforts to make Times Square more orderly recommenced toward the end of World War II, as the police department started to focus on juveniles frequenting Times Square. According to the authorities, the problem had a gender dimension. Underage girls behaved like 'victory chippies' seeking service men in Times Square. Underage boys either loitered in the area, or worked as shoeshine and delivery boys. Routinely, police officers rounded up younger looking girls suspected of delinquency and subjected underage

ones to medical inspections for venereal diseases. They also detained teenage boys and returned them to their parents.<sup>35</sup>

After LaGuardia's mayoralty, honky tonks became the primary target of Times Square business interests and the city government. Since the early 1930s, the city's elites considered these establishments and the people that they attracted to be menaces. Honky tonks sought to maximize profits with cheap amusements that attracted huge crowds around the clock. While such entertainment forms had been declining in Coney Island, their miniature versions in Times Square thrived. The centrality of Times Square proved indispensable for amusement businesses. Tourists were more likely to visit midtown Manhattan than the edge of Brooklyn where Coney Island was located, and so did many New Yorkers. By the 1940s, boardwalk type businesses had altered the atmosphere of Times Square into a truly working class cultural space. The Broadway Association, which represented the mainstream business sector of the area, found this development to be truly disturbing. In 1948, the Association presented Robert F. Wagner, Jr., Chairman of the City Planning Commission, with proposals that called for the rezoning of the midtown area so that the 'carnival atmosphere' of Times Square and Broadway could be eliminated.<sup>36</sup>

As the honky tonks continued to thrive, the frustration over disorderly conditions in Times Square resurfaced in the domain of the mainstream public sphere in 1952. The Broadway Association took the lead by arguing that Times Square could not survive as a penny arcade area and proposed the rezoning of the area. On December 13, 1952, in a letter to *The New York Times*, Edgar Van echoed LaGuardia's previously expressed dislike of street peddlers: 'Pushcarts, canister wavers, socks salesmen, gardenia hawkers, bootblacks, accordion virtuosi, somnolent bums in theatre exits and just plain or garden variety of panhandlers make the sector a jungle of come-ons that would not be tolerated in the most chaotic community in the Orient.'<sup>37</sup> Two days later, understanding that a campaign to remove peddlers had been tried and had failed, the editors of *The New York Times* sought to channel indignation elsewhere. They recalled the proposal of the Broadway Association which sought to 'protect Times Square from becoming a honky-tonk Coney Island', and provided an inventory of businesses causing disorder:

*On Broadway and Seventh Avenue alone up to Fifty-fourth Street (not attempting to make a side-street census) there are half dozen . . . arcades. There are eight dance palaces, some with canned music blaring into the streets over raucous loudspeakers. Eight record shops are committing the same loudspeaker nuisance, and several auction shops*

*also pipe their blare to the streets. Contributing to a boardwalk atmosphere are shooting galleries, bazaars, gift shops of a junky nature, 'last day' sales, 'riot' sales, 'alteration' sales, live turtle emporiums, shops for passport photos, jokes, magic tricks, monogrammed cowboy hats, lurid, sexy and sadistic movie advertising (the latter more prevalent, however, on Forty-second Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue).*<sup>38</sup>

The attacks against these businesses seemed peculiar, given the fact that they had completely taken over Times Square. Furthermore, typically, no one advanced any vision of what Times Square ought to be. The argument that Times Square could not survive as a penny arcade area made no business sense. It was penny arcades rather than theatres or other mainstream businesses that were able to afford the high rents of Times Square.<sup>39</sup>

At the end of 1953, the City Planning Commission decided to alter the three classifications of retail districts so that new businesses that contributed to Times Square's midway atmosphere could be prevented from opening. By then, the Broadway Association had hired the city planning firm of Harrison, Ballard & Allen, which drafted zoning revisions that favored the elimination of those businesses considered to be disorderly from most of New York. The zoning changes ensured that shooting galleries, flea circuses, penny arcades, wax museums, pinball gaming establishments, freak shows, skee-ball, open-front stores, sidewalk cafes, ground floor auction rooms, and other amusements could no longer open anywhere in midtown. In the beginning of 1954, the Board of Estimate unanimously approved these zoning changes. Although businesses that already engaged in these activities were spared, whenever they closed, they could not be replaced. According to the editors of *The New York Times*, who wrote five editorials on the matter in about two years, 'The Board of Estimate has taken an important initial step toward somehow remaking Times Square into the decent and respectable neighborhood we should have for one of our most famous name places.'<sup>40</sup> The mentioning of 'somehow' in the sentence revealed the ambivalence of everyone concerned about these zoning changes. After about a quarter of a century of dominating Times Square, honky tonks seemed to be on their way out, for unclear reasons. What would replace them seemed even more unclear.<sup>41</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Between 1929 and 1954 Times Square became an area full of establishments providing cheap amusements. This transformation reflected

the affirmation of working class culture in every aspect of New York City life. But it also irritated the elites, midtown real estate interests, and the city government, which refused to surrender the most high profile area of the city to ordinary people. They argued that inexpensive vendors and their clients made Times Square a disorderly space and that this damaged the image of the city at large. They lobbied for crackdowns against disorderly elements that city administrations happily sponsored. In the end, they managed to outlaw the establishments that made Times Square a lively area.

The campaign against Raines Law hotels and property owners of rooms and apartments suspected for prostitution during the first two decades of the twentieth century set the tone for subsequent crusades. The entertainment provided by certain night clubs, burlesque houses, and gay establishments was characterized as illegitimate and morally bankrupt. Gradually, the fear of declining real estate values drove attacks against street peddlers and honky tonks. The discourse employed against these targets created a counterproductive atmosphere for those with vested interests in Times Square. After a while, many prospective affluent visitors of Times Square began to wonder about the area and kept away. The characterization of people who frequented honky tonks as disorderly and of low income did not help.

Curiously enough, the elimination of cheap amusements set the stage for the revival of the sex industry in Times Square. Sex-related businesses such as adult bookstores, peep shows, movie theatres, and massage parlors replaced the honky tonks. Prostitution houses and streetwalkers complemented this commercial sexual infrastructure and in the process numerous 'legitimate' businesses were driven out of the district. The working class character of Times Square persisted, and many establishments that had nothing to do with the sexual underworld but provided inexpensive entertainment thrived. However, from a mainstream point of view, Times Square declined and became the most disorderly area in New York City. Efforts to change the situation, consumed the city and state governments for another five decades.

## NOTES

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