

# **In Defense of the Moving Pictures: The People's Institute, The National Board of Censorship and the Problem of Leisure in Urban America**

**Nancy J. Rosenbloom**

Located in the midst of a vibrant and ethnically diverse working-class neighborhood on New York's Lower East Side, the People's Institute had by 1909 earned a reputation as a maverick among community organizations.<sup>1</sup> Under the leadership of Charles Sprague Smith, its founder and managing director, the Institute supported a number of political and cultural activities for the immigrant and working classes. Among the projects to which Sprague Smith committed the People's Institute was the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures. From its creation in June 1909 two things were unusual about the National Board of Censorship. First, its name to the contrary, the Board opposed growing pressures for legalized censorship; instead it sought the voluntary cooperation of the industry in a plan aimed at improving the quality and quantity of pictures produced. Second, the Board's close affiliation with the People's Institute from 1909 to 1915 was informed by a set of assumptions about the social usefulness of moving pictures that set it apart from many of the ideas dominating American reform.

In positioning itself to defend the moving picture industry, the New York-based Board developed a national profile and entered into a close alliance with the newly formed Motion Picture Patents Company. What resulted was a partnership between businessmen and reformers that sought to offset middle-class criticism of the medium. The officers of the Motion Picture Patents Company also hoped

to increase middle-class patronage of the moving pictures through their support of the National Board. The motivation of the reformers at the People's Institute, on the other hand, is less obvious and perhaps more intriguing. For while across America reformers both within and outside the progressive camp found much to criticize in the moving pictures, those who took charge of the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures championed the moving pictures. What in contemporary language was referred to as the "uplift of moving pictures" became to them the cornerstone upon which they sought to rebuild social relations, particularly within the community and family. That they were also acutely aware of contemporary debates on the nature of culture only intensified their shared optimism in the potential of the cinema as a truly "democratic art."<sup>2</sup>

The decision to sponsor the National Board followed in the tradition of what Sprague Smith called "working with the people."<sup>3</sup> Along with his colleagues John Collier, Sonya Levien and Frederic Howe, Sprague Smith hoped that the National Board would both allay middle-class anxieties about the power of the cinema to disrupt accepted mores and encourage better fare and healthier surroundings for those already smitten with nickel madness. Their interest in the social potential of moving pictures developed as a corollary to their desire to expand the leisure time activities especially for the working class. The interest of these four champions of the democratic art in the possibilities of the motion picture for solving the "leisure time problem" was rooted in a less than sanguine assessment of the economic transformation of the early twentieth century and its impact on the standard of living enjoyed by the American worker. As the clamor over the ill-effects of saloon life rose around them, they appreciated the important social function the saloon served as a gathering place where men could talk about politics. Noting the success of the purity crusaders in closing down the saloons, Sprague Smith and Collier, in particular, were intent on finding new social centers to replace the saloons. No one would articulate the dream they held for a socially responsive cinema more clearly than Collier when he wrote to Levien:

Our present object is to make motion pictures a center of gravity of the whole leisure time problem.... In emphasizing Leisure Time we are trying to force civilization to change the focus of its attention from production to happiness. The economic revolution, making possible such a change of focus is taking place rapidly. Ours is it to help that some human nature, some social richness, some life exuberance, survives the present famine and the impending revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Sprague Smith, Collier, Levien and Howe shared a commitment to American progressivism that informed their attitudes toward the moving pictures and toward censorship. Their positive assessment of the moving pictures must be taken into account when discussing the relationship between politics and culture in the progressive era. Disagreements within the reform movement on the extent

to which the state should legislate on moral issues has made it difficult for historians to talk meaningfully about the complicated relationship between progressivism and motion picture censorship. Moreover, historians have typically located the progressive interest in leisure time pursuits in the more general concern of the middle class to “regain its cultural authority over the lower classes and their own children.”<sup>5</sup> While this may have been true of many reformers, it does not do justice to this quartet of progressives who rejected social control models of reform. Their interest in leisure focused instead on the need to develop activities that would encourage the building of social and community relations. They recognized that moving pictures had the potential to create empathy among different people, to sustain neighborhood sociability, and to contribute to the general education of society.

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it is an examination of why Sprague Smith, Collier, Levien and Howe, as leaders of the People’s Institute, thought moving pictures could play a key role in creating an individually and socially rewarding form of leisure activity. Second, it shows how under their stewardship the National Board of Censorship attempted to integrate its defense of the moving pictures with the values of American progressivism. And finally, it demonstrates how the National Board of Censorship sought to free the moving pictures from the burden of a repressive scrutiny to which others would force it to submit.

\*\*\*

Founded in 1897, the People’s Institute flourished in the first decade of the twentieth century as a reform-minded association that promoted a progressive political agenda. In some ways, it modeled itself after the nineteenth-century mechanic’s institute, especially in its emphasis on the development of the individual and its confidence in self-improvement through education. In other ways, the People’s Institute shared much with the contemporary settlement house movement, most notably a dedication to community development and a concern for the social and industrial problems of urban America. What distinguished the People’s Institute from other community based organizations, however, was that it conceived of itself in essentially political terms. Above all else, it wanted to be the political voice of the people it served.

The People’s Institute owed much of its vitality to Charles Sprague Smith, its founder and managing director from 1897 until his death in 1910. He believed that the activities sponsored by the People’s Institute should address the most difficult challenges facing urban America, particularly creating and maintaining a political consensus in a society increasingly marked by class divisions. Sprague Smith belonged to the social club of “genteel reformers” who in Victorian America lauded reason and celebrated progress. But, unlike his contemporaries whose reading of Darwin led them to pit ethnic and racial groups against one another in a race for human survival, he welcomed mass democracy.<sup>6</sup> He lacked patience with social reformers whose class prejudices smacked of patronage and

superiority. Even as he rose through the ranks of academia as a professor of comparative language and literature at Columbia University, he faulted the Ivory Tower for its elitism and decided to be more active in overcoming what he saw as “the gulf that lay between the university and the people, and in less measure between the church and the people.”<sup>7</sup>

The founding of the People’s Institute and the subsequent organization of a People’s Church and the People’s Clubs promised to bridge the gulf that separated working-class and immigrant families from the arbiters of middle-class Protestant culture. The rich and varied club life at the Institute encouraged educational, social and civic activities with a particular emphasis on citizenship classes, theater-outings and concerts. The clubs were autonomous, free to open their membership to both sexes, to allow alcohol, and to determine how to best finance themselves.<sup>8</sup> Activities such as dancing, games and theater were popular. The People’s Church welcomed all creeds to a weekly lecture by an invited speaker, usually a clergyman, whose only injunction was to “place himself at the ethical standpoint common to all religions, so that his address may not offend Jew or Gentile, believer in a personal God or unbeliever.”<sup>9</sup>

The most popular activity of the People’s Institute was the People’s Forum. At the historic Cooper Union, the Institute provided a non-partisan forum for free discussion of political theories to promote good government, social cooperation and peaceful social evolution. From here, the Institute reached out to the immigrant and working-class populations of the Lower East Side as well as Brooklyn and even the outlying suburbs. In many ways the center of intellectual life at the Institute, the Forum best typified its social, educational and essentially political character. A wide variety of speakers were invited to address the Forum, although each had to meet certain criteria. In this way, the Institute sought to exclude from the forum “preachers of revolution” on the grounds that their ideas would not pass the litmus test of being intellectually sound.<sup>10</sup>

At the heart of the social and cultural activities at the People’s Institute lay a profound commitment to political reform. Deeply rooted in the fertile soil of New York politics, the People’s Institute opposed Tammany Hall, lobbied on a variety of issues of concern to New York’s working classes, and generated non-partisan solutions to municipal problems that ranged from unemployment to leisure. Sprague Smith found little to admire in the efficiency of the political machine at Tammany Hall, even though he understood that the favors of the ward boss, the lack of competent leadership, and the class-based prejudice of most social reformers all contributed to the tenacity of Tammany politicians among working-class families. Intent on creating an alternative to the corruption he saw in old-style politics, Sprague Smith conceived of the Forum as a response to the void that the structure of government had failed to fill.<sup>11</sup> The People’s Forum, along with other activities at the Institute, would offer “an extra-political organization where men of all parties and of no party could join hands.”<sup>12</sup> From the beginning, the Institute announced that members of its civic clubs would go “after Tammany with a club and unsightly streets with a broom.”<sup>13</sup>

Sprague Smith's dedication to fighting Tammany Hall earned him a citation in George Washington Plunkitt's popular primer on the urban machine, where he was singled out as one of the "morning glories" of civic reformers.<sup>14</sup> But Plunkitt underestimated his ability to organize those around him. At the same time that Sprague Smith struggled against what he saw as corruption in politics, he also tried to orchestrate a positive program that would increase participation on the part of the immigrant and working-class populations in the political system without aggrandizing the power of the machine. As managing director of the People's Institute, he devoted himself to the ideals of what he called "progressive democracy." Yet while he identified himself with American Progressivism and publicly affirmed his belief in mass democracy, he never came to terms with exactly what this meant. When Theodore Roosevelt was inaugurated in 1905, Sprague Smith sent him a congratulatory telegram on behalf of 1600 New Yorkers who had gathered at Cooper Union: "Your motto, a square deal to all, and no favors, especially appeals to us, representing as we do the progressive spirit of American democracy."<sup>15</sup> Several years later, however, he lamented over the lack of cohesion within Progressivism and hoped to unify the movement through the creation of the Ethical Social League, another affiliate of the People's Institute. Shortly after its creation in 1907, he reported that leaders from "every church, save the Catholic, the synagogues, the Ethical Society, the settlements, the philanthropies, organized labor, the intelligent socialists, single taxers, the professions, leading educators,...the leading professors of sociology" were participating. "The purpose of this organization," he wrote in a letter to New York State Senator William Armstrong in 1908, "is to win the control over the progressive movement for intelligent and consecrated elements of the community, not to allow it to pass into the hands of the unintelligent and revolutionary."<sup>16</sup>

Sprague Smith's devotion to democracy was tempered by his deep-seated fears of revolution. These fears came to the fore in 1908, a year of social unrest, massive immigration and severe unemployment. What remained constant in his political vision was his social idealism. In this regard, he valued not only political consensus but also social interaction and dialogue in solving what loomed as a cultural crisis in urban America. High on his list of priorities was the goal of uniting "uptown" and "downtown," of breaking down the barriers between the "classes" and the "masses," and of contributing to the regeneration of New York's municipal life. By 1908 his naivete about the growing alienation between social classes had matured into an understanding that "Labor men and women" did not want to come uptown and that "the world of culture" showed a deplorable "lack of interest in what Labor thought." Undaunted, he intensified his efforts to "work with the people" rather than "for them" and to stimulate confidence in political and social democracy.<sup>17</sup> To this end he envisioned the People's Institute as a forum that promoted the free exchange of ideas on the problems of the day, albeit with an emphasis on the curative powers of social science and history. What was needed "to promote social progress", was "for the scholar and the toiler" to work together by developing a "sane public opinion, informed as to the outcome of past

and present social experiments, freed from class prejudice and, especially in this country, inspired with profound faith in democracy...<sup>18</sup>

Buoyed by the success of the People's Forum, Sprague Smith became interested in translating other aspects of his social theories into action. He rejected the idea that culture belonged to the few and constantly sought new possibilities for the Institute to serve the working-class and immigrant audience that attended its events so regularly. Such a possibility presented itself to him early in the spring of 1909. On December 24, 1908, New York City Mayor George McClellan closed down all the city's nickelodeons that were operating under common show licenses on the grounds of danger and immorality.<sup>19</sup> As an inexpensive form of leisure, nickelodeons had attracted crowds since 1905 when scores of storefront theaters solicited neighborhood business. Nickel madness caused reformers, political and religious leaders, and parents to fear that the moving pictures not only enervated and demoralized immigrant and working-class Americans but threatened similar damage to their own families.<sup>20</sup> While the exhibitors sought relief from the courts and appealed to Judge William J. Gaynor for an injunction, they also sought help from the People's Institute. Even before McClellan's controversial action, the Institute had expressed an interest in improving the conditions inside the moving picture showhouses and saw this request as an opportunity to initiate reforms. Sprague Smith's willingness to support the exhibitors in their confrontation with the mayor also reflected, in part, his antagonism towards Tammany Hall.

The nickelodeon remained among the least expensive forms of leisure in 1908 and its increasing popularity attracted attention from many social critics. Jane Addams, among others, had faulted the cinema for encouraging desultory if not delinquent behavior among juveniles and contributing to their estrangement from family and community. No less concerned about American youth, Sprague Smith recognized an essential kinship between the cinema and American drama and saw in the showhouses an opportunity to develop a model theater, a place where families could attend dramatic presentations. In this way, he stressed the cinema's potential for social integration rather than alienation. Above all, he accepted a nineteenth-century definition of audience that not only tolerated but encouraged social mingling and that regarded culture not so much as an object of reification but of shared enjoyment.<sup>21</sup>

Three factors converged to bring Sprague Smith to this point in his career. First, a New England heritage was the most identifiable strand in his background. Born and educated in Massachusetts, he believed in the political primacy of the community, seeing it as an evolution from the town-meeting. Second, he had devoted himself to a career in college teaching, albeit with a strong commitment to social service. When changes in the university resulted in more highly specialized and compartmentalized academic areas with less emphasis on community involvement, he abandoned the Ivory Tower for social work.<sup>22</sup> Finally, he had studied the Icelandic Sagas intensely. This literary form had sensitized him to seek the heroic in the common man. There is no doubt that he embraced

a traditional definition of culture that stressed literature, music and drama. Yet, he also appreciated some of the possibilities the cinema offered for creating a more democratic culture and for easing, if not erasing, the distinction between the masses and classes.

Sprague Smith's vision of American culture and the role that the cinema might play in expanding the boundaries of that culture underscored the middle-class character of American progressivism. For although he was dedicated to social harmony and the fusion of uptown and downtown, he could not completely escape the contemporary bias that culture was something to be brought to the masses. While sensitive to the intellectual prowess of the immigrant and working-class population, he did not immediately translate this into a clear vision of how the cinema might be used to display not only the heroism but also the humanity of the masses. For this reason, what began early in 1909 as a defense of the exhibitors soon turned into a partnership with the Motion Picture Patents Company, already the most powerful organization within the dynamic motion picture industry.<sup>23</sup>

Preliminary discussions between Sprague Smith and the executive officers of the Motion Picture Patents Company began early in the spring of 1909. These discussions followed closely upon the establishment in New York City of the first Board of Censorship of Programs of Motion Picture Shows, which had been created by a number of civic bodies in response to a resolution of the Association of Motion Pictures Exhibitors of New York. The Motion Picture Patents Company was only too eager to enter negotiations with Sprague Smith and the People's Institute, and by June 1909 the Board had transformed itself into the National Board of Censorship. The People's Institute became the main sponsor of the National Board, sharing with it staff and office space.<sup>24</sup> In agreeing to cooperate with the Motion Picture Patents Company in the formulation of national standards for the motion picture industry, the People's Institute sought to represent as broad a public as possible, heterogeneous and national rather than local and peculiaristic. For Sprague Smith and the People's Institute, the creation of the National Board of Censorship thus provided a new opportunity to close the gap between the masses and the classes.

\*\*\*

No man was better suited to clarify Sprague Smith's ideas on the cinema than John Collier. Hired in 1908 as the Civic Secretary of the People's Institute and as the editor of its newspaper, *The Civic Journal*, Collier was serving as a trouble shooter who identified special problems for the Institute.<sup>25</sup> At Sprague Smith's request, Collier had agreed in 1908 to conduct a study of cheap amusements on Manhattan. From observing the audience and talking to exhibitors, Collier developed a sense of the strengths and weaknesses of the moving picture. In doing so, he tried to identify with both the moving picture audience and the exhibitor, often an ethnic businessman who shared more in common with his customers than with the manufacturers. Collier's interest in folk cultures and his affinity for

observing groups of people sensitized him to understanding how class and ethnicity influenced definitions of community enjoyment. As an outsider—he had been born and raised in Atlanta—Collier’s definition of American culture was never as narrow or intolerant as it was for those who hailed from the bastions of Yankee conservatism. More deeply attuned to the varieties of cultural expression, Collier had less trouble looking to the future than to the past.

Lawrence Levine has argued convincingly that many cultural forms such as drama, music and even photography were being redefined in the later nineteenth-century to meet elite standards of taste. In the process, culture became more than ever the possession of the few rather than the many. To redress this imbalance and to return a dramatic forum to the people, Collier sought to create a model theater. In this context, he saw great potential in the nickelodeon. First of all, he appreciated how the nickelodeon was rooted in the neighborhood and was intimately related to the daily lives of the people. Second, he valued the moving pictures for their depiction of various aspects of society and human nature. “In the nickelodeon one sees history, travel, the reproduction of industries,” Collier wrote. “He sees farce-comedy which at worst is relaxing, innocuous, rather monotonously confined to horseplay, and at its best is distinctly humanizing, laughing with and not at the subject.”<sup>26</sup>

Collier lamented the passing of other forms of commercial amusement that had captured the public imagination. In this regard, ethnic communities provided better models than did the native-born. Collier cited both the Sicilian marionette and the Chinese theaters for exciting public enthusiasm and participation. He believed the cinema was uniquely situated to carry forth the banner of the people not so much because of price—since street theater too was very affordable—but because of the technological innovations that made it possible to entertain so many on a continuous basis. Collier respected the machine’s ability to reproduce the play. Moreover, the very size and composition of its audience meant that the nickelodeon had great potential to help regenerate community life at the same time that it satisfied the demand for affordable leisure. Through moving pictures Collier hoped to reaffirm the process of communal celebration, which he, like others of his day, believed was essential to the survival of culture.<sup>27</sup>

Although Collier shared Sprague Smith’s concern for the leisure pursuits of Manhattan’s working classes, the formative influences on his thought were radically different. Collier based his recommendations for the improvement of leisure on ideas refracted through the prism of his New South upbringing. He was an outsider to the New York cultural milieu, having returned from an extended stay in Europe only shortly before assuming the position with the People’s Institute. Moreover, although he was broadly read in fields that ranged from philosophy and psychology to biology, Collier lacked an American college education. Unlike Sprague Smith, who had made the academy his life’s goal, Collier self-consciously chose social work as an avenue to self-fulfillment. Although his first forays into social service in Atlanta failed, he was deeply committed to social reform as a profession.<sup>28</sup>

Collier's predilection for philosophy and intellectual inquiry led him to try to locate his beliefs historically. Passing references to Thoreau, Emerson, and the American transcendentalists suggest that nature was neither terrifying nor treacherous to him but rather a source of inspiration and solace.<sup>29</sup> When life in the big city became too hectic, Collier liked to absent himself for long periods of time in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina and Georgia, where he found the needed solitude to contemplate truth and justice and to conceive of new ways to apply his vision to American urban life. Like Sprague Smith, Collier was vague in his definition of democracy but clear in his commitment to make democracy the standard bearer of his political idealism. In this context, he wrote about the creation of a public opinion in America "...not confined to any dogma or party," which he believed formed the "true culture of the nation" and "the soul of American democracy."<sup>30</sup>

No less significant in his intellectual development was his exposure to German philosophy and above all to the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. Profoundly interested in the liberation of the individual spirit, Collier found in Nietzsche an avenue of escape from the more narrowly defined political concerns of New York's anti-Tammany forces to broader issues of self-development. When Collier first read Nietzsche, he was only seventeen and a protege of Brander Matthews, whom he had met through family connections.<sup>31</sup> Collier credited his friend and tutor Lucy Crozier with introducing him to Nietzsche, William Morris, and symbolist literature and Matthews with supplying him with tickets that enabled him to attend the theater frequently. Subsequent travels in Europe and a period of study in Germany with an emphasis on psychology gave Collier the confidence to try to develop his own ideas about the relationship between the individual and modern society. Collier's reading of Nietzsche inspired a reconsideration of American individualism that offered a bridge between transcendentalism and modern thought. Defending Nietzsche as the "thundering apostle of the development of personality," Collier sought to develop the instinctual as well as the rational side of man. "The beyond man," wrote Collier, "is immanent in man and to be realized through inner growth, where the State ends..."<sup>32</sup>

At the time that Collier defended the role of the cinema as a democratic art, he had become interested in the debate among sociologists that modern urban society deprived people of a rich communal life. Collier's position was that the community could invigorate itself through the integration of play with other forms of social life. In this regard, he modeled his own view about the potential of moving pictures as an art form after the Nietzschean concept of classical drama. In his *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche had combined a devastating critique of modern cultural decadence with a call for a radically new concept of theater in which the Dionysian impulse—banned from the stage by Socratic rationalism—was celebrated as the source of life and art. To Collier, moving pictures, like drama, promoted self-discovery, perhaps even the self-transcendence toward which the Nietzschean dance of life and self-creation moved.

While Sprague Smith took charge of the practical matters involved in creating an effective alliance between the motion picture industry and the world of social reform, Collier explored the role the National Board might play in promoting a greater social role for moving pictures. In this respect, Collier stressed the importance of using the Board not so much to eliminate certain depictions from the moving pictures but rather to stimulate the “future output of pictures” that would appeal to the “best intelligence of the widest possible audience.”<sup>33</sup> According to Collier, the strength of moving pictures lay in their ability to speak “directly to the sentiments, the prejudices and passions, the romantic and social interests of more than a million American middle-class and laboring families.”<sup>34</sup> This position set Sprague Smith and Collier at odds with other reformers who believed that moving pictures, like saloons and vaudeville, promoted raucous, irresponsible and anti-social behavior. Above all Collier rejected the popular notion that moving pictures caused juvenile delinquency and truancy. Such deeply opposing views of the potential of moving pictures could not be reconciled and resulted in a struggle over censorship that reverberated in legislative halls around the nation. For if Sprague Smith and Collier were interested in the dramatic possibilities of the moving pictures and the potential of the nickelodeons to satisfy the needs of working-class leisure and community life, many middle-class reformers were not. And the Institute’s leaders were not prepared to ally themselves fully with charity organizations for whom the notion of uplift presumed a middle-class Protestant model of behavior. Indeed, the logic behind the Institute’s activities assumed the opposite. Free and open discussion, religious diversity, working-class autonomy—these were the values that motivated reformers like Sprague Smith and Collier.

The confusion within New York’s reform community was compounded by the inadequate vocabulary that was used to express these goals. Commonly used words like uplift and censorship actually meant different things to different reformers. For reformers from a middle-class Protestant tradition, uplift resonated with a moralistic tone. Didactic, educational, devoted to inspiring model behavior as rigidly defined by Sunday School preachers—these were criteria by which many sought to measure the success or failure of the uplift of moving pictures. In contrast, uplift to Collier implied exciting the imagination, stimulating the play instinct, and regenerating if not redeeming social life. In this way, uplift included a spiritual dimension that had little in common with the moralism of Sunday church services. It also entailed a commitment to social action, by which Collier meant

the improvement of social structure; the release of energy rather than the restriction of non-essential evils; social safety through social achievement; an intensified and enriched rather than a merely extended democracy; the encouragement of variety rather than the search for uniformity.<sup>35</sup>

Initially the divisions within the ranks of those reformers who agreed to sponsor the National Board had little effect upon their cooperation with the film industry. Appointed chairman of the executive committee on censorship for the Board, Collier experienced little difficulty in convincing the motion picture manufacturers, particularly those connected to the recently incorporated Motion Picture Patents Company, to participate in this experiment of censorship. Collier promised the manufacturers a “liberal” censorship, targeting only the “occasional offensive picture” that threatened to undermine the public standing of the whole business. As he explained, a “narrow and unreasonable censorship would not last for a month.”<sup>36</sup> But here too, imprecision over what censorship meant led to serious problems for the National Board.

It was exceedingly important to Collier that the censorship be voluntary both in the manufacturers’ participation and the service of members on the censoring committee. He believed members of the censoring committees should not be paid so that they would be less tempted to yield to political suasion than would salaried appointees. Unlike other reformers, Collier stressed how voluntary censorship could only be made fully compatible with a Constitutional definition of free speech if manufacturers were not legally compelled to submit their pictures. Voluntary censorship was thus a benign process that offered the manufacturers an opportunity to have their films reviewed by a committee and stamped with a seal of approval that could then be used in national advertising. In this way, the National Board hoped to encourage a positive attitude towards the motion picture industry by assuring the public of the quality of the product. All of this rested, however, on faith in the good intentions of the producers to follow the suggestions of the Board and on the assumption that the Board adequately represented public taste.

If Collier’s explanation of voluntary censorship remains troublesome, his educational theories fall neatly within the progressive camp.<sup>37</sup> Throughout his years on the Board, Collier was especially interested in exploiting the educational possibilities of moving pictures. His two best known essays, *The City, Where Crime is Play* and *The Problem of Motion Pictures*, explored variations on the theme of the “play principle” and its contribution to the emotional development of children. Collier believed that the emotional and psychological development of children was being neglected in favor of their technical and intellectual development. Addressing a conference of social workers in June 1910, Collier exhorted them not to ignore drama as a manifestation of the play principle that had been in many periods of the world’s history the leading form of ennobled expression and vicarious experience for the leading elements of the public. Furthermore, he implored them: “Let us ask how we can help in the development of this people’s theatre, this democratic art, ...how we can harness this force to our chariot of social ideals.”<sup>38</sup>

\*\*\*

Had Collier been so inclined, he might have found a lucrative future as an advocate for the cinema, for he saw much of real political and social significance in the fast-growing medium. The most serious problem Collier found with moving pictures was in the showhouses, where the physical environment harbored health dangers. Dirty, poorly ventilated and frequently overcrowded, the theatres especially threatened fire and epidemic disease. Prompted by the People's Institute, the National Board worked to secure local regulations for proper ventilation and adequate lighting in local theaters. In this endeavor, no one was more effective than Sonya Levien. Like Collier, Levien came from outside the Yankee reform tradition, yet was very much a part of New York's tenement culture. Born in the Jewish Pale of Settlement in the Ukraine, Levien had migrated to the United States as a child with her family. She fought her way out of the ghetto, through law school, and into the ranks of those writing for New York's many magazines. At the same time she continued to work at the People's Institute, which two of her close friends, reformers Josephine Roche and George Creel, called her "beloved settlement." In addition to the long hours at the Institute and on staff for the National Board, Levien was passionately committed to women's suffrage. At one point she even took over the editing of the *Woman's Journal*, hoping to mend internecine conflicts within the suffrage organizations.<sup>39</sup>

Levien understood the ghetto as an insider, not romanticizing poverty or the impact of migration on deeply rooted folk cultures like her own. She sympathized with the political radicalism of Emma Goldman, was fascinated by the modernist rebellion in Greenwich Village, but remained ambivalent in her evaluation of the challenges immigration posed to maintaining traditional family values. Since maintaining social tradition depended primarily on community reinforcement, she believed that recreational activities had the potential to contribute to the rebuilding of social traditions amidst what she called "the debris of Europe's social tradition" in American cities.<sup>40</sup> Yet, she had little sympathy for social uplifters who failed to appreciate the indigenous cultures of the ethnic communities. Having once "played exhibit A in the life of the University Settlement," Levien appreciated the tolerance for ethnic diversity at the People's Institute.<sup>41</sup>

Trained as a lawyer—she had graduated from New York University Law School in 1908—Levien was deeply committed to the lower East Side and the immigrant community to which she belonged. She was especially well-prepared to draft a pamphlet entitled *Suggestions for a Model Ordinance for Regulating Motion Picture Theaters*. Even here, where the Board prepared a systematic critique of the showhouses, it also found much to commend in the cinema. Above all, the model ordinance introduced the idea that the motion picture theatre should be a form of public service, licensed by the community for public welfare. In this regard, the ordinance valued moving pictures as "a form of journalism, of editorial discussion, and of platform discussion." It is not surprising, therefore, that the Board stressed that moving pictures

must from the outset be treated with that respect which is given to art, free press and free speech. They should not be subject to inquisitorial control or censorship before they are publicly exhibited... The motion picture may within a few years become the most important vehicle of free public discussion in America.<sup>42</sup>

While promoting the moving pictures as a public forum, the ordinance also took cognizance of the power of the municipality to legislate on matters of its own welfare. Within this context, the ordinance offered guidelines for building in residential neighborhoods theatres capable of accommodating three to five hundred people and for constructing portable booths that could be taken to churches, schools and family restaurants. The report detailed all aspects of theatre construction from the width of aisles to ventilation of toilets. Since the popularity of moving pictures with children was a concern, the ordinance suggested a fairly mild remedy—considering how many reformers wanted to ban children from the moving pictures shows—whereby unattended children would be segregated in an adequately lighted interior and, under the supervision of a matron, shown a program without vaudeville, a form of entertainment not given the same respect as moving pictures. Finally, the model ordinance addressed the “moral controls of the program” but made few specific recommendations.

Of all those on the staff of the National Board of Censorship, Sonya Levien probably had the least direct contact with the leadership of the Motion Picture Patents Company and hence with the actual decisions being made at the level of production. While first Sprague Smith and then Collier conducted regular and lengthy communication with the officers of the Patents Company, Levien worked efficiently as Educational Secretary to educate the public by publicizing the good intentions of the National Board in a variety of publications prepared by the Board and the People’s Institute. The Model Ordinance fell into this category, as did other brochures and pamphlets, all equally dedicated to lauding the principle of free speech for the cinema. Levien’s apparent disinterest in the actual product on the screen is even more striking because in 1922 she forsook her career as editor and journalist to move to Hollywood as a highly paid and successful screen-writer.<sup>43</sup>

Levien reached the same conclusions about the cinema as had Collier, although for different reasons. Like so many immigrant Jews, Levien became fascinated by the power of the cinema. Its ability to assault the senses, engage the viewer, and seize control, if only for the moment, of the emotions of the audience never threatened her sense of propriety. She had no desire to suppress the power of moving pictures. Moreover, Levien and Collier had formed a close working relationship in 1912, and she might have found a means to mesh Collier’s interest in folk culture with her own affinity for the screenplay. But when Levien was asked to assume additional responsibilities that entailed educational pictures, she

objected. Instead, Levien resigned from the Institute and began to work for *The Metropolitan Magazine*, where she became best known for her sensitive editing of Theodore Roosevelt's regular contributions after the defeat of the progressive wing of the Republican Party in 1912.<sup>44</sup>

\*\*\*

After Sprague Smith's death in 1910, Collier guided the Board until Howe was appointed managing director of the Institute and subsequently chair of the National Board of Censorship in April 1912. At the time of his appointment, Howe presented an impeccable progressive profile and enjoyed a national reputation for his writings on the city. During his tenure the work of the National Board became the main activity at the People's Institute. His own predilection to use the Forum at the Institute as widely as possible for encouraging open discussion was reinforced by his conception of the National Board as a direct representative of the public will.

Howe was no stranger to the world of reform. Much like Sprague Smith and Collier, Howe transcended his social origins. Born in a small Pennsylvania town where the Methodist Church dictated the rules of social life, Howe credited his graduate studies in politics at Johns Hopkins University with professors such as Albert Shaw, Richard Ely, James Bryce and Woodrow Wilson with teaching him about political theory. As for the rules of the game, those Howe learned as a hard-working attorney in New York, Pittsburgh and Cleveland, where he became a part of the political and legal coterie surrounding reform Mayor Tom Johnson. Along with Newton Baker, whom Wilson later appointed Secretary of War, and Brand Whitlock, a future mayor of Toledo, Howe learned not only about the potential for corruption in municipal politics but also about the potential for making government serve the people. With far more political experience than either Sprague Smith or Collier, Howe was intent on affirming, once and for all, the role of the moving pictures as a public service that could increase the enjoyment of leisure time for greater parts of the community.

During Howe's three-year tenure as managing director of the People's Institute, the Forum welcomed speakers whose radical ideas might have offended the late Sprague Smith. W.E.B. DuBois and Emma Goldman, among others, were invited personally by Howe to address the Institute. In addition to a new sense of intellectual dynamism, Howe also brought vigorous discussion—even argument—to the meetings of the National Board of Censorship. Sensitive to how vulnerable the National Board had become to attacks from those who wanted to exercise stricter control over the medium, Howe launched a counter-offensive. Under Howe, the Board publicly declared itself opposed to official prior censorship of the motion picture on first amendment grounds. Rather than act as a mediator between the public and the industry, the Board now claimed to represent the public by virtue of its close identification with the audience.<sup>45</sup>

In theory, Howe's interest in the cinema was compatible with the direction Collier had charted for the National Board of Censorship. In practice, Howe's

combativeness engaged the National Board head-on with those who would force the industry to submit its pictures to federal, state or local boards of censorship. Anxious to avoid the chilling effect that censorship would have on the development of some story lines and the depiction of certain scenes, Howe directly addressed three important issues that Sprague Smith and Collier had never fully clarified. First, he denied that any legal censorship, whether at the state or federal level, could conduct an “efficient and disinterested criticism of pictures” and asserted that it could, among other things, lead to “the suppression of certain types of subjects of political or social import.” Second, he rejected the idea that the motion picture audience, or any part of it, needed special protection, and called such attempts at suppressing many pictures “for the child, the woman, the weak and the immigrant” an example of “class legislation” or “paternalism in morals.” And finally, Howe minimized rather than expanded the parameters of what the National Board of Censorship claimed to accomplish. He wrote:

The National Board is a human institution... It reflects a public opinion which constantly varies. As Society formulates intelligent theories and principles of conduct, it must inevitably alter its decisions. The Board freely grants differences of opinion to various classes and to various constituent parts of the Nation.... It does not assume omniscience.<sup>46</sup>

At its best, Howe’s leadership revitalized the National Board in three specific ways. First, he encouraged frank discussion of individual films and tried to entice volunteer censors from a variety of perspectives, even convincing his friend and colleague, Max Eastman, editor of the radical paper *The Masses*, to join one of the Board’s censoring subcommittees. Second, Howe encouraged the use of the cinema itself as a forum to promote discussion on controversial issues such as prostitution and its remedies.<sup>47</sup> Third, he politicized the National Board by charging it with the task of securing the constitutional protection of free speech for the motion picture. Howe’s desire to exploit the potential of the moving picture as a people’s forum coincided with the industry’s goal to protect itself from legal censorship imposed by state or federal government. During his tenure as chairman, the National Board became a mouthpiece against state and federal censorship. In this respect, he defended the motion picture as second only to the press and the public school as the “greatest educational agency of the age,...universalizing our knowledge of common topics...and making America think together...”<sup>48</sup>

Howe’s interest in providing recreational activities as part of a municipal program was a natural corollary to his progressive agenda. When the People’s Institute opened its season in the fall of 1913 with a keynote address by Howe, he addressed the theme of “A Better New York” by calling, among other things, for a program to make the city a “positive agency of human happiness and well being.” Last but not least on his list of “grave problems” for the city to resolve

was that of leisure and recreation. “Is not happiness a right and its enjoyment a municipal obligation as much as police, fire, and health departments?” he asked.<sup>49</sup>

Recasting the discussion of leisure in terms of entitlement, however, was not something the motion picture industry wanted to pursue. It was John Collier who recognized the problem. Realizing in January 1914 that the Board had reached a critical turning point in its relationship with the industry, Collier reluctantly concluded that the work of the National Board would be greatly simplified if it abandoned the idea of developing the educational use of motion pictures.<sup>50</sup> This was a surprising position for Collier to assume, since in 1909 he had been in the forefront of those who argued that the Board could be useful in helping to improve moving pictures and promote their educational use. The experience of the past five years had convinced Collier that, at least for the present, the commercial interests of the motion picture industry were fundamentally opposed to the full-scale development of educational pictures. In turn, the inability of the National Board to successfully promote educational pictures had fundamentally altered its relationship with the People’s Institute.

For his own part, Howe seemed, at the least, insensitive to the crisis at the National Board of Censorship. All but totally dependent upon the financial resources of the motion picture industry and especially upon those of the Motion Picture Patents Company, the National Board simply could not ignore the important changes that were taking place within the industry. At the same time that Howe glorified the educational potential of the cinema and rejected efforts at legalizing censorship, the Board found it increasingly difficult to legitimate the actions of the Motion Picture Patents Company. When the United States brought an anti-trust suit against the Patents Company in 1912, reformers at the Institute must have shuddered in embarrassment. As the case proceeded—testimony ended only in 1914—it became increasingly apparent that the Patents Company had deliberately sought control of the market, not only in the production but also in the distribution of moving pictures. The targets of their control were often the same ethnic businessmen whom the People’s Institute had initially sought to protect.

Howe was not to blame for the crisis facing the National Board. He did, however, fail to provide badly needed leadership. Nominated by the Wilson administration for the position as Commissioner of Immigration at Ellis Island, Howe eagerly awaited confirmation by the Senate. Although he continued to speak out as managing director of the People’s Institute and express concern especially about the problems plaguing the immigrant population, he ceased paying attention to the operation of the National Board of Censorship. Left under the supervision of William McGuire, its executive secretary, the National Board tried to redefine itself. After 1914, the National Board and the People’s Institute drifted apart. With Sprague Smith dead, Collier on an extended leave of absence in North Carolina, and Sonya Levien now working as an editor of *Metropolitan Magazine*, the whole tenor of the Board’s leadership shifted. McGuire had no formal connection with the Institute. Nor did Orrin Cocks of the Lay Federation

of Churches, who joined the staff in 1914 in an effort to streamline efficiency. Both exerted more influence on establishing policy than Howe, who remained nominally in charge until his appointment as Commissioner of Immigration in 1914 led him to refocus his attention on other equally pressing matters.

Howe's resignation as chairman of the National Board of Censorship heralded the end of an era of close cooperation between the Board and the People's Institute. It was, however, more than administrative shifts that came between the Institute and the National Board. The Board could not survive without the support of the industry, and even though it was reaching out to the independent film producers, its early dependence on the Patents Company had become problematic. Relations with the Institute were further strained by the nativist attitudes of the leaders of both the Patents Company and of McGuire and Cocks at the National Board. For the first time, ethnic slurs appeared in the National Board's correspondence with the Patents Company. More importantly, the liberal censorship that Sprague Smith, Collier, Levien and Howe had championed was being eroded by the repressive attitudes of Cocks and members of the censoring sub-committees. Policy at the National Board was now being decided by new leadership more sympathetic with the group of charity workers and social reformers whose very presumptions Sprague Smith, Collier, Levien and Howe had rejected.<sup>51</sup>

It would almost seem that Howe deliberately deserted the National Board of Censorship at its weakest point since its creation. Not only was the Board implicated in the anti-trust case against the Patents Company, but it also compromised its progressive credentials by approving the controversial and popular extravaganza *Birth of a Nation*.<sup>52</sup> Such an explanation, however, minimizes the energy Sprague Smith, Collier, Levien, and even Howe had devoted to securing a legitimate and socially responsible position for the American cinema. As their endeavors focused more and more on a free speech position, their commitment to cultural pluralism did not wane. At the same time, the provocation of racial and sexual tensions in *The Birth of A Nation* seriously damaged their efforts to seek a new cultural consensus based on greater tolerance for ethnic and racial diversity. While one film certainly cannot be held responsible for nationally held attitudes, it was nevertheless emblematic of the times and of a fast growing intolerance exacerbated by the specter of the war.

\*\*\*

For Sprague Smith, Collier, Levien and Howe, the National Board of Censorship had offered an opportunity to experiment with a new form of cultural expression in the tumultuous years before the war. They sought to expand the function of cinema from only providing pleasure to meeting the need of their social and political agenda. Their personal differences notwithstanding, they tried to protect the cinema—the democratic art, the people's theater—from the avarice of businessmen, the repressive moralism of do-gooders, and the chilling effects of political censorship. They believed that the cinema could contribute

something to the noble vision they held for America. In diversity they saw unity; the cultural pluralism of a heterogeneous people promised hope for democracy. As long as there existed an underlying political consensus dedicated to maintaining a balance between individual and social rights and responsibilities, they did not fear the challenges that race, class, ethnicity, gender or age posed for cultural unity. Their dream, however, failed to sustain itself in the face of heightened class and ethnic conflict and the manipulation of American nationalism during World War I. The cinema had offered one tool for releasing their vision of a pluralistic and democratic America from the trappings of a more brutal social and economic order. But that was too tall an order for a commercial form of leisure, itself under siege, to fulfill.

The reformers at the People's Institute anticipated the centrality of moving pictures to the development of a new American ethos and they eagerly turned their attention to help in the process. Sprague Smith hoped that exploring new forms of leisure activities such as the moving pictures might help alleviate some of the class tensions that threatened to destroy his dream of political consensus. Collier too believed that leisure might offer fulfillment to those abused by economic and social conditions, but, unlike Sprague Smith, he sought to liberate the individual spirit and to allow full rein to the development of personality by encouraging the play instinct to express itself as fully and freely as possible. Less interested in individual psychology than Collier, Levien believed in the civic function of communal celebration that moving pictures might generate. Howe's contribution to the debate over how the People's Institute might address its energies to the leisure time problem, on the other hand, was to refocus attention on the political nature of the question and to define leisure activities as an entitlement to which all citizens should have equal access. At its core, their vision challenged others to accept the moving pictures for what they were and what they might become: the democratic art.

## Notes

This paper was originally presented at the annual conference of the American Studies Association, Toronto, Ontario, November 3-5, 1989. Revision of the article was made possible by a Summer Faculty Fellowship from Canisius College.

1. See especially Robert J. Fisher, "The People's Institute of New York City, 1897-1934: Culture, Progressive Democracy, and the People" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1974), and Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (New York, 1962), 212-20. For a preliminary treatment of the People's Institute and the National Board of Censorship, see Robert J. Fisher, "Film Censorship and Progressive Reform: The National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, 1909-1922," *Journal of Popular Film* 4 (1975), 143-56.

2. For the debate on the cultural crisis of the prewar years see Henry May, *The End of American Innocence* (New York, 1969), and Peter Conn, *The Divided Mind: Ideology and Imagination in America, 1898-1917* (Cambridge, 1983). For the modernist response see Daniel Joseph Signal, "Towards a Definition of American Modernism," *American Quarterly* 39 (Spring, 1987), 7-26.

3. Charles Sprague Smith, *Working with the People* (New York, 1904).

4. Collier to Levien, n.d., Levien Manuscript Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, California, Box 1.

5. See especially John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1978), 98-104.

6. Sprague Smith, "The People's Institute of New York and Its Work for the Development of Citizenship Along Democratic Lines," *The Arena* (July, 1907), 49.

7. Collier, "The People's Institute," *Independent* (May 30, 1912), 1144.

8. For a difference of opinion on the autonomy of the People's Clubs see Sprague Smith *Working With the People*, 83-84; and Edgar A. Russell, "Work of the People's Institute as Originated and Carried on by Charles Sprague Smith," *The Craftsmen* (May, 1906), 182-89.

9. Sprague Smith, "Ethical Work of the People's Institute," *Outlook* (April 22, 1905), 1001-1003.

10. Sprague Smith, *Working with the People*, 15. Speakers on socialism were most welcome.

11. *Ibid.*, 22.

12. Russell, "Work of the People's Institute," 185.

13. Collier, "The People's Institute," *The World Today* (February, 1909), 170-75.

14. William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (New York, 1963), 18. This book was originally published in 1905.

15. Sprague Smith to Theodore Roosevelt, n.d. [March, 1905], People's Institute Records, Box 7, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

16. Sprague Smith to Armstrong, May 21, 1908, People's Institute Records, Box 9.

17. For a discussion of what Sprague Smith meant by the "masses" and the "classes" see Sprague Smith, *Working with the People*, xv-xvi, 9-10.

18. *Ibid.*, 32-33.

19. For a discussion of the relationship between New York politics, the People's Institute and the founding of the National Board of Censorship of Motion Picture Shows see Nancy J. Rosenbloom, "Between Reform and Regulation: The Struggle over Film Censorship in Progressive America, 1909-1922," *Film History* 1 (1987), 307-25. On New York politics, see David Hammack, *Power and Society: Greater New York at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1982).

20. See Collier, "Cheap Amusements," *Charities and the Commons* (April 11, 1908), 73-76. For more recent treatments of this question, see Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison, 1976), 83-102, and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements* (Philadelphia, 1986).

21. For a discussion of 19th century melodrama see David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (Chicago, 1961), 23, and Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988), chap. 1.

22. See especially Lewis Perry, *Intellectual Life in America* (Chicago, 1984), chap. VI.

23. See Thomas R. Gunning, "D. W. Griffith and the Narrator-System: Narrative Structure and Industry Organization in Biograph Films, 1908-1909" (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1986), 469-84; and Nancy J. Rosenbloom, "Progressive Reform, Censorship and the Motion Picture Industry, 1909-1917," in Larry Bennett and Ronald Edsforth, eds., *Popular Culture and Political Change in Modern America* (Buffalo, New York, 1991), 41-59.

24. For further information on the organization of the National Board of Censorship and the alliance between the People's Institute and the Motion Picture Patents Company, see Rosenbloom, "Between Reform and Regulation," 309-11.

25. John Collier, *From Every Zenith* (Denver, 1963), 71.

26. Collier, "Cheap Amusements," *Charities and the Commons* (April 11, 1908), 74.

27. See Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 102-104. Collier shared much in common with Luther Gulick and the Playground Movement. He was interested in the regenerative functions of urban leisure but unlike many of his contemporaries sought not to impose regulations on instinctual life but to seek means to liberate it, albeit within a controlled environment.

28. For more on Collier's young adulthood, see Collier, *From Every Zenith*, 59-111.

29. In his attitude towards nature, Collier can be compared to southern contemporaries such as Ellen Glasgow. On the writings of southern expatriates, see Daniel Signal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1982), 104-108.

30. Collier, "The People's Institute," 1144-48.

31. Collier, *From Every Zenith*, 37.

32. *Ibid.*, 39.

33. "A National Board of Censorship," *The Moving Picture World* (June 26, 1909), 867-68.

34. John Collier, *The Problem of Motion Pictures*, reprinted from the Proceedings of the Child Welfare Conference, Clark University, June 1910 (New York, 1910), 2.

35. Collier to Sanderson, August 8, [1916], People's Institute Records, Box 12.

36. Collier to Manufacturers of Motion Pictures, March 15, 1909, Document File, Edison Archives, Edison National Historic Site, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior. For further information of how the censorship board actually worked, see Rosenbloom, "Progressive Reform, Censorship, and the Motion Picture Industry, 1909-1917."
37. Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York, 1961).
38. Collier, *The Problem of Motion Pictures*, 11.
39. For this and other information on Levien, see Levien Manuscript Collection.
40. Levien, "Hidden Sentiment in New York," *The Survey* (January 11, 1913).
41. Levien, untitled typescript, n.d., Levien Manuscript Collection, Box 9.
42. National Board of Censorship, *Suggestions for A Model Motion Picture Ordinance for Regulating Motion Picture Theaters* (New York, [ca. 1912]), 3.
43. For more on Levien's career in Hollywood see Libbian Benedict, "The Story of Sonya Levien" *The American Hebrew* (June 19, 1925), 207, and Alida S. Malkus, "The Story of Sonya Levien," Levien Manuscript Collection, Box 1.
44. Levien Manuscript Collection, Box 9.
45. For more on Howe, the National Board of Censorship, and the People's Institute, see Rosenbloom, "Progressive Reform, Censorship and the Motion Picture Industry, 1909-1917."
46. National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, *The Question of Motion Picture Censorship* (New York, 1914), 6-11.
47. For example, see *The Inside of the White Slave Trade*, which professed to be an authentic study of prostitution and received Howe's endorsement. A print of this rare film is available at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research. For an interesting discussion of the development of the social problem film during these years but with a very different interpretation of the roles Howe and the National Board of Censorship played see Kay Sloan, *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (Urbana, Illinois, 1988), 5-7.
48. Howe quoted in typescript, [December] 1914, National Board of Review Records, Box 29, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.
49. Howe quoted in "People's Institute: Defining a Better New York," *The Survey* (November 22, 1913), 198.
50. Collier to Cocks, January 5, 1914, National Board of Review Records, Box 170.
51. Collier to Sanderson, [1916], People's Institute Records, Box 12.
52. Lary May has suggested that Howe resigned in the wake of the controversy over this film. While this is certainly plausible given what we know of Howe's politics, he had, in fact, tendered his resignation before the film was approved by the Board. See Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York, 1972), 82-83. See also Howe to McGuire, April 1, 1915, National Board of Review Records, Box 29.