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

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Coney Island occupies an intractable position within the sphere of American leisure history. Invariably associated with amusement parks and beaches, Coney Island has often been praised as a working class haven for commercial leisure, a place where people did not need inexhaustible economic resources to enjoy their leisure time. However, Coney Island's history belies this simplistic account. The appropriate use of Coney Island and the type of recreation it should supply galvanized much public debate and policy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In particular, prize-fighting caused vitriolic condemnations as an extreme and inhumane form of leisure, and this fed into a larger debate over the authenticity and appropriate uses of leisure time.

Taking a theoretical cue from Pierre Bourdieu, I argue that the attempts to regulate prize-fighting on Coney Island represents a critical point at which social forces external to the working class attempted to define and control the acceptable use of public space and leisure time. In particular, I focus on the proposed but never held December 1893 bout between then reigning champion James Corbett and challenger Peter Mitchell as indicative of this trend. Indeed, the effort to end the Mitchell-Corbett fight represents a larger effort to reshape working class culture according to a Victorian middle class virtues, while simultaneously protecting that construction from eroding. Indeed, a significant element of the impetus to change working class culture arose from a perceived threat that the working and middle classes were becoming increasingly homogenous. Furthermore, this effort signifies a larger struggle to define and demarcate the concept of leisure and Coney Island's position as a site of leisure.

Before launching into the crux of this argument, some theoretical considerations require brief comment. Bourdieu's account of taste specifically addresses the relationship between class or social position and the ability to define and demarcate the boundaries of acceptable cultural

practices. 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, 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 (213-14). Perhaps most important, the middle-class participant chooses a sport which confirms their existing beliefs and provides benefits which facilitate those beliefs. Finally, this middle class sporting practice also seeks to separate its space from the perceived vulgarity of other groups and their spaces (215). 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 (57). 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 (212-13). Working-class participants seek out these violent sporting activities because they constitute a rejection of the ideological constructions of the dominant class (214). Exploring this theoretical backdrop and the place of boxing in the larger context of leisure practices from this time period provides clarity for the focused discussion on the Mitchell-Corbett bout which follows.

Lifestyle shifts brought about by the dual forces of urbanization and industrialization led to analogous changes in concept of leisure in the 19th century. These changes increased the amount of leisure time and the type of activities that individuals could pursue, and 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). This impetus to reform took many different forms including efforts to control working-class saloons, dance halls, theatres, and later movie houses.[1] Likewise, emerging resort communities such as Ocean Grove and Asbury Park, New Jersey emphasized leisure time as a means of a instilling a strong moral character and a "respectable" alternative to mass culture, and ostensibly established the model for a "Christian America" (Uminocwicz 8-10). Particularly salient to the current topic, the muscular Christianity movement shared the assumptions of an America in need of moral reform and posited a philosophy of leisure to achieve this end.

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

[1] For information on efforts to reform saloons and movie theatres see *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.

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. Boxing 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 pugilism 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 pugilism further stretched the ossified 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 boxing 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 boxing 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, boxing challenged the rationalized virility's basis of self-control in the individual. 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 boxing its inherent threat to the rational basis of masculinity. However, the loss of self-control in the crowd presented only part of the threat of boxing

A corollary to the loss of control in the crowd, the rhetorical conventions used to portray the conduct of prize-fighters also relies on metaphors of savagery and bloodlust. Fighters frequently battled with "brutal" disregard for their opponents or their own safety.[2] 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. Consequently, references to the non-human nature and irrational nature of the prize-ring carried over to discussions fighters. 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?"). Pugilism in these accounts threatens to erode the

[2] 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.

distinction between a sentient, rational consciousness to a primitive chaotic affliction. Such beliefs extended beyond the confines of the boxing match, and risked widespread social disorder.

Because of the association of boxing 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 boxing as a sport only enjoyed by saloon keepers, thieves, pickpockets, gamblers, and ruffians.[3] By stressing this association, these accounts emphasize the potential for social disorder and crime that may overtake the entire city. One article in particular makes this connection explicit by emphasizing the disreputable character of numerous well-known pugilists.[4] Ostensibly an interview with a retired boxer (whose identity is never disclosed), this article stresses that pugilists are the most cowardly members of a community, and that outside of a prize ring their preferred means of fighting involves deadly weapons. It posits a causal connection between boxing and the use of weapons in society, and augurs that "scientific boxing" will lead to increased violent crimes.

Pugilism existed at the center of contested notions of leisure practices. By arguing the potential threats of prize fighting, certain members of the middle class sought to establish a concrete construction of masculinity and society. By characterizing different leisure practices under the dualistic rubrics of respectability and vulgarity, these categories exhibit Bourdieu's notion of distinctive taste formation. These categorical strategies do not simply exist to naturalize status quo social relationships, though that is certainly one consequence. However, they also have the effect of structuring social space according to these relationships. By

[3] "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.
[4] "Are Pugilists Cowardly?," *New York Times*, 5 February 1883.

association with respectability or vulgarity, social spaces become invested with meaning; consequently, the conceptualizations of these spaces reflect larger class relationships in the cultural field under which they are organized.

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. 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 thoroughly divided topography of taste 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. The presence of gamblers on the island further degrades its respectability (Dawson 308). Furthermore, the police openly allowed such disorderly activities to occur ("Gambling at Coney Island"). By the 1890's, upper class patronage had dropped to a 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 pugilism, specifically the activities of the Coney Island Athletic Club and the Corbett-Mitchell bout, became an early flashpoint in this confrontation.

Key actors in the planned Mitchell-Corbett 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 assitant teller. His boxing career began at eighteen, and he lived a peripatetic existence traveling and sparring in vaudeville shows until his 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 boxing, no single figure's story elucidates the class issue at play in this affair than that of the political boss John Y. McKane.

Emigrating from Ireland with his parents as a youth, McKane presents an interesting, if not perplexing, subject. 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). Morever, 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.

This campaign 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 15 February Mitchell, the English champion, arrived to accept the challenge ("Mitchell Means Business). Evidence suggests that a clandestine effort to end the bout began even prior to Mitchell's arrival. 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, but on 21 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,[5] 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 arguments against boxing explicated above. 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

[5] 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.
[6] Primarily, the *Sun*, the *Tribune*, and the *Times* participated, but some papers, like the *National Police Gazette*, firmly supported the bout, as well as boxing in general.

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 expose 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 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 serious about this being a "scientific contest" for points 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 derailed 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 opponents of the fight rely on

a dualistic construction of respectability and vulgarity, consistent with Bourdieux's account of taste, to discredit the fight.

The sermons of Taber and other prominent clergymen further illustrated the larger fears of the movement to end the fight, and augment 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, pugilism as leisure threatened harm to all who participated. One article artfully expresses this by framing the "riotous orgy . . . of unrestrained pugilism" 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.

*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. Paradigmatic of these denouncements, the 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 unlikely expressed sincere anger, yet that such expression would be the most politically expedient and convincing rhetorical tactics implies the pervasiveness of the beliefs about rigid distinctions between the classes. This ossified 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.

Commissioned by the New York Times to write an expose on Coney Island and the impending prize-fight, French journalist Raymond De L'Eppe focused on the island's tawdry elements[7]. First, De'Leppe employs religious imagery of Brooklynn as a "pious and civilized" community, but that brigaded politicians have commandeered power over the respectable citizenry. De'Leppe 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, completing the binary by 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'Leppe continues the metaphoric construction of Coney Island as representing a threat of social disorder.

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

Section II of his 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'Leppe 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'Leppe gazes toward the "civilized" shore of Brooklyn and invokes rhetorical phrases such as justice, the institution of prisons, the 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'Leppe'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'Leppe next explicates the necessity of moral reform for the island.

After an unsuccessful attempt to gain access to the Coney Island Athletic Club, De'Leppe contemplates his day while he awaits his return to "civilization." In particular, his ruminations focus on the topography of taste which characterizes 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'Leppe learns that McKane owns a home on the East part of the island while operating his criminal enterprise on the West end. This geographical bifurcation represents the larger split which the static rationalized view of class conveys. By constructing criminality as omnipresent and in control of political power, De'Leppe suggests overtly that irrationality and disorder of the lower class have taken over the different aspects of the city. On this somber note, De'Leppe 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 20 October 1893, headlines proclaimed the news that the Mitchell-Corbett fight had been cancelled ("No Fight at Coney Island"; "The Times Vigorous Battle"). Indeed, 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.[8] 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.

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. Interrelated 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

[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.

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

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