

Reforming the Sodom by the Sea: Coney Island, Prize-Fighting, and Class Stratification

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Coney Island occupies a unique position in American leisure history. Invariably associated with amusement parks and beaches, Coney Island conjures notions of affordable and accessible amusement for the laboring and middle-classes alike.¹ Coney Island's history prior to the amusement park era, however, offers the chance to interrogate contested notions of leisure in American history. Coney Island provided a wide range of less technologically extravagant amusements such as swimming, eating, drinking, and less respectable activities like vaudeville shows and gambling. Perhaps foremost among these activities, prizefighting caused vitriolic condemnations as an extreme and inhumane form of leisure, and this fed into a larger debate over appropriate use of leisure time.

Prizefighting challenged numerous values of the Victorian mindset in America, and its popularity among immigrant laborers particularly soured the attitudes of middle-class cultural custodians. The earliest attempts to regulate leisure time on Coney Island centered on the presence of prizefighting and gambling, and these attempts represent a critical point in which social forces attempted to define and control the use of Coney Island by the working-class. In particular, the proposed December 1893 bout between then reigning champion James Corbett and challenger Peter Mitchell expresses this trend. Indeed, the effort to end the Mitchell-Corbett fight represents a larger effort to reshape working-class culture according to Victorian middle-class virtues. Simultaneously, social custodians sought to ossify class distinctions to prevent heterogeneous class fraternizing. Indeed, a significant element of the impetus to reform

¹ For Coney Island's history, see John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*; Judith A. Adams, "Coney Island and the Enclosed Park: Steeplechase, Luna, and Dreamland," in *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills*; John Sterngass, *First Resorts: Pursuing Pleasure at Saratoga Springs, Newport and Coney Island*.

working-class culture arose from a perceived threat that the working and middle-classes were associating with increased frequency. Hence, in an effort to define and demarcate the concept of leisure and Coney Island's function as a site of leisure, these social custodians constructed a binary of leisure, focusing on a threat to rational, moral society as presented by the working-class and its leisure pursuits on Coney Island. The campaign against the Mitchell-Corbett championship bout offers a unique means of investigating this phenomenon.

Pierre Bourdieu specifically addresses the relationship between class or social position and the ability to define and demarcate the boundaries of acceptable cultural practices, in a discussion that allows for greater insight into the negotiations around Coney Island. Social groups with sufficient means to attain hegemony over a field of cultural production utilize this power by defining the practices of other groups as "course" or "vulgar," thereby creating a binary between sophisticated and profane dispositions that serves to legitimate social stratification (Bourdieu 7). In regard to organized sport, Bourdieu offers further helpful comments. When sporting activities are dispersed among different classes within a field, these differences are retranslated into debates over the proper means of participation in a particular activity (211). These debates center on different perceptions of the benefits to be gained from participation, specifically in relation to the body (212). Members of a class are most attracted to a particular sport when it is consistent with their world-view.

Thus, according to Bourdieu, sports most likely to attract the members of the middle class are ones which do not "offend the high dignity of the person" (217-18). For the bourgeois participant, the body becomes the end for participating in organized sport, and therefore exercise of the body is only pursued for its own sake (218). Bourdieu links this notion to what he calls the aesthetic disposition: the ability to participate in an activity without a practical end (54-55).

This does not mean that bourgeois sports practitioners have no goals when they engage in sports, but simply that the body's appearance and health take a preeminent focus for their motivation. The participants in these sporting practices also seek to separate their space from the perceived vulgarity of other groups and their spaces. Finally and perhaps most important, the middle-class participant chooses a sport which confirms their existing beliefs and provides benefits which facilitate those beliefs (213-15). This attitude toward other groups, their social practices, and the spaces in which they conduct those actions naturalizes the social stratification and constructs the working-class culture as a negative point of reference. Working-class participation, on the other hand, differs markedly. Bourdieu argues that members of the working-class are more likely to embrace sports that require a substantial investment of energy, effort, and pain, and he mentions boxing as being particularly attractive. Working-class participants seek out these violent sporting activities because they constitute a rejection of the ideological constructions of the dominant class (212-14). Exploring this theoretical backdrop and the place of prize-fighting in the larger context of leisure practices from this time period provides clarity for an examination of the Mitchell-Corbett bout.

The history of leisure time involved not only increased access to recreation by laboring people, but a simultaneous concern among social custodians to control that leisure time. The dual forces of urbanization and industrialization led to parallel changes in concepts of leisure in the 19th century, and these changes increased the amount of leisure time and the type of activities that individuals could pursue. Soon reform-minded people began to argue for leisure activities which would both inculcate rationality and morality in the masses, primarily the working-class (Cross 88-9). These reformers turned their attention to working-class saloons, dance halls,

theatres, and later movie houses.² Likewise, emerging resort communities such as Ocean Grove and Asbury Park, New Jersey emphasized leisure time as a means of instilling a strong moral character and a “respectable” alternative to mass culture, and ostensibly established the model for a “Christian America” (Uminocwicz 8-10).

Understood in this context of class leisure stratification, a less idyllic history of Coney Island appears. Early articles on the island are rife with references to its contested nature. Early condemnations of the island focus on its potential to disrupt the rational order of individual and society. Both the loss of individual self-control and crime on Coney Island warrant its denigration, and these themes would characterize much of the campaign against the Mitchell-Corbett bout. An early expose, appearing in 1874, characterizes the island as a haven for the working-classes, and that its very attainability by all classes renders it unfashionable (Shanley 306). Metaphors of irrationality appear again to reinforce the rigid class distinctions when the bathers on the beach are described as lunatics and wild beasts (308-9). By 1879, however, a more thorough division of social space emerges. The east end of the island boasted exclusive resorts, at least one of which signified its respectability by erecting fences to separate the swimmers from on-lookers (Bishop 357). Further to the west, respectability decreased as evidenced by the presence of by the large number of resorts catering to “whiskey drinking pugilists and gamblers” whose “inns are the scenes of disorder and debauch” (“Coney Island Point”). The specter of crime accompanies this characterization as the presence of gamblers on the island degrades its respectability to certain cultural commentators (Dawson 308).

Furthermore, the police openly allowed such disorderly activities to occur (“Gambling at Coney

² For information on efforts to reform saloons and movie theatres see Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920*. David Nasaw’s *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* also provides excellent information on these topics, as well as accounts of efforts to restrict dance halls and vaudeville shows.

Island”). By the 1890’s, upper class patronage had dropped to an infinitesimal trickle, leaving it firmly as a space for middle and working-class leisure. This bifurcated construction engendered a struggle to define the meaning of the island as a social leisure space, and prize-fighting, specifically the activities of the Coney Island Athletic Club and the Corbett-Mitchell bout, became an early flashpoint in this confrontation.

The rejection of prize-fighting by social custodians of genteel culture did not have its genesis strictly in an austere objection to leisure and physical prowess, per se. In fact, leisure and physical zest had been assimilated into the rhetoric of middle-class culture by the early 1890s. The prevalence of the muscular Christianity movement demonstrates that sectors of the middle-class had embraced leisure and physical training as a means of establishing a rational moral order. Muscular Christianity as a movement grew out of both British and American Victorian middle-class values, and played a significant role in efforts to restrict and recast the culture of the working-class. A fusion of middle-class virtues and a specific notion of masculinity formed the locus of this ideological approach toward leisure time. Essential nineteenth century middle-class values included sobriety, industriousness, temperance, and a rational commitment to law and order (Overman 86). The muscular Christianity movement embraced these as a means of developing moral character through athletic training and competition and as a means of transforming society from evil to good (Ladd and Mathisen 13). Furthermore, masculine identity based upon self-restraint and discipline learned through the participation in morally uplifting sports created, proponents argued, rational control of the lower class by the middle and upper classes (Hall 55-6). By the 1890’s, muscular Christians believed that the “world would be won for Christ” in their own generation (Ladd and Mathisen 68). While it is clearly not the case that every member of the clergy or middle-class self-identified as a

muscular Christian, the general belief that sports, of a certain type, could and did contribute to the benefit of the individual and society resonated widely in certain parts of the American consciousness.

This zeal for physical prowess, however, threatened to blur the distinctions between middle and working-class male cultural values, and this threat of opaque class distinctions electrified efforts to reform Coney Island as a prize-fighting haven. Prize-fighting expressed virility as the violent defense of honor, pain, prowess, and courage, and these values reflecting a working-class orientation (Gorn 107, 146). Despite this association with urban laborers, middle-class spectators were increasingly, albeit furtively, enjoying the thrill of the prize ring. As early as mid-nineteenth century, newspaper accounts hint that middle-class men were patronizing the prize ring, and by the 1880's it was increasingly common for middle-class men to openly view a fight (197). One bout in October 1893 counted doctors, lawyers, bankers, two District Attorneys, and a state senator among its spectators ("Dixon Again Victor"). Such diverse attendance suggests that efforts to eradicate prize-fighting on Coney Island stemmed from not only a desire to reshape working-class culture, but also to prevent an erosion of purportedly respectable middle-class citizens.

Increased rationalization of prize-fighting further stretched the notion of middle-class virtues. Illustrative of this trend, New York's statute prohibiting prize-fighting and its judicial interpretation codified a distinction between scientific sparring and prize fighting. Section 458 of the Penal Code declared that any participant or promoter of a fight in a prize-ring was guilty of a misdemeanor offense ("Prize Fighting in New York"). However, in a case against John L. Sullivan, a distinction arose: boxing matches which were "mere trials of skill" without intention of inflicting serious injury or for a knock out were acceptable by law ("Prize Fights in Madison

Square”). An emergent rhetoric of “scientific boxing” coincided with this legal distinction in which prize-fighting aficionados transformed the sport from relying solely on strength to embrace strategy and point-based scoring. James Corbett’s defeat of Sullivan, which bestowed upon him the title he was to defend against Mitchell, had in fact been the first championship bout to reflect this rationalization of the sport. Fought under the Marquis of Queensbury Rules that specified the use of gloves, three minute rounds, one minute rest periods, and ten second knock outs, this bout attained legal status by being sponsored by an athletic association (Gale 72). By conceptualizing prize-fighting as a rationalized endeavor, advocates of the sport pressured the rigid distinctions of masculinity attributed to the middle and lower classes, and this notion played a significant role in the campaign against the Mitchell-Corbett bout.

By making a spectacle of violence, prize-fighting challenged the rationalized virility’s justification of individual self-control. The admittedly bloody nature of prize-fighting often incited the crowd toward riotous excess. Noting the difference of two fights on the ticket at Coney Island in March 1893, the *New York Daily Tribune* derided the crowd for preferring the brutality and suffering in the first match to the second, more scientific, match (“Brutal Fighting”). During the Green-Murray contest of June 1882, the crowd expected a “rattling fight” and expressed joy when Green was struck in the neck (“Pugilism at the Sea Side”). In fact, Green became so heavily battered that many in the crowd purportedly claimed it be “the happiest moment of their lives” (Mr. Green Whipped”). Furthermore, the spectacle of violence reduced the crowd to non-human levels. One bout’s violence caused the *New York Times* to compare the crowd’s inflamed reactions to the baiting of tigers in the Roman Coliseum (“The Judge Saw the Fight”). Spectators at still another fight ostensibly expressed disappointment that neither fighter

died as a result of the blows received (“Pugilism and the Police”). Such behavior demonstrated to the opponents of prize-fighting its inherent threat to the rational basis of masculinity.

A corollary to the loss of control in the crowd, the rhetorical conventions used to portray the conduct of prize-fighters also relied on metaphors of savagery and bloodlust. Fighters frequently battled with “brutal” disregard for their opponents or their own safety.³ This brutality often caused pugilists to lose rational control of their behavior. During an 1892 brawl, George Godfrey characteristically became “vicious” and “appeared to lose his temper” on several occasions” (“Choynski Defeats Godfrey”). This loss of self-control supposedly resulted in a complete loss of rationality, and newspapers responded by occasionally resorting to animal metaphors to discuss prize-fights. In 1873, the *New York Times* compared a pair of fighters to roosters in a cock-fighting ring (“Pugilism and the Police”). An August 1893 bout involved excessive violence in which the loser was beaten long after victory had been assured, and the victor engaged with “the ferocity with which a fighting dog tears a hapless victim” (“What is the Reason?”). In these accounts, prize-fighting threatened to erode the distinction between a sapient, rational consciousness to a primitive chaotic affliction.

Critics of boxing believed that the sport had implications that stretched far beyond the confines of the boxing ring. Because of the association of prize-fighting with urban laborers, critics often focused on its potential to infest society with crime. Despite the previously mentioned middle-class spectators, newspaper accounts continually referenced the most undesirable elements of the crowd, characterizing prize-fighting as a sport only enjoyed by

³ For just a sample of the frequency of this rhetoric, see “Where Were the Police? A Brutal Prize Fight Near Bath, L.I,” *New York Times* 22 December 1873; “A Brutal Prize Fight,” *New York Times*, 10 June 1881; “The Brutes Meet at Last,” *New York Times*, 31 July 1884; “Fighting with Hard Gloves; A Brutal Contest in Texas on Sunday Afternoon,” *New York Times*, 30 June 1885; “Prize Fights in Madison Square,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 24 August 1893.

saloon keepers, thieves, pickpockets, gamblers, and ruffians.⁴ By stressing this association, these accounts emphasize the potential for social disorder and crime that could overtake the entire city. One article in particular made this connection explicit by emphasizing the disreputable character of numerous well-known pugilists.⁵ Ostensibly an interview with a retired boxer (whose identity is never disclosed), this article stressed that pugilists are the most cowardly members of a community, and that outside of a prize ring their preferred means of fighting involved deadly weapons. It posited a causal connection between prize-fighting and the use of weapons in society, and predicted that “scientific boxing” will lead to increased violent crimes.

Prize-fighting existed at the center of contested notions of leisure practices. As Bourdieu’s work suggests, by characterizing different leisure practices under the dualistic rubrics of respectability and vulgarity, these constructions both naturalized existing social relationships, and structured social space according to these relationships. Through association with respectability or vulgarity, spaces became invested with meaning; consequently, the conceptualizations of these spaces reflected larger class relationships in the cultural field under which they were organized..

These issues played themselves out in the Mitchell-Corbett bout. Key actors in the planned bout reflect the working-class origins of the sport. Reigning champion, James J. Corbett, the son of Irish immigrants who owned a livery stable, briefly worked in banking, earning his way upward from messenger to assistant teller. His prize-fighting career began at eighteen, and he lived a peripatetic existence traveling and sparring in vaudeville shows until his

⁴ “Where Was Tom Donahue?,” *New York Times*, 31 March 1882; “Pugilists in Earnest,” *New York Times*, 7 April 1883; “What is the Reason,” *New York Times*, 9 August 1893; “The Judge Saw the Fight,” *New York Times*, 9 August 1893.

⁵ “Are Pugilists Cowardly?,” *New York Times*, 5 February 1883.

defeat of John L. Sullivan in 1892 (Gale 72). When investigating life of challenger Charley Mitchell, it is little surprise that his proposed battle against Corbett stirred vehement opposition. Hailing from England, Mitchell had a long history of violent barroom altercations. In one such incident, he purportedly bit off a piece of the nose of bar employee. Upon arrival for the bout with Corbett, he had just been released from serving two months in prison for this offense (“Mitchell Means Business”).

While the two fighters set to meet in this bout certainly indicate the colorful history of prize-fighting, no single figure’s story elucidates the class issue at play in this affair than that of the political boss John Y. McKane. McKane’s career began as a carpenter in Gravesend, NY, but he quickly moved into political life when he was elected constable in 1867 based on his reputation of honest work and a commendable private life (Sterngass 235). By 1893, McKane controlled nearly every powerful political position of Gravesend—and therefore Coney Island—including Chief of Police, Fire, School, and Town Commissionerships, as well as Superintendent of the Sheepshead Bay Methodist Church (“M’Kane Has Spoken”). In the interim twenty-six years, McKane’s irreproachable character seems to have tarnished under the influence of political life. During the 1880’s, gambling at racetracks and prizefights did not occur without a payoff to McKane (Reiss 97). Moreover, McKane became a principal founder of the Coney Island Athletic Club to solidify control over the prizefighting profits along with his cohorts in the local Democratic machine, and it was in a building owned by McKane that the club held its bouts (Reiss 97-8).

The involvement of local politicians, many of an immigrant background, in a disreputable business venture such as this fomented much of the vituperative campaign against the Mitchell-Corbett fight, a campaign which began almost immediately upon the decision to hold the bout on

Coney Island. Corbett issued a statement offering to defend his recently won title in January of 1893 (“Corbett’s Sweeping Challenge”), and by February 15, Mitchell, the English champion, arrived to accept the challenge (“Mitchell Means Business”). Even before Mitchell’s arrival, opponents embarked upon a clandestine effort to end the bout. A Treasury Department official awaited Mitchell’s craft at the docks to prevent him from setting foot on U.S. soil due to his status as an ex-convict (“Mr. Mitchell is Here”). However, a court ruling expeditiously discharged Mitchell on the basis that no law prevented him from entering the country because he had been convicted of only a misdemeanor rather than a felony (“Mitchell Means Business”; “Mr. Mitchell Won a Fight”). Throughout the spring and summer, Mitchell and Corbett’s agents considered various locations for the bout, and in September, Mitchell agreed to meet the champion on December 18 at the Coney Island Athletic Club (“Will Fight at Coney Island”). Up until this point, the proposed bout had generated only slight press against it, but once a date was in place, a vitriolic effort covered the pages of prominent newspapers calling for the bout’s cancellation.⁶

Propelled by New York City’s clergy, this polemical attack reiterated the earlier arguments against prize-fighting. The month-long effort focused on primarily demonstrating that the bout would be a brutal slugging match instead of a “scientific bout” for points, that it would cause a lack of self-control and crime to infest the city, as well as deriding the involvement of local authorities in staging the bout. Five days before the eventual cancellation of the fight, the penultimate rhetorical tactic appeared, tying these diverse threads into one singular exposé on the match, in which the well-known phrase “Sodom by the Sea” emerged as a characterization of Coney Island. These tactics suggest much at was at stake for individuals invested in both sides

⁶ See Untitled Editorial, *New York Times*, 3 April 1893; “Not on Coney Island,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 6 April 1893; “Prize Fighting in New York,” *New York Times*, 7 April 1893; “Mr. Ridgeway’s Opportunity,” *New York Times*, 4 August 1893; “What Will Mr. Ridgeway Do?,” *New York Times*, 5 August 1893.

of the affair, and the eventual triumph of the opposing groups implies critical inferences about the nature of leisure, class stratification, and the respectability of Coney Island.

Throughout the movement, the exact type of endeavor the fight would be stirred much controversy. The contract signed by both Corbett and Mitchell indicated it would be a “scientific glove contest” (“Corbett and Mitchell Sign”). Furthermore, it would be fought according to the Marquis of Queensbury rules listed above (“Mr. Mitchell Arrives”). Whether or not the fighters were genuinely in these assurances remains unclear. The last documented bare-knuckle championship fight occurred three years before between John L. Sullivan and Jake Kilrain (Gorn 237). However, this merely establishes that the Mitchell-Corbett affair would involve only a glove of some sort and fought under a rationalized set of rules. Opponents of the bout focused on the allegation that it would not simply be a contest for points, but rather a “genuine fight to the finish” (“Not a Contest for Points”). Because the Queensbury rules allowed for a victory to occur via knockout, opponents of the bout derided this as a brutal slugging fest parading as a rationalized athletic endeavor (“A Prize Fight, Nothing Else”). Reverend J. Russell Taber best expressed this belief by arguing that the presence of gloves and rules did not diminish the brutality of a fight which allowed for knockouts; additionally, Taber characterized proponents as evidence of a lower civilization still battling with high culture in America (“A Substratum of Humanity”). Thus, the fight’s opponents relied on a dualistic construction of respectability and vulgarity to discredit the fight.

The sermons of Taber and other prominent clergymen further illustrated the larger fears of the movement to end the fight, as well as the construction of pugilism as a threat to rational order. Claiming that only those with “liquor inflamed passions demand excitement and blood,” Taber exhibits the belief that this low-brow form of popular amusement threatens social order

(“A Substratum of Humanity”). Furthermore, prize-fighting as leisure threatened harm to all who participated. One article artfully expresses this by framing the “riotous orgy . . . of unrestrained prize-fighting” which renders the crowds “. . . half-crazed and white-faced” against the innocence of the children McKane led in his Sunday Schools (“Will Denounces the Bruisers”). This construction tacitly suggests that innocence and virtue are transformed by the brutal display of violence. Rev. Dr. Lyman Abbott suggested that not only were all who either watched or participated in a prizefight brutalized through its violence, but that by allowing these contests to occur society encouraged criminality through the message that bribery would allow illegality with impunity (“Clergyman United for War”). Indeed, the involvement of local authorities as agents of social control irked the opponents of the bout perhaps most of all.

The *modus operandi* of the Coney Island Athletic Club involved the protection of fighters and gambling interests by powerful public figures invested in the endeavor. McKane, along with fellow members of the Democratic machine such as Magistrate Tighe, Police Justice Newton, and Sheriff Courtney arranged for political protection of the fights, while also receiving significant profits from the gate as primary investors (Reiss 97-8). This involvement brought forth perhaps the most distinctly middle-class based rhetorical tactics of the campaign. Typical of these denouncements, a *New York Times* editorial called forth the “decent, reputable, and industrious” citizens to oppose the elected officials in an approaching election (“Brooklyn’s Rulers”). Such phrasing even came from officials peripherally associated with the invested politicians. Assistant District Attorney Shorter of Kings County, when pressured by a reporter, expressed outrage of the “uncivilized” nature of America if boxers be considered legitimately employed like men of “learning” and “refinement” (“Protection for the Fight”). This condemnation likely did not express sincere anger, but that such outrage would be the most

politically expedient and convincing tactic implies the pervasiveness of the beliefs about rigid distinctions between the classes. This construction synthesized the brutal nature of the fight, the potential criminal threat, and righteous indignation over political involvement, and fused them into a rhetorical construction of Coney Island as an iniquitous den in need of reform, a true Sodom by the Sea.

Commissioned by the *New York Times* to write an exposé on Coney Island and the impending prize-fight, French journalist Raymond De L'Epee focused on the island's tawdry elements⁷. First, De L'Epee employs religious imagery of Brooklyn as a "pious and civilized" community, but that politicians have commandeered power over the respectable citizenry. De L'Epee here establishes the first part of a dualistic construction of virtue reminiscent of the general characterizations of Coney Island listed above, and completes the construction by focusing on the "insolent pride," "vociferous expletives," and "vicious grins" of people of the "lowest possible dimensions": prizefighters. This construction embraces the static notion of masculinity and class values, emphasizing the rational and restrained nature of the middle class against the excessive and coarse lower class. Prize fighting constitutes evidence of the vulgar nature of the lower class. De L'Epee continues the metaphoric construction of Coney Island as representing a threat of social disorder.

Section II of De L'Eppe's article portrays the "mad desire" of the patrons of West Coney Island to imbibe alcohol, while a new type of woman on Coney Island derives joy from the "moans of the robbed" while plotting to "despoil" strangers with their licentious occupation. De L'Epee expresses discomfort from the leers of the patrons of the West End, comparing their looks to predatory gaze of a spider on a fly in its web. Further, De L'Epee gazes toward the "civilized" shore of Brooklyn and invokes phrases such as justice, the institution of prisons, the

⁷ See Raymond De L'Epee, "M'Kane's Sodom by the Sea," *New York Times*, 15 October 1893.

courts, and the law as elements of an order whose reach has not yet captured the island. These tactics all embrace the link between social order and class, and emphasize Coney Island's destructive alternative to middle-class rationalized values. Foremost, the island expresses the crime that accompanies a laboring class orientation to the world, but also De L'Epee's comments exhibit the concern of those opponents of prize-fighting: that these lower values would ensnare members of the middle-class. Emerging from this trend, De L'Epee next explicates the necessity of moral reform for the island.

After an unsuccessful attempt to gain access to the Coney Island Athletic Club, De L'Epee contemplates his day while he awaits his return to "civilization." In particular, his ruminations focus on the contrasts between the two halves of the island, the east end with its churches and respectable residences and the west end with its tawdry denigration. When in conversation with a fellow passenger, De L'Epee learned that McKane owns a home on the east part of the island while operating his criminal enterprise on the west end. By constructing criminality as omnipresent and in control of political power, De L'Epee suggests that irrationality and disorder of the lower class have taken over the different aspects of the city. On this somber note, De L'Epee ends the article. The conclusion illustrates that unless reformed, the "Sodom by the Sea" and its cancerous disorder will attain hegemony over the entire social sphere.

On October 20 1893, headlines proclaimed the news that the Mitchell-Corbett fight had been cancelled ("No Fight at Coney Island"; "The Times Vigorous Battle"). Out of fear of the potential political ramifications, the Coney Island Athletic Club surrendered and voided the match (Reiss 98). However, the cessation of one prizefight did not cease calls for the reformation of Coney Island. Rather, this tendency to attempt a reshaping of the Island

continued throughout the decade. Within a year, John McKane found a new residence at Sing-Sing and Gravesend had been incorporated into New York City, thus establishing direct political control over Coney Island. The legalization of prizefighting under the Horton Law in 1896 also did not abate the tendency to view Coney Island as a threat to middle-class virtue. The very next year officials argued that the moral decay of the island required a complete destruction of the bowery and the establishment of a city park to illustrate the new religious glory of the island. A reformist zeal characterizes the relationship of the middle-class to Coney Island in the years prior to and just after the turning of the twentieth century.⁸

These tendencies suggest deeper conclusions. Preeminently, the desire to reform Coney Island implies a still tense relationship to the concept of leisure in American society. While the concept that recreation augmented work had firmly emerged, a deeper discomfort with the *type* of recreation burgeoned sharply. With a numerically significant body of idle urban poor, society deemed it necessary to consider what means of filling their free time these people should take. Related to this concern, the desire to ensure the maintenance of status quo class relationships demanded that protectors of the middle-class exert control over this recent evolution in time and society. Rhetorical techniques provided the most expedient way of manipulating the body politic to this end. As such, like Bourdieu suggests, these individuals established a movement to first demarcate the boundaries of this class relationship. Employing the rhetoric of respectability and taste, efforts to end prize-fighting signified a larger struggle to control the practices of leisure and the social spaces in which these practices occurred. This rhetoric achieved a reification of class

⁸ See "Coney Island Park Plans," *New York Times*, 11 June 1899; "Coney Island Park Urged," *New York Times*, 12 June 1899; "Mr. Coler's Coney Island Project," *New York Times*, 13 June 1899; "Coney Island Park Plan," 14 June 1899.

relations which continued to exert control over the nature of leisure into the new century and beyond.

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