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AMERICAN BOREDOM: THE ORIGINS OF A WAY OF LIFE, 1885-1950

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

American Boredom: The Origins of a Way of Life, 1885-1950

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Americans did not always complain about feeling bored. This dissertation explains how the concept of boredom emerged in the United States and why it became a normative feature of everyday life. Boredom is often conceived as a human emotion, as a constant, transhistorical attribute, consisting of stable, innate traits. This is not the case. A long process of social interactions with discourses representing the experience of boredom, the types of “problems” caused by its effects, and the solutions proposed to eradicate it, resulted in boredom becoming a culturally constructed emotion by the mid-twentieth century. In the late nineteenth century, a discourse about rationalized industry and the social problems caused by the effects of monotony on industrial workers appeared in popular culture. The “problem of monotony” became intertwined with cultural concerns over the threat or promise of leisure—a set of ideas that by the mid-twentieth century became a capacious category used to explain deviant behavior and simultaneously offer the promise of therapeutic self-fulfillment in consumer culture. As popular and scientific discourses converged in the 1920s with post-World War I cultural trends, many Americans, across all classes, started to believe boredom was a natural aspect of

“modern” life and not simply a very human response to repetitive work. Boredom became permanently established in American society as an undesirable experience and was represented as causing a range of aberrant behaviors requiring adjustment to social norms. In the world of work, industrial psychologists sought to increase industrial efficiency and diminish employee unrest. They created a scientific paradigm where boredom was cast as a pathological condition, a set of psychological symptoms overlapping with descriptions of depression. In the 1930s—when social scientists and big business found cost-effective ways to “solve” the pathological problem of boredom—theory and practice were synthesized, and a therapeutic response to tedium became the basis for vast social, economic, and personal changes. Sustained psychological research initiated the medicalization of boredom, the prescription of pharmaceuticals as an antidote, and the use of background music in industry as a form of “therapy” to pacify workers and increase their productivity.

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Introduction

A homeless man is burned to death in Mount Morris Park, Harlem by 5 youths. Detectives classify the motive as “simple boredom.” An article in the journal *Adolescence* claims teenagers join Satanic cults as “an escape from boredom and conformity.” 20-year-old Mason Seckar calls 911 and tells dispatchers he is bleeding to death or his daughter is lying unconscious on the side of the road. After making hundreds of prank calls he is caught by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and delivers a nationally broadcast apology for acting out of boredom on “Inside Edition.” A CNN article on “bedroom boredom” is accompanied by an illustration of a young woman lying in bed and staring into space as her male partner fools around on a laptop computer.¹

1,000 students participate in a research project by abstaining from all media for 24 hours. The majority felt bored and unable to find other ways of spending their time. “I assumed it would be easy to distract myself for most of the day and then get really drunk at night. I ended up just sitting on my bed staring at the wall instead,” said one student. The advertising agency for AT & T must have been overjoyed at such an account. “And in the real case of an emergency, like boredom, your phone’s screen is the perfect place to play hundreds of games like Frogger or Bejeweled,” runs the copy for a campaign promoting the company’s wireless services. Deviant behavior, the degradation of interpersonal relations, the loss of imagination, and the commercialization of boredom

¹ Clifford Krauss, “5 Youths Are Held in the Fiery Death of a Homeless Man,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1995, 1; Cynthia M. Clark, “Clinical Assessment of Adolescents Involved in Satanism,” *Adolescence* 29, no. 114 (1994): 461-468; Paul Walsh, “Wis. Man: Boredom Made Him Call in Hundreds of Fake Crimes in Minn., Fla.,” *Star Tribune*, May 13, 2011, <http://www.startribune.com/local/121794969.html>; Ian Kerner, “Dealing with Bedroom Boredom,” *CNN.com*, June 2, 2011, <http://thechart.blogs.cnn.com/2011/06/02/dealing-with-bedroom-boredom>.

are only the starting zone in an avalanche of cultural anxiety and jubilation over the possibilities of desire seeking a desire.²

Since 1950, hundreds of thousands of articles have been written about “the problem of boredom” in popular magazines, self-help books, newspapers and scientific journals. Type in the keyword “boredom” on an Internet search engine and an astonishing array of entries appear. Entire websites and innumerable blogs, articles, and books are devoted to offering solutions for how to avoid and cope with boredom at work, home, and play. The business of boredom thrives in contemporary American culture—20 percent of Americans (roughly 63 million) are diagnosed annually as suffering from mood disorders associated with the pathological symptoms of this psychological affliction. The social problems attributed to boredom’s effects by contemporary psychologists are a nightmarish compendium of dysfunction:

In education, it has been linked to low grades and diminished academic achievement, truancy, dropout rates, school dissatisfaction, and oppositional behavior. In industry, boredom has been associated with job dissatisfaction, property damage, and increased accident rates. In a clinical context, boredom has been reported to be significantly positively related to depression, anxiety, hopelessness, loneliness, hostility, overt and covert narcissism, alienation, and borderline personality disorder. Significant negative correlations have been reported between boredom proneness and self-actualization; purpose in life; sexual, relationship, and life satisfaction; and persistence and sociability. Boredom has also been implicated as a contributing factor in substance use, pathological gambling, and eating disorders.

The prescription of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors to remedy these undesirable behaviors is commonplace—pharmaceutical companies sold 11 billion dollars of antidepressants in 2001. Boredom reached epidemic proportions in the 1950s and has run

² “Boredom,” *theworldunplugged.com*, <http://theworldunplugged.wordpress.com/emotion/boredom>; “Reach Out With mMode,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, November 20, 2003, C11; Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003), 431.

rampant throughout the United States ever since.³

Americans did not always complain about feeling bored. In this dissertation I explain the history of how boredom emerged in the United States and why it became seen as a normative feature of everyday life. Boredom is not an innate trait. Instead, it became a culturally constructed emotion after a long process of social interactions with a system of symbols or a “grammar” of boredom—the intersection of discourses representing how boredom is experienced, why it is a social problem, and what solutions are most beneficial to country and character with the organization of the concept by legal, business, labor, governmental, and social-scientific expert systems. The connection between specialized labor and monotony is central to understanding why boredom became seen by Americans as a natural condition of existence. In the late nineteenth century, a discourse about rationalized industry and the social problems caused by the effects of monotony on workers appeared in popular culture.

The “problem of monotony” became intertwined with cultural concerns over the threat or promise of leisure—a set of historically contingent ideas that by the mid-twentieth century became a capacious category to explain deviant behavior and simultaneously offer the promise of therapeutic self-fulfillment in consumer culture. In the world of work, industrial psychologists sought to increase industrial efficiency and diminish unrest. They created a scientific paradigm where boredom was cast as pathological condition, a set of symptoms overlapping with descriptions of depression. Sustained psychological research initiated the medicalization of boredom, the prescription of pharmaceuticals as an antidote, and the use of background music in

³ John D. Watt and Stephen Vodanovich, “Boredom Proneness and Psychosocial Development,” *Journal of Psychology* 133, no. 3 (1999): 303; *Pharmaceutical Therapeutic Categories Outlook* (London: SG Securities Group, Ltd, 2002), 102-103.

industry as a form of “therapy” to pacify workers and increase productivity. As popular and scientific discourses converged in the 1920s with post-World War I cultural trends and the commercialization of boredom by advertisers, Americans started to believe boredom was a natural aspect of “modern” life and not only a response to repetitive work. The cultural consequences were immense. Boredom became permanently established in American society as an undesirable experience and was represented as causing a range of aberrant behaviors requiring adjustment to social norms.

In this dissertation I provide an account of how ideas are transformed from the realm of popular commentary and reformist agitation into a collective consciousness that guides the way Americans come to understand and explain the world—the cultural acceptance of boredom as a universal experience in need of no further explanation; the incorporation of the concept into the social lexicon as a manifestation of discontent with existence; and its service as a useful instrument of institutional power. I also unravel how a scientific paradigm about boredom, based on disreputable research, was established without the repetition required for validating research findings and the rigorous evaluation of the scientific community.

My contention is that this scientific paradigm, developed by industrial psychologists in the 1920s, still serves today as the foundational basis for all research conducted on boredom in a number of social scientific professions and is responsible for a wide variety of “interventions” to alleviate boredom including behavior modification, cognitive restructuring, and psychopharmacology. As societies become more complex, the population becomes removed in time and space from the productions of large organizations. Today, we place our faith in scientific knowledge as being accurate and

having undergone review and revision to “get things right.” When this is not the case, people can be influenced to believe they have harmful afflictions in need of therapy where the “cure” is unnecessary or more dangerous than the ailment it is supposed to heal.⁴

I claim boredom is a culturally constructed emotion. This dissertation examines how Americans began to articulate feelings about their experiences of boredom in domestic life during the 1920s. At the same time, advertising agencies started to promote consumer goods and services as a way to “banish boredom”—indicating there was a cultural climate of opinion receptive to the idea. These two new trends combined with a nascent discourse on tedium beyond work leads me to believe the 1920s were the decade when boredom became naturalized in American culture. The entire population did not suddenly experience feelings of boredom. Only a sustained process, shaped by historical circumstances, where people learned how boredom looked and felt from childhood through their adult lives could create an all-encompassing atmosphere ripe for the experience to become ordinary. Though more historical study is necessary, my research suggests boredom was represented throughout popular culture as a natural response to “modern” life for the three decades prior to World War II and in the abundance of post-war society came to fruition as a common experience among the population.

The secondary literature on boredom is located in the fields of philosophy, literary criticism, sociology, and to a much lesser extent anthropology and psychoanalysis. Some authors in these professions claim to write histories of boredom but their sources are limited and sporadic—usually confined to classic works of literature and art—resulting in narratives characterized by broad theoretical claims about a society or, in some cases, the

⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 27, 33.

entire “modern” (Western) world. These texts try to answer one of two fundamental questions: how do humans experience boredom or what cultural conditions structure boredom so it becomes ingrained in human subjectivity—at times both of these interests overlap. The majority of contemporary secondary sources all attempt to explain what discourses about boredom reveal about “modernity.” No historical interpretation grounded in a diversity of evidence exists nor has there been any thorough attempt to uncover how boredom specifically emerges in a society. Explicating the body of work written about boredom is a complicated endeavor requiring a slow, progressive approach—especially since most of it was written for academic specialists, emerging from what Peter Toohey derisively calls a “bilious and bookish matrix.” A simplified outline will suffice to locate this dissertation with respect to constructionist and essentialist perspectives, the two main theoretical divisions in contemporary monographs written about boredom.⁵

Contemporary constructionists are influenced by a group of theorists associated with the Frankfurt School—Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer—who depicted modernity as a process of fragmentation where pre-modern subjects who previously experienced a communal sense of wholeness were degraded by changes in technology and the reorganization of urban spaces and economic systems. According to this narrative, human subjectivity became hollowed-out and people were unable to resist processes intended to integrate them into the requirements of a rationalized society—the consequences were distracted perception and the hardening of psyches into boredom. These accounts generally represent people as victims of urban modernization whose mentally degraded, bored state created a desire for

⁵ Peter Toohey, *Boredom, A Lively History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 141.

novelty and commercial amusements. This materialist philosophy was paradoxically tinged with undertones of moral judgment—the masses were viewed with suspicion for their malleability and trivialization of life. The Frankfort School theorists offered a sweeping historical account where a pre-modern sense of cognitive unity collapsed with the advent of “modernity” resulting in the inevitable rise of a totalizing boredom.⁶

Constructionists such as Patricia Spacks, Sean Desmond Healy, Orrin E. Klapp, Lars Svendsen, and Elizabeth S. Goodstein portray boredom as emerging during mid-nineteenth century in Europe as a “symptom of modernity” where it became endemic in countries being transformed by the industrial revolution. These authors can be categorized as neo-Weberian theorists who, in addition to the Frankfort School, draw ideas from Nietzsche and Foucault. In general, they identify the increased importance of leisure, a growing sense of the right to happiness, secularization, individualism, bureaucratization, and the standardized organization of time and space as the causes for boredom—a “disenchanted, secularized form of human discontent.” According to constructionist accounts, the experience of boredom infected entire populations by the early twentieth century and became a major problem of modernity.

These writers present history on a grand scale with little documentary evidence: “Boredom spread among the lower classes in the course of the nineteenth century, and by early in the twentieth, the philosophical dilemmas associated with the experience had also

⁶ Elizabeth Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities, Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 1, 18; Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception, Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2001), 48; George Simmel, “The Metropolis and the Mental Life,” in *Simmel on Culture*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 175-176, 178; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 101-108, 528, 932; Sigfried Kracauer, “Boredom,” in *The Mass Ornament, Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 331-334; Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 2002), 137.

been thoroughly democratized,” is a representative statement. The social construction of boredom, at the core a symbol for a loss of meaning in modern life, is represented as a historical rupture where the advent of this new structure of experience appears suddenly and immediately becomes integrated into “one’s being.” Constructionists offer little insight into the epistemological status of boredom—how it becomes part of subjectivity and what exact type of mental process it constitutes. For example, is boredom a culturally constructed emotion, something people learn, or a form of psychological trauma, where the reaction to modernization rewires brain chemistry? Constructionist narratives simply portray boredom as becoming a fundamental aspect of modern life and leave it at that. How boredom propagates itself identically from generation to generation is never considered. In addition, the interpretation of modern subjectivity as exclusively constituted through external social forces, especially language, leaves little room for individual volition.⁷

One of the most sophisticated philosophers on boredom, Elizabeth S. Goodstein, suggests modern subjects can no longer perceive why the experience of boredom is peculiar to modernity—a pertinent insight into how ideas about boredom obscure its history as they become normative. Following the logic of Frankfurt School theorists, some constructionists critique consumer culture and mass entertainment for perpetuating and preying on a cultural fear of boredom—the promotion of mass distraction as a therapy for dulled minds. At the same time, these writers portray types of deviant

⁷ Ben Anderson, “Time-Stilled Space-Slowed: How Boredom Matters,” *Geoform* 35, no. 6 (2004): 741; Toohey, *Boredom*, 150; Patricia Meyers Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2, 10, 14, 21, 23, 28, 199, 252, 272; Sean Desmond Healy, *Boredom, Self and Culture* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984), 11, 15-16, 84, 87-88; Orrin E. Klapp, *Overload and Boredom: Essays on the Quality of Life in the Information Society* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 2, 4, 6, 11, 23, 32, 84; Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 11, 26-27, 153-154; Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 17, 19, 48; Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities*, 1-2, 4-5, 18-20, 22, 141-147.

behavior harmful to the social good—the desire of individuals to seek thrills in leisure, abuse drugs, and engage in violent, criminal and sexually risky behaviors—as attempts to compensate for the vacuity of existence. This narrative of societal degeneration unwittingly helps conceal the history constructionists wish to explain since it replicates ideas found in American popular culture during the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century, when boredom was represented as a pathological condition. By portraying boredom as an inevitable manifestation of modernity, the constructionist tradition compresses historical processes into a short time frame—all moderns are bored by 1900—and the possibility for ideas about boredom to shift with new cultural trends is suppressed. Simply representing boredom as a consequence of modernization is a gloss on complicated neuro-scientific, phenomenological, and historical issues.⁸

Contemporary essentialist writers (there are only a few since this theoretical stance is not in academic vogue) sidestep these concerns by conceptualizing boredom as inherent. They construe boredom as an innate human emotion or instinct unaffected by cultural change—a mystery of the soul and not a historically specific experience. They deploy a basic typology modeled after Flaubert's *ennui commun* and *ennui moderne*, usually described as quotidian and existential boredom, to privilege one or the other as universal to the human condition and impervious to materialist critiques. In this epistemological model, human experience is shaped exclusively by internal systems of thought. Essentialists are primarily concerned with the experience of boredom as a means of developing narrowly defined agendas. Reinhard Kuhn in *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* privileges existential ennui—a feeling of the world being emptied of its significance that affects the soul and body while existing independently of

⁸ Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities*, 18.

any external circumstances and the will—over quotidian forms of boredom—*déoeuvrement*, psychosomatic boredom, monotony and *anomie*—which he dismisses as philosophically irrelevant to his project of explaining why ennui is the essential force behind great literary productions. The monotony a housewife or industrial worker experiences, according to Kuhn, is trivial compared to the ennui that engulfs great male writers and inspires them to produce exceptional works of art.⁹

Kuhn's interest is in illustrating how ennui can help explain "the creative act" especially in the twentieth century where it became the dominant theme among classic authors. *The Demon of Noontide* is brilliantly written, especially in the discussion of *taedium vitae*, *acedia*, *horror loci*, and *melancholia*, but it fails to explain why boredom becomes a significant social problem in the twentieth century. The clue Kuhn overlooks lies in the huge groups of people he dismisses as meaningless—presumably their experiences of quotidian boredom are due to material conditions, a subject the author wishes to avoid. The benefit of Kuhn's ahistorical work is that it raises a fundamental question: if boredom is an emotion, then why cannot it simply be a contemporary name of a universal dissatisfaction with life? The most recent author on boredom, Peter Toohey, believes this is the case.¹⁰

In *Boredom, A Lively History*, Toohey follows essentialist logic by asserting that boredom has a "natural biological basis." As a universal experience boredom was felt in most eras, according to the author, and existed to "provide an early warning signal that certain situations may be less dangerous to well-being." The conditional "most" muddies

⁹ Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, 42; Reinhard Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide, Ennui in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 13, 6-9; Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities*, 23, 34.

¹⁰ Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide*, 378.

the argument but this formulation implies boredom is an instinct (as opposed to an emotion). It also is entirely speculative. The evidence used to prove that boredom is innate rests on flimsy to nonexistent evidence: two ancient inscriptions found in Benevento and Pompeii, Italy, which Toohey interpreted to indicate these cities had bored populations; and a faith that boredom stems from a lack of dopamine in the brain. Toohey never explains the relationship between boredom and a deficit of endogenous chemicals. Do only certain people lack this neurotransmitter? Do potentially harmful external forces trigger a physiological response to lower dopamine levels resulting in boredom? Does the feeling of boredom create a physiological change in the brain's chemistry? Scientific research has not come close to answering these questions.¹¹

Only quotidian boredom exists, according to Toohey, and existential boredom is a “name for a constellation of other diseases, or simply a relatively trivial phenomenon.” Responding to the constructionists, he questions whether aspects of modernization—rationalization, bureaucratization, secularism, and individualism— contributed to the rise of boredom. *Boredom, A Lively History* is marred by a number of contradictions. The turn to psychopharmacology as a therapeutic means to treat boredom in the twentieth century is based on an existentialist conception of monotony. Toohey opposes the use of drugs to treat boredom but he dismisses the discourse of existential boredom as meaningless. In trying to answer materialist critics, Toohey says the reason why boredom is not easily identifiable in all societies since the beginning of time is that not all of them enabled or required “creatures to experience boredom.” As an essentialist, Toohey constantly depicts boredom as not susceptible to external contexts. He denies it is ever socially transmitted. His admission a culture needs to “enable” the condition is

¹¹ Toohey, *Boredom*, 161, 169, 174, 143-145, 45.

inconsistent and undermines his theoretical stance—a reflection of the ample confusion found in most secondary literature on boredom. While I am sympathetic to Toohey’s concerns about the over use of drug therapy, he does not provide a convincing historical account of how boredom originated in American culture and why the turn to representing boredom as a mood disorder occurred. The tactic of using quotidian boredom to prove therapeutic responses are unnecessary (since it has a useful social function) veils the historical development of psychopharmacology and its amalgamation of depression with boredom.¹²

The theoretical models of constructionists and essentialists have a relationship to history, but they are better situated in the fields of philosophy and literary criticism. Both schools of thought are valuable for clarifying the questions a historical account must pose to provide a detailed narrative of how boredom originates in a society. This dissertation shares an affinity with the constructionists but offers a proportionate mixture of theory and historical evidence. My research dates the appearance of boredom in the United States at approximately the same time as the constructionists argue it dawned in Europe. Like them, I am committed to representing boredom as a social construction and not an innate feature of the entire human race.

Chapters One and Two trace the emergence of a discourse about monotony in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth- century—the first time when ideas connecting specialized labor and monotony became widespread in American culture. These new ideas ran counter to mainstream portrayals by identifying the stupefying effects of monotony—rather than personal immorality—as the cause of social disruptions. Taken as a whole, the first two chapters explain how “the problem of monotony” became

¹² Ibid., 169, 151, 174, 146.

recognized and accepted within American culture as a consequence of rationalized work and as the foundation for debates over the threat and promise of leisure. These chapters also begin to reveal why concepts about monotony are historically contingent—as people respond to new societal trends their ideas about the experience and meaning of boredom changes. Both chapters chart how the solutions proposed for alleviating monotony made the possibility of advocating changes in the organization of production virtually impossible.

Chapter One traces how for female workers in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth- century monotony became associated with debased domesticity, racial decline, and the degradations of commercial amusements. Popular ideas influenced the social survey movement—the first attempt by American social scientists to document boredom in the workplace and present a viable solution. Protective legislation and recreational reform gained broad public support during the Progressive Era as solutions to monotony for female workers. The use of debased motherhood as a legal strategy helped secure the success of protective legislation while recreational reform influenced the lives of thousands of women, though it ultimately did not meet the expectations of its proponents. The chapter maps how progressive reformers successfully deployed ideas about monotony to change the lives of millions of female wage-earners who were never consulted about whether they supported legislative efforts. Restoring motherhood was deemed more socially advantageous than concerns over a loss of weekly earnings. Once protective legislation became embraced as an exclusive solution, ideas about the negative effects of monotony on women workers receded in popular culture.

Chapter Two examines how ideas about the effects of monotony on male workers resulted in a set of competing ideologies. In the Gilded Age, popular social commentators represented industrial unrest—strikes and radical political activism—and excessive drinking as the two most common reactions to monotonous work by male industrial workers. After 1900, white collar male employees also began to complain about boredom at work and their leisure time behavior received public scrutiny as well. Popular writers cast “turning tramp” along with alcohol abuse and unrest as the primary social ills caused by boredom. Temperance reformers and industrial education advocates molded popular ideas about the relationship between monotony and deviant behavior to fit their political agendas. At the same time, union leaders and their allies promoted the eight hour day and higher wages as the only solution to repetitive work—increased leisure, they claimed, would revitalize bored minds. The belief that more recreation served as a therapy to cure bored workers ran counter to the perspectives of social critics who saw commercialized entertainment as encouraging deviant behavior. New concerns about the effects of monotony on efficient production promoted the rise of industrial psychology—a discipline specifically intended to discredit popular ideas by asserting only scientific expertise could properly determine the etiology of monotony and provide experimentally proven solutions.

Chapter Three chronicles the creation of a scientific paradigm for boredom and the far-reaching cultural consequences of truth claims based on shoddy science. The first research studies on repetitive work and boredom were conducted in England during the 1920s. Charles S. Myers, England’s preeminent industrial psychologist, created a foundational set of ideas that shaped boredom research for two decades: boredom caused

industrial inefficiency; certain people were innately tolerant of boredom; and industrial psychologists needed to develop quantitative tests to identify boredom prone individuals so they could be selected for highly specialized tasks. A series of deeply flawed experiments created by English industrial psychologists established boredom as a pathological condition by 1929. According to their conclusions, boredom was a psychological state characterized by low intelligence, an inhibited work ethic, the potential for socially disruptive behavior, and an inability to integrate harmoniously with others in the community—all of which hindered productivity. The scientific community accepted the English research findings as “facts” based on solid evidence although they were published with little peer review and no rigorous evaluation of methodology and data analysis. The boredom paradigm was embraced by leading American industrial psychologists who replicated it in all major textbooks used to train at least three generations of professionals. Today it survives as a model for identifying people in need of therapeutic adjustment, among practitioners in a number of social scientific fields.

Chapter Four demonstrates why in the 1920s Americans suddenly felt boredom was an inescapable condition of modern existence. The chapter examines marriage, advertising, religion, and representations of the Ku Klux Klan as areas where popular ideas about boredom became naturalized as a permanent feature of American life. In marriage boredom was held responsible for dissatisfactions with one’s spouse, adultery and divorce. Advertisers deployed illustrations and snappy copy to reinforce and shape cultural values about boredom in order to sell consumer goods. Religious leaders gave interviews and told their congregations that boredom was the impetus behind secularization. Popular writers attributed the rise of membership in the Klan to the

monotony of rural life. By the end of the decade, boredom became understood as a salient characteristic of American society. Moving into the 1930s, the chapter illustrates the cultural consequences of boredom research. In the United States, an industrial psychologist meshed the English boredom paradigm with his own research on amphetamine (Benzedrine Sulfate), funded by the pharmaceutical company Smith, Kline and French (SKF). He concluded that the drug allowed workers to overcome their feelings of boredom. The use of legal and illicit pharmaceuticals to conquer boredom and feed the insatiable demands of the American work ethic commenced. In addition, SKF used the symptoms ascribed to boredom to market Benzedrine Sulfate as a cure for mild depression. In England, boredom researchers conducted a study on twelve subjects in a factory for six months and “proved” that the use of background music was a way to divert inattentive minds to increase productivity. The idea was immediately lauded by the press as the ultimate solution for industrial boredom. In the United States a struggling company, Muzak, appropriated the finding and began selling functional music as a way to subdue workers and increase efficiency for war industries.

Chapters Five and Six comprise a case study investigating the process of how a scientific hypothesis traverses the laboratory to the marketplace. Chapter Five charts the creation of sonic environments for American industrial workers during World War II. The leading purveyor of background music was the Radio Corporation of America (R.C.A.). The company’s model was based on employee participation—workers brought in records and they were played by a disc-jockey over a public address system. R.C.A.’s format inadvertently created the workplace as a site for cultural exchange where workers heard a spectrum of music ranging from “race” to “hillbilly” to classical; a mix of genres

many may never have listened to until they were played over loudspeakers during work. Muzak competed by entering the market with its concept of functional music—a rationalized, centrally controlled format of programming deliberately intended to end employee participation. Musical programs were limited to “sweet” swing tunes blended with a mix of “safe” exotica minus any vocals, an aesthetic that company officials believed matched white, working-class tastes. Muzak sold functional music as a scientifically engineered product able to control the emotions of employees, resulting in the alleviation of boredom and increased efficiency. The company’s vision of social engineering, of making everything and everyone identical, helped it conquer the industrial market by the late 1940s.

Chapter Six compares the differences between how R.C.A. and Muzak promoted their musical products. R.C.A. was focused on the immediate concerns with war production and advertised its public address system and record library in the traditional terminology of corporate welfare programs—to create cooperation and unity between management and labor as an expression of common patriotic values. Muzak looked beyond the war. Company executives felt the inherent conflict between management and labor would re-emerge in the post-war world. For corporate managers, the company stressed functional music’s rationalized approach to human engineering. For workers, background music served the same purpose at work as increased leisure did in free time—to reinvigorate bored minds and make production pleasurable. Next, the chapter maps how Muzak waged a cultural war against “swing-jive” music and why it removed all genres of music popularly associated with African-Americans from its programming. The chapter concludes by examining the first organized resistance against the playing of

background music in public. In 1949, the installation of Muzak on buses in the nation's capital and in Grand Central Terminal elicited an angry outpouring of condemnation from commuters and journalists. The protests were rebuffed in a Supreme Court ruling, *Public Utilities Commission v. Pollak* (1952), which allowed background music to be broadcast in public places. In response, Muzak pursued an aggressive campaign in the late twentieth century to install sonic environments in every conceivable public space and, as a consequence, naturalized the idea that life required a musical soundtrack to make it complete.

As these chapters show, American boredom has a distinct history originating as a response to the rationalized workplace. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Americans increasingly grew intolerant of boredom. The experience became seen as a disagreeable, normative feature of everyday life. The identification of boredom as a “mood disorder” was a key moment in its history, an indication of the intense cultural resistance to “non-productive” psychological responses over what to do with undefined free time or to feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with existence. In contemporary culture, an exclusive focus on the experience of boredom has concealed its history and as consequence many people rarely question why they are bored or what forms of institutional power the experience might serve. When boredom becomes an emotional construct—a reflexive subjective response lacking in self-reflection or a symbolic shorthand for disenchantment with the world—it masks the systemic problems of society: the causes behind why life may feel unrewarding. The inequalities of capitalism, issues of interpersonal communication and intimacy, the reasons why consumer culture may not be a source of therapeutic liberation and self-fulfillment, why imaginative thought may be

diminishing over time, lack of interest in politics and economics and a host of other complicated social issues—all dissolve in the phrase “I’m Bored.”

Debased Motherhood and Careless Girls: Monotony and National Destiny in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era

As European States shifted from agrarian to early industrial societies, the beginning of subdivided labor provoked the first concerns about the problem of monotony. A rich European literature about its corrosive effects—individual and social—influenced American writers who began grappling with the same issue during the Gilded Age. One of the first people to suggest that subdivided labor made workers mentally dull was Adam Smith. Writing about handwork in 1776, Smith said performing only a few simple tasks made a worker “as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.” The resulting state of mind left workers incapable of rational conversation and unable to feel “generous, noble, or tender” sentiments. Degraded laborers could not contribute to domestic life and were inadequate citizens—they could no longer judge or contribute to the political, economic, or social interests of the nation.¹³

In a barbarian society, by contrast, a variety of tasks and social obligations had kept men vital. Progress demanded the increased specialization of work, according to Smith, which left him with a paradox—how could a country evolve to even greater heights of civilization if a majority of its population were required to become less intellectually and emotionally vigorous than savages? His solution was for government sponsored education to teach “common people” how to better adjust to technological innovations.¹⁴

Major thinkers agreed on the mental degradation induced by industrial work.

Marx and Engels, in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1847), wrote: “Owing to the

¹³ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, vol. 2 (New York: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1914), 264.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 264, 265.

extensive use of machinery and to the division of labor, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack that is required of him.” This statement was often cited by American socialists and anarchists as one factor in why the natural course of history would result in the proletarian overthrow of capitalism.¹⁵

William Morris joined his antimodern critique of the English factory system with Marxian socialism. In “Art Under Plutocracy,” he portrayed the class solidarity of industrial workers as being borne out of their lack of joy in work and subsequent feelings of monotony—leading to their antagonism toward the capitalist class. The ideas of John Ruskin and Morris were repeatedly used by activists in the United States to justify the development of trade schools (to foster skilled laborers) and extension university classes where, reflecting the values of the Arts and Crafts movement, mentally dulled laborers could revitalize themselves through hobbies such as gardening or woodworking.¹⁶

In 1858, Pierre Proudhon, a French anarchist and member of Parliament, referred to a worker who had been stupefied by subdivided labor as “a cog in the immense structure of society”—a phrase later favored by social activists in the United States in a variety of manifestations. By the late nineteenth century, Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin, known as the “anarchist prince,” was recognized by leading economists in England and the United States as connecting the specialization of labor and machine-tending to the

¹⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2009), 50.

¹⁶ William Morris, “Art Under Plutocracy,” in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, Vol. 23, *Lectures on Socialism*, ed. May Morris (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1915), 187; T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 63, 65.

dulling of the “brains of the employee to such an extent that the power to think and reason is almost lost.” Moral philosophers, communists, antimodern art critics, anarchists, and a host of other European social observers all loosely shaped a discourse anchored in the belief that specialized labor caused monotony—a psychological state defined as a form of mental degradation.¹⁷

Portraying monotony as the consequence of specific historical conditions was new. A materialist discourse situating boredom as an epiphenomenon of industrialization ran against an older conception where individuals who experienced ennui were viewed as morally deficient. European writers agreed the problem of monotony posed a threat to the social order. Yet their views diverged on what type of damage stupefied humans might do. Solutions to the problem varied. The discourse about specialized work and monotony constructed by European writers illustrated the substantial potential of the term for use as a category of social analysis—this became evident in the original ways American social critics used monotony to interrogate and respond to industrialization.¹⁸

Monotony is often conceived as a human emotion, as a constant, transhistorical attribute, consisting of stable, innate traits. This is not the case. The way monotony is conceptualized, how groups of people determine what types of “problems” are caused by its effects, and the solutions they propose to eradicate it are all historically contingent. From the late 1880s through World War I, the term “boredom” was not in wide usage throughout American culture and was rarely deployed to describe social problems. In

¹⁷ Georges Friedmann, *Industrial Society: The Emergence of the Human Problems of Automation* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1955), 130; David A. Wells, *Recent Economic Changes and Their Effect on the Production and Distribution of Wealth and the Well-Being of Society* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1889), 94; John Atkinson Hobson, *The Evolution of Modern Capitalism: A Study of Machine Production* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), 345.

¹⁸ Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities*, 22, 123-124.

contrast, a discourse about monotony emerged as a response to rationalized, repetitive work. This discourse became the dominant mode of expression to register anxieties about the behavior of mentally dulled industrial workers and was used by specific groups of people, whether loosely affiliated or tightly organized, to propose solutions intended to bind the fissures caused by the problem.

In other words, the term “monotony” was certainly used to register negative reactions about things such as a barren landscape, a wearisome speaker, or an unrewarding novel but Americans first came to understand it as a condition primarily experienced by the working class—one that had harmful consequences for the individual, for domestic life, and for the nation. Monotony was not considered an innate emotional state but as a response to modern industrial conditions—a psychological counterpart to the physiologically based neurasthenia. The idea that boredom affected the everyday existence of all Americans, regardless of class or ethnicity, only came into being during the 1920s.¹⁹

The discourses examined in this and the following chapters are a set of ideas and practices which, when combined, organize the way groups of people define certain truths about society. Ideas appear as *Sollen* (“should-beings”) in society and exist as phantasms unless they find some way to become realized in the material world. The goal is to trace how groups of people function as the bearer of concepts, how they try, successfully (or not), to gain social power and to condition the behavior of others by attempting to turn ideas into concrete realities that have an effect on the social world.²⁰

¹⁹ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 24.

²⁰ Ibid., 7; Kracauer, “The Group as Bearer of Ideas,” in *The Mass Ornament, Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 143.

During the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, a diverse group of white, middle-class social critics and activists—clergymen, economists, labor leaders, journalists, settlement-house workers, sociologists, and novelists—wrote about the problems of specialized labor according to the different effects monotony had on women and men (the discourse about men is discussed in Chapter Two). In the late nineteenth century, boredom was depicted as type of mental degeneration that undermined domesticity and caused single female wage-earners to engage in depraved behavior including prostitution—ideas intimately linked to concerns over national degeneration and anxieties about the enticements of consumer culture. This new discourse gained wide social recognition during the Progressive Era and was popularized in the social surveys of female activists who advocated protective legislation to decrease working hours and, less successfully, to reform recreation.

Close to 11 million immigrants came to the United States from 1870–1900. In each of the country's twelve largest cities, 60 percent of the population were either foreign born or children of non-native parents. The vast industrial growth of the nation, based on the rationalized strategy of de-skilled, specialized labor, brought with it a vigorous entry of young women into the workplace. In the Gilded Age, the middle-class questioned the morality of wage work for women. Married women who took jobs were represented as neglecting their families and single female workers were often characterized as flirting with vice. Popular portrayals of working women depicted them as working not to save, but to spend money for pleasure—to purchase clothes and enjoy

cheap amusements. Single women were represented as morally lax, making them a threat to the future of the family and the nation.²¹

Feminists and social activists, though their careers were in the public realm, still believed in the gender-based ideology of a domestic haven—an enclave away from the harsh, competitive world of work—where women served as moral guardians to their children and husbands. To keep this private sanctuary intact, reformers sought to protect womanhood and the home through a number of reform organizations, especially Working Girls Societies and Women’s Clubs. Domestic fiction written for middle-class women celebrated females as innately superior in matters of moral judgment and glorified their purity in personal relationships. These ideas about the roles of women were intertwined with larger concerns about America’s place in the world.²²

In the late nineteenth century, many believed the nation was on an evolutionary continuum where racial perfection and gender specialization would culminate in the most superior culture found in human history—one fit to rule or “civilize” those less advanced. The doctrine of separate spheres, where men worked and women were dedicated to the home, was considered essential to higher civilization. In this cultural context, newspapers, government agencies, and social activists sought to unearth whether female wage work posed a danger to motherhood. In general, the answer was affirmative—

²¹ Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 123; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work, A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 86, 90, 97–99, 105.

²² Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 166; Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 41.

conventional depictions of wage-earning women blamed them for failing to develop proper domestic skills and for depressing the wages of male workers.²³

At the same time an alternative way of thinking, where the monotony of specialized labor and not individual choice was to blame for the deterioration of family life and motherhood, emerged in popular culture. Unlike in Great Britain, where a vast amount of literature extolled the social problems of monotony for women working in the “factory system,” only a few commentators in the United States wrote about the issue during the nineteenth century. Monotony was characterized as stunting the intellect and debasing the higher nature of female wage-earners. Middle-class social activists were concerned over the rise of young girls employed as cheap labor by industry—some began work at age ten since no federal child labor laws existed—and these reformers saw monotonous employment as dissolving innate female qualities. With mass production “the instinct of womanly reserve is imperiled,” wrote Katharine Coman.²⁴

In 1885, the first influential publication connecting subdivided labor, monotony and debased domesticity appeared in the United States. Josiah Strong, a Congregational clergyman and a founder of the Social Gospel movement, in *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* expressed concern about the inability of female wage earners to run an economically sound household. “Girls brought up in the factories, or whose mothers are there employed, make poor housekeepers, learn little of those arts of economy. . . . They make poor wives, and keep their husbands poor,” he wrote. In 1886, a comment in the radical journal *The Index*, edited by Francis Ellingwood Abbot, bluntly

²³ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 25-26; Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 97.

²⁴ Clare de Graffenried, “Child Labor,” *Publications of the American Economic Association* 5, no. 2 (1890): 130; Katharine Coman, “Transition in the Industrial Status of Women,” *The Wellesley Magazine* 1, no. 4 (1893): 176.

stated “the effects of monotony on the New England factory girl make her unfit for marriage.” Conventional wisdom held that women employees dulled by boredom became inadequate wives or undesirable mates. But the explanations for this problem varied.²⁵

At a convention of the Associations of Working Girls Societies held in New York City in 1890 one speaker said monotonous work created “empty-headed wives” who, because they couldn’t hold an intelligent conversation, drove their husbands to the “drunkenness and unfaithfulness that make hells of homes.” Mary E. Halley, a factory inspector in Ohio, agreed with Strong that monotonous toil left female wage-earners too stupefied to learn their social and domestic duties. Many commentators just assumed the problem was self-evident and made factual statements such as “the family life is sordid and miserable”—due to the effects of boredom at work—and said no more. John Atkinson Hobson, the widely read English economist, in *The Evolution of Modern Capitalism* (1897) argued a bored female machine operative was unable to be “a good mother, a good wife, or the maker of a home.” Not only did these mentally devitalized women cook unpalatable, rushed meals but they sapped the physical and moral health of the family. Socialist feminists such as May Wood Simmons, author of *Woman and the Social Problem* (1899), argued that capitalism made women “unfit for wifehood or motherhood” and that the conditions of repetitive wage work would lead to the “physical degeneration” of generations to come.²⁶

²⁵ Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: The American Home Missionary Society, 1885), 98; Benjamin Franklin Underwood, “Current Topics,” *The Index* 7, no. 12 (1886): 133.

²⁶ E.P. Terhune, “Address by Mrs. E.P. Terhune,” in *The Discussions of the Convention Held in New York City, Associations of Working Girls Societies* (New York: Trow’s Printing and Bookbinding Company, 1890), 123; Mary E. Halley, “Practical Factory Life,” *Eighth Annual Report of the Department of Inspection of Workshops, Factories, and Public Buildings to the General Assembly of the State of Ohio for the Year 1891* (Columbus: The Westbote Company, 1892), 381; Coman, “Transition in the Industrial Status

Writers of both sexes expressed concerns over the dangers working women posed to the home but male social critics also represented the degrading effects of monotonous work as a sign of the nation's possible collapse. Josiah Strong believed the trait of boredom could be transmitted through generations of workers and that mentally dulled female factory workers would breed a permanent "class of hereditary operatives"—a source of decline rotting away the possibility of advanced civilization. This idea was also fostered by J. A. Hobson who called the effects of boredom on women "the worst injury modern industry has inflicted on our lives" which "must be looked upon as a tendency antagonistic to civilization."²⁷

In the late nineteenth century many Americans, including Strong, believed the term "civilization" signified a specific stage in human evolution where cultures moved from savagery to stages of heightened perfection—a Darwinist version of Protestant millennialism. Prior to Darwin, Protestants believed human history was a struggle against evil to bring the world closer to Christ's rule on earth. As Americans came to believe evolution meant the survival of the fittest, Protestants shifted to an emphasis on superior races out-surviving inferior ones. Biologists in the late nineteenth century believed learned traits were passed along genetically. The widely read study of Richard Dugdale, *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity* (1877) portrayed a family line as passing on degenerate traits— crime, mental defectiveness, prostitution, and poverty—from generation to generation. Biological determinism explained why

of Women," 177; Hobson, *The Evolution of Modern Capitalism*, 320; Daniel Bender, *American Abyss, Savagery and Civilization in the Age of Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 119.

²⁷ Strong, *Our Country*, 98; Hobson, *The Evolution of Modern Capitalism*, 320.

some cultures had more cultivated tastes and customs and justified claims that only certain peoples were fit to rule the earth.²⁸

The most fully-developed expression of fear over bored female-wage earners thwarting the nation's rise to the pinnacle of civilization came in Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward* (1888). According to Doctor Leete, one of the novel's main characters, in the late nineteenth century working-class factory girls were "worked to death," making them undesirable wives since they came to marriage physically sapped, prematurely old, and intellectually stunted by monotony. Many turned to prostitution and sold "themselves to men to get their living" since low wages made escaping poverty impossible.²⁹

In Bellamy's imagined twenty first century nation the "unnatural rivalry with men" for work by female wage earners was resolved by creating a segregated industrial army where women had some sort of career, though Bellamy left the exact occupations they entered undefined. The belief that women replaced male workers as machine operatives or were responsible for low-paying jobs was an undercurrent of male commentary but female writers, especially those who conducted social surveys, illustrated how women actually took new jobs that men found undesirable.³⁰

Women in the industrial army were selected for the "one kind of occupation" they were best adapted to. They performed light tasks with short hours, were given generous vacations, received wages equal to men, and no longer had to perform household work. The idea that innate traits determined what kind of job a person was fit for, and that traits could be selected accordingly, anticipated the rise of vocational selection techniques by

²⁸ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 26, 29; Bender, *American Abyss*, 191–192.

²⁹ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (New York: Signet Classic, 2000), 172.

³⁰ Ibid.

industrial psychologists in the early twentieth century. The difference was that industrial psychologists did not separate women from repetitive work conditions, but sought to locate and hire those who would be most productive because they could tolerate monotony.³¹

In Doctor Leete's utopian time women no longer toiled in monotonous jobs and were paid equal wages with men (prostitution became unnecessary). Left to develop as accomplished wives and mothers, women fulfilled their primal role—the “power of giving happiness to men.” Untouched by domestic chores or any form of disparaging labor, women became the force behind sexual selection. Bellamy's new woman represented the apotheosis of the Victorian domestic ideal. Since females could rise to a level of unprecedented cultural refinement, they would “preserve and transmit the better types of the race” to the next generation and “the inferior types” would drop out. The rise of an organized eugenic movement in the United States was still a decade away but Bellamy, like Strong, was guided by a belief in biological determinism.³²

The racial purity of Doctor Leete's society symbolized the rise of the United States to the highest form of civilization. Mothers in utopia ascended “to the full height of their responsibility as the wardens of the world to come”—literally leading the United States, “the pioneer in evolution,” to help uplift the “more backward races” toward more “civilized institutions.” *Looking Backward* neatly resolved anxieties about social degeneration by structuring the logic of separate spheres into what Bellamy must have felt was a more palatable version for women. By tracing the destructive effects of

³¹ Ibid., 167.

³² Ibid., 170, 174.

repetitive work, *Looking Backward* strengthened the connections between female monotony, debased domesticity and racial decline as leading to national degeneration.³³

Strong, Bellamy, and Hobson drew their portrayals of working women from a myriad of expressions already located in popular culture about advanced civilization and the decline of motherhood. None of them truly accepted the idea that female workers had become a permanent part of the workforce nor did female reformers such as Katharine Coman who, even though she advocated legislation to abridge working hours and improve the conditions of labor, felt the ultimate goal was restoring “the mother to the home.” Middle-Class women involved in the club movement such as Mrs. E.P. Terhune of the Working Girls Society believed teaching female wage-earners bourgeois values by providing classes in domestic economy would solve the problem of monotony at work. Attendance by wage-earners at club meetings would end in “a home worthy of the name, with a brave, sensible woman at the head of it, who will help her husband to rise in the world, and bring up healthy, moral men and women to battle for the right in the years to come.” Mary E. Halley, presaging the campaigns by progressive reformers in the early twentieth century, felt the only way to help diminish the effects of monotonous labor was to limit the hours that females worked. Though they differed on how to solve the problem, what distinguished the ideas of these writers from moralistic explanations of female domestic failure was their emphasis on the impact of boredom stemming from repetitive work.³⁴

Another late nineteenth century fear about female wage-earners was whether they would turn to prostitution. Concerns over the immorality of working women were usually

³³ Ibid., 176, 91.

³⁴ Coman, “Transition in the Industrial Status of Women,” 177; Terhune, “Address by Mrs. E.P. Terhune,” 122; Halley, “Practical Factory Life,” 381.

connected to critiques about their enjoyment of commercial entertainments, especially by middle-class activists involved with the Social Purity movement. The Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Purity Congress, and the Society for the Suppression of Vice all conducted social investigations into the lives of female wage earners to learn why female factory operatives or domestic servants became prostitutes. Mixing sexes at work, belonging to a boarding house where rooms were rented to men, and suffering male sexual harassment at work were all considered reasons for why women might become prostitutes or criminals. One of the substantial factors, reformers believed, was an attraction to unwholesome excitements—dance halls, theaters, and concerts—where single working women were seduced by villainous male patrons. Even the colorful clothes female employees wore were considered tasteless and a sign of moral deterioration.³⁵

The key question for Gilded Age social investigators and reformers was were the causes of prostitution voluntary or involuntary? Many reformers were informed by a worldview that simultaneously perceived working women as victims of industrialization and as active members of a profligate lower class. In contrast, there was an emerging, though limited, discourse where the effects of monotonous work were held responsible for female participation in cheap amusements and prostitution.³⁶

The Bennett Street Industrial School in Boston provided an evening club for girls who “after hours of monotonous work in factory or shop need the recreation and refreshment...which they are but too apt to seek on the gaily-lighted street, or in the

³⁵ Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 101–103; Laura Hapke, *Girls Who Went Wrong: Prostitutes in American Fiction, 1885–1917* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1989), 10; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 164; Enstad, *Ladies of Labor*, 29–30.

³⁶ Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 99; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 165.

dance hall and cheap theaters.” The club provided books, games, musical entertainment and classes in cooking, dressmaking, and embroidering. Florence B. Lockwood of the Working Girls Society believed the monotony from repetitive work created “a vacancy” in the minds of female wage-earners making them prone to read “trashy novels” resulting in “foolish thoughts and fancies,” morbid introspection, and unhealthy speculations—all reasons why a young women were attracted to commercial entertainments. Her suggestion was for clubs to build a library and to hold evenings with practical talks and classes on literature. What distinguished these commentators from their colleagues in the recreational reform movement was their emphasis on the destructive effects of monotony but they still sought to safeguard female virtue while instilling a bourgeois value system.³⁷

The discourse about the relationship between monotony and prostitution always represented the commercialized world of pleasure as the setting where young women were degraded. In 1888 the Deputy Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics conducted a survey of San Francisco houses of prostitution to determine how many prostitutes were wage-earners. The final report attributed the “dull monotony of the work” to making young female wage-earners crave pleasure. The report’s author created a standard narrative of how all working class girls fell into prostitution: “A visit to a theater and some oysters afterwards do not make up such a giddy whirl of gaiety after all, but a girl cannot help feeling kindly towards the man who provides them, and thus throws a dash of color into the monotone of daily drudgery.” Mentally dulled and dazzled by

³⁷ M.T. Hersey, “Girls’ Club,” *Lend A Hand* 4, no. 12 (1889): 853; Florence B. Lockwood, “The Literary Element in Club Life,” in *The Discussions of the Convention Held in New York City, Associations of Working Girls Societies* (New York: Trow’s Printing and Bookbinding Company, 1890), 37.

cheap amusements, a female wage-earner accepted small gifts of money in exchange for sexual favors and then eventually drifted into prostitution.³⁸

William W. Sanger in *The History of Prostitution* (1895) wrote that the trades causing a “lamentable monotony”—sewing and domestic service—were primarily responsible for women turning to prostitution. Sanger portrayed female factory operatives in New York’s needle trade, who were made weary by the mind numbing effects of factory life, as being unable to resist “the persuasions and promises” of seductive men who then lead them down a path to prostitution. Though never directly stated, these “factual” representations implied that low wages were also a reason why factory operatives became prostitutes—at the time many working women said they believed inadequate pay was behind why some turned to a life of prostitution.³⁹

In 1899, Annie Marion MacLean, a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, posed as a clerk in two Chicago department stores during the Christmas shopping season. She documented how fatigue from standing all day, the poor working environment, and the monotony of long waits for short bursts of customer activity were not “conducive to elevated thoughts.” Female sales clerks worked long hours for low pay and had a hard time making ends meet—several suggested prostitution as a “lucrative employment” to MacLean. “They viewed the matter solely from a commercial standpoint, and justified their conduct by the urgency of the need,” she wrote. The

³⁸ California General Assembly, “Prostitution” in *Third Biennial Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the State of California for the Years 1887-1888* (Sacramento: State Printing Office, 1888), 105, 107.

³⁹ Some working women saw low wages as the direct source behind prostitution and many felt it was a rational economic choice in contrast to jobs that did not offer them a comfortable standard of living. Barbara Meil Hobson has traced how prostitution was a short-term practice based on a wage earner’s low income. The majority of working women who became prostitutes during the Gilded Age did so “occasionally, seasonally, or off hours from regular jobs.” William W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes and Effects Throughout the World* (New York: The American Medical Press, 1895), 535, 526; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 166; Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 104; Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 109.

sociologist recommended legislation based on the Consumers' League of Illinois standards for equal pay regardless of sex and a six and a half day work week at ten-hours per day, indicating female white-collar employees suffered the same hardships as their male counterparts in industry.⁴⁰

Ideas about monotony and prostitution converged in Stephen Crane's novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893). Stephen Crane became fascinated with prostitutes while enrolled at the Syracuse University in 1891. He worked as a stringer for the *New-York Tribune* and interviewed women at the Putnam County Courthouse who had been arrested for solicitation. The first draft of his novel *Maggie* was written in Crane's fraternity house, Delta Upsilon, and he moved to New York City in 1892 to continue writing sketches about the brothels, bars, and dance halls of the Tenderloin and Bowery districts. *Maggie* was published in 1893 at Crane's expense and, after his success with the best-selling *The Red Badge of Courage*, D. Appleton and Company agreed to reissue a bowdlerized version of the earlier work minus what was considered profane language and a final scene where Maggie solicited her only customer of the novel.⁴¹

Crane's *Maggie* was the first fully developed tragedy about the corrosive effects of monotony on a working girl's life—a fact overlooked by most contemporary literary critics as well as those of Crane's day. In *Maggie*, the phrase “collars and cuffs” was used ingeniously by Crane as a metonym for monotonous work. Maggie was sent off to find a job by her abrasive brother Jimmy over fear his pretty sister would be seduced by one of the young working-class men in their Bowery tenement district. Maggie found

⁴⁰ Annie Marion MacLean, “Two Weeks in Department Stores,” *American Journal of Sociology* 4, no. 6 (1899): 725, 728, 730, 732, 736.

⁴¹ Kevin J. Hayes, “Chronology of Crane's Life and Times,” in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (A Story of New York)*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Boston: Bedford, 1999), 28-29; Hapke, *Girls Who Went Wrong*, 45, 48-49.

employment in a shirt factory where she joined twenty other girls of “various shades of yellow discontent” and “treadled at her machine all day.” Soon afterward she met Pete the bartender, a friend of her brother Jimmy, whose sense of “personal superiority” filled her “dim thoughts” with the belief he was an aristocrat among men.⁴²

After only a short time on the job, Maggie began to view the factory as “a dreary place of endless grinding.” The repetitive nature of performing specialized tasks at her sewing machine offered plenty of space for inattention, and Maggie became distracted. For three days, “over the eternal collars and cuffs in the factory,” she daydreamed about Pete’s life. Maggie thought about how he “must live in a blare of pleasure.” Bored by the tedious job, her thoughts turned to fantasizing about alternative worlds filled with fun and romance—a connection between female monotony and a desire for excitement that Crane developed as the novel progressed.⁴³

Maggie’s mental and moral deterioration occurred in a series of measured steps. While her intellectual acuity was already being eroded by the all-encompassing monotony of work and life in a dirty Rum Alley tenement, Maggie was still portrayed by Crane as possessing a moral awareness. Early on in the story, Pete expected Maggie to kiss him for taking her to a beer garden with a vaudeville show. “Naw, Pete,” she said, “Dat wasn’t in it,” but soon afterward Maggie started to realize the world of wage work was a trap. Deliverance appeared in Pete’s ability to pay for cheap amusements. He introduced the girl to freak shows, the Central Park Menagerie, the Museum of Arts, and especially melodramatic plays. All this made him loom in her eyes “like a golden sun.” A

⁴² Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (A Story of New York)*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Boston: Bedford, 1999), 50, 52.

⁴³ Crane’s understanding of how highly specialized work created distracted minds was prescient. By the 1920s, industrial psychologists contended industrial unrest was, in part, caused by reveries or the inattentive state characterizing boredom on the job. Crane, *Maggie*, 53, 54.

taste of leisure activities created a hedonistic desire in Maggie and fostered a vision of a romantic, heroic life beyond the shirt factory.⁴⁴

Crane embraced the popular working-girl literary convention by having Maggie conflate what she saw in the theater with real life. The plays Maggie attended with Pete were based on dramas such as “Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl; or, Death at the Wheel” (1871), where a virtuous working-girl heroine faced villains who tried to ruin her reputation and kept her from marrying the working-class man she loved. In the end, the girl learned she was actually a wealthy heiress and was reunited with her lover, who had made a fortune. This standard form of the working-girl drama flourished both in dime novels and on the stage during the Gilded Age. Instead of undergoing a magical transformation from the sewing factory to a life of riches with Pete, however, the once-virtuous Maggie became a prostitute.⁴⁵

A low-paying job, the tireless monotony at work, and the lure of cheap amusements all converged to erode Maggie’s ability to make rational choices and resulted in her moral degradation. After being kicked out of the house by her drunken mother, Maggie finally succumbed to Pete’s sexual advances and was ruined. She quit her job and developed a “spaniel-like dependence” for her lover. In a scene where Maggie and Pete went to a dirty beer garden filled with prostitutes, Crane portrayed Maggie’s intellectual decline. She imagined a “rose-tinted future” and “perceived only vague reasons to be miserable.” Riches were imminent because Pete’s clothes indicated

⁴⁴ Ibid., 58, 52, 60, 62.

⁴⁵ Enstad, *Ladies of Labor*, 38–39.

wealth and prosperity. As long as Pete adored her, Maggie denied considering any apprehensions about the course of her life.⁴⁶

At this point the story reached its dénouement. Pete spurned Maggie, her mother and brother refused to let her return home and, left without any means to survive, Maggie turned to prostitution. The story concluded with Maggie's solicitation of a "huge fat man," who followed "the girl of the crimson legions" to the edge of a river. She was found drowned, a victim of either suicide or murder.⁴⁷

A fundamental tension existed in *Maggie* between balancing the girl's autonomy and assigning blame to the external forces responsible for her degradation. Though already mentally dulled by the effects of her tedious job at the sewing factory, Maggie chose to escape through the pursuit of pleasure in commercial amusements. Still, her visions of romantic love and her faith in Pete were predicated on her trips to the theater and her reflexive acceptance of formulaic tales told about virtuous working girls—a warning against the deceptions of mass culture and an indication that she unwittingly fell into prostitution instead of acting out of rational volition.

In the late nineteenth century an emerging discourse addressed the relationship between repetitive work and monotony. This set of ideas reflected popular concerns about degraded domesticity, declining civilization, anxieties over new forms of leisure, and prostitution, but with one major difference—it ran against the current of mainstream thought by identifying monotony as the cause for undesirable behavior. According to Daniel Rodgers, the "discovery of industrial monotony" took place at the beginning of the twentieth century. After 1900, the volume of articles written about monotony and

⁴⁶ Crane, *Maggie*, 74.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 83, 85, 89.

work increased along with the unprecedented publication of social surveys that investigated the world of female factory operatives. Yet, the main ideas about why monotonous work was harmful to private life and the nation were already becoming established in the late nineteenth century. They provided the foundation for what became a hegemonic cultural narrative in the following years.⁴⁸

In the early twentieth century two significant trends occurred. The advocacy of a group of elite economists, educators, settlement house residents, and social workers, writing about women wage-earners, made the issues of overspecialization, machine-tending, and boredom a pervasive concern throughout popular culture. As the problem of monotony became nationally recognized, ideas about the proper solutions—shorter work hours and recreational reform—moved from the realm of words to social activism. Limits on labor time became fixed in law. Knowledge about why the effects of monotony on women threatened home and society and how to solve the problem became enduring “structures of meaning,” to borrow a phrase from Clifford Geertz, within American culture.⁴⁹

The Census of 1900 recorded 23 million women aged sixteen or older. Five million of them, 20.6 percent or one in five, were working for wages outside the home. In all, 23 percent of these women were foreign born and 17 percent were born in the United States with at least one foreign parent. The aggregate total of these women, who were designated as “white” and thought of as immigrants, was 40 percent. When combined with the 37 percent of native-born “white” working women, this meant 77 percent of all wage-earning females were considered “white.” The rest of the female workforce was

⁴⁸ Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 74, 76.

⁴⁹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 12.

classified as Negro (the majority of the remaining wage earners), Indian, or Mongolian. 87 percent of “white” working women were single and under twenty-five years of age with only 2.2 percent of them belonging to a union in 1900.⁵⁰

The recognition that almost a quarter of the nation’s young female population worked for wages provoked the same fervor as in the past. Prior to publication of the substantially documented sociological investigations into women’s work—originating in Elizabeth Beardsley Butler’s *Woman and the Trades* (1909)—the number of articles and books on the worrisome effects of specialized work on female wage-earners dramatically increased from the late nineteenth century on. The majority stayed within the previously established discourse but a few authors expanded the types of social problems caused by boredom and sharpened their critique of child labor.

Educated women went undercover to report on what life was like in the world of menial jobs. They experienced long hours of stupefying boredom and realized any notion of work as the center of a moral life was antiquated. Mrs. John Van Vorst, in *The Woman Who Toils* (1903), recounted the “oppressive monotony” of repeatedly fitting tin caps on pickle jars in a Pittsburgh factory and of working a mechanical roller in a Chicago picture frame factory. Mrs. Van Vorst saw her female co-workers as “miserable drudges” who, due to the effects of repetitive work, became intellectually vacuous—the young operatives only talked about dress, young men, and entertainments. Even though all employees were stultified by the effects of monotony, Mrs. Van Vorst’s middle-class values kept her sympathies in check. She felt that only the bread-winners—women who helped support their families in contrast to those who worked only to “exercise their

⁵⁰ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistics of Women at Work Based on Unpublished Information Derived From the Schedules of the Twelfth Census: 1900* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1907), 9–10; Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 153, 141.

coquetry” and make pin money for luxuries—were worth saving by selection for training in industrial education.⁵¹

Amy E. Tanner, who had a Ph.D. in psychology and worked with G. Stanley Hall at Clark University, wrote about her experiences as a waitress in 1907. Tanner worked as a server in a café connected to an apartment house frequented by army and navy officers. The job—setting tables, serving plates of food, washing dishes, and polishing silver—kept her busy for thirteen hours a day, seven days a week. “In the daytime, my thoughts of outside interests, my friends, my books, even my family, all such thoughts became far away and uninteresting . . . I was too confused in mind and too dulled too care . . . I became a creature ruled by sensations,” she wrote. Tanner portrayed her co-workers’ wild craving for excitement as a consequence of being bound down by “excessive and monotonous work”—some yielded to “any form of temptation” including prostitution.⁵²

Other writers also documented the connection between monotonous work and the desire for thrills, usually without offering any solution to the problem. Typical statements described the dreadful monotony of a factory life as “choking the intellectual life” of young women who could only crave stimulants or seek relief in “highly-spiced” recreation such as visits to dance halls and other commercial amusements.⁵³

A few social critics deviated from such standard formulations. Raising the specter of revolution, Dr. Felix Adler told an audience at the Manhattan Trade School for Girls that “factory workers in their present condition are drudges. The sordid monotony

⁵¹ Jennifer Fronec, *New York Undercover: Private Surveillance in the Progressive Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 14; Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America*, 75; Mrs. John Van Vorst and Marie Van Vorst, *The Woman Who Toils: Being the Experiences of Two Ladies as Factory Girls* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1903), 25, 46, 132, 160.

⁵² Amy E. Tanner, “Glimpses at the Mind of a Waitress,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 13, no. 1 (1907): 48.

⁵³ O.M. Becker, “Factory Education,” *Machinery* 12, no. 4 (December, 1905): 164; “Monotony Wears the Mind,” *Public Policy* 8, no. 9 (1903): 140.

of it has created socialism.” The solution was to provide industrial education for young women so they could learn a craft while cultivating their minds and cultural tastes. Jane Addams, another advocate of industrial education traced “the connection between the monotony and dullness of factory work and the petty immoralities which are often youth’s protest against them.” She split her narrative into a series of tales about how the revolt against boredom affected boys and girls differently. For young women, the reaction to monotonous work created a need for adventure that lead to moral fatigue and deviant behavior. The types of stories Addams told about factory girls were always based on their desire to escape dreary lives and usually ended in disaster.⁵⁴

An 18 year old Scottish girl, who was the sole financial support for her family, worked in a candy factory during the day and glove factory in the evening until she met a “chorus girl in a cheap theater” and ran off with her because “the contrast between her monotonous drudgery and the glitter of the stage broke down her allegiance to her helpless family.” A Russian factory girl in a “fit of revolt against the monotony of her work” stole \$300 from her father, ran away, and went on a spree before she was caught and sent to reform school. A young American girl who worked in a factory for six years met a man in a dance hall and ran off with him. He tried to force her into a life of prostitution and she threatened to kill him. In court she told the judge: “I just had to go to the dances sometimes after pushing down the lever of my machine with my right foot and using both my arms feeding it for ten hours a day.” The association of boredom with a complete loss of moral responsibility and criminality (outside of prostitution) for women

⁵⁴ “Trade Schools for Social Betterment,” *The School Journal* 68, no. 17 (1904): 466; Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 107.

was new and though Addams' ideas strayed from mainstream representations about monotony and work, they would become prevalent later in the century.⁵⁵

In their drive to win state and national legislation banning young children from work, the critics of child labor expressed intense outrage over the harmful effects of monotony on factory operatives. "The drudgery of a monotonous toil which stunts the body and compresses the mind... degrades without compunction while it kills without mercy," wrote Louis F. Post. The effects of monotony on young girls were portrayed as degrading reproductive ability and leaving them vulnerable to sexual advances. W.A. Forster told medical conventioners that a factory girl who did the same task over nine thousand times a day would make the "poor little slave"—if she lived—a mother who would breed children "stunted mentally, physically, and morally." Only legislation stopping child labor could stop a "dangerous race" from undermining the nation's future. In "The Grind Behind The Holidays," the poet Edwin Markham described for *Cosmopolitan* readers how factory girls who made confections for the Christmas holidays lived a hellish existence of murderous monotony "where health and character are broken down." In the streets after work, their dulled minds and souls were "exposed to brutal jests and vile profanities" which might lead them astray.⁵⁶

The efforts of child labor advocates most closely mirrored those of Progressive Era activists such as Florence Kelly, a founder of the National Consumers League and a colleague of Jane Addams, who was an early champion of protective legislation for the same reason found in the later publications of the social survey movement—specialized

⁵⁵ Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets*, 107, 113-114, 117-118.

⁵⁶ Louis F. Post, "Child Labor," *The Public*, May 16, 1903, 92; W.A. Forster, "Presidential Address," *The Medical Forum* 3, no. 5 (1906): 126; Edwin Markham, "The Grind Behind The Holidays," *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, November 1906, 144, 150.

wage work made women “unfit . . . for life in the home.” The problem of monotony was central to making a strong case for each group’s agenda. In the early twentieth century, the discourse about monotony and female work proliferated throughout popular culture leaving a deep impression of lives dominated by an irrepressible psychological burden. Solutions to the problem of boredom were still in a state of flux but the articles and books produced by surreptitious authors, settlement house workers, and other reformers served as a basis for the collection of data behind the vast endeavors of those involved in the social survey movement.⁵⁷

From 1909–1917, Progressive Era activists sought protective legislation for a ten-hour day, six day work week. What most historians have missed is how progressive reformers empowered the discourse about female wage-earners and monotony by making it a central element in their campaign for legal recognition. Elizabeth Beardsley Butler in *Woman and the Trades* (1909), Sue Ainslie Clark and Edith Wyatt in *Making Both Ends Meet* (1912), and Josephine Goldmark in *Fatigue and Industry* (1912) filled the pages of their research with elaborate descriptions of how specialized, unskilled work processes promoted boredom. They reduced the types of social problems caused by the effects of monotony to a single issue—degraded motherhood—which tapped into popular concerns about racial degeneration and America’s place in civilization. The brevity of this discourse made it effective at igniting public opinion and the drive for protective legislation made modest gains prior to World War I.

The progressive reformers who conducted investigations into the lives of working women felt that once an overwhelming catalog of evidence about the relationship between repetitive work and monotony was made available to the public, the sheer

⁵⁷ Bender, *American Abyss*, 119.

magnitude of the facts would serve as a catalyst for social change. Social surveys shifted from first person narratives based on personal experience to accounts written in the more “scientific” language of sociological research reports—a narrative tactic intended to convey an objective representation of reality. The collective pages of *Women and the Trades*, *Making Both Ends Meet*, and *Fatigue and Efficiency* comprised a mass compendium documenting the relationship between repetitive work and monotony. Canning, candy making, the garment trades, laundries, the metal trades, lamp manufacturing, glass making, paper box making, printing, telephone and telegraph industries, cracker making, cigar production, and retail sales were all described. Though these reports were intended to provide objective accounts of women’s work, this was an impossible task given the sense of urgency and social magnitude the female authors attached to their research.

Elizabeth Beardsley Butler in *Women and the Trades*, the first volume of the famous Pittsburgh Survey, set out to describe what she called “the subsidiary, uninteresting, and monotonous occupations.” The pages of her survey were filled with the gritty details of how factory work pushed the physical and mental limits of female wage earners. This rendering of a cracker factory assembly line is typical of Butler’s numerous descriptions of specialized work:

The pace of each worker is pitched to the highest point. I noticed especially one small girl with flushed cheeks and white lips who was folding the ends of soda cracker boxes and putting on each end a red stamp. Her teeth were set, and her breath came hard, like that of an overspent runner at the end of a race; yet it was only ten o'clock in the morning. Her arms moved irregularly, jerkily, as if she were spurring her nervous energy to its limit.

The conclusion she reached in all her intricate portrayals of female wage-work was consistently the same—“days of monotonous toil” dulled the minds of female factory workers.⁵⁸

Butler’s final chapter, the grand summation of her elaborate investigations into four hundred companies, insured that her points about the relationship between repetitive work and monotony were not lost in the minute detail of *Women and the Trades*. She described hinge makers who put fifty hinges a minute through a machine for ten hours a day, cigar makers who endlessly put a tobacco leaf on a suction plate, pressed a treadle, and pushed a rolled stogie aside, and paper box makers who mindlessly used a machine to cover the finished product with paper. “Such work not only requires no thought; it is stupefying. The operative who has become in truth an adjunct of the machine, works with machine-like precision, and with machine-like absence of thought,” she concluded.⁵⁹

The centerpiece of Clark and Wyatt’s *Making Both Ends Meet* was their chapter on “Monotony and Fatigue in Speeding.” The “stupefying and wearing effect of machine-work from concentration and intensity of application and attention was frequently mentioned by factory workers in their accounts,” opened a section where the hard lives of factory and handworkers were portrayed. Tales of Tina Levin, an eighteen-year-old Russian who was a machine operative in an underwear factory; of Fanny Leysher, another Russian immigrant of twenty-one years who machine stitched belts on corset covers; and of Anna Florin, an eighteen-year-old who spoke no English and who

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Beardsley Butler, *Women and the Trades: Pittsburgh, 1907–1908* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1909), 64–65.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 370–371.

machine-sewed 784 corset covers a day for \$7 a week were all part of a litany of stories about exploited, impoverished, and mentally dulled factory workers.⁶⁰

Clark and Wyatt wanted their readers to understand that the effects of monotonous work were not limited to machine operatives. To describe the difficulties of skilled labor, the authors focused on the story of Elena and Gerda Nakov, two young Polish sisters who sewed children's dresses. Four years of repetitive, fast, tedious work had "beaten down" both sisters so "that no efforts of public or private philanthropic medical care in the State and the City have been able to restore their health." Clark and Wyatt concluded their chronicles about "monotony and speeding" by making it clear their subjects were devitalized and mentally warped to the point of being human machines.⁶¹

Josephine Goldmark, in the pioneering study *Fatigue and Industry*, crafted a number of detailed observations about repetitive work. "The capping girl sits close to the red-hot sealing irons, usually holding a number of caps in her hand, and dropping them monotonously, one at a time, upon the cans as they pass swiftly on the tireless conveyor, at a rate varying from 54 to 80 cans per minute," was an often cited example in popular literature to illustrate how female factory operatives became the mechanical extensions of assembly lines.⁶²

For Goldmark the "evils of monotony," a form of psychic fatigue, were worse than those caused by muscular exertion. She used physiological language to describe how repetitive work caused mental dullness: "We must bear in mind that the special functions of the brain have separate centers. Thus, there is a center for hearing, another for sight,

⁶⁰ Sue Ainslie Clark and Edith Wyatt, *Making Both Ends Meet: The Income and Outlay of New York Working Girls* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1911), 120–123, 128–132.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 142–146, 141.

⁶² Josephine Goldmark, *Fatigue and Efficiency: A Study in Industry* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1912), 61.

another for speech etc. When certain centers are working continuously, monotonously, from morning to night, day by day, and week by week, it is physiologically inevitable they should tire.” This was one of the first attempts at using scientific language to define the etiology of boredom in the United States. The single-minded concentration of workers performing specialized tasks caused monotony—a state Goldmark thought “the human spirit innately” found repulsive.⁶³

These examples only underscore the extensive documentation found in the social surveys about how the types of repetitive jobs considered suitable for women created stultified minds. For many readers at the time, including Supreme Court justices and leading corporate executives, the evidence seemed insurmountable. The sociological research of Butler, Clark and Wyatt, and Goldmark “proved” that the existence of female monotony was a hard fact, a negative consequence of capitalism. With the weight of science on their side, these progressive reformers turned to explaining why the corrosive effects of female monotony required protective legislation.

Elizabeth Butler, Clark and Wyatt, and Josephine Goldmark all accepted female wage work as an economic reality. These activists understood that the majority of young, unmarried women wage earners viewed their position as temporary, where marriage, though it might be desirable as an expression of romantic love, was often considered an escape from the difficulties of low-paying, monotonous toil. The issue of what happened in the home once women left work became the primary reason behind the push for protective legislation. To this end, they re-energized ideas promoted by writers in the late nineteenth century about the degradation of motherhood and national decline—a concept so self-evident that only a few pointed words of explanation were necessary.

⁶³ Ibid., 68, 59.

Elizabeth Butler concisely wrote “that inferior and monotonous work processes are no preparation for intelligent home making.” Clark and Wyatt linked female monotony to racial decline and degraded motherhood. Goldmark told an interviewer for the *New York Times*, “The tired-out girl is unfit for maternity.” Factory girls would raise “undervitalized children,” who would “probably be weaklings,” leading to racial deterioration. She summarized why fear over female monotony justified protective legislation: “It comes back, you see, to the home, to the citizenship of the future, to the woman’s place in normal life.” Goldmark’s comment on a woman’s “normal life” reflected an assumption all these progressive reformers held—that, though wage work was an inevitable consequence of industrialization, the use of women as cheap, unskilled labor was a perversion of the natural order of things.⁶⁴

The idiom of domestic decline symbolized the severe consequences of not recognizing harmful effects of monotony on the nation’s future mothers. To make this point clear, Elizabeth Butler emphasized that the social waste caused by the addled minds of female workers was “more serious by far than the destruction of the individual.” Invested in middle-class values that celebrated the role of women as child-bearers and as the moral guardians of the home, these writers drew a direct correlation between female monotony and the potential decline of American civilization. The hope was that fewer hours of work would counterbalance the effects of monotony and keep a woman’s physical and mental state vital enough for her to become a decent wife and mother.⁶⁵

Protective laws were based on the principle of preserving a woman’s mind and morals. Safeguarding her reproductive capacities would assure traditional domestic

⁶⁴ Butler, *Women and the Trades*, 96; Clark and Wyatt, *Making Both Ends Meet*, 42, 221; “What the Study of the Relation of Fatigue to Efficiency Shows,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1912, SM8.

⁶⁵ Butler, *Women and the Trades*, 96.

relationships remained intact and help to avoid racial decline. Josephine Goldmark worked tirelessly with her brother-in-law, Louis Brandeis, on the brief for *Muller v. State of Oregon* (1908), a case testing whether Oregon's Ten-Hour law was constitutional. The Supreme Court ruled in Oregon's favor. Justice Brewer, noting the "copious collection" of data provided by Brandeis, included the following remarks in his opinion: "as healthy mothers are essential to vigorous offspring, the physical well-being of woman becomes an object of public interest and care in order to preserve the strength and vigor of the race." After the Court ruling, the movement for protective legislation acquired more advocates who helped popularize the cause.⁶⁶

The University of Wisconsin economist Theresa McMahon thought women's work was a sign of evolutionary regression. In "Women and Economic Evolution" (1912), she wrote: "under the present regime motherhood is not compatible with business careers." McMahon did not blame female workers but instead placed responsibility on the industrial system. "To restrict fecundity under such circumstances, or to refuse to be mothers at all, is hardly a reproach to the women who are thus forced to toil, but rather a reproach to civilization imposing home-making, motherhood, and bread-winning upon the supposed weaker sex," wrote McMahon.⁶⁷

Edward Ross, in *Changing America* (1912), made a connection between the fate of future mothers and the human "wreckage" created by the long hours, high speed, and mentally dulling effect of factory work. He believed women who worked in factories would be useless as "helpmates" to their husbands and they would bear children who

⁶⁶ Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 185; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 42; Clark and Wyatt, *Making Both Ends Meet*, 220.

⁶⁷ Bender, *American Abyss*, 118; Theresa Schmid McMahon, "Women and Economic Evolution or The Effects of Industrial Wages Upon the Status of Women," *Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin* 7 (1912): 189, 77.

became “vagrants, or idlers, or paupers.” Worse yet, after generations of procreation by female wage earners, the American type of girl, “the girls of the distinctly feminine type, the girls who have the qualities of fitness, grace, and charm,” would regress to another type—the peasant girl whose “squat, splay-footed, wide-backed, broad-faced” and short neck marked a decline away from the “high-strung, high-bred” type whom American men admired. The effects of factory work on women, he thought, would destroy motherhood, cause racial degeneration, and stop the advance of American civilization. For Ross, only national protective legislation to shorten the working hours for female wage-earners, so their “vitality and stamina” could be preserved, was a legitimate solution. Craft unions, worried about the growth of a female workforce, also supported campaigns to implement protective legislation.⁶⁸

By 1912, there were twenty-four states with laws limiting the hours of female labor in manufacturing industries with the norm being ten hours per day and sixty hours per week. Only California and Washington made an 8-hour working day and 48-hour working week mandatory. For other industries, such as mercantile establishments, laundries, telephone and telegraph industries, restaurants, and hotels, hours were much less regulated throughout the country.⁶⁹

The discourse connecting monotonous work to debased motherhood played a central role in the fight for protective legislation. While the reduction in working hours began to alleviate some of the hardships, both psychological and physical, of long days at tedious jobs, there were negative outcomes. One consequence was that working women, who were already paid exceptionally low wages, lost a portion of their weekly income.

⁶⁸ Edward A. Ross, *Changing America* (New York: The Century Company, 1919), 66, 71-75; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 42.

⁶⁹ Goldmark, *Fatigue and Efficiency*, 291–297.

To right the balance, progressive activists vigorously pushed for a minimum wage law—a battle they and groups such as the National Consumers League and the National Women’s Trade Union League ultimately lost when the Supreme Court ruled against a District of Columbia law in 1923. Protective legislation institutionalized the belief a woman’s primary role was to reproduce and to serve as a domestic guardian while also denying female wage earners equal access to employment and wages. By focusing on protective legislation as the sole solution to monotony, reformers failed to combat the problems caused by specialized labor at the source, the structure of production on the shop floor—this failure characterized all non-scientific, popular discourses about work and boredom.⁷⁰

Several women involved with the social survey movement foreshadowed what became a long-term search by corporations and industrial psychologists to find solutions for boredom at work. Sue Ainslie Clark and Edith Wyatt were not convinced that protective legislation solved the problem of monotony. After conducting case studies in a cotton mill, a bleachery, and a cloth-finishing factory, they found that a new scientific management technique—twenty minute rest pauses—elicited a positive response from female operatives. Starting around 1912, efficiency engineers and industrial psychologists tried to convince corporate managers that brief periods of rest dispelled boredom. Unaware that rest pauses were justified by speeding-up workers to make-up for lost time, Clark and Wyatt saw scientific management techniques as a panacea—a profession establishing “truth about industry, toward justice....without fear or favor.” They called rest periods “more stirring and vital than the gains in wages and hours” and

⁷⁰ Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 198, 195, 212.

they looked forward to the eradication of monotony in all trades once scientific management realized “its magnificent dream.”⁷¹

Josephine Goldmark called for scientific research to determine the exact causes of workplace monotony and to provide solutions. Her concern was to move from a discourse of “pity” to a more rational basis for legislation. Goldmark’s comment about the underlying basis for protective legislation, what she called expressions of “pity” meant to evoke an empathetic response from male politicians and judges, reveals how the ideological use of monotony is always grounded in specific historical conditions. In the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, the allegedly catastrophic consequences of monotony were brandished to help bring about economic regulation. The wait for progressive reformers who wanted efficiency engineers or scientific researchers to investigate industrial monotony was not long. Beginning in 1913, the new profession of industrial psychology made research on work and monotony a priority—to help increase industrial output, not improve the lives of female workers.

In addition to seeking protective legislation, Elizabeth Butler and her progressive allies followed the tradition of late nineteenth century writers who connected boredom at work to creating the need in young women for cheap amusements, which could lead to a life of prostitution. “In so far as hours of work tend to dull and stupefy the worker, they are longer than the community can afford. Dulled senses demand powerful stimuli; exhaustion of the vital forces leads to a desire for crude, violent excitation,” Butler wrote. Visits to roller skating rinks, nickelodeons, dance halls, and cafés could all lead to “sexual license.” Monotony destroyed a working girl’s “foresight and social judgment” and could also impel them “toward vicious or criminal behavior.” Florence Marshall

⁷¹ Clark and Wyatt, *Making Both Ends Meet*, xii, 268, 270; Goldmark, *Fatigue and Efficiency*, 3–4.

thought working women sought “pleasure at night, to counteract the dull monotony of routine” and that “the apathy resulting from monotonous labor prevent the cultivation of any ethical sense, and tend to make girls careless and reckless regarding their moral standards.”⁷²

Jane Addams in *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (1912) also blamed the “gray and monotonous path of regular work” for creating a desire in working women to accept invitations to “dinner and places of amusement”—the first step to a life of prostitution. A bored female worker who craved a “sense of adventure” went to one of Chicago’s 328 dance halls. Once inside, she drank alcohol to “dispel her lassitude” over the long day of hard work. If alone, she became vulnerable to the advances of the dance hall “spieler,” a male dancer who was paid by dance hall owners to make sure single women did not go left unnoticed, and who, according to Addams, was often in cahoots with procurers from brothels. Addams provided detailed information to back up her general contentions. She told the story of a Milwaukee factory girl who stayed at Hull House after a brief courtship with a young man she met at a dance hall. He had proposed they get married in Chicago. The man was an agent for a “disreputable house” and the girl escaped a potential life of prostitution only by chance. She went to register her new residence with the police who unearthed the “well-organized plot.”⁷³

Narratives naming boredom as the cause of deviant behavior expanded into popular culture. They gave weight to the belief that external social factors and not individual morality should be held responsible. A *Chicago Tribune* article, “Breaking-Up

⁷² Butler, *Women and the Trades*, 356; Florence M. Marshall, “The Industrial Training of Women,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 33, no. 1 (1909): 124.

⁷³ Jane Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1912), 216, 151-151, 38-39.

Monotony,” reported on a women probation officer from the East Coast who asserted “working girls go wrong out of sheer monotony.” The dreary existence of factory girls made them seek excitements in nickel theaters and the “cheap dance hall” where sin found “a strong foothold.” Working girls were not inherently immoral. Society needed to “make the lives of these girls less monotonous,” according to the criminal expert. If “unwholesome and immoral” forms of entertainment were replaced by “legitimate” recreation and amusement facilities, the problem of prostitution and female vice would disappear.⁷⁴

The film *Traffic in Souls* (1913), directed by George Loane Tucker, was a huge box office success despite being banned in a number of cities including Chicago. Lorna, a bored candy store saleswoman, was seduced by a well-dressed gentleman who bought her consumer goods and paid for an evening of dining and dancing. Little did Lorna know her suitor was the agent of a large prostitution network guided by William Trubus, who, for comic relief and in a commentary on the hypocrisy of wealthy elites, also ran the International Purity and Reform League. With her senses dulled by female monotony and drink, Lorna was forced into a brothel, only to be rescued in the nick of time by her sister.⁷⁵

Anxieties over working women participating in commercial amusements and concerns about their immorality reflected broader social trends during the Progressive Era. Some female wage-earners—known as “charity girls” because they did not take money for sex—participated in a culture of treating where sexual favors were traded for degrees of male attention, gifts, and access to commercial entertainment. These practices

⁷⁴ “Breaking-Up Monotony,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 13, 1913, B4.

⁷⁵ “Mayor as Censor Dooms Film Show,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 8, 1914, 8; *Traffic in Souls*, Videocassette, directed by George Loane Tucker (1913; New York: Kino on Video, 1994).

were well-known to middle-class reformers. Most women workers guarded their reputations, but those who did not came to symbolize for reformers the necessity to regulate the behavior of all female wage earners.⁷⁶

Progressive reformers organized large anti-prostitution campaigns throughout the country. From 1902 to 1916, vice investigations modeled after the private efforts of New York's private Committee of Fifteen and Chicago's Vice Commission were conducted in 102 cities and 3 states. Tanner, Marshall, Butler, and Addams were aware of these efforts but they were more interested in lobbying for recreation reform: regulating commercialized recreation by requiring chaperones at all amusement resorts; gaining support from owners of amusements to monitor the behavior of their patrons; creating social and education clubs to teach young women how to ward off the temptations of the city; and providing alternatives to cheap amusements, such as sponsoring chaperoned dances. Some of these activists, who had fled dull home lives filled with purposeless ease to seek authentic experiences by living among immigrants, did not seem to see the irony in their solutions, which sought to promote the same middle-class norms of female conduct that the reformers themselves had rejected. Unlike protective legislation, recreational reform failed. Proprietors of mass entertainment had no compelling reasons to stop the flow of profits and single female workers refused solutions based on bourgeois values in favor of commercial amusements and male companionship.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 45, 110.

⁷⁷ The vice investigations of groups like the Committee of Fifteen paralleled the data collection techniques used by the sociological surveys of working class women. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America*, 193–195; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 179–181, 184; Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America*, 74; Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877–1920* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 3; Christopher Lasch, “Jane Addams: The College Woman and the Family Claim,” in *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965), 17–18, 20, 23, 25, 36.

The social survey movement turned unfounded nineteenth century ideas about the relationship between repetitive work and monotony into scientific truth claims. The recording and dissemination of data about female wage-earners established what seemed a clear chain of causation—specialized work inculcated employees with a new, dangerous psychological condition. When monotony became established as a material reality it was wedded to an ideological system already understood as “real” by the public—mythologies about racial decline and the consequences of debased motherhood and depraved female behavior on family life and the future of American civilization. This potent combination gained wide cultural acceptance and gave states the institutional power to alter women’s lives through the application of laws intended to stabilize an endangered domesticity. With this development, the concept of monotony became accessible to rationalization by organizations—an entry point that by the 1940s would allow ideas about monotony to open-up possibilities of social engineering across broad spans of time and space. Activists concerned about the effects of monotony on female wage-earners helped engender social change. But as protective legislation achieved success, this female-specific discourse faded. Nor was it revitalized by any group prior to World War II. Its historical moment had passed.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 20-21.

Deviance or Deliverance?: Monotonous Work, Maladjusted Men, and The Problem of Leisure, 1885-1915

There was no quick resolution to solving the problem of monotony for male workers during the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Ideas about how specialized labor affected men were grounded in the same formulaic equation as for female wage-earners—the monotony caused by repetitive work created mentally dulled citizens who were a potential threat to social norms. Though traditionally about industrial workers, a parallel discourse emerged in the early twentieth century to include male employees in the service sector—clerks, mailmen, hotel employees, and pharmacists—that indicated a growing discontent with the rationalized techniques of modern business administration.

There were notable differences between the accounts social critics, activists, and journalists constructed about the effects of monotony on women and men. In the late nineteenth century excessive drinking and industrial unrest were the social problems attributed to bored male workers. Little concern was expressed about the corrupting influences of commercial mass amusements on male virtue and morality—unlike the discourse about monotony and female wage-earners. In the twentieth century, the number of popular articles written about male employees and monotony multiplied and attracted national attention. The social predicaments of saloons, strikes, and the “tramp problem,” were joined by a series of issues connected to the workplace—inefficient production, job turnover, and industrial accidents. Once social scientists began to believe workplace monotony might decrease profits, they sought a different set of solutions than those offered in the public sphere. One development was the genesis of a scientific discourse about boredom and work. In 1913, Harvard professor Hugo Münsterberg made the issue

of workplace monotony a cornerstone for creating the new profession of industrial psychology

Anxieties over degraded fatherhood and the decline of civilization never took a central role in the ideas circulating throughout popular culture about male employees. Nor was there any extensive scientific documentation accumulated by the social survey movement about the existence of workplace monotony for men and its potential negative influence on the household. The rhetoric of debased domesticity and racial decline were powerful elements in obtaining protective legislation for women and children—the Supreme Court decision in *Muller v. Oregon* (1908) ran against the laissez-faire principles and the “liberty of contract” doctrine established three years earlier in *Lochner v. New York* (1905). The majority in *Lochner* ruled that placing limits on working hours was a violation of the rights of employers and employees to purchase and sell labor.⁷⁹

The primary solution advocated by activists concerned with the effects of monotony on male workers was the eight hour day and higher wages—to increase leisure time and consumption as a means of reinvigorating dulled minds. The ideology of separate spheres foreclosed the possibility of portraying repetitive work as the cause of inadequate fathers and circumvented contemplating male responsibility for racial degeneration (unlike women)—reasons why protective legislation was not an option for men. This inability to transcend the bonds of a narrow-minded worldview allowed ideas about monotony to converge inadvertently with corporate interests. The combination of *Lochner* with the Supreme Court decision in *Adair v. United States* (1908)—upholding the use of “yellow dog” contracts and the right of employers to dismiss workers who

⁷⁹ Peter Irons, *A People's History of the Supreme Court* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 255.

joined unions—left the goal of an eight hour day unobtainable for most workers until the late 1930s.⁸⁰

Prior to World War I, alternatives to the eight hour day appeared. Prohibitionist critics of commercial entertainment sought to end the “excessive” drinking of male industrial workers. Social critics who feared the growing ranks of tramps advocated industrial education. A few novelists offered solutions to monotonous jobs: socialist revolution, becoming a farmer, or accepting long hours of drudgery in exchange for a vibrant family life and materialist pleasures were all represented as possibilities. The failure of unions and their allies to win a rapid victory for the eight hour day permitted ideas about monotony and male work to endure in popular culture and in the scientific world for decades. This sustained discourse had a powerful influence on American culture. In the 1920s, boredom transcended the realm of work and appeared in popular culture as a natural psychological response to the conditions of modern existence. By the 1930s, corporate managers and industrial psychologists had pursued therapeutic responses to workplace monotony. Several of their canner efforts, the use of background music and psychopharmacology, have had a potent influence on contemporary life. Still, many of the apprehensions over specialized work and the effects of monotony on men were specific to the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. They originated in a small tract written by a Congregational clergyman.

Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis (1885), by Josiah Strong, was one of the first bestselling publications to address the problem of boredom in American society. Following the logic of separate spheres—in advanced civilizations men provided for families and sheltered them from the marketplace while women took

⁸⁰ Ibid., 259.

care of domestic duties and raised children to become proper citizens—Strong separated the effects of monotony into the worlds of female and male work. “Such dreary monotony is the most wearisome of all manual labor. It admits of little interest and no enthusiasm in one's work; and, worst of all, it cramps the mind and belittles the man,” he wrote. The degeneration of male factory operatives into “imbeciles” robbed of their “strength, wit, and versatility” threatened to defer the millennial reign of Christ’s kingdom in the United States.⁸¹

Strong connected boredom to two social issues specifically related to men—industrial unrest and the problem of alcohol abuse after work. The violent clashes between labor and capital during the late nineteenth century made it seem that class conflict might tear the nation apart. Strong and others suggested the psychological rebellion against highly specialized work was one factor influencing workers to strike. Bored male industrial workers, according to Strong, became a group ready to furnish “recruits to the criminal, intemperate, socialistic and revolutionary classes.” Socialists and anarchist writers such as Albert Parsons quoted Karl Marx’s statements on monotonous labor as one of the reasons the capitalist system inevitably led to proletarian revolution. The idea that workplace monotony caused men to revolt against their employers sustained itself well into the twentieth century and became one of the primary factors stimulating research conducted by industrial psychologists.⁸²

⁸¹ Strong believed the ravages of monotony would help erode Protestantism into the “mere formalism” found in Europe. Americans could not be God’s chosen people if they no longer had the superior intelligence, physical strength, and the Protestant sensibilities required to rule the earth. Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 28; Strong, *Our Country*, 95–96, 160, 180.

⁸² Strong, *Our Country*, 98; Albert Richard Parsons, *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Scientific Basis* (Chicago: Mrs. A.R. Parsons Publishing, 1887), 38, 45.

Strong also associated boredom with the problem of leisure—concerns over the socially disruptive behavior of industrial laborers outside of the workplace. The “liquor vote” resulted in “rabble ruled” cities, contended Strong. Though he was concerned about the political participation of Catholic factory operatives, other writers were anxious about the vice-ridden habits of all immigrant workers. Felix L. Oswald believed “millions of workingmen” used alcohol as an “anodyne” to overcome the experience of repetitive factory work—a habit leading to gambling or a life of crime. Throughout the late nineteenth century temperance advocates such as Lillie B. Chace Wyman and Lyman Abbott represented drunkenness and dissipation as the consequence of workers trying to escape “the dreary monotony of their lives.”⁸³

Employers saw drinking as eroding work discipline and efficiency, while temperance proponents stressed that wages should be put to more constructive uses such as saving for a home. On the other hand, male industrial workers did not view drinking as a response to boredom, a reminder of the gap between observers and the observed. For many, gathering in a saloon was an important communal activity. Saloons were social spaces for meeting and making friends—a place to talk about work, politics, religion and other community issues. Saloon culture also promoted group values—alliances, camaraderie, and collectivity—over acquisitive capitalism. Still, the attitudes of workers about drinking were not part of the agenda of those writing about the problem of monotony. Over time, as historical conditions changed, alcoholism and crime remained central to an ever expanding set of social problems attributed to boredom. As with female

⁸³ Strong, *Our Country*, 43; Felix L. Oswald, “Temperance Teachings of Science,” *The Chautauquan* 5, no. 6 (1885): 311-314; Lillie B. Chace Wyman, “Companions of the Cotton Loom,” *The Chautauquan* 18, no. 5 (1894): 603; Lyman Abbott, *Christianity and Social Problems* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1896), 221; Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 47, 61.

wage-earners, popular critics depicted boredom and not individual choice as the culprit behind deviant behavior.⁸⁴

Strong's *Our Country* contained antimodern yearnings for a time before "the age of machinery," where variety in work and the promise of becoming a master craftsman eliminated any possibility of class distinctions and "ingenuity and taste" flourished among laborers. The clergyman knew this was only wishful thinking and he offered a single solution to the problem of boredom. Businessmen needed to restrain their voracious appetites for profit and in the spirit of Christian self-denial "make the nation greater" by sharing their wealth. Paying male industrial workers higher wages would diminish class strife and stop forcing them to send their women to work in order to avoid poverty—wives could stay at home to raise their children as solid Americanized citizens. Other writers such as Lyman Abbott, Frederick William Heidner, and Morrison Isaac Swift also advocated raising wages and limiting work to an eight-hour day to compensate for monotony. Unlike Strong, these social critics saw increased leisure time as an antidote to boredom, as long as the laboring classes used the free hours to learn "the requisites of social improvement."⁸⁵

Temperance reformers, on their "noble mission of mercy and uplifting," suggested building club-houses with a hall for lectures and concerts, rooms for club meetings, and a library to provide alternative recreational activities other than the saloon. Felix L. Oswald wanted to build Temperance Gardens for industrial workers—a public garden with a free gymnasium, a footrace track, ball ground, a tennis-hall or nine-pin-

⁸⁴ Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will*, 47, 61, 223.

⁸⁵ Strong, *Our Country*, 9, 215, 96-97; Abbott, *Christianity and Social Problems*, 221; Frederick William Heidner, *The Laborer's Friend and Employer's Counselor: A Popular Treatise on the Labor Question* (Chicago: Heidner Publishing Company, 1895), 19; Morrison Isaac Swift, *Problems of the New Life* (Ashtabula, Ohio: Democratic Standard, 1891), 29.

alley, a free bath, and a few zoological attractions. These social spaces would “supersede vicious pastimes” and “regenerate the manhood of the tempted classes.” Though approximating the more vibrant women’s club movement, these solutions for bored male workers never took hold.⁸⁶

Instead, the eight hour day and higher wages gained primacy as the best solution for the ravages of repetitive work by the twentieth century. Social critics writing about monotony reflected more general ideas promoted by organized labor. Labor leaders argued higher wages and increased leisure time would lead to progressive consumption. They claimed that workers desired virtuous leisure time activities—spending time at home with the family, going to church, reading, taking night classes, and purchasing material comforts—that contributed to moral uplift, national economic strength, and a more enlightened citizenry.⁸⁷

Ideas about the detrimental effects of specialized work and boredom on male workers were widely dispersed in popular culture by the end of the nineteenth century. But a vigorous public defense of monotonous labor only emerged in response to a few off-hand comments by Henry Codman Potter, the Episcopal bishop of the New York diocese. In 1897, Trinity Church in New York City held a week-long celebration for its Bicentenary. On Jubilee Day, rows of people lined Broadway and Wall Street hoping to get a chance to hear Bishop Potter give the keynote address. In a church filled with dignitaries, he began to speak at 11:00 a.m., “an hour when the tide of business was at its flood,” as a reporter for the *New York Times* noted. Though most of Potter’s comments

⁸⁶ Oswald, “Temperance Teachings of Science,” 313; Morrison Isaac Swift, “Shall University Culture Be More Widely Diffused?” *Journal of Pedagogy*, September 1889, 6.

⁸⁷ Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 106-107.

were about Trinity's history, he spent a few minutes talking about a visit he spent at a large factory where the monotony of specialized labor was "turning the laboring man into a simple idiot." He detailed how factory operatives drank, gambled and fought to escape their boredom and told the audience it was obvious why labor struck against repetitive work. "Not one of us but would become a striker. Myself among the first," Bishop Potter concluded.⁸⁸

Though, as one critic explained, the remarks by Bishop Potter were part of an extensive literature already known to the public, they evoked a vitriolic national response. The Bishop was called "scandalous," "a public enemy," "an immature theorist," and someone whose "very kindly anxiety" resulted in wasted sympathy. The most prevalent defense of specialized labor came from those who equated the productive output of factory goods as the inevitable sign of advanced civilization—monotony was the price male industrial workers had to pay for the nation's progress. "The world must improve, though the individual is hurt," wrote Starr Hoyt Nichols about the effects of boredom on workers. Some editors in trade journals admitted specialized labor was "mechanical, monotonous and repulsive," but then went on to characterize the resulting discontent and harm done to individual workers as what "human progress depends for its momentum." Often they raised the idea that certain workers were innately suited for monotonous work.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ "Jubilee Day at Trinity," *New York Times*, May 6, 1897, 12; "Bishop Potter Condemns Machinery," *New York Times*, May 6, 1897, 6.

⁸⁹ "False Teachers," *The Electrical Engineer*, May 12, 1897, 505; "Bishop Potter and Machinery," *The Bibliotheca Sacra*, July 1897, 580; "Machine Tenders 'Gamble and Fight'," *The Engineer*, May 8, 1897, 114; Starr Hoyt Nichols, "Men and Machinery," *The North American Review* 166, no. 498 (1898): 608; "The Election and Republican Institutions," *Gunton's Magazine*, January 1897, 12.

Laborers enjoyed repetitive work, contended Nichols. Monotonous toils suited these men exactly because “the majority of human minds are weak, and slow, and could do little in the world but for simple tasks adapted to small and barren brains.” An editor in *The Bibliotheca Sacra* argued “idle and useless men” were well-fitted for repetitive work and the opportunity gave them the “dignity of producers.” The belief that intellectually inferior people possessed a tolerance for monotony became the basis for research conducted by British industrial psychologists in the 1920s. Trade journals also portrayed factory operatives as enjoying their work because, after becoming habituated to being an extension of the machine, there was plenty of time to think—another idea that ultimately captured the attention of industrial psychologists, who were especially interested in daydreams and other states of inattention on the job.⁹⁰

After 1900, the number of articles written about repetitive work and the effect of monotony on male workers sharply increased. The same two formulations—specialized labor created mentally dulled minds or people were innately tolerant to monotony—remained intact from the nineteenth century. When combined with the discourse about female wage-earners, these ideas became accepted as common knowledge throughout American culture, though they were not substantiated by any research proving that boredom existed as a psychological state in workers. “The work of the factory means usually the doing of the same small task over and over again—moment in and moment out, hour after hour, day after day. Its reactive effect upon the mind is dullness, apathy, a mechanical and stolid spirit, without vivacity or hope,” was a typical example of how twentieth century social critics wrote about male industrial workers.

⁹⁰ Nichols, “Men and Machinery,” 602, 609; “Machinery and the Laborer,” *American Machinist*, May 13, 1897, 368.

In a new development, complaints from the service sector about low-paying white collar jobs emerged. Clerks, postal workers, hotel employees and pharmacists surfaced in the press, suffering from monotony. Newell Dwight Hillis, a liberal Protestant clergyman who succeeded Henry Ward Beecher at Brooklyn's Plymouth Congregational Church, portrayed the life of a clerk as analogous to that of a convict working on a sand pile. Self-sufficiency dissolved in the tedious routine of male office workers. "Monotony destroys the soul. Monotony is dangerous," he wrote. Dispatches from "the field" began to fill trade journals with complaints about tedious jobs. In *The Postal Record*, a mailman filed a report beginning with a quote from *Hamlet*—"There is a divinity that shapes our ends"—followed by his comment: "One wonders what kind of a blooming divinity it is that hands a fellow a job like carrying mail—this daily, endless, monotonous grind with no chance of ever getting anywhere in particular." An editorial in *The Bulletin of Pharmacy* lamented the life of "the man with the pestle" whose "monotonous routine" created "much pathos in the sacrifices" pharmacists made to serve their customers.⁹¹

William Arch McKeever, a professor of philosophy at Kansas State Agricultural College, expressed concern over elevator operators shriveling-up "in both body and soul" due to the monotonous nature of their daily toil. Service workers who wrote about boring jobs stressed the consequences of their exploitation as inexpensive labor. Long hours, low wages, the sense of relinquishing their individuality to the rationalized workplace, and a loss of upward mobility were their main complaints. Other commentators empathized

⁹¹ Edgar Gardner Murphy, *Problems of the Present South* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1904), 108; Newell Dwight Hillis, "What Life Offers the Clerk: His Perils and His Rewards," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 15, 1907, E2; Mr. Fagin, "Branch Items," *The Postal Record* 28, no. 5 (1915): 146.

with these concerns but tended to focus on the social problems caused by a rapidly growing and stupefied workforce.⁹²

In the early twentieth century the literature about the effects of monotony on male workers was dominated by anxieties over two social problems—excessive drinking and turning tramp. According to the emerging conventional wisdom, industrial workers and service sector employees, especially clerks, were compelled to consume alcohol as the only escape from their dreary jobs. Turning tramp arose from the need to flee repetitive work as an act of self-preservation. In the dominant view, this problem affected industrial workers exclusively and was a significant concern of anti-child labor activists. As in the nineteenth century, temperance advocates, journalists, novelists and social critics did not blame male workers for their behavior but, instead, assigned responsibility to external forces. The notion that boredom caused alcohol abuse was a historically contingent belief: one of the animating impulses behind depictions of dissipated workers was the push for Prohibition. Still, the connection between boredom and alcoholism remains intact in contemporary American culture. Using the idea of monotony to explain why workers turned tramp, however, was more firmly established in specific historical conditions.⁹³

From the nineteenth century until World War I, as the Prohibition movement spread, there was a single-minded focus on monotonous work driving workers to drink during their free time. Unlike female wage-earners, according to reformers, bored male

⁹² William Arch McKeever, *The Industrial Training of the Boy* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1914), 45; “The Man with the Pestle,” Editorial, *The Bulletin of Pharmacy* 14, no. 1 (1900): 1-2.

⁹³ In the late nineteenth century, Anthony Comstock, founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, represented gambling-addicted clerks as defrauding their employers. He equated gambling with masturbation as unleashing uncontrollable desires. Popular articles about clerks represented excessive drinking as an irrepressible effect of boredom but gambling and masturbation were not mentioned. Nicola Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents, Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 108.

employees were not corrupted by mass commercial entertainments. Ideas about the improper use of leisure time for female factory operatives were quite concrete—women could lose their virtue, making them unfit for motherhood, and premarital sex could lead to a life of prostitution. This was not true for male workers. The social or personal consequences of excessive drinking were never made explicit. Typically “monotonous drudgery” was seen as begetting a “feverish craving for alcoholic stimulants.” Durant Drake, a professor of philosophy at Vassar, explained the need for alcohol as the only way to vivify dulled lives because “a fleeting anaesthesia of unhappy memories and longings is effected, and for the moment life seems worth living.” Most writers did not go to the trouble of trying to explain what type of psychological relief male workers derived from their visits to the saloon.⁹⁴

Novelists portrayed male alcoholism as an inevitable response to the conditions of industrial labor. Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle* (1906) told the horrifying tale of Stanislovas, a child laborer, who was left intellectually vacuous after placing cans on a conveyor belt for long hours in a lard factory. At his next job, as beer carrier at an oil factory, he was eaten by rats after drinking too much and falling asleep in a locked room. Jurgus Rudkus, the novel’s main male character, worked on the animal-killing floors and disdainfully judged fellow workers who took refuge on Whiskey Row. Though Jurgus shunned drinking, he recognized that alcohol gave a fellow worker “courage for his task; the deadly brutalizing monotony of it did not affect him so.” After an industrial accident, Jurgus was forced to shovel fertilizer into carts to make a living, a degrading task that left him covered with manure and sickened by phosphates. The repetitive, brutalizing job

⁹⁴ Alfred Martin Colwick, “Poverty and Social Decay,” *The Arena* 26, no. 1 (1901): 37; Durant Drake, *Problems of Conduct: An Introductory Survey of Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1914), 197.

stole his capacity for self-reflection and he became an alcoholic before turning to tramping. James Oppenheim's "Pay Envelopes" (1909) was filled with stories of men who were compelled to drink as a response to their repetitive jobs. In a characteristic passage, bored steel mill workers instinctively rebelled: "The men felt riotous. Penned in fires all day, stupefied, stifled, exhausted, overworked, their whole being craved for wildness, for irresponsibility, for forgetfulness. They began drinking heavily." Industrial workers received the most attention for their drinking habits but a few journalists also began to express concern over the leisure time behavior of clerks.⁹⁵

During the late nineteenth century clerks believed they had a chance for upward mobility and their jobs would lead to self-betterment. They expressed a faith in the middle-class discourse of manliness that stressed self-mastery and restraint—the idea that hard work and living abstemiously allowed one to become a self-made man. Potential clerks wrote application letters to employers emphasizing their good character. Honesty, integrity, reliability, not smoking cigarettes or chewing tobacco, sobriety, refusal to use coarse language, and abstinence from carousing were all included by applicants to prove their qualifications.⁹⁶

In the early twentieth century, the growth of large corporations swelled the ranks of office workers, which led to an increase in journalistic articles focusing on the plight of clerks. From 1900–1910, the growth in the number of clerks was 127 percent. Employers hired native-born Americans who had at least a high-school education. These young men made roughly \$800 annually, which was enough money to lead a lower-

⁹⁵ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Signet Classics, 2001), 82, 93, 149, 159, 174, 331, 351; James Oppenheim, "Slag," in *Pay Envelopes: Tales of the Mill, the Mine and the City Street* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1911), 119.

⁹⁶ Oliver Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870–1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 128–129; Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 12.

middle-class life. In contrast, a typical male factory worker made \$300 per year. During the Progressive Era, the bureaucratic mechanisms of large corporations established a homogenous, impersonal work culture where clerks found it increasingly difficult to gain promotion. Increasingly, lower-level white collar employees began to associate the idea of success with the ability to participate in pleasurable leisure activities and to purchase consumer goods. These changes in the lives of clerks and other low-paid service sector workers did not go unnoticed by contemporary social critics.⁹⁷

Articles written about low-salaried white collar workers mentioned going out and getting drunk but this behavior was linked as much to the despair about lost ambition and individuality as it was to reflexive reactions over monotonous workplaces. Long passages described how the rationalized office or store reduced male employees to the equivalent of human machines. Some articles harkened back to a time when work was more varied and self-reliance flourished and lamented the loss of “individuality that characterized our fathers.” The theme of habituation—of having a sense of self-worth and ambition crushed over time until an employee became a “high-class automation”—was a commonplace staple of newspaper and trade journal articles.

“Why Clerks Lose Ambition” described how after a few years of exacting, predictable routine a clerk recognized “the days of his ambition are over and he knows that it is the monotony of the office and nothing else that has killed him.” In addition to apprehension about lower middle-class men losing their bourgeois values by seeking relief in saloons where the atmosphere was “charged with danger as a thunder storm is full of electric darts,” writers also saw repetitive work as destroying aesthetic sensibilities. An editorial about druggists mourned the “loss of culture in the best sense”

⁹⁷ Zunz, *Making America Corporate*, 126-127, 130, 148; Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 13.

where worn-out drudges could not enjoy society, books, music, and art—“all the things that enrich and broaden the mind.” The writer concluded by saying “in every view, this starved life is a mistake.” Ideas about service employees and the negative effects of monotony during leisure time were just emerging in the early twentieth century and they gained momentum after World War I.⁹⁸

The problem of white-collar monotony was becoming a serious social issue, as one extreme short story suggested. James Oppenheim’s “The Empty Life” chronicled the lives of Paul Lynch, a clerk, and his wife Louise, a former saleswoman in the glove department at Macys. They lived in the “Model Tenements” on Seventy-Ninth Street near the East River—a reference to the Shively Sanitary Tenements. The couple exploited Louise’s eight-year-old sister, Tessie, as a domestic servant. Paul was “a cog in the well-ordered machine of Business.” He worked in the Tariff Department of an express company alongside his fellow clerks, “a group of bloodless, unbackboned, manless men.” These clerks represented the feminization of the workplace, and their emasculation meant they no longer met the standards of manliness required to be responsible citizens. Throughout the day, rows upon rows of men mechanically corrected old rate-sheets until at five-thirty, overwhelmed by monotony, they ran for the exits. “Was it any wonder that Paul, with the other clerks, felt the terrible lust for life; that he wanted to plunge into excesses and excitement; that he craved strong drink?” asked the story’s narrator.⁹⁹

One day Tessie came home from school and began to cook dinner. Exhausted from her domestic servitude, she turned on the gas to boil meat, fell asleep before lighting

⁹⁸ Hillis, “What Life Offers the Clerk,” E2; Martin Arends, “Why Clerks Lose Ambition: Daily Grind is Monotonous,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 27, 1907, E7; “The Man with the Pestle,” 2.

⁹⁹ James Oppenheim, “The Empty Life,” in *Pay Envelopes: Tales of the Mill, the Mine and the City Street* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1911), 186-188.

the stove, and was asphyxiated. Paul found Tessie's body. His mental degradation caused an elated reaction: "How precious Tess was, now she was gone! . . . one who ate up his food, used up his room. He was rid of her now." Oppenheim concluded the story by giving Paul and Louise a second chance at life but underscored the social threat of monotony. Alcoholism was one consequence; turning tramp was another. Both allowed critics to shift blame away from individual moral turpitude toward the material conditions of the workplace.¹⁰⁰

In the early twentieth century, the "tramp problem" had become a staple of popular journalism. Estimates based on police reports and railroad accident rates suggest the number of tramps grew from 46,000 in 1893 to at least 500,000 by 1908. The boom and bust cycle of business left an immense number of men unemployed from the 1870s through the early 1900s. Turn-of-the-century moralists, shunning external economic forces, represented tramps as economic failures who hated work. "The fundamental characteristic of the professional tramp is laziness," wrote an editor in the *Commercial & Financial Chronicle*. Comparing male tramps to locusts, the author ran through a list of what remedies the "leading men of Philadelphia" were considering:

It was proposed to send the tramps to jail and keep them on bread and water; to administer chastisement with the aid of the horsewhip; to force them to meditate on the evils of laziness while abstaining from the use of food; or to give such severe punishment that they would thereafter not afflict the State with their presence. Others favored what would seem to be the best solution of the problem—they would establish wood-yards and stone piles at which the tramps should be set to work sawing and splitting the wood and breaking the stone.

These comments were characteristic of the copious amount of puritanically stained ink that spilled onto the pages of trade journals, social welfare publications, and newspapers about the "tramp evil" from 1900-1915. Portraying tramps as undeserving parasites, some

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 195.

leaders of charity societies called for an end to free meals and lodgings for tramps unless they passed a work test. A few individuals countered these merciless assertions by portraying tramping as a response to monotonous work—an expression of social Christian beliefs that the poor were not responsible for their fate.¹⁰¹

Jane Addams was the most visible figure who represented turning tramp as a flight away from specialized labor and an inability to tolerate the boredom at work. In the early 1900s Addams spoke-out about tramping in relation to child labor. Her speeches and essays like “Child Labor and Pauperism” were reprinted in hundreds of journals and the newsletters of charitable organizations. “In our municipal lodging-house in Chicago it is surprising to find how many tramps are tired to death with monotonous labor and begin to tramp in order to get away from it,” she wrote. Addams thought boys became tramps because they started working too early and did not have the mental vigor or moral stamina to make “a man stick to his work whether he likes it or not.” In *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1909), Addams continued to describe tramping as a revolt against factory monotony. The influence of Addams on popular thought was extensive and it was not uncommon to find authors such as Pauline N. Newman repeating how young boys who spent five or six years of labor at hard and monotonous work developed

¹⁰¹ The discourse about tramps was based on traditional Puritan values. Cotton Mather in the *Magalia Christi Americana* (1702) wrote that Jesus Christ forbid showing any favor to beggars. Rodgers, *Work Ethic in Industrial America*, 227, 228; “The Tramp Nuisance,” Editorial, *The Investors’ Supplement of the Commercial & Financial Chronicle*, July 27, 1901, 7; W. R. Elkin, “The Problem of Civilization in the Twentieth Century,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 13, no. 4 (1908): 557; O. F. Lewis, “The Tramp Problem,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 40 (1912): 223; Cotton Mather, *Magalia Christi Americana*, vol.1 (Hartford: Silas Andrus and Son, 1855), 102–103.

into tramps and “useless beings—useless so far as humanity is concerned.” At the same time, a few journalists began to broaden these ideas beyond the scope of child labor.¹⁰²

A reporter for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* told the tale of a worker, aged 34, who had worked in a factory since his early childhood “lifting the arm of a certain machine.” The worker became obsessed “day and night” with the recurring image of his repetitive task and was almost driven insane. He grew to despise “the deadly monotony of the factory” and began hating the idea of work in general. The man woke one morning “possessed with the idea he could not go back to the shop” and quit his job on the spot. Since he had no other skills, the only alternative was for him to “turn tramp.” Prescriptive tales intended to correct misguided attitudes about tramps also began to appear in newspapers and the publications of welfare organizations.¹⁰³

A typical fable had a skeptical churchgoing citizen confronting a tramp asking for money. The citizen would tell the tramp he thought there was no reason for anyone being hungry and to need assistance since the solution was to start working. The tramp would then explain why he felt the citizen was wrong. A story in *The Public* had the tramp asking if the citizen ever considered “the fatal monotony” of factory work. “I’ve been a tramp ten years. I am better off man than I was when I was consuming iron filings ten hours a day six days in the week, and by way of recreation getting moderately drunk on Saturday night,” concluded the fictional tramp named “Wise Willie.” The discourse about male tramps and industrial monotony was grounded in a set of historical specific conditions lasting from 1900 to World War I. After the war, it was no longer relevant as a

¹⁰² Jane Addams, “Child Labor and Pauperism,” *The Christian Work and the Evangelist*, October 10, 1903, 495; Addams, *Spirit of Youth*, 113; Pauline N. Newman, “Child Labor—A Menace,” *The Railroad Trainman* 31, no. 8 (1914): 673.

¹⁰³ M. R. Gray, “Over-Specialization’s Effect on the Worker,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 9, 1904, E1.

call to action for opponents of child labor or a meaningful way to explain labor turnover.¹⁰⁴

A parallel interest in whether monotony was responsible for a loss in corporate productivity and profit also arose in the early twentieth century. A small number of popular articles began to associate the effects of boredom in the workplace with unrest, inefficient production, habituation, accidents on the job, and turnover. Writers usually framed the issue in terms of male employees—most likely because they formed the bulk of the industrial and service sector workforce. The influence of scientific management techniques focused on studying worker behavior to increase efficiency contributed to the realization that monotony might pose a barrier to maximum productivity. Corporate managers were unlikely to take popular articles describing the relationship between monotony and industrial problems seriously because they lacked any quantitative data. Though the rationalized organization of factories and offices was still in its infancy, there were significant increases in productivity compared to the past decade. Only after World War I would the quest for maximum productivity begin to create a corporate audience willing to consider monotony as a problem worth consideration. Still, the issues popular articles raised had an enduring influence on the new profession of industrial psychology.

Unions tried to raise awareness of how states of inattention hindered industrial output. As the American Federation of Labor and other unions began to practice “business unionism”—the acceptance of industrial concentration and the right of management to control the way goods were produced—union leaders began to acknowledge the need for America to maintain its position as the world’s preeminent industrial power. Within this worldview, unions began to worry that a bored labor force

¹⁰⁴ “The ‘Decent’ Tramp,” *The Public*, June 21, 1903, 187.

would undermine the nation's productivity. In an interview with the *New York Times*, John Mitchell, president of the United Mine Workers of America, said "the work, the men, the Nation—all will suffer" if the problem of monotony at work was not solved. The issue was also noticed by authors concerned with the business affairs of service-oriented companies. Frank Channing Haddock in *Business Power: A Practical Manual in Financial Ability* (1914), a Power-Book Library publication, told corporate administrators that if they continued to make their clerks' "life a monotonous routine" where they were "reduced to automata," the consequence would be a considerable loss in profit due to inefficiency. The concern with inefficiency did not stimulate any psychological research until the 1920s but the growing number of industrial accidents caught the attention of a University of Chicago sociologist, who conducted the first American research on the effects of monotony on industrial workers.¹⁰⁵

In 1911, Emory S. Bogardus, a young University of Chicago sociologist, received permission to conduct research on industrial accidents at eleven factories in Chicago. His research began by reiterating ideas about monotony among male workers already established in American popular culture. "Proof is hardly necessary" to understand how the subdivision of labor and excessive speeding on the shop floor caused "the stupefying effects of monotony," he wrote. Bogardus provided this passage as scientific evidence of the existence of boredom in industrial work:

Along one side of the room in which the edges of the sickle section are beveled are arranged a row of grindstones six feet across. In front of these whirring stones sit a line of powerful, heavy-faced men, not a spark of animation in their faces. They are doing the same thing; they drop one of these plates into the slot of the

¹⁰⁵ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 125; Edward Marshall, "John Mitchell on Dangers Confronting Workingmen," *New York Times*, December 18, 1910, SM3; Frank Channing Haddock, *Business Power: A Practical Manual in Financial Ability* (Meriden, CT: The Pelton Publishing Company, 1914), 298.

frame, shove the frame against the rapidly revolving stone and then draw it back; drop, shove, draw back. . . . 5,000 times each day.

The men, true to the dominant metaphor in this emerging literature, merged with their machines. According to Bogardus, they also drank to escape their dreary lives, though this observation was beyond the scope of his research project.¹⁰⁶

Fear of lost individuality was not the motivating factor behind Bogardus's research. He wanted to explain why 30,000 workers were killed and 500,000 injured in industry annually. His main concern was that males "handicapped for life" or killed by industrial accidents left wives and children without a breadwinner. Bogardus's report on the conditions in Chicago's packing, canning, steel, and metalworking industries cataloged a revolting litany of mutilation. The fingers of machine operators slipped into the gears of machines or were caught under dies. Hands were sliced open or cut-off by moving knives or fell onto ripaws. According the research report, these types of accidents were caused by inattention—the subjective state engendered by monotony.¹⁰⁷

Bogardus was the first social scientist to design a controlled experiment about the effects of monotony on male factory workers in the United States. At the Psychological Laboratory of the University of Chicago, he built a special machine with the help of Professor James R. Angell. The device was "designed especially to incorporate as many as possible of the general features of the machines used in the dangerous trades" without causing harm to the test subjects. The research subjects caught a wood block with their left hand as it came out of the machine and dropped it in an open spout. They simultaneously used their right hand to drop another block into the machine to create a

¹⁰⁶ Emory S. Bogardus, "The Relation of Fatigue to Industrial Accidents," *The American Journal of Sociology* 17, no. 3 (November, 1911): 351-353, 357.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 362, 355.

continuous process. The rate of the machine started at 30 blocks per minute and was increased to 37 ½ blocks per minute. In addition, a revolving shield whirled around the area blocks were being picked-up and dropped. Bogardus noted the subjects “manifested an instinctive dread of getting hit” in the hands.¹⁰⁸

He found that more errors occurred once the speed of the machine was increased and theorized that a combination of muscular fatigue and the inattention caused by monotony caused industrial accidents. As a solution, Bogardus called for a Constitutional amendment requiring employers to provide compulsory accident insurance—an idea influenced by European social welfare legislation. He thought employers would “replace monotonous and speeded-up hand operations” with machines to minimize insurance costs and shorten the hours of work to eliminate more accidents.¹⁰⁹

Bogardus promoted vocational selection, based on his research, as a method to identify the men most suited for repetitive industrial work. According to Bogardus, the most qualified applicants would possess mental acuity; a conclusion implying that tolerance to boredom was an inherited trait. Likewise, resistance to monotony was seen as an innate characteristic by industrial psychologists but, for them, low intelligence was the key determinant in selecting people for highly specialized tasks. Bogardus’s belief in keeping the discussion of monotony open to public debate, and using legislation as a solution to the problem, ran counter to the industrial psychologists’ approach. They would attempt to steer scientific research into the private world of managerial control where social reform was undesirable.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 363, 370, 373, 366.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 374. Emory S. Bogardus, “The Relation of Fatigue to Industrial Accidents” (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1912), 67.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 68.

Industrial psychologists would also investigate two other issues raised in the popular press—job turnover and habituation. Union leaders and social welfare activists identified the tendency for male industrial workers to switch jobs as an expensive problem for corporations. “They aimlessly float into an occupation and after a short time just as aimlessly float out again... They see nothing but the monotony of an endless task and flee from it,” wrote Robert W. Selvidge. The explanation for why men left their jobs was the same as for why they turned to tramping, an indication that social critics believed the barrier between self-selected employment and unemployment was permeable. The idea of habituation began to receive attention in the trade journals of efficiency engineers. From their perspective, as time passed, workers became conditioned to stop resisting repetitive processes. This “evolutionary” response served as a coping mechanism to avoid feeling dread about performing monotonous tasks and resulted in the loss of workers’ ambition and their sense of responsibility. What problem habituation posed for employers was unclear, since workers would be more efficient and passive. Surfacing of the issue suggests rather that efficiency engineers were questioning the extreme consequences of their methods.¹¹¹

Since the late nineteenth century, unions had focused on the living wage and shorter working hours as the only solutions for alleviating the problem of workplace monotony. This strategy ceded control over the shop floor or business office to corporations. It meant employees would have no power to affect any structural changes intended to eliminate boredom in the workplace. In the early twentieth century, unions gained support for the eight hour day from academics, journalists, and welfare

¹¹¹ Robert W. Selvidge, “State Control of Entrance to Industries,” *Vocational Education* 3, no. 5 (1914): 342; Addams, *The Spirit of Youth*, 114; Marshall, “John Mitchell,” SM3; Becker, “Factory Education,” *Machinery*, 163.

organizations. These advocates claimed that the psychological uplift workers received from increased leisure time—spending time with families and friends, engaging in enlightening recreational activities and purchasing consumer goods—would revitalize stupefied minds. Labor leaders such as John Mitchell, George E. McNeil, and James O’Connell gave public speeches and wrote essays promoting shorter hours and higher wages as solutions to industrial monotony. Mitchell argued that obtaining material comfort and the “pleasures of life” was necessary for workers to maintain the upbeat attitude required for efficient production. McNeil believed the “monotonous, mind-destroying operation” of the factory system could only be balanced by allowing workers to regain their “personal identity” through increased leisure. Granting a worker more free time meant that his employer was treating him “as a man—a man with all the hopes and joys, the fears and responsibilities, of manhood,” wrote O’Connell. The restoration of manhood during leisure resulted in the increased prosperity of employer and employee alike.¹¹²

Such books as Nicholas Gilman’s *Methods of Industrial Peace* (1904) and Frank Mason’s *Business Principles and Organization* (1914) written by public intellectuals supported union efforts for shorter working hours, but the authors tended to focus on the benefits to corporations. Enlightened business owners found it “pays to arouse their [employees] interest in their work by allowing them a judicious amount of leisure,” wrote Mason. Jane Addams and her progressive managerial allies contended that social legislation to shorten hours and increase wages, along with vocational training, would

¹¹² Marshall, “John Mitchell,” SM3; George E. McNeil, “Trade Union Ideals,” *The American Economic Association Papers and Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual Meeting* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1903), 227; James O’Connell, “Piecework Not Necessary For Best Results in Machine Shop,” *The Engineering Magazine* 19, no. 3 (1900): 380.

break the spell of monotony for male workers. In the service sector, articles in trade journals also began to appear promoting shorter hours and more leisure, but most authors wanted organizations such as the National Association of Retail Druggists to set industry standards in lieu of national legislation. With the exception of Henry Ford's announcement in 1914 of the five dollar day and shorter working hours (if workers met the requirements of the Sociological Department), the push for the eight hour day met with employer resistance and was hindered by *Lochner v. New York*. The Supreme Court's decision in *Lochner* disallowed placing limits on working hours.¹¹³

The proponents of increased leisure were always put on the defensive by the critics of mass culture, even those who were sympathetic to the problem of specialized labor, to explain why bored male employees would choose enlightened recreational activities instead of turning to devitalizing commercial amusements. An editorialist in the *Hartford Courant* attacked the "astute purveyors of monotony who hasten to supply their wares to the worker who fears monotony." Bored male workers were the victims of mass amusements that afflicted them with "the most awful forms of monotony—the monotony of vulgar music, noise, unhealthful food and drink." As an alternative, the *Courant* suggested working men should read the classics, listen to sophisticated music, and attend "really good plays." These activities would not banish boredom, but at least gave workers "something to look forward to." Throughout the early twentieth century, Jane Addams consistently attacked the owners of commercial amusements and "gin-palaces" as "the most evil-minded and most unscrupulous members of the community." She argued the

¹¹³ Nicholas Paine Gilman, *Methods of Industrial Peace* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1904), 411; Frank Richardson Mason, *Business Principles and Organization* (New York: William P. Sullivan, 1914), 65; Addams, *Spirit of Youth*, 146–149, 128–129; "The Man with the Pestle," 2; Drake, *Problems of Conduct*, 205; Colwick, "Poverty and Social Decay," 37.

monotony and dullness of factory work made employees turn to “vicious excitements and trivial amusements.” Addams proposed legislation to provide for more “pure” forms of public recreation as a solution. There was an abundance of editorials and articles on the problems of leisure for industrial workers but the most acerbic critique came from a foreign visitor.¹¹⁴

In 1906, Maxim Gorky arrived in the United States to raise funds for the Bolsheviks. His entry into New York was met with fanfare but within a week the New York press savaged Gorky’s reputation due to his “immoral” conduct—traveling with his common-law wife. The fundraising mission was derailed and Gorky retired to an upstate New York farm where he started work on the novel *Mat*. Hoping to cheer-up the despondent writer, his friends brought him to Coney Island on a typical Sunday when the amusement park was crowded with 300,000 visitors. The trip, while not serving as a mirthful diversion, did stimulate Gorky to write the essay “Boredom,” which was published in *The Independent* in August, 1907.¹¹⁵

The essay skewered justifications behind the drive for shorter working hours and higher wages. American labor activists regarded increased leisure time and a greater opportunity to participate in consumer culture as the means to restore a sense of individuality and to refresh the deadening effects of monotonous work for employees. Gorky subverted these notions by satirizing the bored male industrial workers of New York City seeking the promise of “respite and tranquility” at Coney Island. Males

¹¹⁴ “An American Fear,” *Hartford Courant*, November 18, 1917, X5; Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets*, 7, 107–108, 14, 20.

¹¹⁵ Alexander Kaun, *Maxim Gorky and His Russia* (New York: Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith, 1931), 573, 576, 579, 591; Alex Rabinowitch, “Maxim Gorky’s Visit to America” (master’s thesis, University of Chicago, 1961), 23; Tovah Yedlin, *Maxim Gorky: A Political Biography* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 77; Maxim Gorky, “Boredom,” *The Independent*, August 8, 1907, 309–317.

brought their wives and children along as a gesture of manliness—to show they were the “benefactors of their families” who provided “not only bread, but also magnificent shows.” Coney Island, a “slimy marsh of boredom,” served not to refresh and revitalize but instead, according to Gorky, crushed the spirit of industrial workers. The park’s amusements furthered the process of degrading a mentally dulled worker’s subjectivity and left him with a “dismal ennui, which extinguishes thought.” Gorky’s critique deconstructed the core logic behind the push for shorter working hours.¹¹⁶

In addition, Gorky argued, “corrective” amusements were devised to teach working people how to obey the laws of the capitalist class. For example, a visit to “Hell” and the “Hereafter” brought excursionists into a dark hall where Satan sat “snickering” on a stage filled with prancing demons as a preacher delivered an instructive sermon. To avoid going to Hell, the people “should not kiss girls to whom they are not married, because then the girls might become bad women . . . people should not drink whiskey or beer or other liquors that arouse the passions: they should not visit saloons, but the churches,” intoned the minister. Gorky noted how the confusion of conflicting symbol systems—orthodox religious views condemning lustful or dissipating behavior situated within a commercial enterprise based on inducing hedonistic desires—continued to stupefy workers and “for that very reason it is profitable both to the traders in morality and the vendors of depravity.”¹¹⁷

Gorky historicized boredom as a specific material result of interconnected capitalist processes that left workers doubly robbed of their individuality and hard-earned money—an infinite loop where boring industrial conditions stimulated the search by

¹¹⁶ Gorky, “Boredom,” 310-311, 315, 313.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 314.

workers for new sensations, which resulted in further cultural malaise. His discontent with the mind-numbing effects of mechanized labor processes, the unceasing drive by factory operatives to consume shocking sensations during leisure hours, and their resulting loss of intellect and spirituality reflected Gorky's anti-Americanism and commitment to Bolshevik ideology. Still, he addressed the main issues that domestic critics of increased leisure time for industrial workers found troublesome. The sponsors of shorter hours and increased wages attempted to deflect these critiques but their only recourse was the unconvincing assertion that workers would naturally want to seek enlightened recreational pursuits or they would have to be properly educated. In the short term, reformers seeking to change the leisure habits of industrial workers were more successful than those who concentrated on wages and hours.

To address the social problem most commonly connected to bored male workers, temperance activists advocated the absolute prohibition of the manufacture, sale, and importation of all alcoholic liquor, insisting that minds mentally dulled from repetitive work could not exercise self-restraint. The idea of an eight-hour day and higher wages serving as an antidote to monotonous work survived into the 1920s but the fretting about alcohol ended with the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919. Neither Prohibition nor shorter hours appealed to industrial psychologists but a few ideas targeting changes within the workplace did surface in the new profession.

The concept of variety, the rotation of tasks for industrial workers or service sector employees, began to emerge in the early twentieth century as an antidote to monotony. Changing jobs promotes "the tendency to relieve the monotony" to prevent "the active mind from becoming inactive and narrow for want of variation," wrote J. S.

Donaldson, Assistant Comptroller for the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. Industrial psychologists in the 1920s thought variety in work might solve the problem of boredom, but they met with resistance from corporate managers who were already invested in heightening the specialization of labor. Union leaders such as John Mitchell called for scientists to conduct research on monotony and in the interim promoted vocational selection as a solution—“so men who should be doctors are not made into brick layers.” After World War I, American industrial psychologists focused on vocational selection techniques in an attempt to convince personnel managers they could locate the man best suited for each type of job. Unlike Mitchell, industrial psychologists believed that inherited traits, especially intelligence, were the determinant factor—their agenda was to locate drones, not doctors. The accumulation of three decades of literature about what solutions might dispel industrial monotony heavily influenced the agenda of industrial psychologists.¹¹⁸

Alternative solutions to shorter hours, higher wages or changing work tasks also appeared in popular culture. John Quincy Adams Ward, the American sculptor, dismissed attempts to shorten hours and increase wages as misguided because a worker would “misuse the increase both in money and in leisure which he seeks.” Instead, he promoted building statues and placing works of art on the grounds and inside factories to “make men proud of being workers.” The inspiration workers gained from the plastic arts, he argued, would replace feelings of monotony. This solution to industrial boredom gained few advocates, though it reflected the persistent ideology of aesthetic uplift promoted by the settlement house and vocational training movements. The push for vocational training

¹¹⁸ J. S. Donaldson, “Training Office Workers for a Railroad,” *National Association of Corporation Schools, Second Annual Convention, Papers, Reports, Bibliographies and Discussions* (New York: The Trow Press, 1914), 525-526; Marshall, “John Mitchell,” SM3.

gathered momentum in the early twentieth century. Activists concerned with the welfare of industrial workers stressed the ameliorative effects of night courses to break the “monotony of continuous contemplation of an automatic process” by giving male workers a “modicum of culture.” This emphasis on the development of the intellectual and creative abilities of workers ran counter to the corporate-sponsored *National Association of Corporation Schools* (N.A.C.S.).¹¹⁹

The N.A.C.S. sought legislation to make public schools provide “adequate preparatory educational facilities for those who are to enter industry and who are not to seek professional or semi-professional careers.” In 1914, Mark B. Hughes of the Cadillac Motor Car Company wrote a new constitution for the N.A.C.S. committing the organization to seek curriculum reform in public schools. Young men who were identified as potential industrial employees should be compelled to attend courses where their attitudes were shaped toward accepting the “influences of specialized work, processes which may be repeated and monotonous.” Hughes thought such a program would, over time, reward corporations with increased industrial efficiency. After World War I, vocational training found a small place within corporate welfare programs but it was never seriously applied as a means to solve the problem of workplace monotony.¹²⁰

Boredom as the cause for industrial unrest was not vigorously promoted by popular writers during the early twentieth century. A few socialists, such as Upton Sinclair, argued that socialism was the only way to overcome workplace monotony.

¹¹⁹ John Quincy Adams Ward, “The Relation of Art to Work,” *The Chautauquan* 38, no. 1 (September, 1903): 51-52; Becker, “Factory Education,” 164; Selvidge, “State Control of Entrance to Industries,” 342; Paul C. Stetson, “The Junior High School,” *Vocational Education* 3, no. 1 (1914): 34.

¹²⁰ Mark B. Hughes, “Report of the Subcommittee on Manufacturing and Transportation,” *The National Association of Corporation Schools, Second Annual Convention, Papers, Reports, Bibliographies and Discussions*, (New York: The Trow Press, 1914), 413.

Occasionally trade journals or publications affiliated with organizations advocating industrial education provided interviews with “the working man” that raised the specter of revolution. “For fifteen years I worked as a pattern-maker. I started when fifteen years old and worked up. It was interesting at first, but soon became deadly monotonous. Men all around me were telling obscene stories or talking anarchy. Why? Because they had to do something with their minds or go crazy,” was a stock example. Inefficient production in the factory and office received far more attention.¹²¹

Novelists provided their own set of solutions for dealing with the effects of boredom on employees. Upton Sinclair, in *The Jungle*, suggested that the loss of individualism resulting from industrial monotony created a psychological state receptive to revolution. Jurgis, after being hired as a porter in a hotel by Tommy Hinds, the Illinois state socialist organizer, joined the movement and advocated the end of private property, the redistribution of wealth, and the control of production by workers. His participation in radical politics was transformative—Jurgis regained his sense of ambition, manhood, and self-worth. *The Jungle* followed the logic of writers who believed monotony was a cause behind industrial unrest, but ran against the current by celebrating the potential of degradation to inspire the overthrow of the capitalist order.¹²²

James Oppenheim in “The Cog” (1911) anticipated the anti-corporate ideology of post-World War II back to the earth movements. Richard, the main character in “The Cog,” was a native-born steel worker who became mentally dulled from a brutal twelve hour, seven day a week shift. His wife Molly, frustrated over Richard’s inability to act as a responsible husband and father, told him “you can’t love any more, and you don’t live.

¹²¹ Stetson, “The Junior High School,” 34.

¹²² Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 364, 372.

You're a cog.” Transformed by an act of violence—striking a foreman after being chastised for causing a production stoppage—Richard followed the pioneer tradition of his forefathers. “The West still called the freeman. The mighty farmlands needed labor—the Northwest needed pioneers. There, too, was room for little children—and sun and wind and a green space for the soul,” thought the former industrial worker as he decided to move his family away from the urban grit of the mill town. For Oppenheim, an independent life was only obtainable for white, native-born males who turned their backs on the corporate order and escaped by living off the land.¹²³

Rather than flight or revolution, the short stories of Sinclair Lewis scripted how to accept living within the isolating, boring routines of white-collar life. Lewis’s early business stories were filled with bored clerks, advertising copywriters, bank tellers, and salesmen. They learned to accept their tedious daily routines and the petty slights of their bosses in exchange for the comfort of marriage and the stability of a consumer-oriented domestic life. Lewis wanted his stories to serve an integral role in shaping how white collar workers viewed their future—an example of what C. Wright Mills called the literature of sanctioning or justifying “the new routines we live.”¹²⁴

The story “Honestly—If Possible” followed Terry Ames, an advertising copywriter for a real estate mail-order firm in New York City, who was uncomfortable about writing deceitful promotional materials. The tale hinged on whether a romance with a new female manager, Miss Susan Bratt, would allow Terry to quit his job and find

¹²³ Oppenheim wrote stories about immigrants and native-born industrial workers. “The Cog” is the only story in his collection *Pay Envelopes* where farming on “the frontier” is portrayed as an escape from the ravages of repetitive industrial work. Oppenheim does not explicitly exclude going West as an option for immigrant workers, but the emphasis on Richard’s pioneer forefathers suggests that only native-born Americans could understand and follow this tradition. Oppenheim, “The Cog,” in *Pay Envelopes: Tales of the Mill, the Mine and the City Street* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1911), 97-98, 105.

¹²⁴ Christopher P. Wilson, *White Collar Fictions: Class and Social Representation in American Literature, 1885–1925* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1992), 209-210.

a more honest one somewhere else. At work, Terry had “grown used to his round of boredom,” and his leisure hours were spent in a bleak routine of lonely isolation, of frequenting “movies and beefstew joints.” Ames longed to have a “real life”—the exhilarating possibility of quitting his job and starting fresh as a small businessman, or in a firm where he was no longer required to tell lies to an unsuspecting public—but his apprehensions about losing class status kept him in check.¹²⁵

One night after eating dinner in Chinatown, Terry, a “neat and efficient” person, walked through the Battery and sat down among the “dark and shoddy” derelicts—symbols of what might happen if he left the security of his white-collar profession. The next day Terry told Susan he wanted to be like a “fiction hero,” who would quit and “lead a free, untrammelled life,” but could not because “bein’ just folks” meant common men like him had to stick with their jobs. Terry had already accepted monotony at work as a necessary compromise. Unlike the standard portrayal of a man oppressed by monotony, he was not driven to drink and he was not uncomfortable with his lack of upward mobility—his salary allowed him to have a decent standard of living. Terry’s true anxieties were about the agony of social isolation. The promise of leisure held-out by union leaders as the solution to boredom had failed. Instead of being refreshed and revitalized in his time off, Terry was “palsied” by evening after evening of relentless boredom.¹²⁶

Lewis resolved this problem by offering the companionship found through marriage and a life based on participating in middle-class consumer culture as a couple—reading books, playing tennis and golf, and going out to the movies. Terry proposed to

¹²⁵ Sinclair Lewis, “Honestly—If Possible,” in *If I Were Boss: The Early Business Stories of Sinclair Lewis*, ed. Anthony Di Renzo (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 86.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 93, 101.

Susan at her home where she made it clear they could not forgo their middle-class life if they wanted to get married. They both would have to embrace the tedious and dishonest round of office life in the belief that domesticity would save them from an enveloping boredom. Lewis told his readers that white-collar workers like Terry and Susan needed to accept their place in the social order and take safe harbor in the haven of domestic bliss. Their only pragmatic option was to take the advice of “any good business man” who would tell them their complaints about monotony and honesty were a sign they didn’t know how well-off their lives were. This type of adjustment narrative was not prevalent in the early twentieth century but in the 1920s novels and films such as *Temper* (1924), *The Crowd* (1928) and *Lonesome* (1928) resolved their plots with the main characters accepting monotonous work in exchange for the charms of domestic life and consumer culture. The new field of industrial psychology also sought to adjust bored employees to the conditions of specialized labor but stayed within the purview of the workplace.¹²⁷

One of the nation’s first celebrity social scientists, Hugo Münsterberg, inaugurated the new profession of industrial psychology in 1913. Münsterberg, a professor of psychology at Harvard since 1892, was one of America’s beloved scientific figures. He enjoyed the company of three presidents (Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson) and discussed labor issues with Samuel Gompers. Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, he made headlines in the popular press—an unusual accomplishment for an esteemed member of the academy at the time. Münsterberg contributed frequently to *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s Magazine*, and *McClure’s*. His books on American traits, the pathology of inaccurate criminal confessions, and the application of psychology to educational pedagogy had a large readership. By 1913, he was publishing pro-

¹²⁷ Ibid., 111, 101.

psychology articles in the *New York Times* at least once a month. Münsterberg's life also had its share of infamous moments. He created a national sensation during the trial of Big Bill Haywood in 1907. After administering psychological tests to a crucial witness, the professor mentioned to a reporter, prior to the verdict, that Haywood was definitely guilty. Clarence Darrow, the defense attorney, accused Münsterberg of possessing no more professional judgment than "the man on the moon." After a lunch with President Taft at the White House in 1909, Münsterberg wrote the President a letter about Mrs. Taft's habit of drinking whiskey while dining and suggested that she might be better off trying psychoanalysis. Despite these colorful faux pas, Münsterberg remained an influential public figure until his death in 1916.¹²⁸

With the publication of *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency* (1913), Münsterberg formally established the profession of industrial psychology. He sought to wrest the entire discourse on monotony away from writers in the popular press, including progressive reformers, and place it in the hands of scientifically trained experts—a maneuver designed to shift solutions for industrial problems away from civic-minded legislation to the private world of corporate managers guided by industrial psychologists. Professor Münsterberg gave a talk on November 17, 1913, on "Efficiency in Industry: Its Psychology" at the Boston School of Social Science. "The popular assumption that monotony is disagreeable," he lectured, "is disproved by science." In *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency*, Münsterberg made the same point. Popular representations of monotony inaccurately portrayed specialized labor as creating "a mental starvation which presses down the whole life of the laborer, deprives it of all joy in work, and makes the

¹²⁸ Frank J. Landy, "Hugo Münsterberg: Victim or Visionary?" *Journal of Applied Psychology* 77, no. 6 (1992): 793-796; "New Science Suggested to Solve Social Problems," *New York Times*, February 9, 1913, SM10.

factory scheme a necessary but from the standpoint of psychology a decidedly regrettable evil.” Scientists should not be “obliged to endorse this judgment of popular psychology,” he wrote. Popular representations universalized the effects of boredom. Instead, a select group of people, according to Münsterberg, were born with a tolerance to monotony. The role of industrial psychology was to identify these individuals and select them for repetitive work. With this in mind, Münsterberg opened the door to what became an elusive search by industrial psychologists for the etiology of boredom at work and for solutions to the problem.¹²⁹

Münsterberg melded the new profession from the start to business concerns about maximizing efficiency and controlling labor unrest. His three primary purposes of industrial psychology were: "how we can find the men whose mental qualities make them best fitted for the work they have to do; under what psychological conditions we can secure the greatest and most satisfactory output of work from every man; and how we can produce most completely the influences on human minds which are desired in the interest of business.” Münsterberg saw the study of monotony as a way to distinguish the profession from scientific management since he believed a serious flaw in the Taylor system was its inability to deal with the psychological behavior of workers. Scientific management could eliminate all wasteful movements and adjust production techniques to the best possible gain, but maximum efficiency would never be reached without solving the psychological problem of monotony at work. In this sense, Taylorism and the new profession of industrial psychology went hand in hand. In the future, he implied,

¹²⁹ Loren Baritz, *The Servants of Power: A History of Social Science in American Industry* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1960), 37; “Would Weed Out Worker Misfits,” *Boston Daily Globe*, November 18, 1913, 15; Hugo Münsterberg, *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 190.

industrial psychologists would select the right fodder and scientific managers would then adjust workers to their machines. As industrial psychologists strove to develop monotony proneness tests for vocational selection, they also, in the interim, had to devise immediate solutions to alleviate the problem for all workers. Corporations needed to hire both types of experts if they wanted to maximize profits. Münsterberg's managerial bias did not go unnoticed.¹³⁰

Walter Lippman, who had just co-founded *The New Republic* magazine, commented on Münsterberg's "pleading" with businessmen to take industrial psychologists as "useful plodders"—an overeager attempt to prove "the present usefulness of a science which hardly exists." He felt that *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency* offered no practical information. Instead, the textbook represented a "prospectus" for a profession that could grow into "one of the great engineering sciences." Lippmann believed industrial psychology held great promise for civilization if scientists could find methods to subordinate industry to the psychological needs of men and women. Yet, by accepting the "current commercial morality," Münsterberg's vision for the profession sacrificed the country's social welfare to the goal of merely helping employers increase their profits. This drive to serve industry caused Münsterberg to study the problem of monotony. In his hands, the discourse of monotony shifted entirely toward an all-encompassing concern with achieving the highest rate of industrial production.¹³¹

Following the narrative tradition established by investigative journalists and progressive reformers, Münsterberg told tales gleaned from the shop floor. "For a long while I have tried to discover in every large factory which I have visited the particular job

¹³⁰ Münsterberg, *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency*, 305, 190; Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 252.

¹³¹ Walter Lippmann, "Using Psychology," *New York Times*, March 9, 1913, 83.

which from the standpoint of the outsider presents itself as the most tiresome possible. As soon as I found it, I had a full frank talk with the man or women who performed it and earnestly tried to get self-observational comment,” Münsterberg wrote. He observed a woman who packed 13,000 incandescent lamps in tissue paper per day. With notebook and stopwatch in hand, he noted the task took 20 finger movements as the woman rapidly packed 25 lamps in 42 seconds. “She assured me that she found the work really interesting, and that she constantly felt an inner tension, thinking how many boxes she would be able to fill before the next pause,” wrote Münsterberg. He also spoke with a male machine feeder who made 34,000 uniform movements daily and was told it was “not only the wage which satisfies him, but that he takes decided pleasure in the activity itself.” Not many articles were published defending monotonous work in the early twentieth century, but these stories scientifically reproduced and validated the late nineteenth rhetoric about certain people being innately suited for repetitive work.¹³²

Münsterberg defined monotony as the “particular psychological attitude which we know as subjective dislike of uniformity and lack of change in the work.” To prove his hypothesis, he created a laboratory experiment patterned after the work of Paul Ranschburg, a Hungarian psychologist. Over four hundred male students at Harvard were selected as test subjects from courses on introductory psychology. They participated in a series of word repetition tests to determine their ability for serial recall. The students were given a test of similar words (such as names of flowers) or the exact same words mixed with dissimilar words. The majority of the men underestimated the number of

¹³² Münsterberg, *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency*, 196-197.

repeated or similar words. For Münsterberg, the results validated the Ranschburg effect—poor recall was produced by failures of attention.¹³³

His significant discovery was that about one-fourth of the students estimated the word similarities accurately. The students were then given subjective surveys regarding their “practical attitude to monotony in life.” Münsterberg matched their responses to the test data and concluded those who had the highest serial recall welcomed “repetition in life.” He associated this ability or the subject’s “inner disposition” as an indication of tolerance to monotony. The “inner energy” of people who could not tolerate repetition became exhausted and the resulting “mental torture” was what they called the “dislike of monotony in their work.” In Münsterberg’s model, this meant that people who acutely perceived repetitive tasks possessed a strong focus of attention and were innately suited for tedious jobs.¹³⁴

Münsterberg was comfortable with John Watson’s behaviorism and he felt the study of individual differences could be used to predict behaviors, placing his theory about monotony within a functionalist framework—scientific efforts based on trying to understand how people adapted to different environments and why some adapted better than others. His concept of “special dispositions,” was influenced by William McDougall’s publication in 1908 of *Introduction to Social Psychology*. McDougall believed the mind was a “fixed structure” and “salient features of the human equipment” were derived “from instincts traceable far back into the biological past of the race.”¹³⁵

¹³³ Ibid., 193, 200-201; John C. Jahnke and Ray E. Bower, “Are There Two Ranschburg Effects?” *American Journal of Psychology* 99, no. 2 (Summer, 1986): 286.

¹³⁴ Münsterberg, *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency*, 201, 204.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 791; Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 160; Landy, “Hugo Münsterberg,” 788.

Though quite aware of the increased application of mental tests—Münsterberg helped display them with Joseph Jastrow at the World’s Fair in Chicago in 1893—he did not attempt to connect intelligence to monotony tolerance. Perhaps this was because focused and attentive people were usually thought to be more intelligent. Certainly it would not be pragmatic for a new profession’s first discovery to result in telling businessmen that they needed to select the most promising candidates for the worst forms of work. Whatever the case, Münsterberg made it clear the experiment and his conclusion were only a “theoretical view” requiring more investigation.¹³⁶

As an active proponent of vocational selection, Münsterberg had already been hired by corporations to develop aptitude and work-sample testing for trolley and telephone operators. Drawing upon these examples he called for the development of a series of tests to determine “whether the individual will suffer from repetition in work.” He believed such tests, developed and applied by industrial psychologists, would locate men and women who had a special mental disposition for monotony. Once they were identified “the complaint of monotony would disappear.” Thus, industrial psychology began with a utopian vision. The elusive search for discovering a set of natural laws explaining the psychological origins of boredom sustained itself well into the late twentieth century, as did the impossible dream of witnessing monotony’s demise.¹³⁷

With no clear solution in sight, the popular discourse on the problem of monotony for workers thrived in American culture. The underlying assumption was that corporate “modernization”—technological innovation, the need for highly specialized labor, the speeding-up of life in the workplace, and the implementation of rationalized management

¹³⁶ Landy, “Hugo Münsterberg,” 789.

¹³⁷ Münsterberg, *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency*, 198.

techniques—required the creation of a psychological condition called monotony. This notion became a cultural truth applicable to both female and male employees. It was only a matter of time before the essential qualities of ideas about boredom, especially fears over the standardization of life and the threat of commercialized mass culture, transcended the confines of the workplace and came to be seen as pervading every quarter of existence. By the 1920s, as the pursuit of personal fulfillment ended in discontent, new truths about the effects of monotony emerged—Americans began to use ideas about boredom as a way to explain their disenchantments with modern life.

In 1913, Hugo Münsterberg staked a claim on boredom research, insisting it belonged exclusively within the purview of industrial psychology—a claim that was honored by other scientific and social science professionals until World War II. Corporate managers and the profession of industrial psychology in the United States ignored his call for research on monotonous work for over two decades, though the issue was widely discussed in popular culture for the duration. His most significant ideas—specialized work was above criticism, boredom was different from fatigue, tolerance for monotony was congenital, quantitative tests could detect who enjoyed boring jobs, and the goal of industrial psychology was to maximize corporate profits—all shaped the scientific hypotheses and laboratory experiments of boredom researchers in Great Britain during the early 1920s. Their findings became established as a scientific paradigm and were exported back to America where they resided in every major text book written to train industrial psychologists. The search catalyzed by Münsterberg for an effective solution to industrial monotony resulted in two unanticipated therapeutic applications—the use of background music and psychopharmacology as cures for boredom in the

workplace and beyond. Ideas about monotony originated as a reaction to the harmful effects of specialized labor in the late nineteenth century and culminated in innovations that irrevocably changed the contours of American life.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Ibid., 205.

“Many Folk Who Do Not Care to Use Their Brains”: British Industrial Psychologists and the Pathology of Boredom

Only two months after the end of World War I, waves of industrial “unrest” broke over mills, mines, and manufacturing plants throughout Great Britain. By 1921, labor discontent was pervasive and resulted in an unprecedented level of work stoppages for the next two years. “Labour does not get its full share of the world,” wrote a columnist for the *The Manchester Guardian* in 1919, “it does the hardest, most monotonous, least interesting work.” William Ralph Inge, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, told his congregation “that the root of industrial unrest was not economic,” but was caused by “the normal type of modern industrial conditions with its minute soul-killing division of labor,” where a worker had to perform “a task which is deadly dull in its monotony.”¹³⁹

In post-war England, boredom was seen as a major factor behind labor agitation and as a barrier to higher productivity. Dean Inge’s critique of monotony as a condition of subdivided labor continued the antimodern tradition established by John Ruskin and William Morris. In contrast, many journalists, reformers, and industrialists who grappled with the problem of boredom at work no longer believed laborers could find joy and personal fulfillment on the job. Instead, they promoted increased leisure time, based on a shorter work day, as a means to revitalize bored employees. The turn to what was called “the new leisure” created anxiety among elite groups who were concerned that workers might not use their few extra hours of free time for socially constructive purposes. No such concerns troubled industrial psychologists, hired by the Industrial Fatigue Research Board, who conducted research on boredom during the 1920s. They repudiated ideas

¹³⁹ Ross McKibben, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 144; “The Labour Troubles,” *The Manchester Guardian*, February 3, 1919, 6; “The Worker and His Leisure,” *The Manchester Observer*, December 21, 1919, 18.

about boredom circulating throughout popular culture and focused on devising psychological tests to identify workers who possessed an innate ability to tolerate boredom. By the end of the decade, boredom researchers had constructed boredom as a psychopathology and their efforts were embraced by the scientific community. The result was a new paradigm.¹⁴⁰

Post–World War I Great Britain was troubled by economic stagnation. In an attempt to recover, British capital began investing in the production of consumer goods and moved away from a concentration on heavy industry such as building trains, ships, and engineering machines intended for export. The domestic market for ready-made clothes, small appliances and automobiles was exceptionally large. To achieve a high volume of production, the new industries tried to perfect continuous-flow production by combining high-speed, semi-automatic and mechanized work processes with scientific management techniques—the root source for employee dissatisfaction.¹⁴¹

In 1919, a few English industrialists led a campaign to calm factory operatives by shortening hours, so workers could enjoy a “fuller freedom” of life through leisure. William Lever (Lord Leverhulme), the Lever Brothers soap magnate, in *The Six Hour Day* (1919), contended that machine workers needed more leisure to “compensate for the necessary monotony of their work, and to furnish the time for a fuller home life and the education and recreation which hitherto have not been attainable.” Lever was seen as an

¹⁴⁰ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 62-63.

¹⁴¹ Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-war Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 2,76.

enlightened corporate owner in Great Britain, due to the humane work conditions found in his Port Sunlight factory.¹⁴²

On March 27, 1919, Lord Leverhulme announced that the Port Sunlight operation would establish a six-hour working day for employees, if trade unions and the government approved. Wages would stay the same and more leisure would lift the worker free of “the daily monotony of mechanical industry,” resulting in the development of proper citizens for the empire. Six months later Sir Robert Hadfield, owner of the enormous steelworks in Sheffield, decided to shorten the hours of labor in his factories. “The fatigue of industry through the monotonous and irksome character of modern machine labour must be mitigated by shortening the hours of work and improving the hours of leisure,” he said. Industrialists like these used a shorter day as justification for speeding up work processes, which they felt would increase productivity when compared to an eight-hour day filled with monotony.¹⁴³

Industrial psychologists also weighed in on the issue. Dr. H. M. Vernon, who later conducted boredom research for the Industrial Fatigue Review Board, advocated the six-hour day. Though he felt such a radical change would not come quickly to industry, Vernon backed Lord Leverhulme’s 6-hour “scheme” because “workers suffered from monotony and boredom.” In 1919, Vernon studied the relationship between decreased

¹⁴² At the same time, however, Lever oversaw the implementation of forced labor conditions in the Belgian Congo to obtain palm oil. In 1911, the Huileries du Congo Belge, a company founded by Lever, constructed a factory in Lusanga (renamed Leverville) and brutally exploited palm cutters until the beginning of World War II. Within the matrix of English social hierarchies, white proletariats trumped “uncivilized” colonized natives when it came to monotony and working conditions. “The Worker and His Leisure,” 18; “The Six Hour Day,” *The Manchester Guardian*, February 10, 1919, 3; Jules Marchal, *Lord Leverhulme’s Ghosts: Colonial Exploitation in the Congo*, trans. Martin Thom (New York: Verso, 2008), xvii, 3, 220.

¹⁴³ “Scheme Ready at Port Sunlight,” *The Manchester Guardian*, March 28, 1919, 9; “The Happy Mean of Working Time,” *The Manchester Guardian*, November 9, 1919, 3; “The Six Hour Day,” *The Manchester Guardian*, 3.

working hours, speeded-up labor, and productivity. His results showed “great gains in output in spite of reduced working time” due to the “acceleration” of work processes, and he found less suffering from monotony among his test subjects.¹⁴⁴

Vernon’s colleague, T. H. Pear, a professor of psychology at Manchester University, took the opposite view. “The monotony of our work . . . depended largely on our attitude,” he told an interviewer. Pear went on to explain that if people wanted to “do away with our typewriters and aeroplanes,” then machine-tending and boredom could be eliminated. His response—boredom was an inevitable and beneficial cost of progress—was uncharacteristic of how industrial psychologists viewed the problem. Still, the implicit idea that one’s attitude or temperament might be related to monotony tolerance became a key factor in boredom research studies conducted a few years later.¹⁴⁵

Reform organizations and concerned citizens focused on leisure as a panacea for bored workers. Concerns over how these newfound hours of freedom were spent emerged as a significant social issue. On Crusader’s Sunday, held January 4, 1920, well-known ministers throughout England, including the London Archdeacon Ernest Edward Holmes, gave sermons based on the ideals of the League of Youth and Social Progress. J. Aubrey Rees, the League’s founder, asked the clergy to recognize “that bleak and solitary lives, squalid surroundings, and monotonous toil, generate industrial unrest, social antagonism, and national insecurity.” Rees looked for the clergy to endorse the “opportunity of self-expression” for the mass of people who had been denied participating in “the richness of life”—the same impulse behind the six-hour-day campaign.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ “The Six-Hour Day and Efficiency,” *The Manchester Guardian*, September 12, 1919, 4; “Relation of Hours to Output,” *The Manchester Observer*, November 9, 1919, 3.

¹⁴⁵ “Monotony in Production,” *The Manchester Guardian*, October 20, 1919, 9.

¹⁴⁶ “The Ten Axioms of Youth,” *The Manchester Observer*, January 4, 1920, 16.

The Industrial Welfare Society (IWS) worked closely with employers to alleviate boredom by teaching workers how to pursue “healthy and useful interests” through leisure-time activities. The Society provided over five hundred member companies with an organizer who served as a link between the employers and employees to help design welfare programs. Harold Brighouse, the Manchester School playwright who penned *Hobson’s Choice* (1916), felt it was inevitable that men were becoming “standardised” by machines. Brighouse satirized organizations like the IWS as a bunch of poisonous bureaucrats whose desire to control human behavior clashed with the idiosyncratic possibilities of “the new leisure”—he thought spoon-feeding a “Renaissance” to industrial workers would result in “social revolt.” Though Brighouse felt hobbies such as amateur acting, lawn tennis, and especially gardening (“tillage as a means to individuality,” as he termed it) were particularly suitable for workers to conquer boredom by finding self-expression in leisure, he believed no restraints should be put on the craze for “going on the films” or other commercial amusements.¹⁴⁷

Proposals for how to solve worker boredom came from other quarters as well. Anti-prohibitionist reformers argued the public house “equipped with recreational facilities, organized and recognized as a cheerful and healthy place of refreshment” needed to be preserved as the center of male working-class recreation, because it added “vivacity and colour” to the “drab, monotonous life which our development as an industrial nation has imposed upon millions.”¹⁴⁸

A medical correspondent for *The Manchester Observer* suggested installing gramophones in factories to “exhilarate the nervous control of the cardiac mechanism” of

¹⁴⁷ “Welfare in the Factory,” *The Manchester Guardian*, April 15, 1920, 11; Harold Brighouse, “Self-Expression,” *The Manchester Guardian*, December 18, 1920, 9.

¹⁴⁸ “The Prohibitionist in Politics,” *The Manchester Observer*, November 30, 1919, 19.

workers, which would result in chasing monotony away. The Pelman Institute encouraged workers to “Pelmanize” as an “antidote to monotony.” A system of mental training taught as a correspondence program, Pelmanism promised to cure the tragic lassitude caused by repetitive work by rekindling lost ambition and reviving the entrepreneurial spirit—a “scientific” method of positive thinking. Correspondents who were disciplined enough to retrain their minds for half an hour a day over three months would regain their will to succeed and break free from the drudgery of wage labor.¹⁴⁹

By 1921, the tone of the popular press reached a feverish pitch when reporting on the problem of worker unrest. “Under our present conditions of the subdivisions of labour such a man is kept upon monotonous production work for month after month and year after year,” wrote R. M. Fox, a conscientious objector and leftist journalist. He listed the effects of monotony in America, “the recoil against industrial pressure,” as the push for Prohibition, the rise of Communist agitation, and “the lynching of negroes.” In England, strikes and revolutionary thoughts were the result of bored workers reacting against their “harsh, unlovely conditions.” Fox also thought monotony caused factory girls, who had to concentrate the whole of their vitality and attention on packing boxes, to flock to “lurid and sentimental” films. Other journalists expanded the effects of worker boredom to include a diminished sex life, an overindulgence in tobacco, alcohol, and food, and the turn to dangerous amusements such as the “kinemas and cheap music-halls”—all of

¹⁴⁹ “Prevention of Industrial Fatigue,” *The Manchester Observer*, February 13, 1921, 7; “Pelmanism the Gospel of Action,” Advertisement, *The Manchester Guardian*, January 1, 1919, 7; “What Will Be Your Position on August 13, 1920?” Advertisement, *The Manchester Guardian*, August 13, 1919, 4.

which made industrial workers “pale, underdeveloped, and joyless citizens” who threatened to stop the trajectory of British civilization.¹⁵⁰

Most of the discourse about monotony and work was not gender specific, but by 1921, a concern with female industrial workers emerged in the popular press. Miss Constance Smith, senior investigator for The Church Rescue and Prevention Society, explained that the “burden of monotony” imposed upon women workers often led to “deplorable consequences.” A mentally dulled operative might seek excitements outside of the factory where the possibility to become a “fallen” woman ran high. The mission of the Manchester and Salford Girls’ Institutes was to try and overcome “the great problem of the working-girl”—the “combination of monotonous work and ample leisure.” The Institutes’ objective was to develop the individuality of a factory operative and to fill her leisure time with “the beauty and keen interests that she does not find in her work.” These organizations held social agendas in common with Gilded Age and Progressive Era recreational reformers in the United States. Some journalists and reformers fretted about expanded leisure-time for men—fearing greater opportunities for violence and dissipation—but the greater social threat, they believed, was the deterioration of female morality, which stemmed from bored women operatives participating in the adventurous world of commercial amusements.¹⁵¹

In 1921, five million women aged fourteen or older were employed in Great Britain. Twenty-four percent of these women worked in factories. Women were exclusively hired to do what was termed “light production work,” or mass assembly, in

¹⁵⁰ R.M. Fox, “The Idealism of Revolt,” *The Manchester Guardian*, May 28, 1921, 7; Leonard Hill, “The Great Need for Fresh Air,” *The Manchester Observer*, March 23, 1919, 5; “Juvenile Crime,” *The Manchester Guardian*, May 23, 1919, 12.

¹⁵¹ “Church Rescue Society,” *The Manchester Guardian*, March 9, 1921, 4; “Girls’ Institutes,” *The Manchester Guardian*, April 15, 1921, 6.

the emerging consumer goods manufacturing plants, and a fixed sexual division of labor was established. Assembly-line work subjected female workers to extremely fast machine-tending for ten hours a day—a job represented as “clean and light” to attract potential employees. Women were favored by employers because they were believed to possess better dexterity and concentration than men, along with a higher degree of tolerance for monotonous jobs. Many factories imposed a strict form of discipline on female wage earners. In the Peek Frean biscuit factory, no talking and no eating were allowed. Young women could be reprimanded for wearing too much lipstick. Body searches for tools and the company’s food products were frequent.¹⁵²

Historian Miriam Glucksmann found that “no one at the time” including feminists, trade unions, and social commentators recognized “the new centrality of women within the industrial workforce.” This was not the case with industrial psychologists concerned about the problem of monotony in work during the interwar years. The National Institute of Industrial Psychology (NIIP), cofounded by Charles S. Myers in 1921, attracted many clients who hired large numbers of women—weavers, embroiderers, dressmakers, chocolate and biscuit makers, box makers, clerical staff, and retail saleswomen. The “reduction of monotony” was a central goal of the Institute. Boredom investigators such as Isabel Burnett and Stanley Wyatt, who were hired by the Industrial Fatigue Research Board (IFRB), viewed women as essential to their studies. The vast majority (approximately 95 percent) of all test subjects involved in IFRB research on monotony and work from 1924–1937 were female. In Great Britain,

¹⁵² Of the rest, 56 percent worked in personal and domestic service and 19 percent did office work. Glucksmann, *Women Assemble*, 52, 3, 5, 99.

industrial psychologists believed women who performed highly specialized, repetitive work tasks were the gatekeepers to knowledge about how boredom functioned.¹⁵³

The belief that monotony at work caused labor discontent and drove workers into states of unproductive decay circulated throughout popular culture before English industrial psychologists began to study boredom scientifically. Industrial psychologists borrowed heavily from popular lore, but after 1921 they found no utility in solutions such as the six-hour day, education for self-expression during leisure, the industrial training of female operatives, and public-house reform. Throughout the interwar years, English industrial psychologists insisted that popular ideas about monotony and work were amateurish and untrustworthy. Instead of conceptualizing monotony as a universal response to industrial conditions, boredom researchers and their institutional and business patrons sought to identify people whose innate traits made them tolerant of boredom and receptive to repetitive work.

The first important moment in the history of monotony research came in 1921, when Charles S. Myers created a set of foundational ideas about boredom and specialized labor in *Mind and Work*. Monotony, he asserted, was a psychological response to repetitive work and, if left untreated, it could become a pathological condition. Monotony posed a problem for corporations—a decrease in industrial output and an increase in industrial unrest—and bored workers were inclined to act, outside of work, in undesirable ways, an issue of concern for the society at large.

¹⁵³ The National Institute of Industrial Psychology (NIIP) was a private business and many of the company's studies on monotony at work were not published. The NIIP was cofounded with H. J. Welch, a director of the business firm of Harrisons & Crosfield. Myers left Cambridge, where he had established a famous psychology laboratory, for what he called my "plunge into the business world" in 1922 and spent the rest of his life running the NIIP. The IFRB was a powerful advisory group to The Queen and Parliament. It was overseen by both the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research and the Medical Research Committee. Glucksmann, *Women Assemble*, 8.

Myers wanted researchers to focus on how innate character traits were related to monotony tolerance, so people could be selected for the job they were, in essence, born to do. He felt only “light work”—a euphemism for subdivided, repetitive female jobs—should be studied. Until vocational selection techniques were perfected, Myers claimed rest pauses and variety in work would alleviate boredom. All of these concepts shaped the research agendas of the NIIP and IFRB until World War II.¹⁵⁴

Mind and Work became the training manual for industrial psychologists who studied monotony and work in Great Britain from 1924 to 1937. Myers wrote extensively on boredom, but many of his ideas replicated those found in Hugo Münsterberg’s *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency* (1913). Myers’s ideas on the primacy of vocational selection, the goal of increasing efficiency, the responsibility of monotony for a decrease in output and industrial unrest, and the belief that some people enjoyed monotonous work due to their innate disposition—all were derived from Münsterberg’s untested, theoretical model of boredom. Unique to Myers was his explanation of how boredom became a psychological state and his emphasis on women as ideal test subjects.

Myers’s ideas constituted the basic framework future boredom researchers used to create laboratory and field experiments. His etiology of boredom was grounded in William McDougall’s hormic theory. All intellectual functions, according to McDougall, were driven to service instinctual needs. Human behavior could be modified but always remained “directed to instinctive goals.” For Myers, all people had an innate set of “mental processes” incompatible with doing highly specialized jobs. As a worker did a repetitive task, these processes were at first suppressed. Over time, the “inhibited mental

¹⁵⁴ Charles S. Myers, *Industrial Psychology* (New York: The People’s Institute Publishing Company, Inc., 1925), 13, 116, 19, 13.

processes” surfaced as forms of distraction, such as daydreaming. Some employees attempted to overcome these “mental intrusions” and refocus on the work task. This effort to overcome infringements on attention created a psychological state called boredom.¹⁵⁵

Myers depicted boredom as a feeling characterized by an “absence of interest” in work, leading to a radical decline in productivity. If boredom was allowed to occur for too long, the “higher control” of a worker became fatigued. The end result, if left untreated, would be a chemical poisoning of the brain’s synapses—a condition characterized by mental instability. Not every worker, however, experienced boredom. Many people enjoyed monotonous jobs, Myers hypothesized, because they did not struggle to overcome the distractions caused by repetitive work. Instead, they stayed focused on their tasks or performed them automatically. These employees, following the logic of hormic theory, had underdeveloped instincts. The ability to tolerate boredom indicated congenital weakness and intellectual deficiency. This model explained why boredom was not a universal condition and legitimated the need to cultivate psychological tests to identify the inherent traits responsible for monotony tolerance. This was the reason for proposing vocational selection as the *raison d’être* for industrial psychology.¹⁵⁶

Myers’s conception of boredom blended hormic theory with popular concerns in Great Britain about the survival of civilization and racial decline. He theorized about

¹⁵⁵ According to this theory boredom was distinct from fatigue. The distinction was necessary to explain why industrial psychology was the proper field to tackle the problem of monotony in work as opposed to physiology or scientific management. Leslie S. Hearnshaw, *A Short History of British Psychology, 1840–1940* (London: Methuen & Company, 1964), 189; Charles S. Myers, *Mind and Work* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1921), 42–43, v–vi.

¹⁵⁶ Myers, *Mind and Work*, 42–43, 47, 44.

people who were ideal candidates for repetitive, boring jobs: “In every social stratum there are many folk who do not care to use their brains much; they just want to carry on, week after week, doing the same things, daydreaming perhaps during their day’s work. That is to say, a more or less monotonous occupation is actually welcomed by some people.” After the publication of *Mind and Work*, measurements of intelligence were considered a key factor in determining boredom susceptibility.¹⁵⁷

Bored employees, according to Myers, were responsible for industrial unrest. He surpassed the concerns of journalists, reformers and corporate executives by insisting that monotony made workers demand a fair share of profits and a voice in controlling shop floor work processes, as well as to develop revolutionary thoughts about changing “the whole social fabric.” A bored worker was “an irritant to his fellows, and a nuisance to the management,” and was responsible “for much of the existing unemployment and labour turnover,” wrote Myers. Such a worker ultimately joined “the ranks of the unemployed, the alcoholic, the criminal, or the insane.” Even before a single research project had been conducted, the intended objective neutrality of British scientific discourse was severely compromised. Boredom, from Myers’s perspective, was a capacious category for explaining the causes behind a wide range of social ailments specifically confined to the working class.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Richard Overly, *The Twilight Years: The Paradox of Britain Between the Wars* (New York: Viking, 2009), 98–101; Myers, *Mind and Work*, 19–20.

¹⁵⁸ The rhetoric Myers and the British boredom researchers used to describe the effects of boredom contained many parallels to nineteenth-century descriptions of physiological fatigue. For example, Anson Rabinbach described how “a host of social ills could be traced to the consequences of fatigue: from alcohol and opium cravings to miseducation and the loss of social standing; from crime, vice, and the disintegration of the family to the degradations and discontents of industrial work.” This suggests that Myers, at times, transposed ideas drawn from physiological fatigue research to his “new” psychological descriptions of monotony. Myers, *Mind and Work*, 147–148, 142–143; Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 21.

In addition to formulating a psycho-instinctual etiology of boredom where inherited traits could make generations of family members suited for repetitive work, Myers called for specific approaches to learn about how monotony functioned in the factory. Researchers needed to establish a correlation between monotony and efficiency, he asserted, by examining individual production output in short intervals of the work day—the method IFRB investigators used to discover monotony curves. In addition, Myers told researchers to focus on female factory operatives as experimental subjects.¹⁵⁹

Industrial psychologists working for the IFRB followed Myers's lead. The majority of research projects on monotony and work took females as test subjects. The reasons why women were exclusively selected were never openly discussed. Female workers may have been more amenable to research projects—most did not belong to a union—and they may have been willing to express themselves more than men to the psychologists. Industrial psychologists knew women were only a fraction of the overall workforce. When men took positions in unskilled, highly specialized jobs, they became “feminized” and required the same form of adjustment to repetitive work as women. Still, British researchers did not want to draw attention to the fact that their interpretations of experimental results were based exclusively on female test subjects—all of the studies were portrayed in gender-neutral terms.

The goal of boredom research, Myers asserted, was establishing the value of industrial psychology to corporate managers by proving vocational selection tests could determine boredom proneness. Employees whose test scores indicated an ability to embrace distractions rather than fight them would be selected for the most repetitive forms of work—from Myers's perspective, these workers would be cheap, efficient, and

¹⁵⁹ Myers, *Mind and Work*, 45.

stable. The use of vocational selection techniques to eradicate boredom at work seemed ideal. No conditioning of worker behavior or structural changes to the workplace was necessary—implementation only required the hiring of industrial psychologists. Still, a utopian dream lay in the unforeseeable future—the dream someone could answer a sequence of multiple choice questions that would demystify the mind and allow experts to quantify and categorize the meaning of human behavior. Until then, industrial psychologists would have to settle for more pragmatic solutions to alleviate boredom and increase industrial output.

Myers proposed four solutions for solving the problem of monotony in lieu of vocational selection: a system of promotion where hard work was rewarded with upward mobility into a new job without repetitive tasks, variety in work where people shifted from task to task, the education of workers to take “an intelligent interest in the factory as a whole,” and the use of rest pauses to alleviate boredom and increase production. The first three solutions were intended to overcome boredom by rekindling interest in one’s job and the latter was a structural change where workers were reenergized during a 15-minute break. Only rest pauses and variety in work appeared in the agendas of boredom researchers until the beginning of World War II—most likely because promotions and education were considered by most as outside their professional domain (or unlikely to be realistic or effective solutions).¹⁶⁰

The majority of published boredom research in Great Britain was sponsored by the Industrial Fatigue Research Board (IFRB). Charles S. Myers sat on the IFRB Board and was also the head of the Industrial Psychology Committee—the group responsible for determining the research agendas of the investigative teams sent to study monotony in

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 22, 61–64.

work. According to the psychologist Geoffrey C. Bunn, Myers was considered by colleagues and historians alike as “the most important British psychologist of the first half of the twentieth century.” Myers had great power to set the agenda for boredom research, given the influence of *Mind and Work* (1921) and his role on the board of the IFRB. He also had influence through his close friendship with T. H. Pear, a professor of industrial psychology at Manchester University, who helped shape the research of graduate students such as Isabel Burnett and of his colleague Stanley Wyatt.¹⁶¹

The IFRB came into being in July 1918 and sent investigators to study specific industries such as the metal, textile, glass, laundry, and shoemaking trades. From 1919 to 1923, the IFRB produced 24 reports on the working conditions in these trades. D. R. Wilson, the secretary of the IFRB, made a presentation to the Royal Statistical Society on May 15, 1923, where he explained that the goals of the organization were to increase production and to decrease labor turnover, lost time, and accidents. Until 1922, the Board sought to “educate public opinion in industry” about the significance of its research results and to secure the sympathies of corporate executives, since gaining entry into factories to study conditions was vital to the Board’s research projects. The Board’s *Third Annual Report* (1922) announced a shift away from studying specific trades to the investigation of broad problems “of interest to industries generally.” This change in policy ushered in the first era of boredom research—a decade where, paradoxically, research was underfunded and conducted with a miniscule number of experimental test subjects, but resulted in the establishment of a scientific paradigm.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Geoffrey C. Bunn, “Introduction,” in *Psychology in Britain, Historical Essays and Personal Reflections*, ed. G. C. Bunn, A. D. Lovie, and G. D. Richards (Leicester: BPS Books, 2001), 4.

¹⁶² D. R. Wilson, “On Some Recent Contributions to the Study of Industrial Fatigue,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 86, no.4 (1923): 485, 486.

The relevance of the IFRB's research projects to British manufacturers was on Wilson's mind. "How far are we justified in assuming that results obtained by the study of a few individuals apply to the whole group, and conversely how far can we assume that any general tendency indicated by an extensive inquiry based on mass data is an attribute of the individual composing the group?" Wilson asked. He answered by saying that until there was irrefutable scientific proof that the use of small samples or mass data was not valid to make inferences from "the individual to the class or vice versa," the Board's research methods and results would stand.¹⁶³

Wilson's stance in relation to boredom research was an attempt to condition IFRB scientists and their corporate audience to accept the results of studies conducted on an exceptionally limited and non-representative group as yielding trustworthy, universally applicable, scientific facts. This foundational tenet of the Board was certainly one reason it published the findings of mediocre studies. Another was a belief in rapidly publishing what appeared to be promising results. The hope was that some industries would immediately accept and implement the solutions of industrial psychologists because they had been approved by an official agency of the government. In return, this would allow researchers to study the actual applications of their hypothesis in industrial settings.

Wilson also asked: "At what stage can we claim to have definitely established some principle of importance to industry?" Once factories implemented the recommendations proposed by the Board's investigators, and proved they were effective, the principle would become significant—a startling admission by Wilson that the Board needed the cooperation of corporate managers to verify the laws of science by showing

¹⁶³ Ibid., 490, 491.

they were profitable. The potential disjuncture between conducting legitimate scientific research while trying to serve the goals of a corporate audience did not go unnoticed.¹⁶⁴

One of the discussants, Miss Clara Collet, Labour Department, Board of Trade, said the underlying principle of all of Board's projects was an emphasis on obtaining maximum output. Collet argued that this pro-business agenda overlooked the needs of workers, especially women. She believed improving factory conditions for workers was a secondary consideration to the primary goal of all IRFB research projects—to increase efficiency. The types of solutions the Board promoted to business owners and managers may have made the workplace more pleasant but the underlying principle was to find ways to make employees work faster and harder. Collet felt this imbalanced approach left women workers exhausted and unable to participate in or enjoy the rest of their lives, which was “more important than the working day.”¹⁶⁵

Collet's criticism of the Board's emphasis on maximum output went unanswered, and with good reason. The IFRB's emphasis on studying the general problems of industry expanded its corporate audience—a group who demanded that certain forms of expertise (such as scientific management and industrial psychology) must provide cost-effective, easy to implement, and profitable findings. As Collet pointed-out, this usually meant the needs of workers were considered less important. The recently launched IFRB investigations into monotony and work met the profile emerging from Wilson's presentation to the Royal Statistical Society. Whether the research could meet the challenge of quieting industrial unrest and increasing productivity remained to be seen.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 494, 496.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 501–502.

The second significant period in boredom research occurred from 1924 to 1925 when Stanley Wyatt and Isabel Burnett sought to validate Myers's model of boredom. Their collective research findings presented a new discovery—the monotony curve—as definitive proof that monotony was distinct from physiological fatigue and accountable for declines in workplace productivity. In addition, both of these industrial psychologists were strongly invested in developing a scientific basis for the vocational selection of factory workers where monotony tolerance correlated to inherent character traits. Burnett determined that intelligent people were not suitable for repetitive work. Though based only on four test subjects, her research results were immediately accepted by the profession as a natural law. Wyatt began exploring ideas about individual temperament in conjunction with intelligence, but his experiments were inconclusive. Rest pauses and variety in work alleviated boredom and increased productivity argued Wyatt, but Burnett was less sanguine about these prospects.

Examining the early research projects of Wyatt and Burnett in some detail will provide a framework for understanding the inappropriate scientific conduct of boredom researchers in Britain throughout the 1920s and '30s. Contradictory and skewed data emerged in the introductions to and summaries of research as unvarnished, crystalline scientific facts—a trend characterizing the entire study of monotony and work in Great Britain through 1937. These initial studies also illustrated how closely these researchers' suggested solutions, such as rest pauses and variety in work, mirrored the techniques of efficiency engineers.

The first British investigations into monotony also established the power of listening to the subjective responses of women workers. Descriptions by female factory

operatives about how boredom felt and the ways they choose to overcome the drudgery of specialized labor became a central element in all of Wyatt's future research. Ironically, both Wyatt and Burnett included experimental results indicating there might not be a need for the professional expertise of industrial psychologists.

From 1924 to 1925, three laboratory experiments and one field investigation with a total of 12 test subjects were sponsored by the IFRB to determine if boredom was a problem in "light" manufacturing industries. The first of these was Stanley Wyatt's "Notes on an Experiment on Rest Pauses," published in 1924. Wyatt wanted to determine if rest pauses could reduce monotony in repetitive work and increase output. He created a laboratory experiment where one test subject added numbers of five digits in two shifts of two and one-half hours per day. The experiment ran for five days a week over "several" weeks in a row—the lack of recording the specific duration of the experiment was a harbinger of Wyatt's imprecise methods. The single subject's continuous addition was compared with one 15-minute rest pause given in the middle of each shift.¹⁶⁶

Wyatt took output measurements every 15 minutes to develop a work curve. In the morning output was initially high. In the middle of the work spell the subject's productivity dramatically decreased and then rose near the end. The dip in output resembled an upside down bell curve. Wyatt hypothesized that this curve was due to boredom and wrote, "The monotonous activities of the type under consideration cause a considerable reduction in output." Though "fatigue curves" had existed since the Italian physiologist Angelo Mosso invented the *ergograph* (register of work) in 1884, Wyatt was the first scientist to graph a correlation between monotony and decreased output—a

¹⁶⁶ United Kingdom. Industrial Fatigue Research Board. "Notes on An Experiment on Rest Pauses," in *Two Studies on Rest Pauses in Industry*, Report No. 25, prepared by Stanley Wyatt (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1924), ii, iv.

major breakthrough since the evidence was interpreted as proof for the existence of boredom in the workplace. Though any number of factors with a single test subject could account for such a pattern, only a few more experiments took place before the proof of a “monotony curve” became accepted as a scientific fact.¹⁶⁷

The test subject tried five types of rest-pause activities: absolute rest, uncontrolled, listening to music, drinking tea, and taking a walk. Wyatt determined that a rest pause of 15 minutes led to an increase in productivity for the rest of a work shift. The greatest increase occurred during absolute rest when “the subjects [*sic*] were allowed complete relaxation in easy chairs.” On the surface this idea might have seemed absurd, a suggestion most likely to be met with scorn by managers seeking to increase assembly line efficiency through heightened labor discipline, but Wyatt’s research made its way into the pages of *The Manchester Guardian*. A local reporter commented on “the importance” of Wyatt’s “merely suggestive” results for determining, with more research, how rest pauses might increase industrial output.¹⁶⁸

The key, Wyatt thought, was to have workers take a rest pause at the exact point on the work curve where the first indication of boredom appeared. Rest pauses made a slight change in the rhythm of work. A side effect might have been to make a boring job slightly more tolerable, but this was not Wyatt’s primary concern. The concept of allowing a 15-minute break was based on adjusting a worker’s psychology to accept fast-paced, repetitive work so she would work harder during the second part of a work shift. Presumably a formal pause would also diminish the practice of taking sporadic,

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 34; Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 133-134.

¹⁶⁸ Industrial Fatigue Research Board, “Notes on An Experiment on Rest Pauses,” 36; “Short Rests in Industry,” *The Manchester Guardian*, March 3, 1924, 10.

unauthorized breaks throughout a shift—a practice widely used by workers to slow down the pace of production.

Wyatt's experiment did not attempt to quantify the intelligence or temperament of the test subject, but he still argued that "the amount of monotony experienced probably depends more on the attitude of the operative towards his work" than on the intensity of the repetitive work. His justification for including such a statement was that "it is well known that the same industrial task has different subjective effects upon different individuals, and while some may find the work extremely monotonous . . . others find it comparatively pleasant." There was no scientific record to back up Wyatt's assertion (only the speculations of Münsterberg and Myers), nor did it have anything to do with his study. His desire to offer vocational selection as a solution to industry made Wyatt state that subjective traits were definitively responsible for worker monotony. As this chapter will detail, when Wyatt and another researcher, Isabel Burnett, created experiments to prove such a correlation existed, they were willing to skew or misrepresent their data to insure that this founding myth remained intact.¹⁶⁹

Wyatt's next research project, "On the Extent and Effects of Variety in Repetitive Work" (1924), was a collaborative effort with H. M. Vernon, the industrial psychologist who originally backed Lord Leverhulme's six-hour day program. Vernon's contribution to the study was to build up evidence proving repetitive work created monotony. His data fulfilled Myers's desire to make a stronger association between "light work" and boredom. The entire investigation indicated that the IFRB was committed to conducting research solely among female factory workers.

¹⁶⁹ Industrial Fatigue Research Board, "Notes on An Experiment on Rest Pauses," 23.

Vernon, using time study techniques drawn from scientific management, described the working conditions for women on a number of assembly lines. His measurements of the duration of a work cycle in seconds revealed what exactly was meant by the phrase “repetitive work”—no formal rest breaks were allowed during the work day. For eight hours straight, women “cap padders” inserted a disc of linoleum or cardboard into tin caps at the rate of one-second intervals. Their female coworkers relentlessly stamped tin lids at a pace of 0.7 second. In a tobacco factory, young operatives’ affixed cutters to the lids of a tobacco cans every three seconds. In a box factory, workers stood over a table and within three seconds they opened a flat carton, folded over the ends, and stuck on a strip of glued paper. Vernon, in the vernacular of scientific understatement, concluded that these women were engaged in “what appeared to be” very monotonous occupations.¹⁷⁰

New ideas about talking, temperament, and adaptation emerged in Wyatt’s “On the Extent” research projects. While still in their incipient stages, these three areas of interest led Wyatt to develop a model of boredom that implied the most effective solution was to create a state of psychological diversion, to counteract other forms of mental distraction such as talking or daydreaming, and condition a worker’s attention back on repetitive tasks. Wyatt conducted two studies, one in the field and one in the laboratory, to determine the effectiveness of allowing workers to change the types of tasks they did throughout the day—what was termed “variety in work.”

For the field project, Wyatt visited a factory where women filled orders for retail chemists. Over several days he observed four women aged eighteen to twenty-two. The

¹⁷⁰ United Kingdom. Industrial Fatigue Research Board, *On the Extent and Effects of Variety in Repetitive Work*, Report 26, prepared by Stanley Wyatt and H. M. Vernon (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1924), 2–8.

psychologist, acting like an efficiency engineer, made an “attempt to account for every second” of what the operatives did from 8 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. A typical set of tasks were for a worker to get twenty to thirty bottles, clean them, fill the bottles with aspirin, pad, cap, and label each one, and then pack the order. The employee then repeated the process and usually completed between six to twelve orders a day. “Variety in work” meant doing multiple types of functions within one complete work cycle.¹⁷¹

The four women Wyatt studied sometimes worked in an exact sequence from getting the bottles to packing them, and at other times they altered their routines, apparently to avoid keeping the work from becoming too repetitious. Using time and motion techniques, Wyatt measured the “unproductive time” of the workers. He then had them perform one task at various intervals of time. For example, they exclusively washed bottles for one hour and then filled them with aspirin for an hour, and then moved on to the next task. He found the more systematized routines were more efficient. Though their answers were not included in the research report, Wyatt claimed the workers said they preferred an hourly change in activity to their more casual way of filling orders and did not feel bored using the new system.¹⁷²

The results proved, according to Wyatt, how variety in work, if realized by systematically changing work patterns every hour, was an antidote to boredom—an idea he maintained or slightly refined throughout his future research projects. This was a localized solution. Only factories with similar work processes could take advantage of Wyatt’s analysis.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁷² Ibid., 38, 18.

In a rare example of boredom research actually being applied in the 1920s, the retail order department of the factory Wyatt studied devised “a scheme, based on the different times required to perform the different operations . . . which would tend to eliminate all unproductive time, whilst maintaining variety . . . and would bring about an increase in output.” Wyatt’s concept of “variety” was based on making employees work in intense bursts of repetitive activity and then shift tasks in order to keep their minds off boredom—a form of scientific management based on removing spontaneity from the workplace by adjusting worker behavior. “Variety” was somewhat maintained, but the women lost their autonomy to determine how to pack retail orders and at what pace.¹⁷³

In a second part of his factory study, Wyatt observed the four women at another task. They were required to count nine tablets of pills, place them in a paper held on a groove of a wooden device, fold the paper around the tablets, and place the finished product on a table. This took twelve seconds for one cycle and was repeated twenty-five hundred times per day. The work curves Wyatt obtained from observing the women did not fit the pattern of his test subject in “Notes” (a fact he omitted), but instead fluctuated wildly between high and low degrees of output. He concluded: “Results obtained when unvarying repetition work throughout the day was tried show that it is conducive to fatigue, boredom, and monotony.” The finding “proved” variety in work was superior to doing a single, repetitive task throughout the day.¹⁷⁴

The most significant aspect of Wyatt’s research on the shop floor was his time spent listening to the conversations of female workers when they performed the mind-numbing task of packing tablets of pills. Wyatt did not publish what the women said. He

¹⁷³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 18, 23.

made charts of the average number of conversations during each half hour of the work day and analyzed the effect of talking on output. The data showed that talking during work decreased output anywhere from 18.3 percent to 30.4 percent. “Such conversations indicate a desire for change on the part of the operatives and tend to decrease the monotony of the task,” he wrote.¹⁷⁵

Wyatt recommended providing “facilities for conversation” (the same idea as a rest pause) or to allow talking during work since it relieved “the uniformity and monotony of work.” He misrepresented the experimental evidence in his research summary by stating that talking also tended to “maintain output at a more uniform level throughout the day.” This pattern in Wyatt’s methodology—writing inaccurate summaries where experimental data was distorted, glossed-over, or ignored—deceived readers who only paid attention to the introductory comments and final conclusions of his research publications. The effect was to turn the desired outcomes of boredom researchers into scientific facts without any equivocation.¹⁷⁶

Recognizing how talking might diminish “the tendency for mind-wandering or ‘day-dreaming’” in repetitive work became a key hypothesis of the second factory study. Wyatt, following Myers’s theory, believed certain states of inattention shielded the mind from becoming bored. Workers who talked did not struggle to overcome intrusive thoughts and to refocus their attention back on work—they kept working and avoided feelings of monotony. In 1924, Wyatt saw daydreaming as an undesirable behavior, but later he, like Myers, viewed the fantasy life of a worker as a defense against boredom. In the future, Wyatt kept Myers’s assertions about intelligence and monotony tolerance

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 21, 23.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 23.

intact by using intelligence test scores and observations about temperament to explain the individual differences between conversationalists and daydreamers. These moments of listening to female workers helped Wyatt begin to consider if there might be methods other than talking and fantasizing to divert the mind from boredom.

“On the Extent” also contained laboratory research conducted by Wyatt. His research problem was to determine whether variety in work helped decrease monotony and increase output. Three subjects aged eighteen to twenty-two were given three alternating sets of tasks: simple addition, mechanical computation, and light muscular work. These tasks were then compared with performing each one separately throughout the day with no variety. The study covered six weeks and took place in two and one-half hour shifts in the morning and afternoon with an hour lunch break in between. Wyatt found that alternating work in 50-minute intervals was “much superior to unvaried spells of equal length,” due to a 2.4 to 24.2 percent increase in output. Variety in work seemed to be validated by the experiment, but Wyatt admitted the reader had to take “precaution in the interpretation of results obtained in a laboratory.” This was good advice.¹⁷⁷

Wyatt did not give any explanation of what constituted a significant statistical difference. The output of test “Subject A” was exceptionally high. Wyatt glossed the issue by stating that “A” was an experienced test subject and when not engaged in experiments did daily work consisting of “simple arithmetical computations”—these statements meant the entire experiment was skewed from the start since it was based on comparative methods. The work curves of “Subject B” barely showed any difference in output between varied and repetitive experiments. Taking into account that the data from “A” was suspect, and that Wyatt only tested three subjects, this result implied there might

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 24-25, 37, 29.

not be a simple correlation between variety and increased output. The only logical conclusion about the experiment on variety in work should have been to represent it as being inconclusive.¹⁷⁸

The concept of temperament and monotony tolerance appeared for the first time in “On the Extent.” Wyatt asked his three subjects how they felt about the experimental tasks. “Subject A” said the tasks were “tedious and monotonous.” There were no complaints from “Subject B.” A strong dislike for the entire experiment was expressed by “Subject C.” These brief conversations led Wyatt to conclude: “It may be found that the individuals who find repetition work most monotonous are not only those with a high degree of intelligence, but also those who possess the organic and nervous peculiarities which give rise to sensitive and unstable temperaments.” Tests to determine a person’s temperament might, he noted, “be suitable” for determining boredom tolerance. Wyatt’s claim was based on his feelings about “Subject A,” who was “undoubtedly high strung and sensitive” and therefore unsuitable for monotonous work. None of the subjects were given intelligence or temperament tests and the research conclusion hardly constituted proper experimental method. But, how to relate temperament to boredom susceptibility became a central element in all of Wyatt’s future research.¹⁷⁹

In “On the Extent,” Wyatt coolly explained how industrial factory operatives adapted to repetitive work. “Under industrial conditions work which at the outset may be found to be highly distasteful and monotonous, may be less so as the workers become adapted to the routine conditions,” he wrote. Factory operatives ultimately became “indifferent to unpleasant conditions.” On the surface, making such an observation

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 29, 26.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 34, 30.

seemed irrational. If all workers could adapt to the most tedious forms of subdivided labor, where was the need for industrial psychology or vocational selection? Wyatt's statement implied that the continuation of strict labor discipline and the deployment of scientific management techniques, including the speeding up of employees, might be the best way to obtain maximized profit.¹⁸⁰

In 1924, Wyatt was still working through how intelligence, temperament, and adaptation related to monotony and repetitive work. Throughout his career, Wyatt seemed much more comfortable expressing his opinions in journal articles than in his formal research publications for the IFRB. In "Monotony," published in *The Journal of the National Institute of Industrial Psychology* in January, 1924, he indicated that discussions about individual differences and adaptation in his research reports were connected to ideas about racial decline, civilization, and selecting a stable, passive workforce for manufacturing firms.

The IFRB studies on individual differences and monotony took place within a broader cultural concern with racial degeneration. During the interwar years in Great Britain, there was "widespread public fear that the quality of the population was declining to a point that threatened the continued existence of a vigorous imperial race and imperiled civilization itself," as Richard Overly writes. These were propitious times for British eugenicists, and influential psychologists such as Cyril Burt (who by 1929 served on the Committee on Industrial Psychology for the IFRB) argued that science had proven mental characteristics were inherited. Burt created a hierarchy of humans where the "unfit"—people prone to antisocial behavior and crime—were the bearers of racial decay. He categorized much of the English population as consisting of "borderline persons" who

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 36.

were “mentally dull” and subnormal. Sterilization campaigns to cleanse the English race of the “unfit” gained popular support in the 1920s. After the July 1931 defeat of a major sterilization bill in the House of Commons, the emphasis of eugenicists shifted to positive programs of better breeding—how to select a suitable mate and raise a healthy, large family.¹⁸¹

Wyatt appeared to think vocational selection could save intelligent people from repetitive work so that their skills would not be wasted and they could survive to reproduce a superior race. In “Monotony,” he argued that intelligent people were not fit for specialized labor because the work dulled their minds and reduced them “to the level of automata.” The less intelligent or “subnormals” were already mentally dulled and thus were fit for repetitive work. These workers felt “free from responsibility” and enjoyed monotonous work because it allowed them to engage in pleasant mind wandering, reported Wyatt. Here was a solution where the “unfit” could be segregated and relegated to an industrial colony of mindless assembly line labor. The devolution of intelligent people and the consequences for British civilization seemed to concern Wyatt. Still, an appeal to corporate managers about the need to save the race by mitigating the harm adaptation caused to intelligent workers, a potentially costly civic duty for industry, might have been ineffectual.¹⁸²

More compelling was the argument that bored intelligent workers caused unrest in the factory and for the culture at large. Intelligent workers exhibited a “listless attitude towards work” and monotony created a desire for leisure-time “excitements” which could assume “undesirable forms.” The adaptation of intelligent workers to repetitive work

¹⁸¹ Overy, *The Twilight Years*, 96, 110, 113, 124-125, 129-130.

¹⁸² Stanley Wyatt, “Monotony,” *The Journal of the National Institute of Industrial Psychology* 2 (1924): 26, 24.

processes made them “opposed to modifications” suggested by industrial psychologists to improve working conditions. Employees who had “sensitive and mercurial temperaments” were bad fits for industrial processes requiring “constant steadiness.” The language Wyatt used closely emulated the type of rhetoric usually reserved for people whose behavior set them apart from the rest of society as subnormal—in his model of boredom intelligent people were represented as industrial misfits.¹⁸³

The impulses to save worthy individuals from repetitive work and to advocate on a professional, scientific basis for their removal from tedious jobs as a threat to business were mutually compatible. Either justification removed “intelligent people” from monotonous jobs. Yet convincing corporate managers that the rejection of people who scored high on intelligence tests would end industrial unrest and create a stable, highly efficient labor force would be a difficult task; especially if industrial psychologists continued to write about adaptation. Wyatt would expand this model of individual difference and boredom in all of his future research endeavors, but in 1925 his colleague Isabel Burnett gained more attention by “proving” intelligent people were not fit for repetitive work.

Isabel Burnett in “An Experimental Investigation into Repetitive Work” wanted to determine if there was a relationship between intelligence and monotony tolerance. She also studied whether rest pauses influenced productivity. Burnett selected four women out of a group of 30 from a school for Unemployed Young Persons. All were asked to take an intelligence test containing eight questions such as “If Z is the last letter in the alphabet and if B does not come before A write No under this line.” The four women were picked because they occupied “different positions in the scale of intelligence.” The

¹⁸³ Ibid., 26, 25, 30.

experiment took place in the Psychological Department at the University of Manchester under the guidance of T. H. Pear. All of the women had been unemployed for several months and received higher pay during the study than the ordinary rate paid by employers for similar work. The reason for this incentive was to keep the test subjects from abandoning the experiment. Burnett admitted that the pay biased the subjects' attitudes toward the research but never addressed how this might skew the results of her study.¹⁸⁴

The women were asked to cross-stitch on a 20-inch canvas, where their output was measured by the number of stitches they made in a work spell. Over fourteen weeks, the women worked four days a week in three-hour shifts. On Tuesdays, they were allowed to take as many pauses as they liked and to talk. On Wednesdays, they received one 15-minute rest pause in each work shift and were allowed to talk. On Thursdays, they were not allowed to talk or take any rest pauses. On Fridays, they received three rest pauses in each work shift for five minutes each and were allowed to talk. Burnett believed her laboratory experiment was “comparable with many factory operations”—a fair assessment for the type of work conducted, though factory operatives worked day in and day out for much longer shifts and encountered more complicated environmental and social conditions on the shop floor.¹⁸⁵

Burnett found her test subjects replicated the same pattern of a mid-work spell dip in output recorded by Stanley Wyatt in “Notes” and she called the graphic representation a “monotony curve.” From this point forward, the profession of industrial psychology in both Great Britain and the United States accepted the “monotony curve” as scientific proof that repetitive work caused monotony, which in turn led to a decline in

¹⁸⁴ United Kingdom. Industrial Fatigue Research Board, *An Experimental Investigation into Repetitive Work*, Report 30, prepared by Isabel Burnett (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1925), 2–3, 24, 4.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

productivity. This new scientific fact, based on two studies with a total of five test subjects, was faithfully reproduced throughout the twentieth-century in psychology textbooks and journals.

Burnett wanted to validate Charles Myers's promotion of vocational selection by proving intelligence was related to boredom susceptibility. She also apparently wanted to please her contacts in local Manchester factories where there was a large degree of repetitive work. Burnett reported on one "local firm" unwilling to employ "highly intelligent operatives" because they became bored. The fact that Burnett mentioned a single firm's practice seemed incongruent with what was supposed to be an objective, laboratory-based, scientific study. Burnett opened her study by stating the opinion "of the [Manchester factory] management is confirmed by the findings of this experiment."¹⁸⁶

The first experiment Burnett conducted measured output against the subject's intelligence test score. Each test subject's "name" was designated by their score rank. On average, "Subject C" was the most consistent worker for the entire experiment. Burnett interpreted this as indicating "C's" lack of intelligence was a sign of monotony tolerance. Yet "A" and "B" were the next most consistent workers respectively and "D," the least intelligent, did the least amount of work. On Thursday, the day most resembling factory conditions, "A" had exceptionally high output levels and her total number of stitches exceed all of the other test subjects. "A" and "B" had more "monotony curves" throughout the experiment, indicating a decrease in their overall output, but they were still working at a higher level than "D."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 22.

In aggregate, the two most “intelligent” workers were more productive than the two who scored lower on intelligence tests, and they were willing to work extremely hard under the worst (simulated) industrial conditions. Still, Burnett interpreted her results as indicating “the highly intelligent individual is not suited to repetitive work.” The claim was derived from the fact that “monotony curves” appeared more frequently in the output of the two most intelligent test subjects.¹⁸⁸

Burnett supplemented her data with the subjective responses of the female cross-stitchers. “Subject A,” the most intelligent, “insisted that she liked the work.” Burnett countered this statement with her own observations. “Of the four, A alone showed physical signs of restlessness and boredom. She yawned, she frequently changed her position and sometimes stood up to do her work. . . . and she talked far more than the others, particularly of her hopes and plans for the future, how she would like to go to America, wanted a motor car, and so on.” The other subjects said what Burnett wanted to hear, so she inserted no comments on their behavior into the research report.¹⁸⁹

“Subject B,” the second highest in intelligence, said she found the work “‘very tedious’ and would not like to do it regularly.” The third highest in intelligence, “Subject C,” said she “had not experienced any strain of monotony as a result of repetitive work” and “Subject D,” the least intelligent, “liked the work and had not found it monotonous.” Burnett inadvertently illustrated the problem with using the opinions of test subjects—how could the investigator be sure they were telling the truth? In this instance, she implied that “Subject A” was lying and used her own expertise to contradict an

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 8.

unwelcome remark. Obviously, this implication did not depend on any reliable evidence.¹⁹⁰

Yet Burnett's research conclusion about intelligence and monotony susceptibility, based on four test subjects who, as *The Manchester Guardian* put it, felt they had "soft jobs" because of the high pay, came to be accepted by American industrial psychologists as scientific fact. Burnett's findings made their way into the most influential American textbook of the 1920s—A. T. Poffenberger's *Applied Psychology, Its Principles and Methods* (1927). Poffenberger reviewed Burnett's research and wrote "it seems to be definitely established that low-grade mentalities find satisfaction in jobs of a highly repetitive character." In the 1930s, Morris S. Viteles, author of *Industrial Psychology* (1932), the most influential industrial psychology textbook written in the twentieth century, cited Burnett for having established a relationship between boredom susceptibility and intelligence. In addition, the best-selling industrial psychology textbook of the early post–World War II years, *Personnel and Industrial Psychology* (1948), included Burnett's results as a scientific fact.¹⁹¹

Apparently her contribution to the profession overshadowed the challenge Burnett posed to a main tenet of Myers, the IFRB, and Wyatt—that rest pauses were integral to helping decrease monotony and increase productivity. Her experimental results indicated giving 15-minute rest pauses resulted in "much lower output." Though the test subjects said they disliked Thursday, the day in Burnett's research study with no talking and no

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Wayne Dennis selected Poffenberger as the most influential textbook of the 1920s. "Intelligence and Fatigue," *The Manchester Guardian*, August 28, 1925, 10; Wayne Dennis, *Current Trends in Industrial Psychology* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1949), 2; A. T. Poffenberger, *Applied Psychology, Its Principles and Methods* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1927), 224–225; Morris S. Viteles, *Industrial Psychology* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, Inc., 1932), 538; Edwin E. Ghiselli and Clarence Brown, *Personnel and Industrial Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1948), 424–425.

rest pauses, they accomplished the highest level of aggregate output for the entire experiment—a finding many corporate managers, especially those hiring efficiency engineers, would find satisfying and would conclude that the data implied Wyatt's thoughts about adaptation might have had some basis in reality. The four female test subjects produced the least on Wednesday, the day when 15-minute rest pauses were mandatory. Burnett's analysis was ignored. No future research by the IFRB cited her findings, but all endorsed the use of rest pauses. Burnett was not hired again by the IFRB. For the next twelve years, Stanley Wyatt, who was a colleague of Burnett's advisor T. H. Pear at Manchester University, became the primary boredom researcher for the IFRB.¹⁹²

The third key period of boredom research, from 1927 to 1929, continued to be plagued by questionable methodology, incongruous data, and the biased interpretation of results—the overt manipulation of experimental results to fit desired outcomes typified this period. Yet Stanley Wyatt and his co-investigators for the IFRB rapidly established a widely accepted paradigm about monotony and work by the end of 1929. A series of their research projects late in the decade accumulated more data on monotony curves, rest pauses, and variety in work and presented the results as a set of incontrovertible scientific truths.

The focus of Wyatt's investigations, however, was on developing a battery of tests to locate people who indicated a tolerance for monotony. The most significant turn of events in the late 1920s was the close attention researchers paid to talking and daydreaming. Conversing with coworkers and fantasizing about anything but work, represented by the researchers as forms of extroversion and introversion, were considered as ways to avoid boredom by diverting the mind from unpleasant thoughts. The practical

¹⁹² Industrial Fatigue Research Board, *An Experimental Investigation into Repetitive Work*, 10.

problem was that these states of inattention were considered barriers to heightened efficiency. Still, the effort to understand why talking and daydreaming seemed to subdue monotony ultimately made Wyatt shift course in the late 1930s. He then tried to devise a solution intended to manipulate the behavior of all workers, regardless of individual differences, to shape a docile, stable, efficient workforce.

In 1927, Wyatt published a renegade article, “An Experimental Study of a Repetitive Process,” in the *British Journal of Psychology*. His publication received little attention from the industrial psychology community. The article explained the results of experiments with thirty women who wrapped and packed soap. Wyatt, following the four examples located in Isabel Burnett’s 1925 study, expected to find that “individuals endowed with a relatively low order of intelligence” would be more efficient at repetitive work because they were tolerant of monotony. He administered intelligence tests to his thirty subjects. The highest score was 205.9 and the lowest was 29.7. The women were given four types of repetitive activities in a laboratory environment over an eight-week period so Wyatt could compare their work curves. Much to his surprise, there were no significant differences in efficiency ratings across all of the test subjects. “It appears that the amount of intelligence . . . possessed by an individual is practically no criterion of her efficiency as a worker in a simple repetitive process,” he concluded.¹⁹³

Wyatt’s data shattered Isabel Burnett’s claim about intelligent people not being suited for repetitive work if the criteria was based solely on efficiency. Out of the top ten subjects who scored the highest on their intelligence tests, four had efficiency ratings over 100, four had ratings in the 90s, and two had ratings under 90—the same pattern

¹⁹³ Stanley Wyatt, “An Experimental Study of A Repetitive Process,” *British Journal of Psychology* 17 (1927): 192, 195.

held for the ten workers who scored lowest on the test. The most efficient group of workers was those ten women who had the middle ten intelligence scores. In general, the evidence showed workers to be inefficient at all levels of intelligence—the simple equation of selecting “stupid” workers for repetitive work did not hold. Still, Wyatt remained invested in maintaining that intelligence did help determine who should perform tedious jobs, but he was shrewd enough to focus on the inadequacy of using a test score as an exclusive factor.¹⁹⁴

Wyatt interpreted his results in this 1927 study as indicating “the inadequacy of existing psychological tests as a means of predicting industrial achievement.” Using only intelligence tests to select workers was “fraught with danger and difficulties, and must be treated with the utmost caution and reserve.” It is likely Wyatt was referring to the application of tests by nonscientists, especially personnel managers. The correct scientific solution was to develop more sophisticated psychological tests, using intelligence ratings and some quantitative measure of temperament to determine boredom susceptibility. Yet the implications of the evidence in “An Experimental Study”—boredom seemed to be a universal response to repetitive work and was not based on individual differences (or at least ones easy to derive)—may have influenced Wyatt’s turn to an all-inclusive solution for boredom in 1937.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Wyatt was using a different form of measurement than Burnett. Burnett based her results on units of output. Her basic premise was that the monotony curves of intelligent people illustrated they were not working close to their potential for maximum efficiency though she did not state her conclusion in these terms. Wyatt’s efficiency ratings should have been a better representation of whether boredom was related to intelligence. They should have taken into account decreases in output due to monotony. Wyatt did not include his formula for calculating efficiency in “An Experimental Study,” so it is impossible conclusively to understand what his results meant in relation to Burnett’s findings. He never questioned whether this data might have meant there was a correlation between “average” intelligence and boredom tolerance. Wyatt, “An Experimental Study,” 194.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 208.

Since industrial psychologists viewed vocational selection as the core practice distinguishing their profession from scientific management, Wyatt persisted in trying to find a correlation between intelligence and monotony tolerance. In “An Experimental Study,” each test subject was asked “if she found the work boring or tedious at anytime during the day.” Wyatt included brief extracts of all the women’s responses in the article. He admitted that subjective responses were not akin to hard scientific evidence, and failed to explain the difficulties behind trying to interpret and quantify what the women said. Nonetheless, Wyatt deployed his test subjects’ voices as a means to repudiate or at least gloss over the problems posed by their efficiency data.¹⁹⁶

Wyatt included only sixteen out of thirty of the women’s statements in his analysis. He did not describe which workers he had selected and for what reasons. This suspicious methodology suggested Wyatt wanted to skew the experimental results. Wyatt interpreted two out of the sixteen women in the sample to be saying that they did not feel bored with soap wrapping. One of the women had an intelligence test score of 90.8, placing her right in the middle of the group, and one had a test score of 52.4, the second lowest. He failed to include in his sample one test subject with an intelligence score of 143.1 (the sixth highest) who said: “I like the work very much.” This seemed to be an odd oversight since there was no ambiguity in the test subject’s statement. According to Wyatt, the two who said they enjoyed the repetitive experiments, 12.5 percent in his sample, had “below average” intelligence scores. He concluded: “It appears, therefore, that the experience of boredom, as shown by the opinions of the workers under consideration, is positively related to their degree of intelligence.” The energy exerted on such manipulations seemed hardly worth the effort—the biased results and definitive

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 197.

interpretation were hardly convincing. For Wyatt, the need to establish one of Myers's founding claims outweighed his responsibility to legitimate scientific method.¹⁹⁷

The landmark year for boredom research was 1929. The IFRB's publication of "The Effects of Monotony in Work" by Wyatt and J. A. Fraser established a paradigm for industrial psychologists in Great Britain and the United States. The analysis of the study's data gained consensus within the profession and was published as scientific fact in leading textbooks, at least until 1948. For industrial psychologists concerned with monotony and work, the following "facts" were accepted as indisputable truths well into the late twentieth century: monotony curves existed; boredom decreased output and increased industrial unrest; a relationship existed between intelligence, temperament, and monotony susceptibility; daydreaming compensated for the unpleasant realities of industrial conditions; and, the solutions of rest pauses and variety in work were effective (though acknowledged as provoking resistance from corporate managers). The numerous problems with Wyatt's methodology and analysis were not mentioned by his peers or by

¹⁹⁷ Wyatt seemed to include only statements fitting his model of boredom. He was having difficulty establishing a clear pattern in the afternoon data for a consistent monotony curve and Wyatt apparently only used statements of women who said they were bored in the morning. Twenty-three out of thirty women said they were bored (77 percent). Eleven indicated boredom in the morning and sometimes in the afternoon (37 percent). Twelve out of the twenty-three said they felt bored or tired in the afternoon around 3:00 p.m. (40 percent). Wyatt apparently only kept the eleven responses where the morning was mentioned and added three responses from women who said they "seldom" felt bored during the morning work spell. Apparently he then added two out of the three clear statements about not being bored by the work to create a test sample of sixteen workers. A different way of examining the results is to look at all of the statements. Out of the top ten intelligence scores, nine out of ten workers said they were bored (90 percent). One said she was not bored (10 percent). Out of the next ten intelligence scores, nine out of ten said they were bored or seldom bored (90 percent). One said she was not bored (10 percent). Of the bottom ten intelligence test scores, eight out of ten said they were bored (80 percent). One said she was not bored (10 percent) and one made an inconclusive statement (10 percent). Based on the entire set of answers, there is no statistical correlation between intelligence and subjective responses to boredom. Wyatt, "An Experimental Study," 197, 201.

textbook authors. No “rigorous policing” of the evidence occurred and a flawed paradigm based on shoddy research was rapidly established.¹⁹⁸

For those who followed in Wyatt’s footsteps after World War II—clinical, comparative, educational, and industrial psychologists who sought to find therapeutic solutions to boredom “disorders”—the idea that boredom was a pathological condition

¹⁹⁸ The assertion that a scientific paradigm was established is based on a review of the bestselling textbooks used to train industrial psychologists in the United States from 1920–1948. Thomas Kuhn viewed textbooks as the final arbiters of what constituted scientific fact. “Scientists work from models acquired through education and through subsequent exposure to the literature often without quite knowing or needing to know what characteristics have given these models the status of community paradigms. . . . After it has been accepted, those same applications or others accompany the theory into the textbooks from which the future practitioner learns his trade,” he wrote. Textbooks taught new generations of industrial psychologists about the latest developments in the study of boredom. They also popularized scientific knowledge about monotony, since laypeople were an intended audience. In textbooks, claims about scientific truth were codified for audiences who could not take the time to read through the hundreds of pages of mathematical calculations and charts from each study. The textbooks reviewed were A. T. Poffenberger’s *Applied Psychology: Its Principles and Methods* (1927), Harold Burt’s *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency* (1929), Morris S. Viteles’ *Industrial Psychology* (1932), and Edwin E. Ghiselli’s and Clarence W. Brown’s, *Personal and Industrial Psychology* (1948).

The 1920s textbooks, based on the research of Isabel Burnett and Wyatt, discussed monotony as the cause behind decreased industrial efficiency and increased unrest. Intelligence was established as a determining factor in boredom tolerance and both textbooks stated the need to develop vocational selection tests along this line. Neither Poffenberger nor Burt had anything positive to say about rest pauses as a solution. Poffenberger argued variety in work was a legitimate solution to alleviating boredom. Burt called the idea a “fantasy” since it was based on a “return to pre-standardization era in industry” and would never be accepted by well-organized companies involved in mass production.

In the 1930s, Morris Viteles used the research findings of “The Effects of Monotony and Work” extensively in his textbook and spent pages reproducing some of the results. The existence of monotony curves, the fact that boredom decreased output, the belief that intelligence and temperament were indications of monotony tolerance, and the assertion that daydreams made repetitive work more pleasant were all accepted and represented as scientific fact by Viteles. He also advocated for the use of rest pauses and for developing vocational selection tests to determine boredom susceptibility. Viteles tentatively agreed with the value of variety in work, but stated he felt the concept was unviable for most companies involved in mass production. Viteles’ textbook was the most popular of its day and was widely used to train industrial psychologists well into the 1950s. Ghiselli and Brown were also able to draw ideas from the 1937 study on “Fatigue and Boredom in Repetitive Work” by Wyatt and Langdon, but their textbook only reinforced the paradigm established in 1929. The only new and significant finding was on the use of background music as a way to overcome boredom in repetitive work. Ghiselli and Brown replicated Viteles’ assertions including the mild skepticism about the possibility for the use of variety in work.

There is enough evidence, based on reading reviews about the development of the “Boredom Proneness Scale” (1987) and by examining the multitude of self-help books written in the late twentieth century about how to overcome boredom, to suggest that the flawed paradigm Wyatt and Fraser created still exists in contemporary American culture, but has expanded beyond the boundaries of industrial psychology. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 46; Poffenberger, *Applied Psychology*, 198, 212, 216, 220, 223–225; Harold E. Burt, *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1929), 7, 193–195, 198–199, 202, 215, 218–219, 273; Viteles, *Industrial Psychology*, 513, 515–520, 525, 529, 537, 540, 547, 554, 558–559; Ghiselli and Brown, *Personal and Industrial Psychology*, 415–416, 418–419, 421, 424, 426, 429.

became the most enduring legacy of Wyatt's research. By the late 1920s, monotony was already being shaped into what might appear as a mental affliction: a subjective state characterized by the symptoms of an inhibited work ethic, a high potential for individual and socially disruptive behavior, and the inability to integrate harmoniously with other members of the community.

"The Effects of Monotony in Work" was notable for the same sloppy methodology as in past publications by Wyatt. The study investigated work conditions in three factories producing lamps, chocolate, and cigars. In these settings, forty-five female test subjects performed repetitive manual tasks such as inserting hooks into the glass stem of a lamp. A fourth factory where six women wrapped soap on an assembly line was also studied. The length of the study, the criteria for the selection of workers, the types of conditions under which the experiments were conducted, and how quantitative measurements were derived ("the comparative rate of working" or "efficiency expressed as a percentage of the average for the group") were never explained. No baseline data of output for each worker in any of the experiments was provided, making it impossible to determine whether the analysis of results was valid, since Wyatt and Fraser provided only composite tables and graphs. Within this deeply flawed context, the two industrial psychologists investigated the relationship between monotony and output, the correlation between intelligence and boredom susceptibility, the connection between temperament and daydreaming, and the effects of talking on output.¹⁹⁹

Wyatt and Fraser continued accumulating data on the existence of a "monotony curve" in the morning work spell. They found output declined by 5 percent due to worker

¹⁹⁹ The tables and graphs were based on small cohorts of workers drawn from each factory. United Kingdom. Industrial Fatigue Research Board, *The Effects of Monotony in Work*, Report 56, prepared by Stanley Wyatt and J. A. Fraser (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1929), 6–7.

boredom. Their analysis, intended to represent the whole, was based on a composite of twelve work curves taken from different workers in each factory—a highly suspect way of representing data. Still, boredom was represented as a “psychical state” capable of seriously impairing productivity.²⁰⁰

The two industrial psychologists held interviews with each female worker to determine how she felt about monotony at work. The women were asked, “Are there any features which you particularly like or dislike” about the job and “afterwards were invited to give their views on boredom.” Edited extracts of the responses were published in an appendix to the investigation. Wyatt and Fraser believed the women would be reluctant to criticize occupations they depended on for their livelihood and would underestimate “the unfavorable element” at work. Yet little of this happened—the majority of the operatives had no difficulty stating their work was boring.²⁰¹

Two of the workers declined to be interviewed. Thirty-six out of forty-nine women (73 percent) clearly said they were bored with their jobs. Thirteen (27 percent) were interpreted by the investigators as stating they were not bored, but some of the responses were ambiguous. “I never get bored; it’s too lively here for that. I prefer the work in the afternoon as it seems to go quicker than in the morning,” said a tobacco weigher. Boredom was most prevalent during the mornings, according to Wyatt’s past research. One woman who had the highest scores on multiple intelligence tests was evasive. She said work was only a small part of her life and time in her off-hours was

²⁰⁰ Monotony was less distinguishable to Wyatt and Fraser in the afternoon work spell. Different types of work would produce a variety of output curves. Placing a glass hook in the base of a lamp was not equivalent to wrapping soap on an assembly line. Comparing workers in each factory with each other would have been the only way to provide any form of meaningful information about monotony and a decline in output. Industrial Fatigue Research Board, *The Effects of Monotony in Work*, 2.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

spent “in singing and elocution.” Both of these women and four other workers who said they were bored, but only occasionally, were included the “not bored” category. If these six workers and the two whose statements were vague were removed from the “non-bored” category, only five women (10 percent) would be left who definitely stated they were never bored with their jobs.²⁰²

Why Wyatt and Fraser interviewed the women was not obvious. They concluded that “most of the operatives suffered from boredom” but then, as was the case with the intelligence and efficiency rating data from “An Experimental Study,” proceeded to ignore the implications of their results. All the data and interview answers pointed to boredom as being a universal response to specific forms of work conditions, as opposed to being based on individual differences. Wyatt and Fraser failed to be deterred. As in their past studies, they set out to prove there was a correlation between intelligence and boredom susceptibility.²⁰³

Each of the operatives was given a twenty-nine-minute-long intelligence test consisting of opposites, analogies, mixed sentences, completing sentences, and reasoning exercises. To avoid repeating the “mistake” in “An Experimental Study,” neither the output nor the efficiency of the test subjects was compared to intelligence scores. Instead, the monotony curves of the ten “most intelligent” and the ten “least intelligent” workers were compared. Graphs of each group were published and the researchers argued that “the output curves obtained from the workers of inferior intelligence are steadier and less afflicted by the midterm depression than those of the more intelligent operatives.” Wyatt and Fraser interpreted their graphs as indicating that “workers of inferior intelligence”

²⁰² Ibid., 47, 46.

²⁰³ Ibid., 8.

liked repetitive jobs and “seldom suffered from boredom.” Those operatives of “superior intelligence” were called “industrial misfits.” Wyatt and Fraser’s analysis was an act of willful deception.²⁰⁴

Graphs of eight of the “most intelligent” workers’ output contained a monotony curve, though the curves were not uniform and appeared at different points in time on the graphs. The graphs of the remaining two subjects—both were soap wrappers—contained no obvious example of a monotony curve. The output graphs of three of the “least intelligent” workers contained monotony curves. Two had fluctuating curves, which made them hard to analyze. The remaining five results were steady and showed no monotony curve—four out of these five test subjects were soap wrappers.²⁰⁵

Soap wrappers, unlike all of the other female operatives, worked on an assembly line. The speed of a conveyor belt dictated their work pace—this is the reason why all soap wrappers, regardless of intelligence score, did not have graphs with monotony curves. Did Wyatt and Fraser deliberately include selective data to skew their test results? This appeared to be the case. These industrial psychologists wrote in the same study that they were positive “processes of a semi-automatic nature” were “particularly conducive to boredom” in contrast to “completely automated processes—the researchers knew their data was deliberately manipulated to make the case “intelligent” people were boredom prone.”²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Test scores ranged from a high of 142 to a low of 17. Taking the 10 highest and lowest score results left 29 test subjects (59 percent) out of the study of intelligence and boredom tolerance. There was no methodological justification given for ignoring the majority of test subjects. The graphs represented efficiency, a measure of productivity, and not “output,” the number of units produced. For example, one way to quantify efficiency was to take labor output divided by labor hours. Besides the careless reporting, Wyatt and Fraser did not explain how they derived efficiency percentages. Industrial Fatigue Research Board, *The Effects of Monotony in Work*, 29, 32.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 30–31.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 39.

In addition, comparing the results of various types of work tasks was bad scientific practice. Wyatt and Fraser were aware of this problem. In a different experiment on talking and output for the same research publication, they wrote: “It is, of course, impossible to compare the different groups of workers in this respect, because the time taken to complete a unit of output . . . varied in the different processes.” In other words, the only legitimate form of experiment would have compared workers doing the same types of tasks.²⁰⁷

80 percent of the “intelligent” workers did semi-automatic tasks. 20 percent were soap wrappers who worked on an assembly line. 60 percent of the “less intelligent” workers performed semi-automatic tasks. Out of this cohort 20 percent produced work curves that were difficult to interpret and 10 percent (one operative) had a smooth work curve representing monotony tolerance. 40 percent of the remaining test subjects were soap wrappers who had smooth work curves. If all of the subjects who did automatic jobs were removed from the comparison, only one “less intelligent” test subject had an obviously smooth work curve—such a result was not statistically significant. The investigators constructed a misleading comparative data set to “prove” intelligence was related to monotony tolerance. The question was why did they resort to such tactics?

Wyatt and Fraser were creating a model of boredom susceptibility, based on a combination of intelligence and Jung’s concepts of introversion and extroversion (the basic dimensions of temperament), for use as a vocational selection tool. Throughout the study, the researchers made observations about the behavior of the workers. They concluded “bright, quick, and excitable” women were “usually restless and variable” in productivity. These workers “showed signs of being affected by the monotonous

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 26.

conditions of work”—their temperament was of the type associated with high intelligence. Another group of “contented” though not efficient operatives were of the “patient, calm, and submissive type”—a reference to women who were considered less intelligent and more monotony-tolerant. Wyatt and Fraser were constructing two “pure types” of worker personalities, distinguished (they would show) primarily by the ability to daydream.²⁰⁸

The “passive” introvert was able to daydream while the “excitable” extrovert was not, according to Wyatt. Unlike in the past, he now argued that daydreaming “must be accepted as a frequent and possibly beneficial derivative of repetitive work.” An introvert, he thought, because she did not struggle with trying to overcome intrusive thoughts, could allow her mind to wander. “The worker who is able to day-dream becomes oblivious to unpleasant realities and remains comparatively undisturbed by the unsatisfying features of repetitive work. She is able to exist happily in a world of her own creation,” stated Wyatt. Occasionally, though, this personality type might allow “depressing moods” to become part of their daydreams—a danger analogous with the problem posed by extroverts. Women who instinctually responded by daydreaming during tedious work could tolerate boredom and were now labeled by Wyatt and Fraser as introverts. For Myers, these were the “many folk” who did not care “to use their brains much.” Though there was enough evidence by 1929 to suggest the relationship between intelligence and monotony susceptibility was a canard, Wyatt and Fraser persisted in representing introverts as inferior people.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Boredom in Industry” was a review essay of “The Effects of Monotony in Work” and was written with a lay audience in mind. Stanley Wyatt, “Boredom in Industry,” *Personnel Journal* 8, no.3 (1929): 166; “Industrial Fatigue Research Board, *The Effects of Monotony in Work*, 40.

²⁰⁹ Wyatt, “Boredom in Industry,” 169, 168.

An extrovert could not daydream because she was “unable to detach her thoughts from the industrial situation.” This type of worker was “often filled with a number of varied and discordant thoughts” and longed “for the signal which denotes the end of the industrial day.” Extroverts and those few introverts who allowed unpleasant thoughts to permeate their daydreams experienced “uncontrolled rumination”—a mental state that eventually found “expression in serious unrest.” The inclusion of Jung’s two types of human temperament became the backbone of personality assessment tests created after World War II by psychologists who wanted to identify bored workers.²¹⁰

Though it seems likely that Wyatt and Fraser hoped to better the English race by saving highly intelligent workers from repetitive work, their new model of boredom susceptibility was based upon using vocational selection to identify intelligent, extroverted employees who threatened workforce stability. Unintelligent, introverted workers were considered passive, tolerant of monotony, and “happy”—seemingly a perfect caste for repetitive jobs. The only flaws were that they were considered inefficient (though Wyatt’s own data cast doubt upon such a representation) and there was always the possibility that they would have morose reveries. The latter was a complication Wyatt would attempt to solve in his 1937 study on boredom.

The significance of daydreaming for Wyatt went beyond the boundaries of devising vocational selection tests. Daydreams diverted the mind from boredom. So did talking. Wyatt saw these states of inattention as an effective means for avoiding boredom, but there were problems. How to control workers’ despondent thoughts and unsafe, inattentive actions was one conundrum. Another was to determine if talking had any

²¹⁰ Ibid., 169, 164, 168.

positive or negative effect on productivity—Wyatt knew that solutions for boredom at work had to maintain or increase industrial output.

In “The Effects of Monotony in Work,” Wyatt and Fraser created an experiment to determine the relationship between talking and output. All fifty-one workers talked throughout the workday. According to the test subjects, talking made the time pass quicker and staved off boredom. Wyatt and Fraser agreed. Talking was “a natural and effective antidote to boredom since it diverts attention away from the unpleasant aspects of work,” stated the psychologists. In a new development, the researchers contended that talking was “more wholesome than day-dreaming”—they gave no explanation, but presumably the reason had something to do with labor discipline. Foremen had the ability to keep workers’ conversations “within reasonable limits,” but how to deflect or reform the unruly, and possibly subversive, thoughts of employees was still a murky science. Unfortunately, the experimental data showed that talking decreased output anywhere from 15 to 20 percent depending on the work environment.²¹¹

In 1929, Wyatt and Fraser still sought to use vocational selection techniques to remove employees who might threaten the integrity of the workplace. Even if a content workforce was more attractive to corporate managers than efficient employees, the goal of being able to identify passive, happy workers through applied psychology was still a distant dream. The reality was that female factory operatives at all levels of intelligence and types of temperament were being hired as operatives doing highly repetitive, subdivided tasks. Still, Wyatt continued in the 1930s to try to develop a set of

²¹¹ Industrial Fatigue Research Board, *The Effects of Monotony in Work*, 22, 28, 26; Wyatt, “Boredom in Industry,” 168.

measurement tools based on intelligence and temperament to determine boredom susceptibility. But he was ultimately headed in another direction.

In the 1930s, Wyatt began to emphasize how boredom was a pathological condition in need of a therapeutic cure. His goal was to adjust all “unhealthy” workers so they could find peace and happiness in their tedious jobs, while remaining or becoming more efficient. This new concept, to find a way to divert the mind in a manner similar to talking or daydreaming, formed the basis of Wyatt’s most profound “discovery”—the playing of background music over loudspeakers in factories was a means to pacify workers and increase their efficiency.

Industrial psychologists studying boredom in the workplaces of Great Britain practiced what Thomas S. Kuhn has defined as normal science: “research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for further practice.” The fundamental element required for the practice of normal science was a paradigm. A scientist created a model that “was sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents” leading to a “consensus within the practice of research.” In the case of boredom research, industrial psychologists both in Great Britain and the United States accepted the findings of Isabel Burnett and Stanley Wyatt as a credible foundation for further research.²¹²

By 1929, Wyatt’s model of boredom became a paradigm—one that survived well into the late twentieth century. The research of Wyatt and his peers at the IFRB became embedded in American textbooks, the guides used to teach generations of industrial psychologists. Their influence culminated in 1986 with the creation of the “The Boredom

²¹² Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 10, 11.

Proneness Scale,” a measurement tool currently used to measure levels of worker discontent and “performance decrement” in repetitive jobs. After World War II, American psychologists who accepted Wyatt’s paradigm viewed boredom as a dangerous pathological condition affecting men and women of all ages. They attributed boredom as a cause for: “pathological gambling, deviant behavior in school, higher truancy rates, job dissatisfaction, obesity, drug use, cigarette smoking, reckless and drunk driving, damage of property at work, attraction to novelty, asthma, bronchitis, risky sexual behavior, psychoticism (increased vulnerability to psychoses such as schizophrenia), and greater agreement with criminal cognitions.” Many post-war psychologists attempted to cure boredom with cognitive restructuring techniques or “pharmacological approaches.” Medicating boredom prone people became a way of life. Prozac, Adderal, Concerta, and Ritalin were all prescribed to individuals who exhibited what were considered harmful symptoms of boredom including depression and shyness. The survival of Wyatt’s paradigm is a testament to the difficulty of establishing new ideas once scientific findings become accepted as the “truth” or as literal forms of natural law.²¹³

What is notable and remarkable is that this boredom research was accepted as credible. Almost the entire corpus of studies on monotony and work was marred by shoddy research techniques and a desire to make results fit predetermined agendas. “History suggests that the road to a firm research consensus is extraordinarily arduous,” wrote Kuhn. Yet sometimes hypotheses are turned into facts without proper

²¹³ Stephen J. Vodanovich, “Psychometric Measures of Boredom: A Review of the Literature,” *The Journal of Psychology* 137, no. 6 (2003): 579, 585, 586, 588; Richard Farmer and Norman D. Sundberg, “Boredom Proneness—The Development and Correlates of a New Scale,” *Journal of Personality Assessment* 50, no. 1 (1986): 5, 13; Stephen J. Vodanovich and Steven J. Kass, “A Factor Analytic Study of the Boredom Proneness Scale,” *Journal of Personality Assessment* 55, no. 1 (1990): 115; Edwin W. Brown, “No Letup in the Demand for Prozac,” *Medical Update* 19, no. 9 (1996): 5.

verification—what Bruno Latour, an anthropologist of science, called an “event extremely rare by all standards.” Steven Shapin, a historian of science, traced how societies come to expect that scientific truthfulness is guided by the “rigorous policing” of the institutions and associations scientists are affiliated with. We have to trust what is considered established scientific knowledge, according to Shapin, because small groups or “core-sets” of scientists monitor each other through “credibility-management,” ensuring the validity of what becomes established as fact. This was not the case with any of the boredom research conducted in Great Britain. The road to consensus was not arduous, nor did any stringent oversight occur.²¹⁴

²¹⁴ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 15; Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 79; Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth, Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 27, 413-416.

The Boring Twenties and the Paradigmatic Thirties: American Boredom and its Cultural Consequences

The Roaring Twenties—the phrase evokes images of flappers, jazz, sexual revolution, prosperity, the celebration of big business, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment through conspicuous consumption; an age of abundance and hedonism. Yet, as the writers of the Lost Generation knew all too well, the 1920s were also a decade of cynicism and disillusionment, a time filled with a ubiquitous sense of world-weariness. For the first time in American history, a widespread number of people attributed their discontent with life outside of work to boredom. Like fads for flagpole sitting or Mah Jong, ideas about boredom in private life appeared suddenly, a seeming discontinuity. But this was not a fleeting novelty—an emerging cultural fear over the corrosive effects of quotidian malaise became a capacious and enduring feature of American life. In the “boring twenties,” educated elites and ordinary people accepted, however reluctantly, psychological lassitude as a pervasive feature of “modern life.” This new sensibility permanently marked boredom as the cause for undesirable conduct running against the grain of social norms.²¹⁵

Abraham Myerson’s bestselling *When Life Loses its Zest* (1925) contributed to the normalization of boredom by describing it as a common pathological condition affecting the entire American population. The self-help tract provided a series of practical “cures” to readers as ways to overcome the destructive effects of monotony. During the late 1920s in Great Britain, industrial psychologists molded suspect research into a scientific paradigm where boredom became understood as a pathological mental condition. In the

²¹⁵ Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper, American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 6, 8.

1930s, these two closely related ideas converged in the United States when research for a new pharmaceutical drug, Benzedrine Sulfate, represented boredom as a “mood disorder” associated with the symptoms of depression—the medicalization of malaise ensued. As a result, the development and prescription of drugs to alleviate boredom became routine. In the late 1930s, industrial psychologists “discovered” that playing background music increased industrial efficiency by re-focusing the inattentive, bored minds of workers’ back on repetitive tasks. By the mid-1940s, millions of workers listened to background music in war industries throughout the nation. In the “paradigmatic thirties”—when social scientists and big business found cost-effective ways to “solve” the pathological problem of boredom—theory and practice were synthesized, the therapeutic response to tedium became the basis for vast social, economic, and personal changes. The normalization of boredom in the 1920s created a receptive cultural climate for the new applications of science in the following decade.

Until the 1920s, ideas about boredom in American culture were almost entirely connected to the world of work. The discourse of monotonous work had a clear chain of causation (regardless of whether or not this was an accurate representation of psychological reality) where specialized jobs were held responsible for creating boredom in the psyche of employees. When quotidian boredom emerged as a general concept to characterize deviant behavior it was represented as something everyone in the culture already understood, as a natural human reaction to the vast transformations occurring in society. No explanations were offered for why boredom suddenly became an intrusive feature of American life, which raises the question “how do people come to know when

they are bored?” Several factors explain why this collective cultural consciousness occurred in the 1920s.

One was continuity with the past. Since the late nineteenth century an expanding literature connected the caustic effects of boredom on employees to their participation in debasing mass entertainments. Simultaneously, the dominant solution to monotony in the twentieth century was the promise recreation held for rejuvenating enervated workers. Both discourses about the threat and promise of leisure were central themes in descriptions of quotidian boredom in the twenties—these ideas were widely dispersed throughout the culture due to technological advances in the mass media. Newspaper articles and advertisements contained illustrations and descriptions literally showing what boredom looked and felt like.²¹⁶

The public believed that World War I had subverted religious faith, sexual mores and traditional values. The journalist Frederick Lewis Allan described the reaction to the war as: “The country felt that it ought to be enjoying itself more than it was, and that life was futile and nothing mattered much.” The effectiveness of propaganda to mobilize public opinion during the war combined with Army intelligence testing that represented the mental aptitude of the average American man to be equivalent to a 14 year-old led intellectuals to recoil from “the crowd”—a senseless mass of homogenized citizens who were easily manipulated.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History, The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 107, 121.

²¹⁷ Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday, An Informal History of the 1920s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1931), 64; Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance, A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 223.

New forms of knowledge and an increasing self-consciousness about the technological, social, personal and moral changes in the structure of American life resulted in a general sense that the social order of the country was confused and divided. The growth of corporate power, while praised for the abundant production of consumer goods, with its rationalized and impersonal bureaucratic systems of management was seen as standardizing everyday life.²¹⁸

In the twenties, as in other historical epochs, Americans desperately longed for happiness, to find the answer to why life was worth living. But their obsession with material goods and unrealistic expectations for what constituted personal fulfillment increasingly ended in a sense of discontent. Taking all of the cultural transformations occurring in the 1920s as a whole, one can suggest that only “modern” societies with a highly developed system of rationalized production, marketing, and distribution of consumer goods are open to thinking of quotidian boredom as a social problem.

Examining several aspects of American life—marriage, advertising, religion, and work—helps unravel how ideas of boredom became prevalent in the 1920s. The effects of boredom were easy for most people to grasp since they always served an instrumental purpose. Those concerned with the increasing sense something was deeply wrong with the institution of marriage depicted boredom as the cause of unhappiness, adultery, and divorce. Advertisers promoted the notion that boredom signified the loss of individuality, the diffuse dissatisfaction with life satisfied only by consumer goods. Religious leaders anxious about secularization believed boredom created an appetite for degrading mass entertainments and gross materialism—the former caused people to stop attending religious services and the latter replaced faith. Eight hour advocates, as they had in the

²¹⁸ Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 9, 11, 13.

past, used ideas about monotony to promote their drive for unionization and legislation. A review of these cross-cultural public and private social arenas reveals how terror over becoming afflicted with boredom resulted in the establishment of it as a normative aspect of American society.

In the 1920s people started to name boredom as an inevitable condition of marriage—couples may have gotten tired of each other in the past but this was the first decade in American history where marital breakdown was widely attributed to boredom. Boredom in domestic life lacked a precise definition but in general it was represented as a lack of interest caused by the inability of people to communicate fully or as a restless feeling of dissatisfaction over the absence of variety during the evenings couples spent with each other.

The problem of monotony in family life, including dating, child-rearing, and housework, received considerable attention in the twenties, but the deterioration of marriage was the foremost concern of journalists, marital experts, and advice columnists. In the twenties Americans married younger and more often than in the past. The combination of dating based on romantic love and the new ideal of companionate marriage were responsible for boosting marriage rates. In contrast to Victorian marriage, considered by social critics as hierarchical and emotionally arid, the ideals of companionate marriage were grounded in mutual friendship—unions promising emotional growth, sexual fulfillment and equal rights. Still, new values in courtship and matrimony faltered. Americans also divorced at the highest rate in the world—one in seven marriages by 1924.²¹⁹

²¹⁹ Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations, Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 62, 67; Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A*

Some social commentators in the 1920s blamed the New Woman and new-found female freedoms, an increase in secularization, and “an exaggeration of the importance of sex,” for divorce rates. Others saw dating habits and the demands to match popular ideas of personal fulfillment as the problem. Near the end of the decade, Robert and Helen Lynd and Walter Lippmann came to the same conclusion: the irrational concept of romantic love was to blame for marital unhappiness. “At this point the wisdom of popular romantic marriage is exhausted. For it proceeds on the assumption that love is a mysterious visitation. There is nothing left, then but to grin and bear a miserably dull and nagging fate, or to break off and try again,” wrote Lippmann. From this perspective, the cult of romance stymied men and women from developing relationships centered on openness, deep communication, and intimacy. At the same time, the ideals embodied in companionate marriage created pressure to meet unreasonably high expectations. “People are tending to demand more of a tolerable marriage, and, failing to achieve an adjustment, seek the divorce courts,” stated the Lynds.²²⁰

Men and women began to express disappointment in the transition of romantic courting to the routine of daily married life. In 1922, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* paid readers one dollar to write letters answering whether marriage was a failure. One reader said after the first year of marriage “deadly monotony” came into his marriage and bred discontent. “What could be worse than to be forever in the company of some one whose friends, thoughts, habits and doings are just as familiar as one’s own? There is nothing

Social History of American Family Life (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 109, 115; Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 156-157.

²²⁰ Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 130; Elton Mayo, “Should Marriage Be Monotonous?” *Harper’s Magazine* 151 (September, 1925): 421; Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1929), 310; Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown, A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1957), 128.

to talk about,” he wrote. A letter to the editor of *The Washington Post* complained that husbands did not talk to their wives with “the ardor and interest of engagement days” leading to boredom in domestic life. A 1923 survey of 200 women attending Vassar College determined 90 percent wanted to get married and only eleven would seek a career after graduation. The greatest apprehension of those who desired matrimony was the fear of boredom in marriage. Journalists and marital experts also portrayed the shift from romance to routine as ending in insufferable monotony.²²¹

The joys of romance “become humdrum and tiresome” after marriage where “the monotony of one person's perpetual company is killing,” wrote the psychologist Owen Aloysius Hill. In “Marriage Adjustments,” Winfred Black, the former actress and syndicated columnist for Hearst, crafted the consummate tale of a 1920s union. “Kate and Tom” were married for three years. After a courtship filled with “billing and cooing” they settled into a little bungalow furnished by their parents. Each day after work Tom came home tired and would not go out to the theater, attend church or socialize with friends. After dinner, he silently read and then went to bed. After a day of domestic chores, Kate wanted excitement, to go dancing or see a movie. She became bored with Tom and started to think marriage was a mistake. Kate’s boredom led her down the path of temptation and she accepted a date with the church organist to have an ice cream soda. The possibility of an extramarital relationship or divorce loomed ahead. Black never resolved the story. Instead, she warned her female audience that Kate needed to adjust to the domestic situation and accept Tom’s behavior. Besides coping (how is never discussed) Kate needed to consider cultivating a taste for reading or having children.

²²¹ “It’s the Deadly Monotony,” letter to the editor, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 4, 1922, D5; “Perfect Men are Bad Husbands,” letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, November 11, 1924, 6; “Where is the Girl of Today Bound? 200 at Vassar Tell,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1923, XX1.

Black's story contained most of the elements found in discussions about the monotony of married life. Her advice to Kate became the standard found in advice columns throughout the decade—women needed to sublimate their own desires and do anything to make the marriage work.²²²

In Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920), the main character Carol Kennicott suffered a similar fate. Trapped in a marriage lacking in communication and play, and encompassed by the oppressive monotony of existence in Gopher Prairie, Carol wanted a "more conscious life" and was constantly tempted by the possibility of extramarital affairs. After rebelling against a life of drudgery by taking a job in Washington, D.C. to help with war work, she returned home and accepted her role to deal with the "mechanical details and meaningless talk" of domesticity. Aware of the certainty of marital boredom and the difficulty of struggling against it she knew "a hundred generations of Carols will aspire and go down in tragedy devoid of palls and solemn chanting, the humdrum inevitable tragedy of struggle against inertia." Marital boredom was increasingly being represented in the twenties as a natural state of marital life and responsible for unhappiness, adultery, maladjusted behavior and divorce.²²³

An illustration in the article "Who's to Blame for Divorce," matched those found in advertisements selling products to break the boredom of domestic life—an unhappy couple sat in their living room on separate chairs and the wife scanned a newspaper while her husband stared at the floor with his hands clenched. Dorothy Dix's response to a

²²² Owen Aloysius Hill, *Ethics, General and Special* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1920), 293-294; Winifred Black, "Marriage Adjustments," *Washington Post*, November 5, 1920, 8.

²²³ Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), 34, 36-37, 204-205, 237, 288, 355, 393, 428, 453.

“prosperous businessman” who asked if it was normal for married couples to spend their evenings ignoring each other reinforced this image of a monotonous married life:

The picture you paint of your life, Mr. Man, is a very common one in many homes and it is the great American tragedy. If you could roll up the shades on many a living-room window, you would see a middle-aged man or woman reading or listening in silence dull and cold and depressing. Not five feet away from each other in body, but millions of miles away in soul.

These representations were commonplace in popular culture, the belief that boredom was unavoidable in marriage was accepted as a societal “truth”—a collectively understood explanation for domestic dysfunction.²²⁴

Advertisers reinforced popular ideas about domestic boredom while simultaneously trying to bury them into the national consciousness to create a desire for consumer goods. They singled-out the evening hours spent at home after work as a lucrative market. The domestic sphere was portrayed as colorless and bleak—a world of boredom where the few hours people spent together dragged-on in endless stagnation. The personal relationships between men, women and their families were depicted as cumbersome and unfulfilling. Illustrations of advertisements targeting home life were filled with images of maladjusted relationships. Men gazed out windows with their backs turned toward their female companions; young men and women sat together on couches, hands clasped, staring blankly at the floor; and families in various states of bored prostration sat in sterile parlors studying each other with blasé detachment. These were the “Mr. and Mrs. Stay at Homes” who spent “their evenings cooped up—a life of

²²⁴ Mark H. Revell, “Who’s to Blame for Divorce?” *Illustrated World* 38, no. 2 (1922): 187; Dorothy Dix, “What is the Solution for Bored, Middle-Aged Couples?” *Hartford Courant*, May 3, 1928, 10.

boredom.” To escape the terror of *tedium vitae*, advertisements offered pianos, phonographs, radios, and parlor games as an antidote.²²⁵

The majority of these ads promised temporary relief from boredom. “Shorten the long evenings, drive the deadly boredom away and give your family and guests untold hours of amusement,” went the copy for an Abercrombie & Fitch Company selling table and card games. Phonographs and records would “relieve the monotony of the idle hour” and radios dispelled “the tedium of humdrum” home life. The American Piano Company, in its national advertising campaign for player pianos, used the slogan “banishes boredom.” Both men and women were considered potential customers. An ad for Fannie May candy told dumbfounded men who had trouble enchanting their wives and girlfriends—because their words failed and conversation fell on “listless ears”—that “the best release from boredom is just to open a box of Fannie May's wonderful home-made candies.” These advertisements, by emphasizing monotony as a self-evident condition of contemporary domestic life, helped shape a new cultural sensibility—life at home was as dull as it was at work.²²⁶

The copy for a Daily Reading Guide advertisement made this connection evident:

One is the world of the commonplace; and it is in this that most people find themselves. Here life runs along in a narrow groove of deadening monotony. One day is merely a repetition of another. The day's work; a profitless, lonely evening at home; now and then an attempt to escape from boredom at the movies: or an idle conversation *with* neighbors. People who live in this world of the common place are haunted by a restless spirit of dissatisfaction, by a feeling that they are missing the worthwhile things of life.

²²⁵ “Which of These Worlds Will You Choose to Live In?” Advertisement, *New York Times*, August 17, 1924, BR15; “Mr. and Mrs. Stay at Home,” Advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 1926, A13; “The Ampico Banishing Boredom,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, September 3, 1925, 21.

²²⁶ “These New Indoor Sports,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, November 7, 1929, 17; “No Home Can Afford to be Without Music,” Advertisement, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 11, 1921, 22; “Sparton Radio—The Pathfinder of the Air,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, November 13, 1929, 19; “The Ampico Banishing Boredom,” 21; “When a Fellow Needs Fannie May...As a Substitute for Clever Conversation,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Advertisement, September 14, 1927, 2.

Selling consumer goods to enliven evenings at home implied personal relationships would become more lively and fulfilling but the copy for these advertisements tended to shy away from ensuring a life changing transformation. Yet a few advertisers did push the fantastical qualities of their wares.²²⁷

One could enter the world of culture—"the aristocracy of cultivated minds"—by spending twenty minutes a day with the Daily Reading Guide. The ability to communicate with others about the "worthwhile things in life" opened the door to an elite community where people were "never bored with themselves or with each other." The Cable Piano Company's "I am For Men" campaign anthropomorphized their product into an enticing mistress who took care of the basic therapeutic needs for weary businessmen—soothing tired nerves, refreshing fagged brains, making home life pleasurable and enlivening the monotony of dull evenings—and endowed them with transformative powers. "I kindle new enthusiasm. I impart new happiness. I animate new hopes, new life," was the seductive message offered by the Euphonia Inner Player Piano. The discourse about domestic boredom generated by advertisers and popular writers converged to create new modes of thought that confronted the dominant belief in companionate marriage as the means to a fulfilling life. The outcomes popular writers and advertisers sought were radically different. For advertising agencies and their clients, cultivating a sustained cultural acceptance of marital monotony allowed them to shape new desires for consumer goods. Unlike popular writers who were anxious over high

²²⁷ "Which of These Worlds," BR15.

divorce rates and extramarital affairs, advertisers were not concerned about whether such a narrative might be damaging to the social good.²²⁸

Scientific experts also depicted monotony as a destined state of married life. Abraham Myerson's best-selling *The Nervous Housewife* (1920) represented married women as hopelessly "tortured by monotony." The duties of domestic life were a form of "solitary confinement" without any variety. The essential qualities of housework were, according to Myerson, "monotony, daydreaming, and introspection." Without any vital stimulation, a housewife's daydreams created a desire for entertainment and fostered "disloyal and disastrous thoughts." Myerson thought the tension created by a housewife struggling between reality and her fantasy life resulted in profound disgust, deenergization, fatigue, aches, pains, and a weariness of life.

Though he was describing a psychological phenomenon, Myerson categorized boredom as a cause for neurasthenia and he recommended a form of talking therapy as the best cure for most nervous housewives complimented by "ordinary physical therapeutics." Still, he realized "the rebellion against the monotony and the seclusive character of the home" would continue to increase. He argued (without any detailed program) for structural changes in the home and matrimonial life. In "Should Marriage Be Monotonous?" an article for *Harper's Magazine*, the psychologist Elton Mayo reinforced Myerson's basic ideas about housewives. As the "high economic function" of domestic duty was reduced to drudgery in the 1920s due to urbanization, a housewife was deprived of her "special sphere"—the ensuing monotony made her "repudiate happiness in marriage." Throughout the 1920s, the idea that boredom was an inescapable condition

²²⁸ Ibid. "I am For Men," Advertisement, *Atlanta Constitution*, January 25, 1920, 4A.

of marriage was advanced frequently in popular culture. By the end of the decade it became self-evident and no longer open to serious challenge.²²⁹

According to the emerging narrative, adultery and divorce were considered the worst problems caused by domestic boredom (aside from having to accept and adjust to a dissatisfying marriage). After reading divorce petitions, Antoinette Donnelly, writing under the pseudonym Doris Blake, told her readers that boredom should be classified as a leading cause of marital dissolution even though it was not listed in divorce statistics accumulated by the government. Advice columnists received letters from men and women throughout the twenties about their spouse's extramarital affairs. Many columnists tended to place responsibility on wives for their inability to provide stimulating companionship. Typical of this mode of advice was the assumption that women who practiced the art of allurements during courtship had fallen into a listless domesticity. "The same old line of conversation, same coiffure, same stay-at-home desire" represented the emotional degeneration of a wife who bored her husband into buying dinners for "the wrong woman."²³⁰

Dorothy Dix—who the Lynds felt was "the most potent single agency of diffusion from without shaping the habits of thought of Middletown in regard to marriage"—generally placed the blame for adultery on men. Dix's columns contained many letters written by men. In one signed "An Unhappy Man," a married man who had fallen in love

²²⁹ Abraham Myerson, *The Nervous Housewife* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1920), 25-26, 34, 78, 170, 236, 246; Mayo, "Should Marriage Be Monotonous?" 412.

²³⁰ The literature on boredom and marital dissatisfaction focused almost entirely on women. Complaints about men boring women appear to be minimal. Doris Blake, "Six Tests for a Life Partnership," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 8, 1928, E8; Doris Blake, "How to Be Happily Married," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 26, 1923, 15.

with a young girl asked if he should leave his married wife “who does everything in her power to please me.” Dix’s reply was typical of her views on adultery and divorce:

I have seen a lot of middle-aged men whose middle-aged wives ceased to thrill them and who got bored and tired with domesticity and who thought it would make them young and gay and give them a new zest in life to swap off their faithful old Marias for a young Sheba... I have seen plenty of these men divorce their wives, but I have never seen one of them get any happiness out of it.

Dix consistently represented middle-age as the time married men became bored and sought escape with “little gold-diggers.” She never told men to adjust to the monotony of their situation or to try sparking new interests in the marriage. Instead, Dix told men to go back to their wives because they would lose the respect of their friends and business associates—they would be seen as fools who footed the bill for young playthings who went out to night clubs and restaurants while the older husband sat on the sidelines. Dix, who gave the most balanced advice among the 1920s columnists, also told her readers that husbands whose wives were “bored to death with domesticity and...don’t give a hang whether the poor creatures they are married to are happy or not” were entitled to a divorce and the laws should change to allow this type of petition.²³¹

Scientific authorities such as Myerson and André Tridon, one of the best known psychoanalysts in the country, addressed the problem of monotony and adultery.

Myerson, in agreement with Dix, saw middle age (the late thirties and early forties) as the time when the monotony of marital life made both men and women seek “the possibilities of pleasure” in sexual escapades. His recommendation to revitalize domestic life was for couples to seek “legitimate” recreation together in golf, and fishing trips while also

²³¹ Lynd, *Middletown*, 116n10; Dorothy Dix, Dorothy Dix’s Letter Box, *Hartford Courant*, December 13, 1927, 10; Dorothy Dix, Dorothy Dix’s Letter Box, *Hartford Courant*, September 4, 1928, 10; Dorothy Dix, “First of All, Every Husband Has the Right to Expect Love From His Wife,” *Hartford Courant*, November 21, 1927, 7.

separately seeking excitements that appealed to each sex— gambling, card playing, prize fights and baseball for men and detective stories and thrilling movies for women. “Infidelity is often also a refuge from boredom for the middle class woman,” began the section on “Bored Wives,” in Tridon’s *Psychoanalysis and Love* (1922). Middle class wives were prone to adultery because they suffered from a lack of companionship and became tired of “stupid teas, bridge and gossip parties.” Though Tridon was a pessimist and generally believed any solution for human problems was temporary, he did recommend separation for periods of variable duration as a potential solution. Unlike the nervousness of housewives, adultery born out of boredom was not constructed by Myerson as a pathological condition. Both he and Tridon thought of boredom as a natural state of marriage characterized by a lack of stimulation. Both sought to transfer libidinous impulses to more acceptable social norms—the therapeutic potential of consumer culture in recreational pursuits and short vacations.²³²

Doris Blake castigated novels for portraying wedlock as full of monotony where “there are far more losses than gains.” The “withering scorn” fiction writers expressed for marriage influenced young people to feel contempt and dread for their futures together instead of expecting happiness. “Novels of married life describe the events which lead up to divorce and re-marriage. This is one outstanding influence brought to bear upon youth,” wrote Elton Mayo. He thought the combination of novels, movies promoting love triangles, and the sensational reporting of divorce cases, created a cultural sensibility where marriage and utter boredom were becoming synonymous terms. Novels such as Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* (1922) and Edith Wharton’s *Twilight Sleep* (1927) placed their

²³² Abraham Myerson, *The Foundations of Personality* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1921), 252-253; André Tridon, *Psychoanalysis and Love* (New York: Brentano’s, 1922), 89-90, 96, 320.

married characters in the outwardly perfect lives promoted by the cult of romance. They lived in quality homes filled with an abundance of consumer goods and were able to participate in thrilling leisure activities. Yet, George Babbitt was bored with his wife, family, and real estate agency. Mrs. Babbitt had become “dully habituated to married life” and her increasingly sexless relationship with George was characterized as filled with meaningless conversation. The novel recounts Babbitt’s attempts to escape the boredom of his domestic life, which culminate in his extramarital affair with Tanis Judique.²³³

Likewise, Lita Wyant in *Twilight Sleep* led an opulent life, free of housework, where she could do whatever she pleased. Her husband Jim was a banker who came home tired from work and had no interest accompanying Lita on her aggressive evening chases of fashionable trends. “You can’t take out insurance against boredom,” Lita told her mother-in-law, Pauline Manford, when she was asked why she wanted to divorce Jim. “But why should you be bored?” queried Pauline as she pointed-out the luxurious life Jim provided. “Well; that’s it, I suppose. Always the same old everything,” Lita replied. Instead of getting divorced, Lita began an affair with Pauline’s husband Dexter. The critique of fiction by Doris Blake was not unfounded. Many authors in the 1920s did represent married life as filled with boring, unsatisfying personal relationships, lacking in deep companionship, and resulting in infidelity. The question remained, what could be done to mitigate martial boredom?²³⁴

²³³ Doris Blake, “Propaganda Needed to Offset Flippant Attitude on Marriage,” *Chicago Daily News*, February 5, 1924, 21; Mayo, “Should Marriage Be Monotonous?” 422, 427; Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 11, 23, 150, 324-325.

²³⁴ Edith Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 194, 300; May, *Great Expectations*, 72.

Female advice columnists regularly told their readers that women were responsible for the monotony of domestic life. The inability of wives to make enlightening conversation for their husbands was often cited as a problem. According to Frances McDonald, a husband who continually had to listen to talk about the nonappearance of the ice man, burned biscuits, and descriptions of a search for “the eggbeater as if it were a world event” was justified in being bored and thinking his wife’s mentality was a “total zero.” McDonald recommended that wives get out of their home every day and meet and converse with interesting people—an indication she believed her audience was composed of middle-class women—so they could adequately converse with their husbands. “And then there will be less of boredom in the home and the sort of companionship that makes marriage a permanent institution,” she concluded. Suggesting a wife change her behavior, however, was infrequently given as advice. Instead, the trend was for columnists to tell women they needed to accept boredom as an inevitable aspect of marriage and to stop grumbling about it.²³⁵

Doris Blake told her readers about Rose Wilder Lane’s—the popular freelance writer who later founded the libertarian movement—regret over her decision to get divorced. Lane compared herself with a friend who endured forty years of marriage to a man she didn’t love. Her friend’s life was a morass of boredom and she could not develop her mind. She never visited the lands she dreamed of seeing and was unable to read books she might find interesting. In contrast, Lane led a rich and fulfilling life as a single woman. Yet, Lane said her divorce was a mistake. The lesson Blake drew for her readers was that they had to tolerate the monotony and save the institution of marriage by compelling “their rebellious selves to make consciously the same surrender to personal

²³⁵ Frances McDonald, “When a Woman is a Bore,” *Washington Post*, April 14, 1924, 20.

life” as their mothers. Blake also told her female readership the true test of a companionate marriage was if they could share silence and not be bored—presumably a comment on the common portrayal of the tired husband who sat absorbed in newspapers while ignoring his wife. When a young bride wrote to Frances McDonald and asked if it was true all married life was monotonous, the columnist said there were too many foolish women who confused monotony for serenity. She attacked the bride for not appreciating her “serene, secure, and safe” life and told her to stop complaining about being bored. Throughout the 1920s both Blake and McDonald repeated this mantra. “You have no cause to complain;” stop “crying out” against boredom; and “this idea that marriage is a soul killing humdrum monotony with inequality and inferiority” is false—sensitive women had no reason to bewail their status and must accept the situation was the advice columnists gave wives. No wonder that by 1963 Betty Friedan called this acceptance of marital dissatisfaction “the problem that has no name.”²³⁶

Dorothy Dix, who spent forty years living with a mentally ill husband, advised women not to struggle against boredom in married life and to make every adjustment possible to keep their husbands. Unlike other advice columnists, she often reminded her readers why this strategy was necessary. She believed wives were in a vulnerable state since they had given up their careers to get married and put all of their energy and ambitions into homemaking—they had to “keep their husbands interested” or suffer potential financial disaster. Many of Dix’s columns about bored married couples were

²³⁶ Doris Blake, “Divorced Woman Tells Why She is Sorry Now,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 7, 1925, 14; Blake, “Six Tests,” E8; Frances McDonald, Wives of Tomorrow, *Washington Post*, August 31, 1924, ES2; Doris Blake, “How to Be Happy Though Married,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 3, 1923, 15; Doris Blake, “Showing the Born Idealist How to Face Married Life,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 8, 1925, 22; Frances McDonald, “Man, The Wretch,” *Washington Post*, March 8, 1926, 9; Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 63.

intended to serve as a warning to young people about the dangers of frivolous dating. Rather than focus on the thrill of romance, Dix told women and men to seek partners who had similar interests and to cultivate companionship before they got engaged. She felt couples who had not established a firm commitment to communication and emotional intimacy prior to marriage would eventually lead a monotonous domestic life.²³⁷

Besides telling wives to accept difficult marital circumstances, Dix did recognize there were exceptional situations. When women wrote about husbands who directly and repeatedly told them they were boring, Dix suggested a long separation as the only, last chance option in the hopes the husband's heart would grow fonder in his wife's absence. The advice columnist knew this solution would only work in a small number of relationships since she was convinced once a husband became weary of his wife it was almost impossible to revive a his dead interest. Dix also took a legal approach to monotony in marriage. She felt couples need to sign a marriage contract prior to getting wed containing the conditions for their future conduct. She called this the "Fifty-Fifty" approach, a document based on equal partnerships. Part of the contract needed to state that both parties would work to overcome domestic boredom but if a partner violated this section of the contract, their spouse would have the right to divorce. Dix felt this pragmatic approach would make couples work harder at making their lives more interesting. Yet in the end, the most prominent solution advice columnists offered their

²³⁷ Harnett T. Kane, *Dear Dorothy Dix, The Story of a Compassionate Woman* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1952), 7; Dorothy Dix, "Why Wives Need Advice on Holding Their Husbands," *Hartford Courant*, May 5, 1928, 10; Dorothy Dix, "There Cannot be Any Relationship Between a Husband and Wife Who Do Not Think Alike," *Hartford Courant*, December 30, 1927, 10.

readership was for wives to make the best of an unfortunate but in effect, unavoidable, situation.²³⁸

In 1929, Joseph Wood Krutch traced how over the previous decade the Victorian concept of romantic love had become stripped of its meaning to where “it no longer is the ultimate self-justifying value which it once was.” For Krutch, the idea of romantic love, which he recognized was an illusion, made people believe life was worth living. He felt literature in the twenties demystified the concept of love to the point where its value had become trivial resulting in disharmony and a “vast emptiness” in married life. This interpretation was at odds with the Lynds and Walter Lippmann who characterized the concept of romantic love as the source for marital discontent. Placing the discourse of domestic boredom found in popular culture and advertising between these two interpretations helps bridge their seeming incompatibility.²³⁹

Expectations about romance and companionate marriage as the ultimate source of fulfillment were impossible to match. Many people who wed after participating in courting rituals that involved hiding one’s self and pursuing pleasure to keep the other happy—instead of determining their future compatibility—found themselves dissatisfied with married life. Their complaints were reproduced nationwide through the mass media, which held boredom responsible for disenchanted domestic life, adultery, and divorce. As the new ideas about monotony gained cultural acceptance they began to erode the dominant values inscribed in the cult of romance and companionate marriage. Whether

²³⁸ Dorothy Dix, “The Middle-Aged Woman Who Has Always Taken Her Husband For Granted,” *Hartford Courant*, July 25, 1928, 10; Dorothy Dix, “If I Had a Happy Home,” *Hartford Courant*, June 4, 1928, 10; Dorothy Dix, The Question Box, *Hartford Courant*, March 10, 1927, 12; Dorothy Dix, “The Idea Marriage is the Fifty-Fifty Marriage,” *Hartford Courant*, October 31, 1928, 10.

²³⁹ Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper, A Study and A Confession* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 113, 106, 98, 101-102, 114.

these ideas about the inevitability of monotonous marriage finally became hegemonic in American culture, as Krutch implied, remains unclear. But the discourse about marriage and monotony was nevertheless part of a broader cultural tendency to suggest that boredom was omnipresent in American society.²⁴⁰

Providing the means to escape from the pervasive boredom of modern life became a prevalent feature of advertising in the 1920s. The idea that one's individuality had become standardized and was in need of spiritual renewal—in the secular sense of escaping to a more rewarding world on earth or spending a few hours or days in an ephemeral paradise to revitalize the will—was the primary message advertisers conveyed when they marketed goods and services outside of the domestic realm. With tag-lines such as “Man’s Need of Man” and “A New Field of Opportunity” advertisers sought to convince men they could overcome the “overcrowded monotony of city life.” Advertisements depicted the city as filled with “milling crowds of humanity” where traditional communal values were shattered and recognition of individual merit no longer mattered. An advertising campaign attempting to lure industrial workers to southern mill towns compared the isolation of the city to the communal values of rural life. In the city an average worker went home to the “monotony of a friendless evening” but in mill towns a worker “as an individual counts for something in his town.” Photographs of all male bands and recreation halls built by mills created the illusion of an improved, less boring life for workers through participation in the community’s social life—what the ads failed to mention was almost every public and private space in a mill

²⁴⁰ May, *Great Expectations*, 70.

town was owned by the company, which closely monitored the social practices of employees.²⁴¹

Advertisers also tried to persuade tired businessmen to exchange their current life for the possibility of self-transformation in another location. “Are you wearied by the monotony of life—by facing a tomorrow that offers only a repetition of today?” ran the text from a “Believers in Jacksonville, Florida” advertisement. Moving to Jacksonville, a small-town mecca with an abundance of recreational and business opportunities set in a “delightful climate,” would put an end to an endless world of work where the returns of “worthwhile things” were too scant. Presumably the chance to become an entrepreneurial big fish in a small pond would break the endless cycle of business boredom and restore a lost sense of individuality.²⁴²

Other releases from the world of business and city life offered only a transitory moment of self-renewal to get the “tired out” of one’s system. A 1921 advertisement for Abercrombie & Fitch foreshadowed the scenes in *Babbitt* (1922) where Babbitt—after listening to his friend Paul say finding a solution to boredom was the “cure for living”—suggested a trip to Maine to restore both men’s bum nerves. “Visions of the North Woods are coming nightly to the big game hunter...his wholesome longing to get away from the office, to escape the boredom of business, to thrill again with the chase, is the Nation’s safety value,” read the “Hunters in the Forest” copy. Advertisers promoted vacations and the purchase of resort property as the best way to “relieve the monotony” of everyday life. An advertisement selling property in Michigan’s Woodland Park, a segregated

²⁴¹ “Man’s Need of Man,” Advertisement, *Washington Post*, October 11, 1920, 11; Robert W. Blythe, “Unraveling the Threads of Community Life: Work, Play, and Place in the Alabama Mill Villages of the West Point Manufacturing Company,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 9 (2003): 143-145.

²⁴² “A New Field of Opportunity,” Advertisement, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 17, 1926, F8.

enclave for Midwestern middle-class African-Americans, offered the lakeside retreat as a place “where for a time, at least, you can throw off the cares and worries of the monotonous routine city life and be free.” Visions of momentary visits to lands where worn-nerves were restored so another round of tedious existence could be boldly faced were a staple of advertising in the twenties.²⁴³

Advertisement for films, especially those being shown at palatial theaters, also guaranteed to dispel feelings of lassitude. “You are immediately lifted out of the monotony of everyday life by the magic of Paramount at the enchanted castle of McVickers,” was an example of standard copywriting fare. Women were the intended audience for many of these advertisements—illustrations tended to show more single women arriving at the theater than male-female couples. Escape through fantasy was certainly not new but the idea that existence itself was in need of constant emotional cleansing, to purge the self of dullness, was an innovation of 1920s film advertising. By portraying life as inevitably stifled by an all-encompassing boredom, advertisers implicitly asked their audience to question whether it was worth living. Only if one purchased a ticket to the movies was the answer. Paramount Pictures consistently ran advertisements with the slogan: “more than a show—they are a chance to live, to live, to live!” As ticket sales skyrocketed—over 40 million were sold per week in 1922—and movie palaces started to fill the urban landscape, at least some of those in attendance must have agreed that liberation from monotony was found on the silver screen. Though

²⁴³ “Hunters in the Forest,” Advertisement, *New York Tribune*, August 31, 1921, 11; Lewis, *Babbitt*, 66-68; “Atlantic City,” Advertisement, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 10, 1926, G14; “Let Your Dreams Come True,” Advertisement, *Chicago Defender*, November 4, 1922, 20.

only a small sample, these advertisements were representative of the expansive focus on boredom by the advertising industry.²⁴⁴

In the 1920s, portraying all aspects of American life as boring became a widespread practice in advertising. These ads promised—through the purchase of consumer goods or services promoted as containing magical qualities—self-transformation from confusion and disappointment in a world where life seemed futile and nothing mattered to a richer, happier, fuller and more brilliant future. Advertising agencies might have gained inspiration from the critics of monotony and repetitive work. For the three previous decades, they had depicted the hedonistic desire for commercial entertainment and material goods as a noxious consequence of mentally stupefied minds seeking relief from a life of joyless toil. Even more encouraging was the growing tendency for labor leaders and progressive social critics to accept monotonous work as an inevitable component of progress. Increasingly, they agreed that only increased leisure time for labor—with an emphasis on recreation and consumption—would dissipate the harmful effects of workplace boredom.

The emergence in the early 1920s of a literature portraying the crepuscular side of the Jazz Age—the short stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald, those published in H.L. Mencken's *Smart Set*, and the bestselling *Babbitt* (1922)—could hardly have gone unnoticed by advertisers. In this literature, the sober residue of boredom was all that remained from the pursuit of success and the participation in glamorous, intoxicating revelries. Advertising copywriters were also influenced by a worldview that emphasized a shift in American subjectivity away from rational individualism toward immersion in “the crowd”—the

²⁴⁴ “McVickers Shows are as Great as the Theater Itself,” Advertisement, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 12, 1923, 18; “Tonight’s the Night for a Paramount Picture,” Advertisement, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 19, 1923, 12.

senseless masses. This perspective influenced advertisers to conceive social life as fundamentally boring: typical consumers sought release but were too dull or baffled to make choices about how to reinvigorate their desire for personal independence and fulfillment.

Recognition of boredom as the foundation for an ever expanding consumer culture was in its early stages in the 1920s. Creating desires for material objects and services based on the monotony of everyday life meshed with the objective of convincing consumers that their past purchases had become boring, unfashionable, and in need of replacement with what was au courant. Advertisers offered “expert” advice to the public on how to overcome boredom and fulfill longings for happiness in a society where any clear understanding of what constituted a good life had become unfocused. Their marketing campaigns preyed-upon fear of boredom and helped normalize it as an inescapable cultural contagion. The ability of advertising agencies to shape cultural values was in ascent just as the traditional position of intellectual and ethical leadership from religious authorities began to decline.²⁴⁵

In the 1920s, the clergy was losing its authority to new philosophical ideas and to scientific claims about the origin and purpose of the world. An aggressive form of secularism emerged, marked by H.L Menken’s reportage on the Scopes Trial (1925), the popularization of Freud, who represented religion as a wishful illusion, and Sinclair Lewis’ satire on evangelicalism in *Elmer Gantry* (1927). By 1927 Walter Lippmann claimed the majority of Americans no longer possessed any religious certainty and were in need of a new “religion of the spirit”—to follow what the heart desired as long as one did not transgress “what is right.” Lippmann’s solution for Americans who believed life

²⁴⁵ Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 223, 231-232.

no longer held meaning combined Eastern mysticism with conscientious consumption. He accommodated to the corporate-sponsored vision that a materialist-centered life could act as therapeutic ballast for the weightlessness of modern life.²⁴⁶

The internal crisis in Protestant religion, the debate between fundamentalists and modernists over the virgin birth, the second coming of Christ, and the literal inerrancy of the Scriptures, fragmented the church's unity. In addition, the religious support of Prohibition helped undermine the church's place in a society becoming dominated by urban values. New attitudes toward recreation and the expansion of the commercial amusement industry intensified church leaders' deep fear of consumer culture and diminished their ability to shape the thought of their congregations. The clergy's attempt to grapple with the rise in secularism was based on interrogating why Americans no longer believed in an immaterial world. One response was to attack consumer culture for orienting the masses toward a pernicious value system promoting instant gratification—the belief that self-fulfillment and happiness were easily purchased commodities, rather than subjective revelations only accessible through prayer and self-reflection.²⁴⁷

A handful of leading religious leaders were aware of the psychological influence of commercial mass culture in the 1920s. What they lacked, for the most part, was a response to the gospel of consumption—a way of revitalizing religion as means of personal fulfillment. In an effort to restore their deteriorating authority, clergymen submerged their theological differences when critiquing the pursuit of pleasure—a set of

²⁴⁶ Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh E. Schmidt, *The Religious History of America* (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 2002), 292-293, 299, 300-304; Eugene McCarraher, *Christian Critics, Religion and the Impasse in Modern American Social Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 34-35, 37; Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, 3-4, 326-327.

²⁴⁷ Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History*, 308-309, 312; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 915; McCarraher, *Christian Critics*, 43.

arguments founded on various ideas about boredom. Some religious leaders repeated the charge that monotonous work created a need for excitement. The “abnormal craving for amusement,” according to Rev. Clinton J. Taft, was caused by “the dull monotony of specialized labor.” Rabbi Solomon Goldman deplored the conformity of Americans who, ground to a pulp by work and left stupefied, turned to cheap material goods to find fulfillment.²⁴⁸

Other religious leaders, such as Dr. William B. Stevens, coadjutor Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, believed advertising and commercial entertainments, by representing every aspect of existence as boring, were responsible for changing “the mental habits of Americans” so they desired new thrills to make life feel rewarding. He felt this newly acquired perspective led people to think domestic life was lackluster “and reading and religion a bore.” The Reverend Harris E. Kirk, in a sermon explaining why he was declining a call to minister the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, linked the “sloganized mass mind that is holding the church back” to the craze for fads fueled by a sense of boredom. Many sermons about the evils of mass culture and the search for new thrills contained lines about the “the herd instinct”—the conditioning of human subjectivity presumably by advertisers and industry—being mobilized by a pervasive feeling of ennui.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ According to Donald Meyer, liberal Protestant religious figures did not understand the psychological impact of mass culture and were unadventurous in creating a vital response. This study revises the idea Protestant leaders were passive and unsophisticated about consumer culture but confirms they had trouble taking action. Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers, A Study of the American Quest for Health, Wealth and Personal Power from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), 229-232; “Sees Danger in Some Amusements,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 1923, 19; “Deplores Drabness of Life in America,” *New York Times*, June 5, 1929, 19.

²⁴⁹ “Jazz in Religion Held Modern Church Curse,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 8, 1924, A3; Stewart M. Emery, “Dr. Kirk Sees Many Spiritual Ills in New York,” *New York Times* November 15, 1925, XX3; “Meditation a Lost Art, Declares Pastor; Modern Man Bored With His Own Dullness,” *New York Times*, January 16, 1928, 26.

A number of the clergy and theosophists were convinced the majority of Americans, especially the generation of youth, found life was no longer worth living—a worldview steeped in an all-encompassing sense of boredom. “The worst thing in the world is not trouble but ennui, tedium, boredom, being fed up, saying, ‘What does it matter,’” wrote Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick. The popular mind, according to theosophists such as Montague Matchell and J.J. Fussell, perceived modern life as incoherent where individuals felt nothing mattered because they were “not here long enough to accomplish anything really great or lasting, and in most cases life is full of disappointments and injustices”—a feeling manifested in the need to escape the “boredom of individual life.” The Rev. Dr. Samuel Trexter told his congregation that “former periods with but a fraction of the fullness of modern life never knew boredom. And yet with the full and complex life of today there seems to come a certain heaviness.” Among many of the leading Protestant clergy and a few rabbis and theosophists there was the impression that spirituality had become enveloped by boredom.²⁵⁰

This vein of thought never clearly articulated what caused Americans to feel so disenchanting. The consequence was to naturalize boredom as a permanent condition of modern life. Once historical causation—the connection between monotony and specific qualities of life in a given time period—became obscured, boredom became a capacious category for explaining almost any form of socially undesirable behavior. For these

²⁵⁰ “Fosdick Says Ennui is Life’s Worst Foe,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1928, 22; Montague Machell, “Whence Came We and Whither Do We Go?” *The Theosophical Path*, June 1, 1922, 578-579; J.H. Fussell, “Theosophy, The Balance-Wheel of Life,” *The Theosophical Path*, September 1, 1926, 215; “Fears Pessimism of Youth,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1928, 24.

religious thinkers not only did it cause an “overriding desire for amusements” but boredom led to alcoholism, suicide, greed, selfishness, disease, and depravity.²⁵¹

Religious leaders also expressed anxiety over whether religious services were dull and no longer able to compel people to attend—if competing with Sunday morning golf games and automobile pleasure rides required some form of religious innovation. The presidents of Princeton University and Oberlin College told a symposium on the state of religion among college men that students were no longer attending religious services. “Chapel is a bore,” and services have no “kick” in them were typical statements heard on campus. In 1924, Dr. Stevens gave a radio address on the increasing trend of churches to include “thrills,” what he termed “religious jazz,” to draw in parishioners whose bored, jaded appetites made them favor commercial recreation on Sundays instead of going to church.²⁵²

The loss of interest in religion, the abandonment of “stable fundamentals,” inner vacuity, the lack of constructive cognition, and the disintegration of a life grounded in moral codes were considered the afflictions suffered by those who sought happiness and self-fulfillment in consumer goods and mass entertainment. Certainly religious leaders wanted to resurrect their waning authority and draw people back into the church but they emphasized the hollowing-out of self-hood. Feelings of boredom freed people to act on their immediate desires for contentment and release—what Freud termed “the pleasure principle”—leading to fragmentation and a base temporality. Spiritual authorities sought

²⁵¹ “Meditation a Lost Art,” 26; “Pastor Finds Boredom and Despair Rife; Advises Solitude to Cure This Loneliness,” *New York Times*, July 1, 1929, 23; Machell, “Whence Came We,” 578; R. Machell, “Why Live?” *The Theosophical Path*, February 1, 1922, 118; C. L. Hungerford, “The Etiology of Disease,” *The Theosophical Path*, September 1, 1922, 289-290.

²⁵² “Youth Today Bored, Dr. Hibben Declares,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1928, 19; “Jazz in Religion,” A3.

to convince their congregations and potential followers that a rewarding life transcended ministering to transient corporeal longings but they lacked an imaginative response to the course of contemporary culture.

Fundamentalist organizations like the Lord's Day Alliance proposed legislation to close all forms of commercial amusements on Sunday and to restrict the sale of gasoline to stop "joy riding." But blue laws on the books were already being overturned, especially due to the efforts of professional baseball teams. Editorials in newspapers denounced the enforcement of blue laws and new legislation. "As for the Lord's Day Alliance plan of giving the game of life to God by default, it is only necessary to state that all of the spiritual "driftwood" in America, jammed through the pressure at boredom into our churches, would not reveal enough of the divine spark to light up so much as one small community," wrote an editor for the *Los Angeles Times*.²⁵³

Some churches began to create non-religious social clubs in the hopes to compete with civic clubs, but these efforts were ineffective. A few radical attempts were made by liberal Protestants to draw people into church. "Death from boredom would be the fate of the Christian religion if so-called 'paganism' were not called upon to revivify it and keep it apace with human progress," the Rev. Dr William Guthrie, pastor of St. Marks-in-the-Bouerie, told a reporter. Guthrie created eurhythmic worship at St. Marks—dance and chanted poetry—in the hope he could revitalize Christianity by combining entertainment with traditional practices (he was condemned by Protestant and Catholic leaders alike). In New York City, the Rev. William G. Klett presided over jazz weddings where in a rented dance hall couples, backed by a big-band, fox-trotted to the altar. The innovative idea of

²⁵³ "Drifting Back," Editorial, *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 1921, II4; "Sunday at Dover Much As Usual," *Boston Daily Globe*, October 11, 1926, 17.

re-assembling mass entertainment within the basic constructs of Protestant religious tradition were considered blasphemous and never gained momentum during the 1920s, but they did anticipate the rise of evangelical mega-church entertainment complexes which became popular in the late twentieth century. In contrast, most religious leaders who attacked mass culture failed to take any imaginative steps.²⁵⁴

Solutions to the problem of boredom and mass culture were based on an abstract language gleaned from orthodox religious traditions. According to most clergy, people need to “take life seriously” or engage in “right living” and self-reflection, to participate in community service and attend church regularly. All of these ideas offered no insights on how religion might wrest control from the secular agenda of a corporate-driven consumer culture. Nor were they particularly compelling reasons for people to stop searching for new excitements in exchange for a life based on delayed gratification. In the end, most liberal Protestant leaders relied on an already endangered formulation—“the church must teach people how to live”—without seeing clearly how other cultural forces were already doing this job more effectively. As Protestant leaders struggled with the effects of boredom on the future of religion in America, they overlooked how journalists were beginning to connect monotony to the growth of the Ku Klux Klan—an exclusively white, native organization claiming to be the militant arm of the Protestant church.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ Lynd, *Middletown*, 398; “Theological Truce Ends,” *Boston Daily Globe*, December 31, 1923; Tisa J. Wenger, “The Practice of Dance for the Future of Christianity,” *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965*, ed. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp et. al. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 223, 232; “Now They Are Jazzing Up the Wedding March,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 30, 1924, M3.

²⁵⁵ Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 237-238.

The Ku Klux Klan grew to five million members by 1925 and had a strong presence in urban areas as well as in the countryside. Ignoring the rise of membership in large cities, journalists began in the early 1920s to single-out the boredom of life in small towns as responsible for the rise of the Klan. Rural areas such as Oklahoma, Northern Louisiana, Eastern Texan and Arkansas were filled with “the pressure of ennui” and were places of “drabness and deadly monotony.” Llewellyn Nelson in “The KKK for Boredom” gave a typical explanation for the rise of membership in the Klan:

Across this scene of dullness and disillusionment flashed...the fiery cross of the Ku Klux Klan. Mystery, novelty, action, equality—all this the order had to offer. Disconsolate ministers, discouraged clerks, disappointed lawyers and adventurous mechanics flocked to the new organization. In it they saw an escape from the all-pervading boredom; a secrecy that gave them a sense of self-importance, a regalia that disguised inequalities and set successful and unsuccessful, rich and poor, owner and laborer, all on one plane.

In short, Anglo-Saxon supremacy was an exciting and fun alternative to dull village life—barbeques, parties, parades, the drama of burning crosses and the occasional lynching or beating of African Americans, Jews and Catholics served to level class differences while providing thrills. The historian Frank Tannenbaum represented the practice of lynching as an escape from thwarted impulses caused by a “constant state of boredom.” The people of the South planned a lynching for the “sake of excitement where “the passions, the shouting, the running, the yelling, all conspire to give the starved emotions a full day of play.” The idea that boredom stimulated Klan membership and incited lynching survived into the 1930s and began to become a standard explanation found in newspapers written for African American audiences.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁶ Ibid.; Frank Tannenbaum, “The Ku Klux Klan,” *The Century Magazine* 105, no. 6 (1923): 877-879; William MacDonald, “Ku Kluxism, a Product of the American Mind,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1924, BR3; Llewellyn Nelson, “The KKK for Boredom,” *The New Republic*, January 14, 1925, 197-198; Silas Bent, “Through the South Unsentimentally,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1924, BR7; “Other Papers Say,”

These portrayals not only described monotony as an immutable aspect of rural life but they gave it agency as a social force able to motivate people to mob action—the replacement of individual responsibility with an abstract “truth” about the order of existence. In combination with diagnoses of boredom as the source of marital dysfunction, secularization, the turn to mass commercial entertainment, and disillusionment with work, a portrait emerged of white culture as fundamentally dull and stale. A small number of African American writers noticed this trend and began to contrast the vibrancy of “Aframerican” culture with a white society plagued by normative boredom.

Walter White was vexed by white literary critics’ inability to understand his character Mimi in *Flight* (1926). Mimi, a light-skinned African-American Creole who passed as white, grew tired of “white life as a regimented thing in which the puppets follow certain definite ruts like ants in an anthill.” She returns to “her own people” (her black roots) because she saw “them in all the joyousness and rhythmic ebullience which saves the Negro from boredom and despair. She goes back to her own people for this spiritual satisfaction which she misses in white life,” wrote White.²⁵⁷

George S. Schuyler, the Chief Editorial Writer for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, wrote a series of essays criticizing white culture and racism by contrasting the monotonous, standardizing machine age routines of “Nordics” with the authenticity of black life. Short pieces of fiction began to emerge in African American newspapers where bored white characters were liberated by learning about black artistic accomplishments or by engaging with black culture, usually through clandestine love affairs. These essays and

Chicago Defender, March 29, 1930, 14; “Lynchings Fall Off in First Six Months of Year,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 2, 1938, A1.

²⁵⁷ Walter F. White, “The Spotlight,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 3, 1926, 16.

stories were a direct challenge to the supremacy of white culture and they asserted that “Afriamericans” outshined “the achievement of any other race in the world.” This essentialist comparison of an authentic, spiritual, open and fluid black culture with the monotonous white world was not specific to the Harlem Renaissance. It survived into the late 1930s. Much of the critique of white culture was grounded in the popular depictions of advertisements and the rhetoric about boredom in marriage and religion, but it borrowed heavily from the language in the white popular press describing the effects of specialized labor. As in the past, concerns over workplace boredom generated a voluminous amount of journalistic coverage in the twenties.²⁵⁸

On November 30, 1920 Herbert Hoover spoke to The Federated American Engineering Society. “The vast repetitive operations are dulling the human mind...if we are able to secure the development of our people, we cannot permit the dulling of their sensibilities,” said the Secretary of Commerce. Throughout the decade government officials, economists, journalists, social critics, sociologists, corporate executives and labor leaders wrote articles and made speeches about why boredom was a problem for the nation’s 13 million industrial workers. The majority of those writing about monotony held positions of power and influenced public opinion—they had in common a corporate liberal worldview guided by a bureaucratic ethos. Labor leaders and public figures placed a premium on social engineering—their mission was to advance American civilization

²⁵⁸ George S. Schuyler, “Blessed Are the Sons of Ham,” *Chicago Defender*, April 2, 1927, A1; George S. Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 16, 1929, A8; Gertrude Sanborn, “Veiled Aristocrats: A Story of Two Races,” *Baltimore African-American*, August 29, 1925, A10.

through economic abundance and the uplift of working class families who needed to embrace bourgeois values.²⁵⁹

Labor leaders were at the forefront of promoting the idea that industrial workers should accept monotony on the job. Tedious work, they argued, was an inevitable condition of progress and an inexorable force in America's modern economic system—boredom, though undesirable, was a consequence industrial laborers had to live with. “The unionization of auto workers would not eliminate the repetitive processes in the industry,” stated James M. Lynch, President of the International Typographical Union, to an audience at the American Federation of Labor's Forty-Sixth Annual Convention. Martha Bensley Bruere of the Women's Trade Union League and member of the New York State Industrial Commission wrote: “There are only a few jobs that can be made more interesting without loss of output.” She believed the “problem of monotony” could not be solved by making structural changes in the workplace. The acceptance of rationalized work did not mean monotony at work should be ignored, but this deterministic perspective conditioned the meaning of the problem and what solutions were possible.²⁶⁰

When a union leader asked his audience can “you imagine the state of mind of the individual who is occupied in screwing a nut on a bolt his entire life time?” or when Arthur Pound, an economist, historian, and associate editor of *Atlantic Monthly*, wrote

²⁵⁹ In 1920, close to 42 million people were gainfully employed in the United States. 30.8 percent worked in the manufacturing sector which rose to 41 percent of all occupations excepting agriculture. “Calls Engineers to Help Industry,” *New York Times*, November 20, 1920, 15; “Hoover's Task for the Engineer in Curing Industrial Ills,” *The Iron Age*, 106, no. 22 (1920): 1412; “Herbert Hoover on Individual Waste,” *Railway and Locomotive Engineering* 34, no.3 (1921): 68; “The Federated American Engineering Societies Holds Its First Meeting,” *Power* 52, no. 22 (1920): 878, 867; Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years, A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), 55.

²⁶⁰ “Labor Demands Gradual Time Cuts; Omits 5-Day Limit,” *New York Times*, October 10, 1926, 22; Martha Bensley Bruere, “Patterns,” *The Survey* 49 (1923): 550.

that monotony sits upon the industrial worker “like an incubus,” they were not interested in eradicating boredom from the workplace. Instead, they worried about the plight of the nation—what types of economic and social liabilities workers represented. As larger segments of the population began to purchase consumer goods previously unobtainable to all but a few, the issue of efficient production transcended local corporate goals of growth and profit. The creation of abundance became a source of mass desire and national pride. “What the community needs is output” became the mantra of the 1920s. Increased production and the creation of more goods was the basis of the American standard of living. Promoted by labor leaders since the late nineteenth century, the pursuit of fulfillment by workers through consumption would serve as a basis for social change, help end unemployment, and make the United States an economic power allowing it to stand above other nations.²⁶¹

Boredom at work threatened to inhibit output. This was a traditional concern but the emphasis on prosperity gave it greater resonance in popular culture. Union leaders and social critics saw repetitive work extinguishing the faculties of workers. Loss of the “instinct of mastery” and the “creative instinct” were cited most often. Statements such as one from a bench molder who told sociological investigators “...as soon as ever I get the hang of the thing there isn’t 25 percent of me paying attention to the job” were presented as evidence of how the inability to feel a sense of achievement in one’s work led to a

²⁶¹ “Report of the Proceedings of the Forty-Sixth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor, Held at Detroit, Michigan, October 4 to 14 Inclusive, 1926” (Washington D.C.: The Law Reporter Printing Company, 1926), 171; Arthur Pound, *The Iron Man in Industry, An Outline of the Social Significance of Automatic Machinery* (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1922), 49; P.W. Wilson, “Ford, Democracy, and the Motor Car,” *New York Times*, September 24, 1922, 46; Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage, American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 79, 84.

state of distraction. Inefficient production ensued. So went the accepted discourse on the connection between monotony at work and production.²⁶²

Repetitive work was also viewed as a direct cause of boredom which led to habituation and a loss of active intelligence. Workers became “mere automatons” or “cogs” as a routine job sank into the subconscious realm and each action became habitual. Personnel managers, not workers, were often quoted to legitimate the claim about monotony’s rapacious effects. “They don’t know the monotony hurts them. I think I suffered more seeing them do the same thing all the time than they did doing it” and “That man is dead, just dead! I don’t know what to do for them. They’re just...doing the same monotonous work every day” were typical statements.²⁶³

Labor leaders and others writing about the problem of monotony at work never told tales about what workers directly said to them. This was because, it appears, they had internalized a version of the average worker as a “common man”: a white male with low intelligence who was capable of taking care of himself and his family, who was fairly adaptable and amenable to law, who required leadership and was willing to follow, loyal to country and institutions, and conservative—all in all a “steady, plodding citizen.” From the dominant view, workers were unaware of their own psychological degradation at work—“robots” in need of guidance by those who had the expertise, privilege and power to make the right decisions about how to depict and solve the problem of boredom.²⁶⁴

²⁶² “The Federated American Engineering,” 877; Adolph Bregman, “Monotony and Industrial Unrest,” *The Survey* 49, no.9 (February, 1923): 552; Report of the Proceedings,” 172; Lynd, *Middletown*, 75.

²⁶³ “Labor Chiefs Plan to Unionize Men in Auto Industry,” *New York Times*, Oct 8, 1926, 1; Bregman, “Monotony and Industrial Unrest,” 553; Bruere, “Patterns,” 551; Lynd, *Middletown*, 75.

²⁶⁴ The definition of a “common man” is drawn from Arthur Pound’s popular *The Iron Man in Industry*. Pound, *The Iron Man in Industry*, 52.

The affectation of sympathy by personnel managers was the common denominator among all those writing about the loss of selfhood due to boredom at work. No efforts were made to stop industrial workers from becoming “cogs” on the job. Instead, the popular discourse about debased subjectivity betrayed anxieties about what might happen to American civilization if workers were no longer able to perform their role as reliable citizens during their leisure time. “Instead of tending toward helping these men and making them better Americans, this system provides men who cannot help being good material for the radical and the demagogue to work upon,” said A.J. Berres, Secretary of the Metal Trades Department, A.F. of L, after visiting Ford’s Highland Park plant in 1926. Union leaders, some of their open shop opponents, and social critics agreed that monotony had the potential to corrupt the character of workers which imperiled the nation’s future. Even Henry Ford, who believed the men on his assembly lines were mental defectives, wrote that until monotony is abolished “we shall never be wholly civilized.” The discourse about the problem of boredom contracted into a narrative about America’s economic and social destiny—concern over the harm done to individuals was secondary.²⁶⁵

Problems once at the heart of the discourse about workplace monotony—labor unrest and high turnover—remained alive but with a faint pulse. High unemployment; the weakness of unions (most mass production industries remained open shops in the 1920s); the turn to “business unionism” where labor leaders supported cooperation with management (the endorsement of employee representation committees, corporate welfare programs and scientific management techniques); and a slightly better standard of living

²⁶⁵ “Green Repudiates Remarks by Eddy at Labor Meeting,” *Washington Post*, October 9, 1926, 4; Henry Ford and Samuel Crowther, *My Life and Work* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1923), 279.

for workers than in the past were all reasons for why certain traditional problems associated with boredom and work no longer remained core elements in the popular discourse of monotony and work.²⁶⁶

Instead, by the 1920s, the discourse narrowed from a multivalent set of ideas and practices found in pre-World War I society into a precise theme—the problem of boredom at work could only be resolved through the promise of leisure. The split between types of work performed by men and women narrowed. Instead, a generalized discourse about repetitive work emerged—perhaps due to the success of protective legislation for women in the Progressive Era and the shift of women away from industrial to white collar jobs after the war. Subsequently, the discourse about the proper use of leisure, which was already well-established prior to the war, received heightened public attention.²⁶⁷

Since the late nineteenth century, unions and other individuals concerned with boredom at work promoted shorter hours with the same or higher wages as a solution—the promise of leisure to revitalize the dulled minds of employees. Their efforts were ineffectual until Henry Ford, in September 1926, became the first major corporate executive to implement a five-day work week (40 hours) without a reduction in wages. Ford shortened the work week because he saw that the nation's factories continued to overproduce affordable consumer goods and industrial workers were an untapped consumer market. “Without leisure the workingmen—who are the largest buyers in the country—cannot have the time to cultivate a higher standard of living and, therefore, to

²⁶⁶ Bernstein, *The Lean Years* 58, 65; David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor, The Workplace, The State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 464, 420-422; Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 63, 65, 68.

²⁶⁷ In 1920, more women worked in white collar jobs than in the manufacturing sector. Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 224.

increase their purchasing power,” he told an interviewer for the *New York Times*.

Unmotivated by solving the problem of monotony, Ford compensated for lost time by increasing discipline and speeding-up assembly lines to maintain efficient production.

Though virulently anti-union, Ford was in concert with union leaders about increasing the American standard of living. The American Federation of Labor maintained “if consumers of which the workers form the largest group have more time to enjoy the automobile, radio and other products of the modern age their wants will increase, trade will be fostered and general prosperity will be more firmly established.” Still, there were plenty who recoiled at the thought of leisure as a therapeutic response to boredom.²⁶⁸

Eugenicists such as George Barton Cutten, President of Colgate University, and Arthur Pound portrayed bored industrial workers as craving thrills and using stimulants to blot out “the discontent that overlays their lives.” Cutten, in *The Threat of Leisure*, saw expanded leisure time as a “means of liberty for the indulgence of low tastes” making workers “a serious menace to society.” Anxious about racial decline, Pound and Cutten were convinced that industrial psychologists and personnel managers deliberately selected “morons” as machine operatives—an “ever-increasing body of deficient...to do our mean and monotonous work”—because they were cheaper, more obedient, easily satisfied, and accomplished higher rates of output. Industrial workers, then, were destined to perpetuate and increase generations of “subnormal types.”²⁶⁹

Pound felt a program of eugenic mating could not stop morons from breeding with fellow operatives who were more intelligent. For Cutten, the science of eugenics

²⁶⁸ “Ford Tells the Aim of His 5-Day Week,” *New York Times*, October, 11, 1926, 35; Charles Laue, “Five-Day Week Becomes a Vivid Issue,” *New York Times*, October 17, 1926, Section 9, XX1.

²⁶⁹ Pound, *The Iron Man*, 46, 181-182; George Barton Cutten, *The Threat of Leisure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926), 92.

would eventually lead to the development of a new race of people—those better suited to use leisure in socially productive ways. The dream of a superior race of factory operatives lay in the future, so both Pound and Cutten advocated programs to force workers into using their free time properly. Communities needed to organize “desirable means for occupying leisure time” and workers had to be trained to spend their “own leisure in a satisfying manner.” Since the late nineteenth century, social critics who distrusted working-class recreational behavior had attacked visions of uplift through increased leisure, but what distinguished these commentators was that they no longer felt recreational reform should be a voluntary act. Instead, as the drive for an eight hour day gained momentum, they sought to socially engineer the use of leisure through coercion.²⁷⁰

Other social critics, who did not hold a eugenicist outlook, also believed the “threat of leisure” might destroy American civilization. Stuart Chase in “Play,” an essay written for *Whither Mankind* (1929), explained:

Millions of industrial employees are trying to work off the ‘unrelieved irritations of their psychic lives’ in the thrills, excitements and intense stimulation of prize fights, ball games, race courses, roller coasters, tabloid murder stories, gambling, gin, and ‘torrid screen dramas of sexy souls.’ They take the only outlets they can find in a blind rush from the monotony of their appointed tasks.

Chase felt passive “non-satisfying pseudo-play” was a sign of cultural deterioration and much like Gorky in 1906, he described commercial amusements as standardizing play and replicating a regime of work during leisure. The progress of the machine age gave workers newfound opportunities for recreation and then took them away by “brutalizing in recreation millions of human beings who are already brutalized by the psychological imperatives of their daily labor.” Chase’s solution was to tell workers they should

²⁷⁰ Pound, *The Iron Man*, 187, 57-61; Cutten, *The Threat of Leisure*, 107, 113.

consider participating in “true play”— outdoor recreation, especially hiking and skating, singing, charades and taking part in amateur theater.²⁷¹

For Harvey N. Davis, President of Stevens Institute of Technology, the recreational activities of bored industrial employees corrupted middle-class mores: “the roving minds of the five per cent of us who are repetitive workers carry over sort of a contagion, not only into their own, but into everybody’s leisure hours.” Like Chase, he suggested first-hand play as a solution for workers but his faith lay in a society controlled by engineers who would create a new civilization. Likewise, the Lynds in *Middletown* mirrored Chase’s revulsion over the standardization of leisure and they shared Davis’s belief that experts were needed to plan and control the living habits of the nation’s citizens.²⁷²

As in the past, monotony at work was not seen as constituting a serious social problem by some commentators, since employees who did repetitive tasks were suited for their work. Henry Ford, who admitted the idea of repetitive work was terrifying to him (he used it as a way to discipline unruly foremen who were threatened with being put back on the line if they didn’t follow orders), believed the average industrial worker wanted “a job in which he does not have to think.” Looking back on the 1920s, Harvey N. Davis wrote: “Volumes have been written on the deadening effect of the Ford assembly line on the souls of noble Americans. Individuality and beauty are supposed to be dying.” Workers were represented as “rapidly degenerating into utterly despicable

²⁷¹ Stuart Chase, “Play,” in *Whither Mankind, A Panorama of Modern Civilization*, ed. Charles A. Beard (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), 347, 352.

²⁷² Harvey N. Davis, “Spirit and Culture Under the Machine,” in *Toward Civilization*, ed. Charles A. Beard (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930), 290, 294; Lynd, *Middletown*, 80-81, 269, 271, 309, 311.

mechanical robots.” What Davis termed the “literature of pessimism” left him unconvinced about the deleterious effects of monotony on industrial workers.²⁷³

Dr. Helen T. Woodley, who did research for Merrill-Palmer School in Detroit, told a journalist her studies proved men of “limited intelligence” enjoyed specialized labor and were content to stick to their jobs because they were “inferior human beings.” Certain men possessed a temperament that suited them for repetitive work, President Davis presumed, and they found contentment in routinized occupations. This line of reasoning, where a lack of intelligence was seen as making men fit for monotonous jobs, was the forte of industrial psychologists and always remained a strain complementary to the belief that boredom harmed workers. Still, by the 1930s new ideas in the field of industrial psychology turned away from an emphasis on intelligence and toward universal solutions intended to adjust all employees to living with boredom during work.²⁷⁴

By the end of the 1920s, in popular culture the only solution to monotonous work, therapeutic self-fulfillment through recreation and consumption, became widely understood as a desirable means to refresh the minds of workers and increase the prosperity of the nation. Those apprehensive over the threat of leisure for the working-class would soon be on the defensive and were left trying to convince states to implement prohibitive and educational legislation. In stark contrast, American industrial psychologists remained disinterested in the issue of boredom at work. Only a few research projects were conducted to determine the effects of monotony on work and none of them contributed or revised the paradigm established by Stanley Wyatt in England.

²⁷³ Ford, *My Life and Work*, 93, 103; Davis, “Spirit and Culture,” 283-284.

²⁷⁴ “The Uses of Drudgery,” *The Literary Digest*, September 8, 1923, 28; Davis, “Spirit and Culture,” 286.

In 1923, a young Morris S. Viteles—by the thirties he became known as leading industrial psychologist and had authored a classic textbook—observed that American industrial psychologists were falling behind the advances made by their English counterparts. Frustrated over a “narrow-minded” sensibility focused on vocational selection and the psychology of advertising, he appealed for the profession to conduct more research on monotony—“one of the major problems of industrial psychology.” Instead, the first “scientific” publication on boredom to gain national recognition since Hugo Münsterberg’s *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency* (1913) was written by a Boston neurologist.²⁷⁵

Abraham Myerson, a professor of neurology at Tufts Medical School, of clinical psychiatry at Harvard, and the research director at Boston State psychopathic hospital wrote bestsellers, such as *The Nervous Housewife* (1923), about the psychological problems caused by modern civilization. In 1925, he published *When Life Loses its Zest* which was advertised nationally as a self-help tract on boredom. “Dr. Myerson, an expert neurologist explains for the layman the causes of boredom—that strange weariness that takes the zest out of life—and the cure for it,” ran the advertising copy. In the introduction, Henry Addington Bruce, a journalist who popularized psychology, described boredom as a common pathological condition affecting the American population—the first scientific conception of boredom as a mental disease that existed beyond the world of repetitive labor. Bruce and the book’s advertisements used boredom

²⁷⁵ Morris S. Viteles, “Psychology in Business – in England, France and Germany,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 110 (November, 1923): 207-212.

as an idiom for anhedonia, a psychological term used to describe a symptom of depressive illnesses.²⁷⁶

In 1897, Théodule-Armand Ribot, a French psychologist, introduced the term anhedonia to describe a loss of the pleasure response and satisfaction. Myerson revived the term—after the turn of the century psychiatric interest in anhedonia had faded—calling the condition “the name I have given to this death in life.” Much like George Miller Beard’s concept of neurasthenia, the causes of anhedonia were “the adverse conditions of modern life.” Over stimulation due to mechanical invention, the speeding-up of life, and the narrowing of opportunity to gain satisfaction in work were the primary reasons Americans suffered from anhedonia. Myerson sought to redefine what indicated depression away from Beard’s physiological concept of “nerve force” to a psychological affliction engendered by a lack of self-fulfillment. The problem with anhedonia was it caused a need for extremes and a desire for “bizarre entertainment”—the same social problems ascribed to boredom in the popular discourse.²⁷⁷

Myerson used anhedonia and boredom synonymously. “Bizarre, extraordinary ways of reaching excitement are a sign of essential boredom,” he wrote. Unable to reach satisfaction in “normal” forms of recreation, anhedonics turned to gambling, alcoholism, drug use, the “abyss of ancient and oriental practices” (pederasty and sodomy), inveterate travelling, and big-game hunting. At work, the illness occluded attention and resulted in inefficient production. Myerson recommended physical hygiene, revitalizing the desire to

²⁷⁶ Nicolas Rasmussen, *On Speed, The Many Lives of Amphetamine* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 31; “New Books from Beacon Hill,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, February 8, 1925, BR31; Abraham Myerson, *When Life Loses its Zest* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1925), v.

²⁷⁷ Philip Snaith, “Anhedonia: Exclusion From the Pleasure Dome, a Useful Marker of Biological Depression,” *British Medical Journal* 305, no. 6846 (1992): 134; Myerson, *When Life Loses*, 215, vi-vii, 42; Rasmussen, *On Speed*, 33.

enjoy food, occupational therapy, a denial of pleasure for short periods of time, and an elaborate scheme of child-rearing based on stringent dietary habits and participation in model organizations such as the Boy or Girl Scouts, as cures. *When Life Loses its Zest* contained many of the same ideas about boredom found in the popular discourse since the Gilded Age. Myerson did not cite any research studies, though his ideas roughly correlated to Wyatt's definition of monotony as a subjective state characterized by the symptoms of an inhibited work ethic with a high potential for socially disruptive behavior. What made Myerson's book exceptional was that he represented the pathology of boredom as an underlying sign of depression which could potentially damage the psychic lives of all Americans—a condition of modernity not directed at any specific ethnic group, sex, or class—and that he presented this information as verified by scientific expertise (though none was cited).²⁷⁸

By the end of the 1920s, the confluence of ideas about workplace monotony and quotidian boredom in marriage, advertising, religion, and as a scientifically proven pathological condition of modern American life, powerfully coalesced into a cultural acceptance of boredom as a normative feature of life. In the 1930s, the first large-scale solutions to the problem of monotony began to affect millions of Americans—the origins of what became a sustained ameliorative project to rid people's lives of boredom from the mid-twentieth century until the present day.

During the Great Depression, communist and socialist agitation helped mobilize popular support for the federal government to take a larger role in solving the nation's

²⁷⁸ Walks, warm baths, and the use of sedatives to restore sleep were the elements of proper physical hygiene. Teaching a person to enjoy hobbies such as clay modeling, rug making, and gardening comprised occupational therapy. Myerson believed that allowing anhedonics to enjoy pleasure for a brief period followed by long periods of self-denial would condition them to judiciously enjoy recreation. Myerson, *When Life Loses*, 31-32, 91, 163-164, 176, 201, 203-208.

problems. In the early 1930s, unions in the mining, garment trades and trucking industries were energized by the National Industrial Recovery Act's Section 7a—though vaguely worded, Section 7a encouraged unionization and collective bargaining—but it did little for workers in mass production. By mid-decade, the Wagner Act (1935) and the mass organizing campaigns of the Congress of Industrial Organizations created a coalition of new, powerful industrial unions. In 1936, workers helped reelect President Roosevelt, in a landslide victory, and they were rewarded by the administration's receptivity to unionization in basic industries—autos, meatpacking, steel, rubber, and electrical products.²⁷⁹

After almost fifty years of agitation for the eight hour day and higher wages as a solution to monotonous work, unions and their allies finally obtained their goals with the Flint Sit-Down Strike (1937), which led to the unionization of the auto industry, and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938), which made the maximum work week forty-four hours. With these victories, individual workers were left alone to grapple with the depredations of repetitive jobs. At the same time, social scientists and large corporations designed therapeutic responses—the medicalization of boredom and the broadcasting of background music—to adjust bored people to social norms and the rationalized workplace.

The success of *When Life Loses its Zest* brought Abraham Myerson a middle-class clientele. He treated them until the mid-1930s with the same regime he recommended to the general public. Then, a pharmaceutical company seeking to market a new drug contacted Myerson. In 1934, Smith, Kline & French (SKF) released the Benzedrine

²⁷⁹ Roy Rosenzweig, Nelson Lichtenstein, Joshua Brown, and David Jaffe, *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's History, Volume Two: 1877 to the Present* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 430, 454, 457.

Inhaler, a vaporizer with a volatile amphetamine base, as a decongestant. In the same year the company acquired the patent for orally active amphetamine salts (pill form) to be marketed as Benzedrine Sulfate. The company did not have any clear medical uses for the amphetamine pill, making it impossible to gain approval by the American Medical Association's Council on Pharmacy. SKF aggressively sought to locate scientific evidence of the drug's efficacy by giving away large amounts to doctors, including Myerson, and asking for reports on what medical conditions amphetamine seemed to cure. The company faltered with finding a marketable disease, with the exception of narcolepsy, until Myerson presented his research in 1936 at an American Psychological Association meeting.²⁸⁰

Myerson told his audience that Benzedrine Sulfate drastically improved the moods of anhedonic depressives—a finding significant enough to merit mention in *Time* magazine. SKF research managers realized the boundless potential of selling amphetamine as a cure for mood disorders associated with depression and they sought more research to bolster their application to the AMA. In October, 1937 the company sponsored the publication of Joseph Barmack's research study, "The Effect of Benzedrine Sulfate (Benzyl Methyl Carbinamine) Upon the Report of Boredom and Other Factors," in the *Journal of Psychology*. Upon receipt in the editorial office, the study was immediately printed as a special edition. Barmack was the first American industrial psychologist to experiment with the effects of Benzedrine Sulfate on boredom caused by

²⁸⁰ Rasmussen, *On Speed*, 22-23, 27-28, 35.

repetitive work. His dissertation at Columbia University, completed in 1935, helped determine why Barmack took a turn to psychopharmacology.²⁸¹

Barmack's dissertation, "Boredom and Other Factors in the Physiology of Mental Effort," was influenced by Stanley Wyatt's research. He created a hybrid model of boredom where Wyatt's paradigm, minus the emphasis on intelligence, remained intact but was modified by adding a physiological component. Barmack's research was driven by the same goal as the English industrial psychologists—to make workers more productive by finding a solution to overcome boredom.

His mentor at Columbia, A.T. Poffenberger, who was a prominent industrial psychologist, helped Barmack formulate two experiments intended to locate physiological changes when feelings of boredom occurred in test subjects. In his first experiment Barmack used a pursuitmeter developed by Poffenberger to create a state of boredom. The ironically named pursuitmeter—its function was to pursue infinite nothingness—was described as:

Roughly, it consists of a motor, eccentric pulleys, two pointer arms, a commutator-brush arrangement for the two arms, and a battery of six electrical counters. The subject, seated in front of the pursuitmeter, sees a table top on the central and distal end of which is a glazed glass window about five inches high and eight inches wide. From the top of this window there projects downward a pointer two inches in length. From the bottom of the window there projects upward another pointer similar to the first, to which is attached a large knob. The top pointer moves back and forth in an irregular, infrequently recurring pattern. The subject's task is to follow the upper pointer as closely as possible. By means of the commutator, brush and electrical counters, a record of the subject's accuracy is obtained at approximately one-second intervals.

Fifteen graduate students in psychology at Columbia were used as test subjects. In addition to working the pursuitmeter for 70 minutes, the subjects were studied for oxygen

²⁸¹ Ibid., 31, 35; Joseph E. Barmack, "The Effect of Benzedrine Sulfate (Benzyl Methyl Carbinamine) Upon the Report of Boredom and Other Factors," *The Journal of Psychology* 5, no.1 (1938): 125, 127. The research was reprinted in 1938.

consumption and made subjective assessments regarding their degrees of boredom, attention, and emotional states. Barmack validated Wyatt's monotony curves stating there was a decrease in output in the middle of the work curve. He also found a "depression in oxygen consumption" correlating to the moments the subjects reported feeling bored.²⁸²

Barmack then conducted a second experiment where a new set of subjects, 24 graduate students in psychology from Columbia and the College of the City of New York, added pairs of six-place numbers for 90 minutes, took an Otis Self Administering Test (an intelligence test) for 90 minutes, and were examined for oxygen consumption, blood pressure, heart rate, and work output. In addition, the subjects were given a subjective boredom measurement tool including the estimation of "percent of time spent in daydreaming." Based on the research, Barmack proposed a five-stage hybrid model of boredom—he claimed his concepts were "essentially in agreement with Wyatt," but required establishing a relationship between the psychology of boredom and physiological responses.²⁸³

In the first stage, a worker began a repetitive task and an initial attitude of boredom developed due to a lack of a strong motive to continue the tedious job. Barmack termed this mood "inadequate motivation." In the second stage, the attitude of boredom caused a decrease in vital activities such as the loss of oxygen consumption and a drop in blood pressure that were the function of "accessory organs"—endocrines, vascular, and respiratory. These organs needed to stay in an accelerated state for efficient work. This meant physiological changes were a function of attitude. In stage three, as vital activity became inadequate the worker felt bored. The feeling of boredom was caused by the

²⁸² Ibid., 13, 29.

²⁸³ Ibid., 30, 73.

recognition of an uncomfortable physiological state (depressed vital activity) and this made the worker drift to a sleep state. The worker was only kept awake by the need to continue the repetitive work. The result was inattention to the job task and a marked decrease in production. In the final stage, the worker exhibited an overpowering attitude of boredom. The worker had a desire to get away from the unpleasant situation because he felt physiologically inadequate to it or because physiological adequacy was maintained at great effort—the conflict between a tendency to continue and a desire to get away from the repetitive work.²⁸⁴

Barmack's focus on physiology plus the powerful influence of Smith, Kline & French during the critical period when the company was in its final push to win approval for Benzedrine Sulfate led him to propose the use of amphetamine to eliminate the feeling of boredom and increase productivity. Barmack began his research publication by thanking SKF Laboratories for "their generosity in making available an adequate supply of Benzedrine Sulfate and placebo pills, and for sponsoring the immediate publication of this article." He represented boredom as a mood disorder, matching SKF's criteria, and sought to determine if the use of Benzedrine Sulfate could stop vital activity from being depressed, thus keeping boredom at bay.²⁸⁵

The 1937 study by Barmack was framed by one primary research question: could the use of Benzedrine "retard the development of boredom during repetitive work"? Thirty-six students from general psychology classes at the College of the City of New York were recruited for the study. They were divided into two groups of 18 and one group was given 10 mg. of Benzedrine and the other was given a placebo. They were told

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 61.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 127, 126.

to first fill-out a boredom assessment scale of 6 questions and asked to approximate the amount of time they spent daydreaming. Then the subjects added pairs of six-place numbers for 2 hours and 7 minutes and ended by filling out another subjective rating scale. The experiment was repeated two days later when the second group received the amphetamine. Barmack found subjects who took the Benzedrine Sulfate reported “they were less bored, more relaxed, less irritated, less fatigued, more wide awake, and more attentive” and spent less time daydreaming than those given a placebo. He argued the research confirmed his previous findings that “boredom involves a physiological reversion back to the sleep state” and that Benzedrine definitively retarded “the development of boredom.”²⁸⁶

The publication of Barmack’s results along with Myerson’s report and clinical studies funded by SKF allowed the company to convince the AMA that Benzedrine Sulfate was beneficial for improving mood disorders. In December, 1937 the company was granted approval to sell the drug for use in narcolepsy, Parkinson’s disease, and for mood elevation in depression. SKF spent heavily on advertising targeting doctors to prescribe Benzedrine Sulfate with people who indicated mild forms of depression. A typical advertisement to the medical community listed “apathy, discouragement and undue pessimisms along with subjective difficulty in thinking, in concentrating and in initiating and accomplishing usual tasks” as the primary characteristics of mild depression. The symptoms were synonymous with the types of “attitudes” and “feelings” researchers had associated with boredom for almost two decades and were directly drawn from Myerson’s description of anhedonia. What specifically separated boredom from depression was ambiguous by the late 1930s—this remained the case throughout the

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 126, 127-128, 129, 130, 132.

twentieth century. What did not remain enigmatic was the idea that psychological discontents with “modern life” could be treated or cured through the use of drugs. If boredom was a mood disorder caused by the “adverse conditions” of advanced capitalism in the United States, it could be treated by Benzedrine, and workers could be accommodated to their work—however boring.²⁸⁷

Though Barmack never directly stated that doctors should prescribe to workers, this was implied in his research findings. The research scientist certainly was not the first person to associate using amphetamine to overcome the effects of hard or repetitive work. From 1937-1938 a great deal of attention was given, in newspapers and academic journals, to the use of Benzedrine by university students who were taking it to cram for exams—concerns over misuse and addiction blocked SKF’s attempt to market the drug for mental performance enhancement. The Benzedrine Inhaler could be purchased over the counter, without a prescription, in local drugstores for 50 cents in 1939. The Inhaler contained about 350 mg. of a volatile amphetamine base, the equivalent of seventy 5 mg. pills, contained in a paper strip folded into eight sections. The drug was obtained by cracking open the vaporizer and dissolving the strips in coffee or water. There are no reliable statistics on Inhaler abuse for the 1930s, but a bored or tired worker could easily get extra “pep” by visiting a drugstore or asking a doctor for a prescription. Since SKF’s initial release of Benzedrine Sulfate, amphetamines have always been used to overcome boredom or long hours of work. Barmack only confirmed what was already becoming common knowledge—a work ethic fueled by amphetamine could open the door to

²⁸⁷ Rasmussen, *On Speed*, 41.

upward mobility and the benefits of consumer culture. But it could also provide bosses with pliable, productive workers.²⁸⁸

The cultural consequences of Myerson's and Barmack's publications went beyond the world of work. Their foray into psychopharmacology anticipated the spreading desire of psychologists to connect boredom with inefficiency and to treat it as a form of psychiatric disorder. The drive to manage attention through the use of drugs, combined with the growing influence of pharmaceutical companies in shaping perceptions of disease and medical practice, has had a major influence on American culture since World War II. The increased medicalization of everyday life—from those being treated with anti-depressants such as Prozac to children diagnosed with ADHD—reveals discourses of boredom overlapping with those of depression and inattention. Today, anti-depressants are routinely prescribed and a new generation of cognitive enhancers such as Provigil can influence a wide range of human emotions and experiences—presented by the pharmaceutical and medical community as “unproductive” mental states. The mark Myerson and Barmack made on American culture is ripe with unsettling questions regarding the most intimate of cultural concerns: the repercussions of the sustained push to modify human behavior in the pursuit of maximum efficiency and to achieve what are considered desirable adjustments to fit social norms.²⁸⁹

When corporations appropriate the popular writings of doctors or industrial psychologists to sell products aimed at alleviating boredom, they do so in anticipation of

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 31; “Gimbles Sale of Drugs,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, February 26, 1939, 23; Rasmussen, *On Speed*, 41; Nick Redding, *Methland, the Death and Life of an American Small Town* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 10.

²⁸⁹ Richard Restak, *The Naked Brain, How the Emerging Neurosociety is Changing How We Live, Work, and Love* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 221, 223.

creating a large market demand. This means when boredom meets the world of profit, the condition must be defined as a universal problem, potentially affecting millions of people in need of an uncomplicated solution. While SKF began marketing Benzedrine Sulfate as a treatment for boredom, the English industrial psychologist Stanley Wyatt published a research project on boredom and background music that, once in corporate hands, began a new era in using functional music to pacify labor and increase production.

In 1930, an English company provided Stanley Wyatt and his co-researcher J.N. Langdon a factory laboratory and funding in hopes of finding solutions to reduce boredom and increase industrial production. A year later, the management shifted the team to another factory and supplied generous funds. After three years of research, Wyatt and his colleagues grew weary of their work. “It looked like these studies might go on indefinitely. By this time, however, symptoms of boredom began to appear in the investigators and some kind of antidote seemed desirable. It was decided to have music while we worked” wrote Wyatt in his autobiography. Whether the tale was apocryphal or legitimate—in his research report Wyatt attributed new insights into how workers’ daydreams functioned as the reason for trying music—in 1934 the industrial psychologist convinced management to allow his team to measure the effects of different kinds of music on the output of industrial workers. A gramophone and loud speakers were placed in a suitable department of the factory and the researchers began work on what would become a revolutionary attempt to condition human behavior.²⁹⁰

The team investigated the work habits of 12 female Christmas cracker makers for six months. The work process was described by Wyatt as: “the crepe paper, which forms the outer part of the cracker, is placed flat on the bench and on the top of this is laid a

²⁹⁰ Stanley Wyatt, “An Autobiography,” *Occupational Psychology* 24 (1950): 71.

piece of white paper, a ‘bomb,’ a conundrum, and a piece of sulphite paper. These are then rolled round a hollow metal tube and the process is completed by inserting a ‘filling’ and tying the cracker in two places.” Wyatt began his investigation into the efficacy of audio programming by analyzing the statements made by women workers about what types of daydreams they experienced while making the crackers. The majority said they fantasized about what they would do in the evening or they thought about domestic affairs, clothes, marriage, books and church. A minority of the employees expressed dissatisfaction with their work saying things such as they dreamed about “how they could get out of this hole.” These reports, in aggregate, seemed to validate Wyatt’s assertion in 1929 that daydreams were a corrective to boredom and that they led to some sense of personal fulfillment.²⁹¹

Wyatt and Langdon could not justify their extended research project by reassuring management that the fantasy life of female operatives served as an antidote to boredom. Instead, the industrial psychologists focused on creating a new psychological model. They realized daydreams allowed workers to divert their attention from the repetitive nature of their work—this was the seminal insight into why music could function as a means of psychological conditioning. No longer did they claim that personal traits such as intelligence were a factor in determining who experienced boredom. Wyatt and Langdon now conceptualized this state of mind as a universal reaction to repetitive work. Boredom occurred due to “an awareness of the monotonous conditions of work” and its

²⁹¹ A Christmas cracker is a colorfully decorated cardboard tube usually containing a small paper hat, a toy or some trinket, and a joke or saying on a strip of paper. The cracker is pulled at both ends by two people and is spilt-open accompanied by a small bang. United Kingdom, Industrial Fatigue Research Board, *Fatigue and Boredom in Repetitive Work*, Report 77, prepared by Stanley Wyatt and J.N. Langdon, (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1937), 30, 10.

alleviation depended “upon the extent to which the mind can be distracted from these conditions.”²⁹²

Ignoring the results of their own research and providing no scientific evidence to prove the claim, Wyatt and Langdon asserted that “there is a growing belief that prolonged indulgence in flights of fancy may be undesirable or even harmful.” Assuming workers’ daydreams were inadequate as a therapeutic release, the researchers saw their mission as finding a controlled means to divert workers’ attention away from awareness of their monotonous work and to circumvent inattentive daydreaming. Once this was accomplished the mind would exclusively concentrate on production. After decades of research, the English boredom researchers finally constructed a hypothesis based on finding a psychological solution for boredom. With a new model in place, the industrial psychologists set-out to test whether playing background music at work could condition the female cracker makers’ interior mental states so repetitive work felt pleasurable.²⁹³

Over the six month period, the female employees listened to background music as they worked. The research team played one-steps, fox trots, waltzes, marches and light music at different times in the day, programmed at various lengths. The output of the 12 workers was automatically recorded at quarter-hour intervals on a moving paper band. Wyatt’s most important finding was that music increased daily average work output. He used coefficients of correlation to rank workers between average and maximum rates of work and compared the results to increases in productivity. His data showed the total daily average output increased when music was played in intervals by 2.6% to 6.0% and

²⁹² Ibid., 30.

²⁹³ Ibid., 30, 65.

fell to original levels when it was not. The increase in productivity confined to the period when music was played was impressive, ranging from 6.2 percent to 11.3 percent.²⁹⁴

To reinforce the scientific evidence the research team took weekly statements from the workers on their reactions to the musical programming. The majority of the women said the music did not interfere with the work and helped get them through the day. A few said the rhythm served as an aid to production or gave them a “buoyant and cheerful attitude.” The research publication contained the following edited transcription of the cracker makers’ comments to serve as conclusive proof playing music was effective:

‘You try to work to the music especially when the time is quick.’...In others the music was said to ‘Make you work better because you talked less.’ In particular almost all the workers expressed the opinion that music was most helpful when the work was difficult or troublesome. ‘When on a bad job I thought more about the music than about the job,’ “The music helped you to take your mind off your troubles.’...Finally, there were frequent references to the cheering and diverting effects of music. It was said for instance, that music ‘Brightens things up,’ ‘Makes you more cheerful and lively,’ ‘Takes you out of yourself,’ ‘Gives you something to occupy your mind.

Based on the productivity data sets and the workers’ subjective responses, Wyatt concluded that there was no doubt music “diverted the mind from the monotonous conditions of work,” made workers happy, and increased industrial output. The researchers also recommended a varied program of popular music played in alternate-half hours or for one to two hours throughout the work day as the most effective form of programming. Wyatt and Langdon created the foundation for the concept of functional music—a program of music solely evaluated on the basis of its ability to increase worker output. Their research, based on a single research study of 12 female employees, caused

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 32-34, 36.

one of the most dramatic changes to the everyday life of labor in England and the United States throughout the twentieth century.²⁹⁵

Wyatt wrote a long and detailed report on his findings but “despite the favorable nature of the results and their possible application to industry as a whole” his supervisors felt the press would ridicule the results. He was told to tuck an abbreviated version into the larger report, *Fatigue and Boredom in Repetitive Work* (1937). At the same time he was “semi-officially advised” to find another job since his studies of the psychological problems in industry were falling into disfavor. The results of the longer research on boredom, which were marred by the same questionable research methods as in the past, served to reinforce Wyatt’s research findings from *The Effects of Monotony in Work* (1929) and offered no changes to the previously established paradigm. Though the section on background music contradicted Wyatt’s previous emphasis on intelligence as a crucial factor in determining monotony susceptibility, this had no influence on how the authors of industrial psychology textbooks interpreted Wyatt’s research—after 1940 textbooks still presented the data from *The Effects of Monotony in Work* as scientific fact and updated their sections on boredom and industry by adding a section on Wyatt’s and Langdon’s background music research.²⁹⁶

Wyatt did not lose his job. The preface to *Fatigue and Boredom in Repetitive Work* represented the ten-page section on the use of gramophone music as a significant finding, heralding music as the best “antidote to boredom” since it was a practical and effective technique. The background music section of the study made headlines in the English press—as Wyatt put it, journalists gave his research on music and boredom

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 37-40, 71; Keith Jones, “Music in Factories: a Twentieth-Century Technique for Control of the Productive Self,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 6, no. 5 (2005): 724.

²⁹⁶ Wyatt, “An Autobiography,” 71.

“special comment and commendation.” The National Institute of Industrial Psychology began promoting the use of music in industry as a way to increase production and eliminate boredom. By 1939, only three years after the research publication, there was a marked increase in the playing of music in English factories.²⁹⁷

After 1937, corporate managers took control over dealing with the problem of boredom at work in an attempt to stabilize the labor force while increasing efficiency. The discovery of musical programming as a means of managing human attention had profound effects on the workplace during World War II. In Great Britain all factories involved in war production were required to broadcast a B.B.C. radio show, *Music While You Work*, twice daily. The show played popular musical tunes at the times Wyatt had identified through his monotony curves as least productive, 10:30 a.m. and 3 p.m., and created a soundtrack for workers involved in repetitive work. In the United States Wyatt’s research was commandeered by Muzak during World War II and packaged as a direct approach to labor pacification and increased production. After the war, most working people could no longer avoid sonic environments intended to condition their behavior.²⁹⁸

By the close of the “boring twenties,” Americans accepted boredom as a normative feature of life. Their fear over the detrimental effects of psychological lassitude made it a capacious symbol of deviant behavior in need of therapeutic solutions. In the “paradigmatic thirties,” the first attempts to “cure” masses of people of this

²⁹⁷ Wyatt and Langdon, *Fatigue and Boredom in Repetitive Work*, iii; Wyatt, “An Autobiography,” 71; J. Ramsey and R. E. Rawson, *Rest-Pauses and Refreshments in Industry* (London: National Institute of Industrial Psychology, 1939), 41.

²⁹⁸ There is an extensive literature on the use of music in Great Britain during World War II. All acknowledge Wyatt’s 1937 research as the catalyst behind the implementation of music in factories. Jones, “Music in Factories,” 731.

“modern” affliction resulted in psychopharmacological therapies for boredom and the use of background music to counteract it in the workplace. No longer would Americans be so willing to accept Walt Whitman’s invitation to “loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat” as an opportunity to consider the promise of boredom’s timeless essence. Taking a moment to invite one’s soul to stop and lazily observe a spear of summer grass was becoming rapidly extinct.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁹ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1904), 32, 29.

“Our Interest is in Emotional Control”: Muzak and the Rise of Functional Music

Professor Harold Burris-Meyer, the world’s foremost authority on the use of music in industry, felt especially confident of his scientific prowess when in early March 1946 he wrote: “Somebody is going to undertake the mass influencing of human emotion on a controlled analytical basis sooner than later. There is enough knowledge in existence now to make Goebbels look like a piker without recourse to coercion . . . We are doing it in part at Muzak . . . the commercial applications are breathtaking.” The recipient of the letter, William Benton, the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs in charge of converting “Voice of America” for peacetime use, and an owner of Muzak, jubilantly replied, “Dear Commander, I like your name on that Muzak letterhead. In fact, I glow over it.”³⁰⁰

What fortuitous sequence of events made a background music company, one on the verge of extinction in 1938, seem a more powerful agent of mass manipulation than the Third Reich’s infamous propaganda wizard? The answer reveals a reflexive side of America’s corporate mindset during the 1940s: how an uncritical faith in Science and the pursuit of an elusive dream—the creation of a pacified workforce producing at maximum efficiency—coalesced into a worldview promoting “human engineering for profit” as a social good.

In 1938, Muzak was a struggling company without a clear business model. The company, founded in 1922, was a minor holding of the North American Company, until Warner Brothers Pictures, Inc. purchased it in April 1938. Jack Warner’s failed attempt to

³⁰⁰ Harold Burris-Meyer to William Benton, 25 February 1946, Box 221, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; William Benton to Harold Burris-Meyer, 1 March 1946, Box 221, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

buy the Mutual Broadcasting System made him grasp Muzak. He sought quick approval of the company's application to the Federal Communications Commission for a frequency to compete with the three major radio broadcast networks. Only a few months later the application was rejected, and in early 1939 Warner sold the anemic firm to William Benton, Wadill Catchings, the president of Muzak, and Allan Miller, a partner in the English firm Redifussion, Ltd., which provided music over telephone wires in London.³⁰¹

Benton had cofounded the advertising agency Benton and Bowles in 1929 and helped build it into the world's largest single-office advertising agency during the height of the Great Depression. Having made a quick fortune, he surprised the business world in 1936 by resigning to become a vice president of the University of Chicago, where he excelled for the next nine years at developing educational radio and films. In 1941, on the advice of his close friend and confidant Beardsley Ruml, the former Dean of Social Sciences at the University of Chicago and Treasurer of R. H. Macy, Benton consolidated his power by buying out Catchings and Miller for a mere \$100,000. For the first three years of Benton's stewardship, Muzak remained mired "in the red" by selling a low-cost, commercial-free, wired music service to hotels, restaurants, and wealthy New Yorkers.

³⁰¹ The North American Company conducted a single experiment of providing wired music to consumers. In 1932, the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company, a subsidiary of North American, tried providing nonstop music to its customers through its electrical power wires. The experiment failed due to problems caused by faulty transmission. Muzak moved to New York City and began providing music through telephone wires to hotels and restaurants. Warner purchased Associated Music Publishers. The sale also included the company's subsidiaries: Breitkopf Publications, Inc., Wired Radio, Inc., Muzak Corporation, and Amp Recording Studios. Jane Hulting, "Muzak: A Study in Sonic Ideology" (master's thesis, Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1988), 119–120; "Warner's Reveal Music House Deal," *New York Times*, May 14, 1938, 23; Russell and David Sanjek, *American Popular Music Business in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 60; Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy Listening, and Other Moodsong* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 43–44.

Benton initially overlooked an emerging trend, the use of music in industry, which would ultimately build his company into an iconic and controversial American brand.³⁰²

In 1937, two English industrial psychologists, Wyatt and Langdon, created a sensation in Great Britain and the United States when their study *Fatigue and Boredom in Repetitive Work* made headlines in the popular press. Doron K. Antrim's article for the *Reader's Digest*, "Music Relieves Industrial Tedium," appeared almost immediately after the research was published. "The monotony of mass production breeds boredom and fatigue," Antrim wrote. The author accepted the English research conclusions as scientific fact and he represented background music as "an ally of industry" by alleviating boredom, increasing productivity, and making "workaday lives happier."³⁰³

The popularization of *Fatigue and Boredom* helped legitimate a practice already underway in a few American corporations. Westinghouse at Newark played records over a public address system for forty minutes twice a day and the program was "so popular that many employees purchase records to be included in the repertoire." Antrim's article quoted a Radio Corporation of America "executive" as saying the use of their public address system and record library kept "workers in a cheerful frame of mind and has a beneficial effect on the speed and efficiency with which they work."³⁰⁴

Following Antrim's *Reader's Digest* piece, another article by Glenn M. Tindall appeared in 1937 on the pages of the *Personnel Journal*, a trade magazine for managers.

³⁰² J. Garry Clifford, "Benton William," *American National Biography Online* (February 2000), <http://www.anb.org/articles/07/07-00020.html>; Lanza, *Elevator Music*, 44.

³⁰³ Antrim was the editor of *Metronome* and he became a leading advocate for the use of music in industry throughout the late 1930s and the 1940s. Doron K. Antrim, "Music Relieves Industrial Tedium," *Readers Digest* 31, no. 184 (August 1937): 58.

³⁰⁴ Antrim, "Music Relieves," 59.

The author enthusiastically explained how music eradicated boredom and eliminated a host of labor problems:

Many employers said that music in industry speeds up production, improves morale, pacifies labor unrest, creates good will inside and outside the plant, lessens labor turnover, reduces error, develops comfortable or attractive working conditions and so forth . . . It is a cold hard business advantage which can be turned into profits if based upon logical plans, practical procedures and scientific management.

These two articles foreshadowed what would surface as the primary issue about the use of music in industry: whether employee participation, bringing in records and commenting on what music should be played, or subscription to a rationalized service based on the scientific “art” of human engineering was the most effective and profitable practice for large corporations.³⁰⁵

By 1939, a growing number of American corporations played commercial records for employees on turntables connected to public announcement systems in an attempt to mitigate boredom, increase morale, and boost productivity. Most of these hybrid broadcasting systems were manufactured by the Radio Corporation of America (R.C.A.). Employees brought in their favorite records, companies built broadcast libraries from commercial recordings, and R.C.A. began to pair the selling of its equipment with a transcription record library from its popular Victor label. Large factories built their own radio studios staffed by a “music director” and employee disc jockeys, usually female switchboard operators, who played music three shifts a day. Smaller firms engaged in a number of more fluid practices, but usually a single person was responsible for playing records during a shift.

³⁰⁵ Glenn M. Tindall, “Rhythm for the Restless,” *Personnel Journal* 16, no. 4 (1937): 124.

The programming of music in industry from the late 1930s through the mid-1940s was a somewhat chaotic affair with a populist sensibility. These early years were marked by a high degree of autonomy—there was little or no professional guidance on how to solve acoustical problems or on what types and sequences of music might be most effective at increasing employee output. Once broadcasting equipment was purchased, its use was largely left up to corporate managers and employees: their tastes guided what music was played, where it was played, and for how long. During this time, musical selections partially reflected radio's top hits but also allowed for the transmission of more unfamiliar genres. The flexibility of social practices surrounding the use of music combined with the increased diversity among industrial workers (due to industrial conversion for the war effort) made the shop floor a potential site of aesthetic exchange and tension.

The urgency to achieve maximum industrial production, to become an “Arsenal of Democracy” in the name of saving American society and culture, wrought vast cultural changes as great numbers of female, rural, and black workers started working in mass-production facilities for the first time in their lives. The employment of women forced companies to restructure manufacturing practices—the number of females hired between 1940 and 1944 grew by 50 percent in the entire economy and in the major war industries their employment rose by 460 percent over the same four years. This rearrangement of the working class required new managerial responses to labor practices in the factory and

encouraged the development of new cultural forms at work and in working-class neighborhoods.³⁰⁶

The relative freedom of music in industry created the possibility for cross-cultural pollination on the shop floor. In factories, some employees might, for the first time, hear “race,” opera, polkas, symphonies, waltzes, and “hillbilly” music. The possibility for conflict also existed—a manager might have exclusively played classical music; ethnic groups may have clashed over the merits of playing nationalist favorites or the Hit Parade; and older male workers might have attempted to organize resistance to the new practice. For a brief moment, from 1937 through the mid-1940s, the auspicious uncertainty of musical disorder offered employees the opportunity to help shape their work environment, converse and clash over intimate aesthetic sensibilities, and possibly blur the distinction between work and play.³⁰⁷

Starting in 1941, however, several factors combined to inaugurate a movement toward the rationalized use of music as an instrumental tool of management. The Federal Government’s program to obtain maximum efficiency in war production industries, the publication of a few scientific articles on the proper application of expertise in musical programming, and William Benton’s restructuring of Muzak as a provider of scientifically managed industrial music all converged to bring “authorities” onto the shop floor in an attempt to coordinate and control the use of music. By the late 1940s, Muzak dominated the industrial market and its concept of “planned” music, promoted as a

³⁰⁶ George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 20; Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 50.

³⁰⁷ *Billboard* eventually renamed “race” music as “rhythm and blues” and “hillbilly” as “country and western” after grappling with what to call these typically working-class forms of music throughout the 1940s. Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 316.

scientifically proven method of engineering human emotions, ultimately ended employee participation in music selection and whatever cultural changes it might have augured.

After Benton read the English research on boredom, music and work, Muzak began to develop a business model based on scientific expertise in 1941. On the advice of friends, Benton called on Professor Harold Burris-Meyer, of the Stevens Institute of Technology, who had received a \$30,000 Rockefeller Foundation grant to study auditory stimulus and the control of sound for theaters. The young professor had already made a name for himself as a pioneer in acoustical technology. The manipulation of sound for theaters was still in its formative years, a status the professor characterized as “simply medieval.” His innovations with vacuum tubes and amplifiers caught the attention of reporters at the *New York Times*. In 1935, he induced “hysteria,” driving the audience “almost insane” during the brainstorm scene in Elmer Rice’s play *The Adding Machine*. After one performance, Burris-Meyer triumphantly declared “we have been able to stimulate physiological reactions so violent as to be definitely pathological,” an early indication of the pleasure he took in refining the techniques of mass manipulation.³⁰⁸

By the time Benton contacted him, Burris-Meyer had seen a number of his accomplishments documented by the press—the creation of a “thunder screen,” the utterance of a donkey’s bray coming from the mouth of an actor in *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*, the invention for Paul Robeson of an “acoustic envelop,” the stampede of “invisible horses galloping down the aisles” of a theater, and the use of subsonic sound in *The Emperor Jones* where the pitch of beating drums was so low that the tones were only felt. The professor’s technical innovations and his advocacy for the “scientific control of

³⁰⁸ Waldemar Kaempffert, “Science in the News,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1940, 54; “Sound Harnessed for Stage Effect,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1935, 12; “Of Sound, Fury, and Stevens Tech,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1941, X1.

sound” led to a number of consulting contracts with Broadway shows and the Metropolitan Opera.³⁰⁹

Benton wanted Muzak to be habit-forming; for employees to crave hearing music while they worked. He appreciated products such as cigarettes and coffee because they engendered consumer demand through physical addiction. Burris-Meyer’s theatrical experiments were grounded in conditioning physiological responses through sonic techniques to induce predetermined audience reactions. Benton saw that if the professor could “undertake the mass influencing of human emotion” by restructuring Muzak’s programming as a scientifically designed musical system guaranteed to increase industrial efficiency, then “the commercial applications” would be “breathtaking.” Though Burris-Meyer’s reputation was peaking, Benton was able to convince him and his research assistant, Richmond Cardinell, to shift the emphasis of their research at the Stevens Institute away from the Rockefeller grant’s requirements. Instead, they agreed to study the effects of music on industrial workers. Benton jumped at the opportunity to recast the insolvent company’s product as a necessity for large corporations.³¹⁰

From the start, Muzak marketed itself as unique, since its managed musical programming took the responsibility out of the hands of workers or poorly trained musical directors. “The Muzak Corporation had a product which was planned, controlled, and manufactured with the listener in mind . . . they would be the best outfit, if not the only one with control over the end product, Burris-Meyer recalled.” The professor was

³⁰⁹ Kaempffert, “Science in the News,” 54; “Of Sound, Fury, and Stevens Tech,” X1, X2; “Notes and Comments,” *The New Yorker*, December 21, 1940, 8; Lewis S. Goodfriend, “Harold Burris-Meyer, 1902–1985,” *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 77, no. 5 (1985): 1963.

³¹⁰ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 64; Harold Burris-Meyer to William Benton, 25 February 1946, Box 221, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

also aware of how the use of music in industrial workspaces opened a portal for a broader application of his interest in the technical aspects of mass manipulation, the ability to “make people believe what you will” through the use of sound. Muzak’s potential audience of industrial workers far exceeded the number of theater patrons who might be exposed to the professor’s creations and employees constituted a captive audience for sustained research. These factors might have influenced the professor to violate the terms of his grant, but whatever the reason, the partnership between Muzak and Burris-Meyer was based on a common goal—to prove scientifically that music increased production and to develop new methods of engineering human behavior for commercial gain.³¹¹

Muzak convinced Cluett-Peabody, the largest manufacturer of men’s shirts in the United States, to install wired music in April 1941. Company executives relied heavily on Wyatt and Langdon’s research data to convince Cluett-Peabody to purchase their service. Plus, they reported, the research had convinced the British government to require all factories involved in the war effort to broadcast the B.B.C.’s *Music While You Work* radio program. An added benefit was Burris-Meyer’s presence—the professor promised to conduct part of the Rockefeller research project in the company’s Troy factory to measure the effectiveness of Muzak.

A newspaper article, kept by Benton in a scrapbook, described Muzak’s entry into a new market, the “industrial field,” adding that the company expected factories to become “the most profitable of all” possible client bases. The company’s first industrial client received music piped in from a central location over telephone wires. Muzak used either preexisting broadcasting equipment or did their own acoustical analysis and recommended the best solution for loudspeakers and amplifiers. Over the course of a

³¹¹ Hulting, “Muzak: A Study in Sonic Ideology,” 99; “Of Sound, Fury, and Stevens Tech,” X1.

shift, workers heard sequences of what was marketed as “specially programmed industrial music” interspersed with 15 minutes of silence. The musical selections were produced in a live studio setting by leading bandleaders who rerecorded the most popular musical hits of the 1940s.³¹²

Several crucial ideas central to Muzak’s future success began to emerge out of the Cluett-Peabody installation. Throughout the 1940s, the company emphasized how science “proved” that music increased employee production by eliminating boredom, and used this claim as one of the primary justifications for the purchase of wired music. With Cluett-Peabody as a client, Muzak embarked on a large-scale direct mail campaign using statistics from Wyatt’s research to illustrate how companies could accomplish a “6.2%–11.3% production increase with the use of its services.” At the same time, though, a journalist quoted an anonymous Cluett-Peabody executive that the Muzak installation existed simply for “making its employees enjoy their work more.” This was a public relations tactic favored by Muzak. From its first industrial installation onward, the company collaborated with corporate managers to present its music as an employee benefit, in an attempt to blunt any suggestion the product was a scientific management technique intended to speed up labor.³¹³

Problems within the nation’s factories created a receptive atmosphere for Muzak’s service. In 1941, factory managers began complaining about a loss of control on the shop floor. Labor was scarce due to the war and a wave of long strikes eroded factory discipline—4,288 protests, slowdowns, and work stoppages averaging 18.3 days took place during the year. In response, management developed corporate welfare programs

³¹² William Benton, “The University of Chicago Years, 1936–1945,” scrapbook, vol. 9, 21, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

³¹³ Ibid.

based on a double approach. The underlying ideology was, according to Howell John Harris, to “control the behavior and influence the attitudes of workers, manipulating them until they conformed with management’s stereotype of the ideal employee: efficient, disciplined, willing, cheerfully obedient, and loyal.” At the same time, social science surveys of employees showed they wanted more than wage increases; high on their list was a desire “for pleasant working conditions.” Some corporate managers were beginning to ask laborers “what they wanted” and made concessions (as long as it was not control over production) in an effort to create a less contentious workplace.³¹⁴

Following these trends, Muzak marketed its industrial music service in a corporate welfare idiom; the company asserted it could control employees’ behavior and shape them into a highly productive, stable, and contented group. Corporate managers, guided by Muzak’s marketing department, often attempted to disguise their ulterior motives by telling employees the installation of music was a “gift.” The brilliance of Muzak was to market its product as an implement of worker pacification to management and as a “quality of life” benefit to Labor, a bargain both parties found reasonable.³¹⁵

What became a vast research agenda intended to prove the effectiveness of Muzak to clients was set into motion by the presence of Burris-Meyer at the Cluett-Peabody factory. His interactions with managers illuminated the surprising fact that large corporations did not keep accurate production records and were reluctant to allocate the resources necessary to determine whether the use of music was cost effective. These insights helped shape Muzak’s sustained dedication to providing scientific expertise for

³¹⁴ Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 119, 118, 230; Howell John Harris, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 159, 169, 171.

³¹⁵ Harris never mentions Muzak, but he does connect “music while you work” to the attempts of corporate managers to regain control over the shop floor. Harris, *The Right to Manage*, 165.

clients. By the late 1940s, Muzak provided consultations with renowned in-house authorities and conducted studies inside factories and offices with the results being released as digestible research reports to company owners and managers. The lessons learned from Muzak's first industrial installation began to coalesce into a clearly defined set of marketable principles with the arrival of Bertha Tallman.

On August 28, 1941, Benton attempted to entice a former employee to help stabilize the company. "I could open up an important job for you," Benton wrote to Tallman, his former Traffic Manager at Benton & Bowles. She was currently working on advertising and mailings for the antiwar, isolationist America First Committee. The Director of America First, Robert Stuart, begged Benton not to "steal her" since she was "the one indispensable person around here" and the "committee would practically fold if she deserted us." The point became moot with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December and Tallman joined Muzak. She took command of strengthening the company's connections to Burris-Meyer and Cardinell, along with developing publicity and marketing campaigns based on their research results.³¹⁶

As the country mobilized for war production, playing music for employees became immensely popular. Journalists tracked the number of companies providing music during pre-work, working hours, and lunch periods and found its use surging from being played in hundreds of plants in 1941 to 3,000 in late 1942, with an estimated audience of close to six million workers by the close of 1943. But even with the hiring of Tallman and the implementation of Burris-Meyer's research, Muzak was not taking

³¹⁶ Benton supported America First along with his former partner Chester Bowles and his close friend General Robert Wood who were key officers of the organization. William Benton to Bertha Tallman, 28 August, 1941, Box 79, Folder 11, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; William Benton to Bertha Tallman, 23 September, 1941, Box 79, Folder 11, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

advantage of the new trend. “We are in a most precarious financial position, our overhead is high, the business on the overall is not improving appreciably, it is a bad thing for the business to run up debts (the \$5,000 I am loaning to it),” Benton sternly warned his president Waddill Catchings in January 1942. A power struggle ensued and slowed the company’s growth.³¹⁷

Muzak’s president ignored Benton’s dictate that “it is clear that in industry lies the greatest potential,” and he refused to reorganize the sales force according to the owner’s wishes. In March, Catchings was forced to resign and Bertha Tallman filled the leadership vacuum. The situation was dire. C. M. Finney, president of Associated Music Publishers, told Benton the infighting “left in its wake disrupted organization and dangerously low employee morale.” Bertha Tallman, though never named Muzak’s president, assumed control of the company and restored employee confidence. For the next three years, she built it into the leading provider of music in industry by concentrating on developing scientific expertise and effectively marketing the results.³¹⁸

Once in charge, Tallman focused exclusively on industrial accounts. Muzak was rapidly granted A-1-J status by the War Production Board, allowing it to do business with

³¹⁷ Surveys taken of companies using music in industry were not comprehensive. F.R. McConnell, “Riveting to Rhythm,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1941, SM17; Lawrence Stessin, “Factory Offensive,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1942, H5; Doron K. Antrim, “Music in Industry,” *The Musical Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1943): 275; William Benton to Waddill Catchings, 5 January, 1942, Box 221, Folder 10, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

³¹⁸ C.M. Finney was a close friend of Benton’s who ran Associated Music Publishers (AMP) and AMP Recording. Both were business interests Benton acquired with the purchase of Muzak. Benton’s ownership of AMP left him with the only other viable alternative for broadcasters to purchase licensing fees of music if they didn’t want to deal with the steep rates of The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP). Benton trusted Finney’s advice about Muzak since they had worked closely together in helping Sammy Kaye of CBS break the ASCAP monopoly through the formation of Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI). E. A. Tracey to Waddill Catchings, 26 January, 1942, Box 221, Folder 10, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; William Benton, notes, March 1942, Box 221, Folder 11, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; C. M. Finney to William Benton, 19 October, 1942, Box 222, Folder 6, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; Sanjek, *American Popular Music Business*, 98; Donald Clarke, *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 253.

factories already possessing broadcasting equipment. The New York Telephone Company agreed to make available scarce new lines as long as they did not interfere with “the higher needs of the Army, Navy, and defense plants.” In 1942, Tallman was able to convince the War Production Board to give Muzak priority ratings for war plants wanting wired music and she felt this would remain the case throughout the war. It is likely that savvy companies took advantage of the structural elements Muzak put into place and obtained the music service by folding it into cost-plus war materials contracts.³¹⁹

Near the year’s end, Burris-Meyer and Richard Cardinell finished their research study. On October 12, 1942, Professor Harold Burris-Meyer presented his research paper “Music in Industry” to the Metropolitan Section of the American Society of Mechanical Engineering in New York City. Tallman arranged the meeting, with company funds, to stimulate sales and generate publicity. “We ballyhooed the Engineers’ meeting, inviting a large number of our potential subscribers to it as well as various newspaper, magazine and radio operators,” she triumphantly wrote. The Muzak Corporation was quick to recognize it was selling a worldview and not simply a musical service; in less than a year, most of Burris-Meyer’s presentation was replicated in a large-scale advertising campaign and in the company’s promotional materials.³²⁰

The audience members were unaware of Burris-Meyer’s involvement with Muzak. The professor did not mention that his research was influenced by Muzak’s sales agenda, since the Rockefeller Foundation grant required a bi-partisan approach. He told Tallman “his report to the Rockefeller Foundation will not be valid unless it is assumed

³¹⁹ A. M. Davis to Bertha Tallman, 27 October, 1942, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; Bertha Tallman to William Benton and C. M. Finney, 11 November, 1942, Box 222, Folder 6, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

³²⁰ Bertha Tallman to William Benton, 29 October, 1942, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

that his studies were made in both R.C.A. and Muzak plants.” To avoid any sense of impropriety, he falsely told the audience that both R.C.A. and Muzak had generously cooperated with his research. Cloaking the project as a legitimate, objective scientific endeavor by disguising Muzak’s exclusive commercial influence, Burris-Meyer told the audience that he was seeking to determine “what it was behind the auditory stimulus that made it such a powerful device.” But, playing music to factory workers was hardly an obvious choice to explore such a weighty subject. The professor never explained why the research environment and methodology were appropriate to his goals; the most obvious reason for such dissembling was to placate the Rockefeller Foundation.³²¹

Burris-Meyer did not spend much time explaining his research results. He focused on explicating the best practices for deploying music in industry, a set of themes gravitating around the positive social benefits gained from human engineering. The entire discussion reflected a belief in centralized control, which was popular in the management ideology of the 1940s. After a few cursory remarks about the growing popularity of music in industry, Burris-Meyer argued that the unstructured programming of music was creating a harmful group of pseudo-authorities. “Evidence to show how good industrial music is, based on casual or superficial observations, is freely adduced. Everybody who gets his hands on a plant music distribution system at once becomes an expert . . . all of this adds up to precisely nothing we can use,” he stated. The professor noted there was a great variety in how companies deployed music; all kinds of records were spun and there was a vociferous debate over whether vocals should be played on the shop floor.

³²¹ The Rockefeller Foundation gave Burris-Meyer \$30,000 to research “developing new sound techniques for the theater.” He never seems to have been publicly disciplined for straying so far from the funding objectives. Bertha Tallman to William Benton, 29 October, 1942, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; Harold Burris-Meyer, “Music in Industry,” *Mechanical Engineering* 65, no. 1 (1943): 31; “Gets New Sound Effect Fund,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1939, 33.

Following the “hearsay, hunch, and theory” of the amateurs who currently programmed music for factories, he suggested, resulted in chaos and minimized profitability.³²²

In 1942, there were no academic programs, books, or training manuals widely available to teach people how to program industrial music effectively. A few articles in trade journals gave perfunctory tips on buying a sound system and how to program music. Those involved in playing music for the shop floor followed their own beat; only after Burris-Meyer’s presentation were they branded as “amateurs.” According to the professor, the consequences of employing untrained programmers were potentially disastrous. For example, a layperson might play “Deep in the Heart of Texas” and productivity would fall as workers stopped to clap their hands. Music contained within itself a potential threat to maintaining discipline. What if workers responded to music as a form of entertainment and sang along, snapped their fingers, tapped their feet, or even felt the urge to dance? Work and play were considered separate spheres; what would occur if that distinction was collapsed? Jitterbug strikes of the postwar period illustrated the flip side of music’s power. This form of “shop-floor activism” used music playfully—what George Lipsitz termed an attempt “to deny the hegemony of work over pleasure.”³²³

Music represented what Nietzsche described as an ability to “unleash the uncivilized impulses of humanity.” Burris-Meyer argued only experts could provide the mechanisms of “civilized control;” only they could organize unpredictable or unruly audience behavior through scientific programming based on quantitative research. The professor did not discourse on the finer points of programming. Instead, he simply

³²² Harris, *The Right to Manage*, 99; Burris-Meyer, “Music in Industry,” 31.

³²³ According to Lipsitz, jitterbug dancing accompanied the Oakland general strike as well as the 1946 walkout at the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company in Alabama. Less than a year later, striking steelworkers in Fairfield Alabama, filled the street in front of the mill and ‘demonstrated’ by holding a jitterbug dance. Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 225.

claimed, echoing the fundamental principle of scientific management, that there should be “one kind of right programming”—the one best way being centralized control of a universally accepted set of practices. With a few sarcastic flourishes Burris-Meyer created a new problem for industry: effective musical programming required scientific management and standardization—this just happened to be the exclusive domain of Muzak.³²⁴

Corporate reliance on musical expertise began during World War II but really blossomed in the postwar years. Burris-Meyer’s call for the rise of a new class of experts was met by a movement to standardize musical programming in industry. R.C.A. began to produce training guidelines for companies purchasing its equipment and transcription libraries. A new literature about the proper way to program music began to emerge in the popular press, trade journals, and in do-it-yourself manuals. By the end of the war, there was a large movement toward Muzak and away from plant-based programming. A cultural shift occurred—the playing of music for employees (and eventually consumers) would no longer be left in the hands of “amateurs,” but required specialized training.

After establishing the need for musical experts, the professor outlined how music could open a new frontier in human engineering. He first established his awe-inspiring abilities. For this mastermind “it was [easy] to make people laugh and make them weep” in theatrical settings. Burris-Meyer believed he could scientifically discover techniques to control sensory perception; this faith was grounded in thinking the conditioned use of sound or music induced physiological changes, such as an increase or decrease in muscular energy or pulse rate and increased respiration. The desire to create and

³²⁴ Nietzsche quoted in Lydia Goehr, *Elective Affinities: Musical Essays on the History of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 177; Burris-Meyer, “Music in Industry,” 34.

manipulate human subjectivity led to the professor's most famous statement: "Our interest is in emotional control. We are interested in exerting it directly by emotional stimulus, and by inducing physiological change as the basis for emotion." This overtly behaviorist belief became a mantra for Muzak over the next 30 years.³²⁵

Burris-Meyer called for the creation of a new musical genre that, in theory, would manipulate the bodily processes of workers, resulting in scientifically predetermined emotional states. This form of "control" would benefit corporations with increased production and workers by making them happy. According to Burris-Meyer, popular music, or what the professor termed "leisure music," made workers more efficient, but it still was "not in the idiom of the modern industrial plant." Musicians and composers needed to awake to a new reality: their "largest audience" in the future would be employees listening at work. Once composers started to write music based on patterns intended to control workers' emotions, the transformative results in productivity would merit significant attention "when the record of this civilization is written."³²⁶

³²⁵ Burris-Meyer, "Music in Industry," 31.

³²⁶ In the 1940s, Burris-Meyer's call for a new musical idiom was considered revolutionary. The idea of writing compositions to specifically manipulate workers was new, but the broader practice was not. Linda Tyler has shown how department stores in the early 1900s rearranged "musical compositions to fit commercial needs." The Wannamaker department store went further by hiring composers to write works based on the worldview of retail commercialism. One excellent example was the *Song of the Times*, composed by Horatio Parker for a dedication ceremony. The song and text were a "celebration of consumption" that extolled the virtues of modern retailing. Conscious or not, many of Burris-Meyer's ideas and how Muzak shaped and marketed its services resonated with the musical practices of department stores from the 1890s until the 1930s. As store owners responded to pressures from the depression and catalog houses, their musical practices declined, though phonographs and radios still played music in the retail environment. In postwar America, the use of Muzak in department stores grew rapidly. Burris-Meyer appeared to have liberally borrowed from Edward Podolsky's *The Doctor Prescribes Music; The Influence of Music on Health and Personality* written in 1939. The idea of a new industrial musical idiom resonates with Podolsky's reference to music as a cure for mental disorders. "In the great musical pharmacopeia there are various types of musical compositions as there are various types of drugs in the medical pharmacopeia," Podolsky wrote. He went on to discuss an experiment on a thirteen-year-old boy who was wounded in the head with an ax. A part of the brain was exposed and a doctor measured the modifications in blood volume when music was played. The experiment demonstrated "more work can be done when lively music is being played. We have here the basis for using music to increase output in industry." Podolsky cited the research of Wyatt and Langdon as scientific proof that music alleviated boredom and after reviewing the uses of

No company in 1942 recorded or produced a genre of music in the “idiom of the modern” factory. This did not stop Muzak from appropriating the professor’s rhetoric for its marketing campaigns. Muzak called its industrial product, though still in development, “planned music” during the war years and asserted it was based on scientific principles. The appeal of what appeared to be a novel musical genre, an art form created explicitly to function as a social commodity, came from its utopian promise of technocratic social control blended with the fantasy of achieving maximum efficiency and profit.³²⁷

What was the stumbling block to heightened worker productivity that expert musical programming (and eventually the new genre of industrial music) would overcome? Absenteeism, early departures at work, labor turnover, and wildcat strikes all plagued war industries; underlying them all, Burris-Meyer reported to the “Music in Industry” meeting, was boredom. According to the professor, the “dislocations brought about by industrialization” begat alienated labor, a condition manifesting itself as boredom. The consequences were a loss of morale and inefficient production. Burris-Meyer was confident that music contained the power to dissipate the mark of worker alienation by making the act of production feel satisfying. Proper scientific techniques in musical programming would create an overwhelming counter-emotional state to boredom

music as a disciplinary technology in hospitals, asylums, and prisons, he connected those “therapeutic techniques” to music in industry as a way to relieve boredom and increase efficiency. Burris-Meyer was portrayed as a genius in the popular press, but clearly his ideas had a number of antecedents. There is an American history of using music at work and in institutions but it remains largely hidden. For example, see Kenneth Sherman Clark, *Music in Industry* (New York: National Bureau for the Advancement of Music, 1929) and Willem Van De Wall, *Music in Institutions* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1936). Burris-Meyer, “Music in Industry,” 34; Linda L. Tyler, “Commerce and Poetry Hand in Hand”: Music in American Department Stores, 1880–1930,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 45, no.1 (1992): 105; Edward Podolsky, *The Doctor Prescribes Music; The Influence of Music on Health and Personality* (New York: Federick A. Stokes Company, 1939), 35, 47, 43, 97–98.

³²⁷ Starting in 1942, Muzak engaged in a quest to create a scientifically developed music. The results came to be known as “functional music” or “stimulus progression” by the mid–1950s. By then, the company claimed its products had the ability to “emotionally control” behavior in almost every arena of everyday life.

(by inducing predetermined physiological changes in all workers listening), resulting in heightened productivity.³²⁸

In one of his more exuberant statements, Burris-Meyer argued that expertly programmed music, and especially music composed for industry, would fundamentally alter workers' mental states. Enough exposure to scientific music would rewire human subjectivity, allowing a preindustrial mentality to reemerge. As in the preindustrial past, employees would no longer simply seek a pay envelope in exchange for their labor, but would come to realize work was "a major element of living." This was an early articulation of Muzak's attempt to "affect and shape society by the means of an aesthetic product designed to dissolve into life itself." By historically representing boredom as a response to industrialization, Burris-Meyer and ultimately Muzak conceptualized boredom as a mass phenomenon and music as more than a therapeutic response. In the model they created for wired or "planned" industrial music, the individual no longer mattered.³²⁹

To Muzak, only aggregate aesthetic values or measures of productivity were meaningful. Thinking of boredom and responses to musical programming as universal conditions allowed Muzak and its clients to believe "scientific" music overcame "difference and individuation." This faith in using music as a predictable means of human engineering is based on what Tia DeNora called "objectivism": a belief "that music's meanings are immanent, inherent in musical forms as opposed to being brought to life in and through the interplay of forms and interpretation." The underlying philosophy of

³²⁸ Burris-Meyer, "Music in Industry," 31.

³²⁹ In the postwar years, Muzak successfully expanded the definition of boredom to encompass not only the "dislocations" of industrialization but also those caused by modern American culture—the entire population became a target market. Burris-Meyer, "Music in Industry," 34; Herve Vanel, "John Cage's Muzak-Plus: The Fu(rni)ture of Music," *Representations* 102 (2008): 95.

Muzak became the achievement of what Theodor Adorno called *Vergleichung*: “the making of everything and everyone the same.” Thinking of boredom as culturally constructed, as a phenomenon affecting all American workers, allowed Burris-Meyer and Muzak to provide a universal solution—one intended to make all workers (and eventually all consumers) behave in the same exact manner.³³⁰

By mid-1942, corporate managers had solved production problems related to conversion and large war industries began to reassert discipline and authority over the workforce. Muzak’s combination of Progressive Era thought—a positivist vision of science based on the promise of prediction and control where rational social engineering was considered a desirable means to solve cultural problems—with John B. Watson’s extreme behaviorism—all mental action could be explained as reflex responses to the environment—appealed to an emerging wartime corporate sensibility. The company shrewdly accentuated its centralized control over the distribution of industrial music to mirror a managerial concern over being the exclusive source of authority able to coordinate and implement all workplace decisions.³³¹

The way Muzak began to develop its industrial product and to market it to large corporations during the war was not simply a matter of the company responding to the already emerging practice of using music in industry, coupled with industry’s drive to reach maximum productivity in manufacturing war materiel. The success of Muzak was dependent on promoting an ideology, based on a faith in science to predict and control

³³⁰ Regardless of how Muzak produced and marketed functional music, its programming was based on the subjective survey responses of workers. The genres of music the company played were dependent on a simple statistical analysis of what workers said they “liked” hearing. Goehr, *Elective Affinities*, 187; Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 22.

³³¹ Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home*, 119; Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 251–252; Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America*, 157, 168, 162, 146.

human behavior for the common good. The concept of functional music infused the mundane practice of playing records with magical powers, resulting in a powerful appeal to corporate managers.³³²

It was not until late in the program that Burris-Meyer got around to presenting his research results to the “Music in Industry” audience. The Stevens research team had planned to study rates of output based on the musical genre played to workers. Instead, William Benton asked them to examine worker productivity in a series of “before and after” music studies—to determine the rate of output prior to and during the time when music was played. Bertha Tallman had held a number of talks with Burris-Meyer and Cardinell during the course of research for “Music in Industry,” and she always “pointed up the importance of developing material that would give us a sales weapon.”³³³

Burris-Meyer’s most significant research tried to determine the effect of music on production rates. He had conducted four separate studies of employees doing piecework. The productivity of all subjects was expressed as the “average weekly production per 100 man-hours.” This figure was used to compare differences in output before and after music was played to workers.³³⁴

The professor stated that his research proved music increased production in a range from 4.07% to 11.4%. He alternated between absolute proclamations and tentative statements about the results. On the one hand, the research settled “definitively the question of what music does to the production rate.” On the other, all of the studies were “only” based on a “sampling technique” and were “not sufficient to form the basis of

³³² Harris, *The Right to Manage*, 98.

³³³ Bertha Tallman to William Benton, 29 October, 1942, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

³³⁴ Burris-Meyer, “Music in Industry,” 31–32.

unassailable conclusions.” The same tentativeness was apparent when the professor spoke about Richmond Cardinell’s hand-drawn graphs, which were used throughout the presentation. “These charts *would seem* to indicate then that music makes work go faster,” Burris-Meyer stated ambivalently.³³⁵

In addition to “definitively” proving the efficacy of music for production, Burris-Meyer presented two new scientific discoveries of his own. Using the same before and after methodology, he concluded that the number of lost man-hours from workers leaving early declined from 2.52% to 0.845% when music was played. More spectacular was his fantastic assertion that music caused a decline in Monday morning absenteeism from 22.75% to 2.85%. The cause for this extraordinary change in behavior was not supplied.³³⁶

Absenteeism in American war factories was a serious problem, especially among female workers. Newspapers and trade journals were filled with articles attempting to determine the cause and find a solution. E. William Noland, a sociologist, studied absenteeism in an attempt to construct a profile of workers prone to frequent absences—personnel directors could then avoid hiring people with the wrong character type. Playing music was a far more cost-effective solution and it appears Burris-Meyer wanted to boost his reputation with such incredible results.³³⁷

³³⁵ Ibid., 33, 32. Italics added.

³³⁶ Given the professor’s optimistic rhetoric about the ability to control workers’ emotions, one might presume the underlying reasons were an addiction to expertly programmed music and a subsequent newfound joy in work. Burris-Meyer, “Music in Industry,” 32–33.

³³⁷ Absenteeism was 50 percent higher among female workers than that of men. By 1943, there was a movement away from viewing absenteeism as a character flaw. A typical example was a *Los Angeles Times* article explaining “dissipation, laziness and indifference to work are far from the major factors in absenteeism.” The problem for women was essential services such as banks, doctors, and markets were closed when they left for work in the morning and returned to home at night. A number of articles suggested “business and professional places” needed to expand their evening hours to reduce absenteeism. Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home*, 124; Harris, *The Right to Manage*, 165; Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*,

The last project Burris-Meyer reported on illustrated how Muzak programmers were just beginning to think about playing music in sets of specific sequences intended to speedup the work process. The study, he told the audience, took place in a factory where an anonymous wired music provider offered controlled programming with music that was “arranged and recorded for industrial use . . . on high fidelity equipment” (only Muzak fit this description). Production records from “approximately 1 year before this experiment took place,” were used as a benchmark. The professor could not “vouch absolutely for the conditions obtaining at that time,” implying their use might be cause for concern.³³⁸

Results based on this data showed an 8% increase in “maximum efficiency” among workers listening to what was labeled a standard program. A 14.8% increase occurred with a “planned-test musical program” apparently created by Muzak with the professor’s guidance. “We have . . . established the fact that the remedy exists and the technique for employing it is in hand,” he concluded. The research findings seemed to conclusively prove that the “anonymous” organization’s approach to programming was superior to plant-based music distribution systems run by “amateurs.”³³⁹

There were a number of problems with Burris-Meyer’s production studies. The data provided to the audience met hardly any standards of contemporary scientific practice. The lack of data presented by Burris-Meyer was enough to indicate that the research did not follow proper scientific method. The number of subjects in two of the studies was missing as was the duration for one of them. The form of musical

236; “A Possible Cure for Absenteeism,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 1943, A4; “Report on Absenteeism,” *New York Times*, August 30, 1943, 22; Elizabeth Hawes, “Woman War Worker: A Case History,” *New York Times*, December 26, 1943, SM9.

³³⁸ At this time, a sequence of Muzak’s industrial program took genre, song length, instrumentation, tempo, and dynamic range into account. The planned music developed for this study was based on creating the most effective combination of all the elements to increase aggregate employee output. Burris-Meyer, “Music in Industry,” 33–34.

³³⁹ Ibid.

programming (genre of music and the sequence it was played in), the number of hours the music was played, and where employees heard the music (potentially any place from the shop floor to a company lunchroom) was not mentioned. In one of the studies no mathematical data was offered: the author just asserted that output was “higher” after employees listened to music.³⁴⁰

The sampling procedure, the measurement tools, and the means of accounting for a margin of error were all flawed. Burris-Meyer blamed limited funding for his ability to “only employ a sampling technique”—this suggests he may have felt uncomfortable with the core component of the research. There are multiple ways to sample depending on the population of research subjects. “Music in Industry” used a matched sampling technique to measure the before and after musical studies. A proper technique required taking the same measurements with the same population in the same conditions, excepting the introduction of music.³⁴¹

Burris-Meyer also needed to create a stratified sample among the workers he studied. For example, a cohort of male and female workers who were defined as inexperienced, moderately experienced, and experienced workers would constitute a decent sample, since they most likely would have different rates of output. If a factory employed workers who did a number of different tasks, this would also have to be taken into account. The professor never explained how he selected his subjects and the reasons behind his choices. The results imply that in the majority of the studies, the population was not controlled properly—his language, such as “approximately 100 employees” represented the average output, illustrates how the sampling technique was unsound,

³⁴⁰ Research questions were shaped by a corporate agenda, but this does not in itself mean the methodology and interpretation of results was inherently tainted.

³⁴¹ Burris-Meyer, “Music in Industry,” 32.

since matched sampling requires the same group. The first production study was conducted over a scant two-day period and used only “experienced workers,” which meant the results were intrinsically biased—it is likely all the remaining data in the study was skewed for similar reasons.³⁴²

In addition, the two evaluative tools Burris-Meyer deployed were problematic. All of the results were based on a measurement of average output per 100 man-hours. The technique for deriving this measurement was left unclear, rendering it impossible for anyone to determine the validity of the results. The scale of worker efficiency used to prove the superiority of planned music by the “anonymous” provider was meaningless: a scientist could not determine what constituted maximum human efficiency. No standard deviation, a mathematical calculation across a series of data points that produces a “plus” or “minus” range of error, was applied to any set of data in the study. Burris-Meyer’s research seemed “scientific” to a number of audience members and to the top management team at Muzak, but it met none of the standards required to conduct a proper scientific endeavor in the early 1940s. How this substandard research project established Burris-Meyer as an international authority and why the results became accepted as

³⁴² The research data never mentioned the sex of the workers studied. This omission might have skewed the results. Women may have been more receptive than men to the playing of music in the workplace, since they were already familiar with it as a background in daily life prior to becoming war workers. Women, especially those who were middle class, increasingly became consumers and not producers of household goods. As shoppers, they would have encountered live and background music in department stores. They were also “in charge of the domestic music” from cultivating their own talents to purchasing instruments and a phonograph to enhance family life. The use of a radio while doing household chores in the early 1940s was a frequent practice for those who could afford one. The playing of music on the shop floor, with its often dreary conditions, may have allowed female war workers to associate with past, emotionally charged experiences of shopping and family life that were sacrificed until the war was won, and to fantasize about an abundant future. For the influence of music on female shoppers and their musical “duties in the home” see Tyler, “Commerce and Poetry Hand in Hand,” 102–103; Burris-Meyer, “Music in Industry,” 34.

legitimate scientific fact can only be explained by Bertha Tallman's expertise at public relations.³⁴³

The American Society presentation exhilarated William Benton. "This material, with the right promotion and handling, may be worth its weight in platinum. By far the best stuff we've ever had," he told Tallman. He asked her to keep the professor "tied-up to us," anticipating there might be a demand for his services elsewhere. Tallman kept sponsoring events for Burris-Meyer, but she grew increasingly frustrated with his behavior. Initially, he did not grant her permission to create promotional materials saying his studies took place "in Muzak plants," due to his anxiety over being found in violation of the Rockefeller grant. She grew weary of having to "hold Burris-Meyer's hand" at presentations, an early warning sign the professor's abilities might be lacking.³⁴⁴

All of the events planned by Tallman were designed as sales events for the company. "It was a successful evening—representatives (mostly engineers) from all of the heavy Philadelphia industries were present as well as one or two representatives from the War Production Board," she wrote Benton, "I have no doubt that industry in Philadelphia is pretty much aware of Muzak." The slight drawbacks did not keep Tallman from setting the promotion of her "sales weapon" in motion. She bragged about her

³⁴³ For example, one could measure the output of 50 people who worked 2 hours each to determine output per 100 man-hours. Likewise, a different measurement such as taking 40 people who worked 10 hours each or 400 hours total might have produced 1,200 widgets equaling 300 output units per 100 man-hours. There is no way to understand what Burris-Meyer's results meant without knowing how the measurement of average output per 100 man-hours was determined. The results were based on a percentage of the workers' aggregate efficiency measured against a 100% efficiency scale. Theoretically, the percentage of efficiency is determined by dividing "work out" over "work in" and multiplying by 100. To quantify a percentage of efficiency for a group of human test subjects is impossible. The use of standard deviation is basic practice of any scientific endeavor using sampling techniques, since it helps to determine what can be considered statistically significant. This technique was commonplace during the 1940s.

³⁴⁴ The ex-advertising man had a flair for selecting the proper words—platinum was more costly than gold and during WWII its use was restricted to military use. William Benton to Bertha Tallman, 22 October, 1942, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; Bertha Tallman to William Benton, 11 November, 1942, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

ability to make journalists cast Muzak and the Rockefeller study in a positive light, and displayed a proficiency at convincing writers to construct a set of scientific facts trusted by the public. Her public relations strategy would make the professor “the most outstanding authority on Music in Industry from coast to coast and in Canada.” The assertion was hardly an exaggeration.³⁴⁵

In August, prior to Burris-Meyer’s “Music in Industry” presentation, two preview stories appeared in *Forbes* and *Newsweek*. Throughout the rest of 1942, four more articles appeared promoting the professor’s expertise in *Time*, *Musical America*, and the *New York Times*. After the publication of “Music in Industry” by Burris-Meyer for the January 1943 issue of *Mechanical Engineering*, seven articles describing his research appeared in the popular press including *Business Week*, *Popular Mechanics*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and *Etude*, and three articles surfaced in trade journals. The ability of Muzak to help shape what became “common knowledge” about the use of music in industry serves as an illustrative example of how uncomplicated it may be to establish research as scientific fact in cultures marked by complex social structures.

Journalists first represented the Rockefeller research as scientific and the professor as an expert, and then presented his findings as factual knowledge. Burris-Meyer conducted an “extensive study,” created “elaborate tests,” and did “painstaking research” in a “controlled” manner, according to *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Time*. The professor was a “pioneer experimenter” whose musical programs “were so shattering that one worker burst into tears and ran home” from a Philadelphia

³⁴⁵ Bertha Tallman to William Benton, 11 November, 1942, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; William Benton to Bertha Tallman, 22 October, 1942, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

laundry. The audacious scientist addressed the problem of maximum efficiency, which had plagued corporate managers for almost a half century, by telling a *Forbes* reporter “it’s easy to step-up production in a plant.” Dr. Burris-Meyer of the Stevens Institute of Technology was mentioned in sixteen articles plus two of his own publications in popular science magazines from August 15, 1942, through the end of 1943. The consistent repetition of his name as the only American authority on the use of music in industry, the replication of extensive quotations from his published articles, especially those related to the “emotional control” of workers, and the absolute lack of any critic in popular publications questioning the research’s validity established the professor’s reputation and legitimized the Rockefeller study results as “scientific” fact.³⁴⁶

The majority of articles mentioning the Muzak sponsored research focused on three basic themes: playing music in factories increased production, decreased Monday morning absenteeism, and hindered early departures from work. “Output increases ranging from 4% to over 11% have been reported. . . . Enough has been done to show definitively that the workers like it, that production rises, and that absenteeism and early departures from work drop,” reported the *Wall Street Journal* in a typical formulation. The reporting of Burris-Meyer’s statistical data was erratic, but all of the articles contended in one way or another that there was “no longer any doubt that the right music can increase production.” Reporters also embellished their narratives by adding nonexistent research results. Spurious claims—declines in accidents, fatigue, and “other irregularities which are deleterious to efficiency,” improvements in work quality and the

³⁴⁶ “A Suggestion for Composers: Write Special Scores for Use in Our Factories,” *New York Times*, October 25, 1942, X7; “Productive Melody,” *Time*, November 2, 1942; Lucien Aigner, “Rhythm for the Job,” *New York Times*, March 1943, SM16; “Music at Work,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 1943, 1; “Music While You Work,” *Newsweek*, August 31, 1942, 63; Doron K. Antrim, “Music for All Out Production,” *Forbes*, August 15, 1942, 28.

endorsement of that workers for the playing of music—were all attributed to Burris-Meyer’s findings.³⁴⁷

An article in the trade journal *Factory Management and Maintenance* portrayed the Rockefeller research as “indicative” and not conclusive. “The data are too meager for us to state categorically that music increases production,” wrote the anonymous author. Yet this accurate observation was followed by three pages of case studies intended to prove why music did indeed increase production. A quarter of the articles mentioned the scientifically planned-versus-standard programming study—what *Newsweek* characterized as “the biggest Stevens find”—and used charts prepared by Richmond Cardinell to illustrate the superiority of planned music, since it made “for more uniform, high output.” The characterization of the Rockefeller study as the “Stevens” research might indicate that astute journalists understood Burris-Meyer’s work fell outside the neutral bi-partisan criteria required by the funding institution. Those who could read between the lines certainly knew the study and charts championed Muzak’s services.³⁴⁸

Burris-Meyer’s call for a new musical idiom fascinated reporters. Articles quoted the professor at length about the need for a new genre of musical composition suitable for industrial workers. Most of the articles left the interpretation of what the professor meant up to the audience, but Doron K. Antrim stated the obvious: “We need a more scientific approach to the type of music suitable for use in factories.” This call for an innovative genre of music confronted the prevailing standard practices promoted by R.C.A and

³⁴⁷ “Music While You Work,” 63; “New Music to Spur Factories’ Output,” *New York Times*, October 18, 1942, 44; “Productive Melody,” 2; Eugene A. Conklin, “Music While They Work,” *Mill and Factory* 33, no. 3 (1943): 81; Doron K. Antrim, “The Importance of Music in Wartime Industry,” *The Etude* 61, no. 2 (1943): 99, 130; Ronald F. Eyer, “Music Goes to War on the Home Front,” *Musical America* 62, no. 17 (1942): 7; “Music at Work,” 1.

³⁴⁸ “Music in the Plant,” *Factory Management and Maintenance* 101, no. 2 (1943): 99, 101; “Music While You Work,” 63.

created a “problem” for companies wanting to stay current with technological advances—only one company could claim it had a solution. By mid-1943, Muzak marketed its musical programming as “specially arranged, recorded, and timed for industrial purposes,” and it used graphs created by Cardinell and data from Burris-Meyer to prove the service was scientific.³⁴⁹

Reporters assumed that the benefits of playing music at work for corporations and the war effort were self-evident. They did little to assuage the potential fear of workers that music in industry was another dreaded scientific management technique, but the tone of most articles did cautiously represent management goals as an expression of patriotic fervor. Only Antrim unabashedly endorsed music’s potential to engineer human behavior. “This finding has far reaching possibilities for regulating work speeds without the workers being aware of it,” he wrote. Reporters in the popular press and trade publications shied away from these controversial aspects of music in industry and none of them from late August 1942 through 1943 found any specific flaws in Burris-Meyer’s research methods or his conclusions.³⁵⁰

The only critics were two rivals, Forrest H. Kilpatrick, an industrial psychologist who worked for R.C.A., and Wheeler Beckett, a conductor-composer, who made a study for the War Production Board. Kilpatrick’s article “Music in Industry,” published in the academically oriented *Journal of Applied Psychology*, subtly contrasted Stanley Wyatt’s research to the Rockefeller study. Wyatt, a fellow industrial psychologist, had definitely proved “the use of music does relieve boredom.” Burris-Meyer, who held no degree in

³⁴⁹ Burris-Meyer finally relented to Tallman’s demands and Muzak took full advantage of every element of the study it had shaped. Antrim, “Music in Industry,” 289; “Combat Fatigue With Muzak Industrial Music,” Advertisement, *Mill & Factory* 33, no.1 (1943): 250-251.

³⁵⁰ Doron K. Antrim, “Music for All Out Production,” 28.

any field allied to the sciences, was quoted as saying his research was “not sufficient to form the basis of unassailable conclusions.” Kilpatrick may have had reservations about a nonscientist conducting studies but he still replicated the “Stevens results” in full without stating any concerns about the methodology or conclusions, possibly because the findings helped R.C.A. sell its modified public address systems and transcription library as well.³⁵¹

Instead, Kilpatrick focused on a competitive issue—whether the planned-versus-standard programming study merited consideration. Companies using R.C.A.’s transcription library made their own decisions about what music to play and when to play it. The Burris-Meyer study asserted that only rationalized musical compositions and programming would increase productivity to its highest possible levels. “There is much opinion but little experimental evidence as to the effects of different types of music,” wrote Kilpatrick in an attempt to discredit the finding. This diluted attack gained little attention in the face of Tallman’s larger public relations campaign. Journalists writing for the popular press or trade journals already knew that Burris-Meyer had described his statistical findings as only “indicative” of certain trends, but they had chosen to look the other way. Kilpatrick’s modest dispute suffered the same fate.³⁵²

Wheeler Beckett, in the foreword to his *Music in War Plants*, mentioned the Burris-Meyer study and dismissed it by stating “little was known about the use of music in industry” and there was a need for “an authoritative study” Yet this music authority also failed to elucidate why the “Stevens research” could not be trusted, a necessity since Burris-Meyer’s findings were being elevated by Muzak and the popular press to an

³⁵¹ Forrest H. Kilpatrick, “Music in Industry,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 27, no. 3 (1943): 274.

³⁵² Ibid.

accepted set of scientific facts. The Beckett statistical survey was no model of scientific competency either; it was completely subjective, the result of corporate managers completing a questionnaire about how they used music, combined with limited on-site interviews. The interpretations were strongly biased in favor of promoting the R.C.A. model of “employee participation.” By 1943, this program allowed workers to place the names of songs they wanted to hear in suggestion boxes, and encouraged the creation of recreational musical groups for employees. Beckett contradicted Kilpatrick by finding “the kind of music played is of paramount importance,” thus anticipating that the battle for market share between Muzak and R.C.A. would be based on issues of how to best control musical programming. Ultimately the critics did not stir up any public debate about Burris-Meyer’s findings, and he became known as America’s foremost authority on the use of music in industry.³⁵³

Throughout the fall of 1942, Tallman continued to cement her relationship with Burris-Meyer, but she also began to focus on recruiting Richmond Cardinell. Under Burris-Meyer’s direction, Cardinell worked on new research projects (still under the funding of the Rockefeller Foundation) in hopes of giving Muzak a “big study” which might be used “to assault the War Production Board.” In late November, Tallman offered the research assistant \$3,600.00 per year to leave the Stevens Institute of Technology and become a “sales engineer responsible for research and selling assistance aimed at spreading Muzak into industry.” A full year would pass before Cardinell accepted Muzak’s offer, but the engineer continued to work as a consultant for the firm on a number of projects. By the close of 1942, Tallman had established Muzak’s reputation as

³⁵³ Wheeler Beckett, *Music in War Plants* (Washington, D.C.: War Production Board, 1943), 7, 11.

America's only purveyor of planned industrial music—an accomplishment partially responsible for the company's explosive sales.³⁵⁴

In twenty months, Muzak's New York office had grown from one to a total of eighty industrial clients. More important than raw numbers was the sense of confidence and trust Muzak evoked when reciting the corporate giants who now subscribed to its service: Bell Telephone Laboratories, General Foods, Norden Bombsight, Pepsi-Cola, Bendix Aviation, Otis Elevator, R. H. Donnelley, E. I. DuPont, SKF Industries, Kelsey-Hayes, and Champion Spark Plug were among a roster of the most recognized companies in the country which allowed Muzak to advertise their names as clients. The company's eight small franchises in Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, Buffalo, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Miami, and Montreal, signed fifty-one industrial accounts in 1942. In Detroit, Edsel Ford, who loved the sound of Muzak at the Ford Hospital, promised to install it at the Willow Run bomber plant once war conversion was completed.³⁵⁵

Though still small, Muzak's gross sales of \$427,000 in 1942 and royalties of \$92,000 from the franchises provided needed capital to publicize its product. The wartime rush to achieve maximum efficiency and the benefits of cost-plus accounting benefited R.C.A. and Muzak equally during the push for conversion and throughout World War II. The participation of employees in the selection of music during work did

³⁵⁴ William Benton to Bertha Tallman, 7 November, 1942, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; William Benton to C.M. Finney, 21 November, 1942, Box 222, Folder 6, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

³⁵⁵ Muzak was one of the first American businesses utilizing a franchise business model for expansion. Franchises had their own central broadcasting studio and played sixteen transcription master recordings supplied by the New York office over telephone wires seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. They were responsible for their own sales, technical installations, and billing with support from the main office. Franchises paid a flat 10% royalty fee off of gross sales to the parent company. Bertha Tallman to C.M. Finney, 31 October, 1942, interoffice memorandum, Box 222, Folder 6, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; Bertha Tallman to William Benton, 31 October, 1942, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

not end immediately with the success of Muzak's model of centralized, expert programming. In a survey of seventy-six war plants conducted by Wheeler Beckett in 1943, the majority of respondents, 59 percent said they built their own record libraries, 17 percent subscribed to Muzak's service, and 16 percent purchased the R.C.A. or some other transcription library (8 percent did not respond). An audience of over six million workers was listening to music during work by 1943, and the Beckett survey implied the fluidity of social practices surrounding the use of music during work still existed. By 1952 this was no longer the case.³⁵⁶

Robert Lee Nelson, who coauthored the magisterial *Music in Industry* (a training manual for corporate managers with a pro-R.C.A. slant) for the Industrial Recreation Association in 1944, believed Muzak had captured the industrial market in the early postwar years. In 1952 the company was "the largest supplier of a music service to industry," leading to the decline of employee participation. Nelson became a convert to the use of scientific expertise in the recording and programming of music and attributed Muzak's success to its exclusive holding "to the line of functionalism." In the 1950s, Muzak called its music "functional" and marketed its industrial, office, and retail services as based on the scientific principles of stimulus progression. The worldview promoted by Burris-Meyer and marketed by the company in the early 1940s attracted scores of large American corporations. It provided the foundation for the internal development of a new musical idiom and the expansion of scientific programming—no longer would

³⁵⁶ C.M. Finney to William Benton, 18 January, 1943, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; Wheeler Beckett, *Music in War Plants*, 52.

“amateurs” program a factory’s music, no employee disc jockeys would spin records, and the possibilities were lost for aesthetic exchange on the shop floor.³⁵⁷

From its first industrial client in 1941 onward, Muzak always sought and usually won the endorsement of organized labor for its product’s ability to improve the “quality of life” of industrial workers. The company brashly marketed its service as a form of human engineering where scientifically programmed music altered workers’ emotional states, diverted their minds away from inattentive boredom, focused them on efficient production (a form of speedup), and pacified them into happy workers—or, in the idiom of the day, instilled greater morale among the workforce. Why Muzak’s service appealed to corporate management was understandable—the desire to predict and control workers to obtain higher levels of productivity had undercurrents in managerial ideology and certain strains of progressive social science dating back to the early 1900s. Why organized labor and workers accepted Muzak is more complex.

Muzak made the workplace more pleasant; this was the only concession it offered workers. Workers and unions were aware that Muzak aspired to be a manipulative tool of scientific management. Perhaps the no-strike contract and workers’ own real patriotic impulses, made the more troubling aspects of planned music seem insignificant. More likely, Labor viewed Muzak in the same light as the 8 hour day and higher wages—the benefits gained were greater than the sacrifice, even if this meant losing control over the shop floor or even some aspect of human subjectivity. In addition, since workers were fed a steady diet of sweet swing or the Glenn Miller sound by Muzak during the war,

³⁵⁷ In the early 1950s Muzak began to market background music to white collar service industries. There was a parallel development in retail settings but the company’s growth in this sector is difficult to trace since all of the corporate archives were destroyed in the 1990s. Robert Lee Nelson, “Music in Industry” (master’s thesis, University of Illinois, 1952), 76.

concerns over scientific music compromising a person's interior psychological status may have seemed outlandish. There is still a need to learn more about how workers responded to Muzak.³⁵⁸

Muzak's marketing rhetoric promoted a worldview familiar to corporate managers and made the fantastic goal of maximum efficiency seem obtainable. But this did not mean the company's product in the early 1940s matched its ambitions. What is clear is how a few people, William Benton, Bertha Tallman, and Harold Burris-Meyer, were able to establish pseudoscientific research as a convincing form of truth. The shaping of scientific research for purely commercial means, and the ability by Muzak to promote what were at best questionable results as "scientific" fact, illustrates how small groups of people can generate popular approval of ideas and products. Steven Shapin, in *A Social History of Truth*, is concerned with questions about how scientific knowledge becomes established in a culture at large—how people determine whether "scientists are speaking the truth about the world." He argues that "knowledge is embedded in streams of practical activity," and though this is not his intent, his concept applies to the journalistic representations of Burris-Meyer's research.³⁵⁹

The popularization of Burris-Meyer's research as "science" to mass audiences was notable for a lack of detailed explanation by journalists of the actual studies. Reporters presented key "facts," usually in a few tersely worded sentences. Headlines and subheads contributed in a similar fashion, ranging from broad proclamations, "Statistics

³⁵⁸ Workers appear to have enjoyed hearing Muzak at work especially those who had extremely repetitive tasks. Harris, *The Right to Manage*, 165.

³⁵⁹ By "practical activity" Shapin meant early modern modes of gentlemanly interaction and how they shaped scientific understanding. In the same vein, Bertha Tallman's discourse with journalists influenced the way scientific knowledge was presented and accepted by the public as factual. Shapin, *A Social History of Truth*, xix, 413.

Reveal Music's Potency," to the specific, "Production Gains Range from 1.3 to 11.1%. Sensational language depicted Burris-Meyer's prowess and declared the importance of his research, but the actual data was reproduced without comment. Science was deployed to make the argument that not using music in the workplace was irrational. According to William Graebner, this appeal to authoritative logic was particularly strong in the 1940s. Much of the population welcomed "the advice of experts" due to an ambivalence over how to "carry out the most essential and elemental social tasks," and science and reason were considered "essential to progress."³⁶⁰

Public faith in scientific knowledge, even if there is a proclivity for a culture at a particular time to be more deferential to authority, is based upon the belief that "reliable systems of expertise" are responsible for critically evaluating and testing research before it is represented as established fact. By the 1940s, the majority of Americans were "obliged to trust in impersonal systems" to make judgments about the validity of scientific claims. In Muzak's case, those "systems" were the overlapping connections between the company's advertising campaigns and the many articles in the popular press and trade journals representing music in industry as a panacea for production. For Shapin, the reason we can accept that scientists are "telling the truth" is that the profession is self-regulating since "small specialized communities of knowledge-makers" are the gatekeepers for "establishing and protecting the truth." Part of this endeavor technically

³⁶⁰ This way of characterizing the American people "at large" perhaps accurately represented what was actually occurring in the culture, but it fails to explain why people felt "ambivalent" and fails to grapple with the problem of why the concept of Science had become a complete abstraction for most Americans. For example, what alternatives exist for groups of people in living in complex social structures (what many social critics call "modern society") when presented with expert or scientific facts in the media except to trust or distrust them reflexively? Perhaps the "ambivalence" Graebner uncovered was connected to the recognition that by the 1940s what constituted "truth" was becoming incredibly difficult to discern. Eyer, "Music Goes to War," 7; "New Music to Spur Factories' Output," 44; William Graebner, *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 146.

requires research to be peer reviewed and to appear in refereed journals. The ability of Muzak to slip past the reliable guardians of expertise provides a troubling counterexample—a repeat of how English boredom research became known as scientific fact.³⁶¹

By publishing his research results in popular magazines such as *Mechanical Engineering* and *Scientific American*, Burris-Meyer avoided potentially having to meet more stringent requirements of refereed journals and provided him with a larger audience. The small community of authorities who conducted research on the use of music in industry was influenced by connections to corporate interests. The journalists who served as the final barrier to popularizing Burris-Meyer's research as scientifically valid may have been biased, as was Doron K. Antrim, for example, who wrote "I look for the time when music will be considered as essential to the plant as proper lighting." Or, they might have suspended their standards and engaged in wish fulfillment driven by a patriotic desire to win the war through maximum efficiency. It is possible they simply may not have had the education required to make critical evaluations about research methods.³⁶²

The establishment of Burris-Meyer's research as scientific fact serves as a cautionary tale of how easily the self-regulation of scientific endeavors can be undermined. A central element of these new facts was the representation of boredom as a culturally constructed human condition—by the 1940s this belief was already well established in American society. Muzak's promotional materials represented boredom as a result of the techniques of mass production—the assembly line and repetitious work

³⁶¹ Shapin, *A Social History of Truth*, 15, 414.

³⁶² Antrim, "Music in Industry," 289.

tasks. All industrial workers, according to this logic, were alike and experienced boredom more or less the same. Workers now were not only de-skilled but de-individuated. Their homogeneity meant a universal solution to “industrial ills,” in this case the playing of planned music, could provide effective and predictable results.

Social engineering merged with mass therapy. If Burris-Meyer and Muzak were correct, large groups of people could be manipulated with little regard for the troublesome quirks of human behavior. For Muzak, this vision of “sameness” and malleability drove the company to pursue “the mass influencing of human emotion on a controlled analytical basis” through the continued refinement of scientific music. Today it is almost impossible to escape background music in most public and many “private” spaces. One must wonder whether by seeking to eradicate boredom in the workplace, Muzak set into motion the conditioning of future generations to believe that listening to music at work was natural. To push this further, one might ask how responsible the company was for ridding the country of silence and helping to establish the distinctive American idea that life required a soundtrack.³⁶³

This piece of the Muzak story ends in late 1942. As a narrative of origins, it only gestures toward the future of functional music. Still, a troubling question is left unanswered. What possibly could have caused Burris-Meyer and William Benton to believe by 1946 that the use of background music could “make Goebbels look like a piker”? Did they know about the *Lagerkapelle*, the camp musical group at Auschwitz described by Szymon Laks as playing “gay, lively, joyous” music for prisoners “to encourage work and the joy of life”? The Nazis had used music to “ensure the flawless

³⁶³ Harold Burris-Meyer to William Benton, 25 February 1946, Box 221, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; William Benton to Harold Burris-Meyer, 1 March 1946, Box 221, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

functioning of camp discipline” years before the professor determined that scientifically programmed music could meet the same ends for American war industries.³⁶⁴

Were both Burris-Meyers and Benton aware of the Reich Music Chamber campaign, guided by the composer Richard Strauss, to suppress jazz in 1937? Muzak’s expert programmers strove to insure that no jazz, “hot swing,” improvisation, gospel, or any form of clearly identifiable African-American music ever reached the ears of industrial workers. One thing is clear—both the Nazis and Muzak believed in music’s power to control human emotions and also deployed it to subdue unwanted tastes. Put another way, “work” music served in both countries to maintain what were considered at the time to be the desirable aesthetic sensibilities of the dominant culture.³⁶⁵

Perhaps Benton’s role in the State Department brought him in contact with the organization responsible for the American Occupation in Germany after the war. The Office of Military Government, United States (OMGUS), attempted to stimulate new aesthetic sensibilities in the defeated German population for American music composed by Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, and Virgil Thompson. A document titled “Music Control Instruction No.1” stated OMGUS’s musical goals: “we should not try to regiment culture in the Nazi manner . . . German musical life must be influenced by positive rather than by negative means, i.e. by encouraging music which we think beneficial and crowding out that which we think dangerous.”³⁶⁶

The language of Burris-Meyer’s 1946 letter to William Benton mirrors “Instruction No. 1” in its desire to manipulate people “without recourse to coercion” and

³⁶⁴ Szymon Laks, *Music of Another World*, trans. Chester A. Kiesel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 17.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.; Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Picador, 2007), 343.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 376, 379, 378.

in its faith in the positive good of social control. Certain Americans in government and commerce during the postwar period were comfortable attempting to engineer human behavior as long as the techniques did not require overt violence. As William Graebner has illustrated, social engineering was “encoded” in the ideology of American democratic culture by a range of social scientists and educators until the late 1950s. The relative simplicity of establishing Muzak as the sole source of scientifically planned music in America, and its ability to conquer the industrial market by the mid-1940s, generated an extreme confidence among the company’s employees in their ability to shape human behavior to predetermined ends. Though it may seem shocking (or inane) for a proponent of background music to compare himself and Muzak with Goebbels, there was a symbiosis between their ideology about the function of music. What remains to be seen is whether the development of functional music in the late 1940s would place Muzak ahead of the master propagandist in the hierarchy of social control “when the record of this civilization is written.”³⁶⁷

³⁶⁷ William Graebner, *The Engineering of Consent* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 181-182; Burris-Meyer, “Music in Industry,” 34.

“They Practically Dance Up To Their Machines”: Muzak’s “Science” of Human Engineering

Almost one year before D-Day, William Benton summoned a young New Dealer who specialized in propaganda and logistics to consult with Muzak. Already an experienced advertising virtuoso, Benton started thinking about his role in the postwar world. His consultant, Victor M. Ratner of the War Department, was eager to collaborate. “And the more important thing I’ve got to do is to help this poor democracy of ours learn how to inform itself. It doesn’t know how to do that now. I can make a contribution in that direction,” Ratner wrote to Benton in May 1943. Soon afterward, Ratner left the Pentagon and founded a public relations firm. One of his first projects was to devise a strategy for Muzak to compete effectively with the Radio Corporation of America (R.C.A.), the leading vendor of background music. Ratner conceded that the public address system and transcription library sold by the R.C.A. was a perfect fit for war industries—the company’s rhetoric of cooperation and unity between management and labor had convinced thousands of companies to install its equipment.³⁶⁸

Since 1941, newspapers and trade journals had represented playing music in factories as a strategy for making workers and management march in unity toward maximum efficiency and victory. F. H. McConnell in “Riveting to Rhythm” reported on a number of industries where music proved to be a “stimulus for wartime production.”

³⁶⁸ In mid-1943, Ratner founded Victor M. Ratner Company. He left the firm four years later to work as a vice-president and director of sales and advertising at the Columbia Broadcasting System. Benton wanted Ratner to become a Muzak employee, but the public relations man preferred to work with a range of clients. Ratner became a close friend of Benton and after leaving CBS, he was hired by another Benton associate, Beardsley Ruml, to run Macy’s public relations department. Ratner later became a vice president at Benton and Bowles—the firm William Benton cofounded in the 1930s. Victor M. Ratner to William Benton, 19 May, 1943, Box 223, Folder 11, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; “Macy’s New York Names Public Relations, Ad Chief,” *New York Times*, September 12, 1949, 29; “Victor Ratner Dies; Ad, Sales Executive,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1974, 61.

Defense workers rhythmically riveted and sang “The Anvil Chorus” as a new era of “harmony in the world's work” dawned—a sublime representation of capitalist realism. Throughout the war, journalists lauded music’s ability to create a peaceful fraternity in industry and to stimulate the “miracle” of war production. Lawrence Stessin’s “Factory Offensive” for the *Los Angeles Times* put the issue succinctly: music promoted “a happy, healthy industrial family—and it’ll take just such a family to drive the Japs back to where they came from.”³⁶⁹

The enthusiasm for the use of music in factories reflected a broader cultural trend originating in the 1930s when “a culture of sight and sound” (the sophisticated use of photographs, movies, and music) made influencing masses of people more possible than in the past—these technologies were used by corporate, government, and academic elites to promote national unity and stress conformist modes of thought. By World War II, group values—what William Graebner called “the absolute necessity of sublimating the self to the larger whole”—were promoted through various musical mediums such as community sings by the United Service Organization, Hollywood musicals, the revival of marching bands in high schools and colleges, and the American dance band. All were seen as helping meld the individual into group life. Films like *Pittsburgh* (1942) and King Vidor’s *American Romance* (1944) portrayed peaceful coexistence among munitions workers and factory owners in a world bereft of strikes or speedups; these showed what historian Lary May noted as Hollywood’s representation during the war of an

³⁶⁹ The Anvil Chorus or “Coro di Zingari” is from Act 2, Scene 1 of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Il Traviatore*. The lyrics tell of gypsy men inspired to work by drink and women—a curious choice given that the producer-oriented wartime climate in the U.S. privileged delayed gratification. McConnell, “Riveting to Rhythm,” 26; Stessin, “Factory Offensive,” H5.

“unprecedented class and cultural consensus as the very essence of the American Way.”³⁷⁰

In 1943, R.C.A. marketed “the American Way” more effectively than Muzak. R.C.A. convinced all sizes of war industries that a public address system with some musical programming fostered goodwill and patriotism on the shop floor. Public address systems, by design, were a more personal form of “interaction” between management and labor. Only seven years earlier, Charlie Chaplin mocked them in the opening sequences of *Modern Times* as a crude form of Taylorism. R.C.A. successfully rebutted the critique by packaging public address systems as a means for the literal expression of patriotism and industrial unity. R.C.A. countered Muzak’s roster of musical and scientific celebrities with Dan Halpin, who managed the last Knute Rockne football team at Notre Dame. Halpin, the public relations face of the company’s music-in-industry program, explained in a number of articles and at seminars how to implement “Morale Building Programs.”³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ Susman, *Culture As History*, 160, 165; Graebner, *The Age of Doubt*, 3–4; Lary May, “Making the American Consensus: The Narrative of Conversion and Subversion in World War II Films,” in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 76, 73.

³⁷¹ The *Modern Times* sequence featured Electro Steel Corporation’s president (Allan Garcia) yelling “Section Five, Speed ‘er up; Four One” over a futuristic public address system. In 1942, R.C.A. clients received a library of 300 recordings which were supplemented monthly by 60 new releases. Music libraries could number in the thousands of selections. Typically an employee devoted a minimum of five hours a day to produce a daily play list, run the turntable, make announcements, and keep a ledger of her activities. In general it appears the majority of employees who served as disc jockeys were women and in larger companies men served in a supervisory roles as the Director of Broadcasting. Muzak used telephone wires to deliver its music service during the World War II, limiting its market to essential war industries. The company did supply a transcription library to clients for use with a public address system where wires were unavailable. Muzak’s concept of planned or functional music required centralized control to realize its full potential and served to distinguish the company from R.C.A. During the war, a R.C.A. public address system with a record library ranged in cost from \$250.00 to \$40,000.00. The cost when including the cost of labor was far higher than Muzak. A typical Muzak wired installation cost \$50.00 per month, though Muzak did offer more expensive in-house installations of equipment intended to take advantage of its high-fidelity 16” recordings. By 1947, Halpin had left the world of industrial music to become RCA’s television receiver sales manager. Allan Garcia, “Section Five Conversation with Foreman,” *Modern Times*, DVD, directed by Charlie Chaplin (1936; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2003); “Daniel Halpin, 64,

Halpin told his audiences it was “anyone’s guess” if playing music actually increased production, a clear dismissal of Muzak’s scientific research. He explained that the R.C.A. approach gave employees a chance to participate in musical selections, unlike Muzak, by filling out forms about their preferences and placing them in a selection box. R.C.A. requested that plants hold a dedication ceremony to celebrate the installation of a public address system. Companies received formal instructions for a six-point, eleven-minute ceremony starting and ending in the community singing of patriotic songs. Managers told employees that the broadcasting equipment and musical programming was a company gift to make their lives better. Halpin stressed the importance of having the “plant union representative” on the stage with the plant’s general manager, the chairman of the plant war production drive, a military representative, and a local clergyman. The R.C.A. approach mirrored traditional techniques of corporate welfare programs aimed at making workers feel loyal through ties of self-interest. The company took full advantage of the wartime emergency by making technological objects appear to breathe life into the spirit of human relations. Many war industries followed Halpin’s recommendations and made what amounted to “having a ‘radio station’ within the four walls” of their plants into a centerpiece of a worker’s daily experience.³⁷²

Public address systems were used during the war to provide readings of letters from men in service; to play recordings of plant products being used in combat; to publicize production drive rallies; to offer sounds bites from President Roosevelt and other civic leaders; to stimulate interest in Red Cross blood donations, punctuality drives,

Television Pioneer,” *Washington Post*, Aug 23, 1970, 65; “First Television Console Placed On Exhibition by RCA Victor Unit,” *New York Times*, May 15, 1947, 37; Eyer, “Music Goes to War,” 7; “Music in the Plant,” 101; “Music While You Work,” 63.

³⁷² Dan D. Halpin, “Industrial Music and Morale,” *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 15, no. 2 (1943): 123, 116.

safety programs, and company achievements; and to give company information on promotions, regulations, time schedules, company history, and employee sales. More directly tied to corporate welfare interests was the broadcasting of employee benefit programs such as group insurance, income tax information, mutual benefit associations, employment opportunities, nutritional advice, athletic and social events, and the announcement of birthdays, new births, and employee accomplishments. These practices did constitute a set of tactics intended to manipulate worker morale as a means of increased production, but they also reflected and helped shape wartime patriotism on the shop floor. Gary Gerstle found strong patriotic sentiment among unions and workers who bought bonds, gave blood, and raised money to send gift packages to members of the armed forces. R.C.A.'s marketing of public address systems as fostering patriotism, worker participation, and industrial harmony attracted a large number of manufacturers. In 1943, Muzak ran a weak second in what seemed a barely competitive field.³⁷³

Muzak received a great deal of publicity over its scientific research and its ability to control human emotions, but R.C.A. was consistently portrayed as providing "labor and management with one voice." The use of a public address system for workers building the battleship U.S.S. Alabama—six musical programs were played daily over loudspeakers in the Norfolk Navy Yard—launched an era of "Ballads and Battleships"

³⁷³ The use of music and public address systems were also intended to mask the harsh labor practices used at R.C.A. plants (and those of their clientele). According to Jefferson Cowie, R.C.A. in 1934 pioneered a "sophisticated version of Taylorism known as the work factor system." R.C.A. assembly workers had their every motion on the assembly line "broken down into the smallest element." Managers were then given a formula to "objectively determine the time required to complete any task." Every aspect of a worker's behavior from body movement to the amount of mental processes required to perform the task were quantified. The development of R.C.A.'s renowned worker participation programs based on suggestion boxes and its own development of music in industry programs well before World War II might have been an attempt to overcome or obscure the deleterious effects of its production practices. Halpin, "Industrial Music and Morale, 119–121; Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 65–66; Gary Gerstle, "The Working Class Goes to War," in *The War in American Culture, Society and Consciousness During World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 109, 121.

where defense production would march to victory with R.C.A. transcriptions. The Alabama example stayed in the news for over twenty-three months. This sustained publicity validated using public address systems as a means to win the war.³⁷⁴

Lawrence Stessin, reporting for the *Los Angeles Times*, explained the origins of R.C.A.'s collaborative agenda:

RCA is an industrial pioneer in employee-morale building. Long before Pearl Harbor it began its now famous "Beat the Promise" campaign in each of its six factories. On the hunch that the workers themselves may have a lot of ideas on how to increase production, cut waste and improve the war product, the management asked for suggestions. The incentives were prizes and widespread recognition of every idea adopted.

According to Stessin, the R.C.A. plants delivered war goods sixteen months ahead of schedule. The idea of employee participation became a fundamental aspect of the company's marketing effort.³⁷⁵

At Stromberg-Carlson, Cessna Aircraft, Davis & Geck, and numerous other war plants, employees brought in records. Some even contributed them to the company library and as one reporter marveled, "This is not only permitted but encouraged." Anti-Muzak reporters, those who favored decentralized programming, believed that bringing records to work made employees feel a deeper connection to the music because they appeared to have a choice in what was played. Companies like Sylvania Electric were presented as examples precisely because they engaged in "no clear standard pattern of programming." Botany Worsted Mills allowed R.C.A. into its plant to photograph the spirit of cooperation cultivated by employees filling musical suggestion boxes. "Some

³⁷⁴ "Music on the MacArthur Shift," *Radio Retailing Today*, February 1943, 16; "Forward March With Music!" *The Etude Music Magazine*, March 1942, 14.

³⁷⁵ Stessin, "Factory Offensive," H5.

like it sweet, Some like it hot—both get their wish” ran the caption under a photograph of two female workers.³⁷⁶

R.C.A. advocates argued that the flexibility of owning a public address system made the workplace more personal and brought together employees and management by heightening communication. A *Forbes* reporter watched a New Hampshire employer proudly announce “when six of his girls returned after taking weekend marriage vows with service men.” A number of articles explained how public address systems gave managers “direct contact with the people who work for them and the nation.” Employees bringing in records, making suggestions, and hearing their intimate personal news broadcast in celebratory tones allowed companies using R.C.A. equipment and records to claim they fostered an atmosphere of participatory democracy; it showed that corporate concerns about the everyday lives of workers led to the harmonious plant conditions essential to winning the war.³⁷⁷

In April 1943, Ben Selvin, the head of Muzak’s programming, excitedly reported to Bertha Tallman, who was serving as the de facto president, that “Colonel Baldwin and Colonel Brown were sold on the use of music for the entire Pentagon Building.” William Benton’s past business experience told him the company was about to have a “big boom and expansion in the war industry outlet” and he instructed C. M. Finney, who oversaw all of Benton’s holdings, to work out a deal on musical rights “while our operation is small and unimportant rather than later when it begins to look like a possible ASCAP bonanza.” The moment seemed right to assail R.C.A., a company with at least ten times

³⁷⁶ Both R.C.A. and Muzak sought to eliminate all “hot” swing in musical programming. Most likely the wishes of the “hot” devotee went unfulfilled. “Music on the Macarthur Shift,” 16; Conklin, “Music While They Work,” 81; “War Work Set To Music,” *Popular Mechanics*, December 1943, 43.

³⁷⁷ Antrim, “Music For All-Out Production,” 16; “Sound Tonic for War Workers,” *Radio Retailing*, July 1942, 17.

more clients than Muzak. Sensing an opportunity, Benton instructed Bertha Tallman to prepare the company's first advertising campaign.³⁷⁸

Unlike R.C.A., Muzak strove to create two separate spheres of appeal for managers and for workers, the worlds of rationalized production and of instinctual pleasure. Out of necessity, the company replicated common cultural themes during the war, but its advertising campaign looked forward to the postwar world. Campaigns based on worker patriotism or Muzak's investment in "maximum production" were too closely tied to the war and did not fit the company's long-term agenda of convincing workers to endorse its service because it made them happy.

The twenty-six advertisement campaign began in July 1943 and ended in January 1945. The majority were two page spreads, placed in three trade journals—*Modern Industry, Mill & Factory*, and *Factory Management and Maintenance*. Benton, who was familiar with Ratner's propaganda work for the New Deal, knew overcoming R.C.A.'s market share would require an encompassing vision that resonated with but transcended immediate wartime concerns. Once back in the private sector, Ratner started working as a consultant to Tallman. His contribution sharpened the company's determinist discourse and promoted a postwar world where pleasure and production could coexist peacefully; these were tactics that made Muzak a fierce competitor by the end of 1944.³⁷⁹

One way to understand why Muzak ultimately surpassed R.C.A. and became the leading supplier of work music in the world is to view Ratner's newly developed marketing strategy as the corporate popularization of Freud's Reality and Pleasure

³⁷⁸ Ben Selvin to Bertha Tallman, 9 April, 1943, Box 221, Folder 15, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; William Benton to C. M. Finney, 22 February, 1943, Box 222, Folder 8, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

³⁷⁹ Victor M. Ratner to William Benton, 19 May, 1943, Box 223, Folder 11, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

Principles. Muzak harnessed the Pleasure Principle to the purposes of the Reality Principle. Its appeal to workers, according to Ratner's plan, was that it gave them what they "wished for," to feel pleasure on the job and to be drawn away from the displeasure caused by repetitive work and the damage induced by the application of scientific management techniques. From this perspective, corporations became the embodiment of Freud's Reality Principle—factories were the sites where pleasure was renounced by reality causing dissatisfaction. Ratner believed that corporate executives wanted to improve workers' attention, what Freud called "the special mental function" required by reality, to make workers adapt to the distractions caused by mass production. Muzak's marketing emphasis on functionality, the instrumental ability to manipulate human behavior, was intended to seduce corporate managers who were still invested in regulating the conduct of workers based on delayed gratification.³⁸⁰

Victor Ratner based Muzak's first advertising campaign and his vision for the company's future on the inherent conflict between Management and Labor. His views were influenced by the widespread labor unrest in the midst of America's "miracle of production." Labor shortages, a large rise in unionization, and a belief among American industrial workers of their importance to the war effort resulted in high absenteeism, considerable turnover, and 14,471 strikes (most of them unauthorized) during World War II. The major cause of strikes was wage disputes, but working conditions were also a primary concern. The number of industrial workers killed and injured on the job from

³⁸⁰ Freud believed the primary mental processes were regulated by the Pleasure Principle, where the "pleasure-ego can do nothing but wish, work for a yield of pleasure, and avoid unpleasure." Freud placed the retraction of momentary pleasure for "the gain of assured pleasure at a later time" under the regulation of the Reality Principle and used the belief in an afterlife as his prime example. Sigmund Freud, "Formulations on the Two Principles," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 304, 302.

1940 through 1945 totaled more than eleven times the number of U.S. casualties in combat.³⁸¹

Ratner understood that conventional management ideology of the 1940s (widely held except by a small group of corporate liberals) represented unions as fundamentally opposed to management, viewed the rank-and-file as thoroughly alienated, and assumed conflict between “superior and subordinate” was unavoidable. In postwar America, the conflict between employer and employee exploded: workers harbored resentments over wartime wage freezes, the no-strike clause expired, and unions wanted to test their strength. Over 43,000 strikes occurred between 1945 and 1955. Earlier strikes were over increased wages and union recognition, but by the late 1940s benefits such as shorter hours, improved working conditions, health care, and pensions dominated the union agenda. The rise of unprecedented union power worried corporate leaders, who vigorously strove to regain discipline over the labor force and authority over the production process. As postwar management theorist Walter F. Titus wrote: “The aim of the executive can be summed up in one word, control.” A number of factors ultimately lead unions to turn away from the rank-and-file fight for dominion over the shop floor. The Taft-Harley Labor Act, anticommunism, and a widespread movement to replace workers through machines all helped management regain its authority.³⁸²

Ratner believed corporations ultimately bought Muzak because it increased efficiency. “Management often doesn’t care about making workers ‘feel better’ but it is interested in increased production,” he wrote. On the other hand, Labor wanted Muzak because it “makes workers ‘feel better.’” Instead of casting the company’s lot with one

³⁸¹ David F. Noble, *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 22–23.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 24–25, 31, 39, 28, 36; Harris, *The Right to Manage* 101, 103.

ideological system, Ratner saw an opportunity for Muzak to bridge “the gap between the different points of view of Management and Labor.” Perhaps it was an unrelated coincidence that Ratner thought of Muzak, which created new musical genre, in terms similar to how Freud saw *Art*—as the only way to reconcile the Reality and Pleasure Principles.³⁸³

The “bridge” Muzak built allowed Labor to see the functionalist water flowing clearly underneath it. Ratner, in a smart but uncharacteristic maneuver, felt addressing the negative aspects of Muzak directly would convince union leaders and employees to endorse the product. From its very first commercial installation onward, workers identified Muzak as a speedup tool of management. In 1939, the Isbrandtsen-Moller Company made front page news when it wired Pier 30 in Brooklyn with Muzak. *The New York Times* reported Joseph D. R. Freed, a Vice President of Muzak, as wryly noting the heavy bags of coffee longshoremen carried would no longer be such a burden as they entered a “new aura of romance” in “an atmosphere charged with ebullient melodies” Ray C. B. Brown, a reporter for *The Washington Post*, sarcastically commented that “this substitute for the old-fashioned-chanteys is not, according to the reporter a device to speed up work, but a philanthropic attempt to combine entertainment with drudgery.” By July 1941, the Brooklyn Pier longshoremen decided the music was a form of the hated production “speed-up.” One reporter noted that the local A. F. of L. representative of the International Longshoremen’s Association “suspected a ruse to make the men work

³⁸³ In fact Ratner and Muzak claimed that functional music molded fantasies “into truths of a new kind” that redirected a worker’s distraction back toward attention. Though not what Freud had in mind for artistic creation, the formulation is strikingly similar in terms of bridging the gap between reality and pleasure. Victor M. Ratner, “A Report on Muzak,” September, 1945, Section 4: Some Basic Selling Problems, Part I, 1-2, Box 223, Folder 13, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; Freud, “Formulations on the Two Principles,” 305.

faster” and threatened a strike, leading to “the employer promptly evicting the Muse from the waterfront, reportedly her only misadventure of the kind.” Ratner’s strategy, on the contrary, relied on openly linking the manipulation of behavior with a pleasurable outcome.³⁸⁴

Muzak was a form of speedup, but “it is the pleasantest imaginable form of speed-up,” Ratner claimed. Muzak did get more work out of workers, he admitted, but it did so “only by making them feel good.” Muzak put people out of work, but it was balanced by “how much pleasanter it makes working” for the workers “who remain.” The idiom of pleasure was appropriate for the postwar world, especially for those who felt they had sacrificed as workers and soldiers in exchange for a new world of domestic security and abundance. Ratner pushed for Muzak to conduct personal talks with union executives to explain why Muzak improved working conditions, contributed to “the pleasure and dignity in work,” and meant much more “to the worker rather than management.” Once unions understood the benefits, Ratner argued, their “attitude toward MUZAK will make it acceptable down the line.” Marketing two ideological systems, pleasure and production, as a means to solve industrial conflict constituted the core of Muzak’s original advertising campaign. This dual approach helped background music become omnipresent in everyday life by the late twentieth century.³⁸⁵

Taking a look at the three primary themes anchoring Muzak’s advertising campaign—boredom, morale, and production—helps illustrate why the company’s service began to captivate more clients than R.C.A. in the closing years of World War II.

³⁸⁴ “Pier Equipped for Music Night and Day to Make Longshoremen Work Happily,” *New York Times*, January 29, 1939, 1; Ray C. B. Brown, “Substitute for Chanteys Lightens Dock Labors,” *Washington Post*, February 5, 1939, TS5; McConnell, “Riveting to Rhythm,” 26.

³⁸⁵ Victor M. Ratner, “A Report on Muzak,” September, 1945, Section 4: Some Basic Selling Problems, Part I, 3–4, 6, Box 223, Folder 13, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

The main target of Muzak's determinist discourse was boredom. The eradication of monotony, according to the company's ad campaign, benefited both management and labor. The contagion of boredom was addressed in simple causal language. "Monotony and boredom breed fatigue as readily as physical effort. Morale falls off. Production suffers," read Muzak's first advertisement. The campaign portrayed the visible symptoms of worker alienation as a lack of interest in work, a decrease in morale, absenteeism, and restlessness. "Absenteeism stems from something within the worker—boredom with the task at hand, a dread of returning to it, a desire to leave it early," stated another ad. Muzak's advertising campaign appealed to managers on a basic level. Functional music eradicated boredom and readjusted a worker's attitude—the result was refocused attention back on work and greater industrial efficiency.³⁸⁶

The "testimonials" of management and workers were a central element of Muzak's wartime advertising. Managerial voices made predictable statements about the boredom busting effects of rationalized music. "Muzak certainly has provided real benefit in helping to increase efficiency at our cable plant, especially among employees doing repetitious work," attested William Percival, Foreman at Federal Telephone and Radio. The voices of employees told stories about improved attitudes. Ann Tilley, who worked in the Mounting Department of United Electronics, happily reported: "I don't think of the time. The day goes faster, right up to the end." Since all workers involved in mass production experienced boredom in the same way, Muzak's ads argued the solution could also be universal—the collective listening to planned music.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁶ "Combat Fatigue," 250–251; "Absenteeism Reduced with MUZAK," Advertisement, *Mill & Factory* 33, no.3 (1943): 278–279.

³⁸⁷ The testimonials might have been copywriter fiction, highly edited versions of a particular sentiment, or the literal articulations of employees. If the latter were true, several worker-wordsmiths should have

Muzak's advertising campaign never explained why functional music assuaged employee boredom, but Victor Ratner told his salesmen how to pitch potential clients behind closed doors. The reality of everyday life was that "most people do not fully concentrate on their work. Their jobs aren't that good or complex." The invisible symptom of boredom and the most threatening to management (because it was impossible to detect) was daydreaming. Losses in production, errors, and product rejects were represented in Muzak's advertising campaign as the results of an employee's fantasy life. Daydreaming had long been constructed by industrial psychologists as a cause of worker unrest, as a danger to the corporate body, and as a conduit to individual mental disease. According to Ratner, Muzak salesmen needed to explain that "daydreaming interferes with taking too-much attention from work . . . and Muzak does a superb job of increasing attention to the work by controlling the idle part of the mind." Functional music, he asserted, attacked boredom before it could lead to further inattention or worker alienation.³⁸⁸

Victor Ratner combined the company's use of boredom research conducted by Wyatt and Langdon with a basic Freudian outlook. Freud believed that only unsatisfied people daydreamed. He structured daydreams as "a species of thought-activity split-off" from the Reality Principle, and they "remained subordinate to the Pleasure Principle alone." For management, the restoration of the Reality Principle—the refocusing of a worker's attention to the external world and the repression of a worker's unpleasant

abandoned their machine tending for a more lucrative career in advertising. "A Year Has Proved The Unusual Advantages of MUZAK!" Advertisement, *Factory Management and Maintenance* 102, no.10 (1944): 292–293; "MUZAK While You Work," Advertisement, *Mill & Factory* 33, no.2 (1943): 255.

³⁸⁸ Victor M. Ratner, "A Report on Muzak," September, 1945, Part 1 "The Market for Muzak," Section 2: Marketing Objectives Within Cities, 11-12, Box 223, Folder 13, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

circumstances—was the promise of Muzak. For workers, functional music offered immediate gratification and assurance that the “real” could be made pleasurable. Muzak presented union leaders and the rank and file with what must have seemed a self-evident benefit—what employee enjoyed being bored? According to the company, by orchestrating a happy emotional response, Muzak made everyone forget any unpleasant feelings arising from repetitive work. The music restructured temporal space and time to make a day seem faster, redirected an employee’s fantasy life back to an attentive engagement with work, and increased aggregate productivity.³⁸⁹

Almost every article written about the use of music in industry from 1941 to 1943 mentioned boredom. Not one suggested it came from a worker’s genetic composition or aberrant behavior. Instead, all journalists attributed what appeared to be an epidemic of worker monotony to the performance of repetitive tasks. Most articles were matter-of-fact in reproducing what by 1941 had become the accepted claim—repetitive tasks caused boredom, which in turn triggered worker alienation resulting in industrial inefficiency.

A select few articles offered slight insights into the boring world of mass assembly. “Putting nose caps on antitank shells is mighty important work, but the task can get pretty dull,” wrote Lawrence Stessin of the *Los Angeles Times*. A concerned Doron K. Antrim reported to *The American Magazine*: “Recently I visited a large plant in New Haven, Conn, where the thousand girl employees had been suffering from a bad attack of industrial ennui working at conveyor belts all day. They had grown careless after a few hours and started making costly errors.” Reporters consistently mentioned increased mistakes, greater product rejects, absenteeism, and mental strife as the consequences of a

³⁸⁹ Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” and “Formulations on the Two Principles,” in *The Freud Reader*, 439, 303.

bored workforce. One article mentioned a concern over daydreaming. An editorial in *The Etude* warned about the problems of letting “one’s imagination run amok.” Bored employees might develop “nervous, jittery, hysterical, rumor-mongering personalities,” but thankfully playing music formed “industrious persistent workers.”³⁹⁰

When writing about boredom, journalists faithfully reproduced a rhetoric of mutual benefit that did not tend to favor R.C.A. or Muzak. At times the language describing music’s power bordered on religious revelation: “When the music comes on, many of the men start whistling softly and most of the women begin humming. And if the expression on their faces is a trustworthy guide, boredom is swept away and spirits are lifted by rhythmic sound waves. . . . Music happily tends to dissipate boredom like the sun dispersing mist.” Surprisingly, one reporter, Isabel Morse Jones, attacked the harsh conditions of repetitious work in similarly devout language. The reduction of worker boredom through music was “a distinct triumph of spirit over force, a recognition of the value of inspiration in the face of mechanical destruction.”³⁹¹

The discourse of the popular press and trade journals paralleled Muzak’s marketing materials so closely it seemed like they were written by the same public relations firm. The efforts of Muzak and journalists naturalized the concept of boredom by representing “it” (the term was never defined) as an inevitable historical result of advanced capitalism—the problem of boredom obscured issues of who wielded power and who controlled the workplace. In this case, it was the price humans had to pay for the

³⁹⁰ Stessin, “Factory Offensive,” H6; Doron K. Antrim, “Step on it to Music,” *The American Magazine*, August 1941, 29; “Forward March With Music!” 14.

³⁹¹ McConnell, “Riveting to Rhythm,” SM17; Isabel Morse Jones, “Music Found Soothing to Nerves of Workers,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 1942, C6.

progress of mass assembly. Regardless, management and labor agreed that the conquest of boredom meant the return of spirit or morale to the workplace.

The concept of positive morale—the idea that individual psychological well-being was essential to the nation’s social spirit—had a powerful influence on American society during World War II. Muzak’s advertising campaign tapped-into this notion. The voices of management linked increased morale to more productive employees. “MUZAK has definitely built up the morale and efficiency of this plant,” said K. M. Hoegger, President of Hoegger, Inc. In contrast, the voices of labor always spoke about improved morale in terms of heightened happiness and comfort. “We have music while we work,” explained Patricia Post, a foot press operator at Conmar Products, “and it sure makes working a pleasure.” In Muzak’s worldview, good morale symbolized how corporate managers and employees contributed to winning the war. For corporations the term also stood for a new type of employee whose adjusted attitude translated into greater harmony, less unrest, and increased productivity. For union leaders and the rank and file, positive morale was the sign of a pleasurable workplace where boredom had been abolished.³⁹²

Psychic health was not achieved through the sense of involvement and pride that came with the suspension of self-interest for the public good. Muzak offered self-fulfillment, not self-sacrifice, as a means to victory over the Axis. Management received increased profits and a pacified workforce. Employees became happy in tedious jobs and reveled in a more comfortable work environment. The nation got the miracle of increased industrial efficiency. The idiom of morale, though, might become expendable in the postwar world unless it stood for something larger than the immediate historical moment.

³⁹² Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 222; “MUZAK Has Definitely Built Up Efficiency In Our Plant,” Advertisement, *Factory Management and Maintenance* 102, no.12 (1944): 46–47; “Absenteeism Reduced,” 278–279.

In 1945, Victor Ratner told Muzak executives selling the idea of morale did not end with the Allied victory. “Worker-morale is one of the principle things Muzak is selling,” he wrote. For management, the replacement of boredom with high morale, the determinist ability to swap psychological states, was the primary reason to purchase scientifically programmed music. “Happy workers” seemed to do what Muzak repeatedly claimed its music would “non-coercively” force them to do: stop turning over jobs, stop being absent, stop making errors, stop leaving early, and start working harder. The company’s sustained discourse resonated with their corporate audience.³⁹³

Corporate managers strongly believed that functional music dramatically increased morale. In an unpublished questionnaire taken in 1952, 94% of 110 Muzak clients stated they implemented the service to “create a more pleasant atmosphere.” These corporate executives made it clear they were not making a concession to labor by providing music. Only 12% said employees persuaded them to purchase Muzak. When asked what “significant human factor” was most influenced by playing music, 81 out of 100 respondents (74%) said morale—the most positive response of the entire survey. The logic of Muzak’s determinist discourse made sense. Management could push the bodies of happy employees to their physical limits while not having to worry about a backlash of alienated discontent (unless they turned the service off). Best of all, unions and workers signed-off on the deal.³⁹⁴

Muzak depended on the acceptance of functional music by labor leaders and employees who worked in factories and offices. One of those leaders, Milton Kelly,

³⁹³ Victor M. Ratner, “A Report on Muzak,” September, 1945, Part 4 “Some Basic Selling Problems,” Section 2: A Sales Research Program, Box 223, Folder 13, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

³⁹⁴ Nelson, “Music in Industry,” 64, 67.

President of the Employees Union at C-O-Two Fire Equipment Company, was displayed prominently in a Muzak advertisement. “It’s the best morale builder they’ve ever had in our plant... They [workers] practically dance up to their machines,” he was quoted as saying. The idiom of morale signified Muzak’s power to create emotional uplift—the music made work pleasurable, it lifted the spirits of workers, relaxed nervous tension, and guaranteed that everyone who heard it would cheerfully “feel better.” Labor unions had relinquished control over the shop floor for the past 30 years leaving workers to cope with repetitive work for themselves. Muzak’s marketing campaign matched union rhetoric advocating more benefits for workers—now the promise of leisure could be fulfilled on the job as well. The lure of boredom’s demise and the restoration of morale led union leaders to disregard the fact that Muzak and management sought to dominate the interior lives of employees. Ideas about boredom and morale were intended to appeal to corporate managers and employees alike but the advertising campaign’s emphasis on functional music as a scientific efficiency apparatus exclusively targeted businessmen.³⁹⁵

“These programs make production leap ahead and that’s what we want,” said Catherine Miller, Accounting Department of United Electronics in the ad “MUZAK While You Work is Helping Increase Production.” The voices of labor made unexpected declarations. “I handle thousands of tiny zipper parts every day. When the music plays, my fingers fly,” exclaimed Mary De Rome, a factory worker in the Assembly

³⁹⁵ The vision of a drill press or die stamp machine as next up on a factory worker’s dance card might feel like a jarring incongruity. Muzak’s advertising copy literally proposed what Daniel Bell described as a defining feature of “modern” art, fiction, and musical composition: “Genre becomes an archaic conception whose distinctions are ignored in the flux of experience.” The surreal act of human and machine tangoing on a ten-hour shift in a whirl of flesh and circuitry, the pleasurable integration of the individual into the assembly line without becoming a complete robot, created imagery reminiscent of FilippoTommaso Marinetti and the Futurists—an attempt by Muzak to dissolve the systemic conflict between human and machine. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), 48; “It’s The Best Morale Builder,” Advertisement, *Mill & Factory* 34, no.24 (1944): 40–41; “A Year Has Proved,” 292–293.

Department of Conmar Products. These new employee expressions of delight in repetitive, hard work did not meet the normal expectation of managers. Corporate executives had felt that, during and just after the war, the rank-and-file deliberately undermined the corporate imperative to obtain maximum production. Muzak, by combining scientific authority with a sharply honed determinist ideology and claiming that human engineering could make workers say what management wanted to hear, began for the first time after the war to compete effectively with R.C.A.³⁹⁶

Muzak equated the science behind their background music to the wartime research and development accomplishments of large corporations. The company vigorously promoted its in-house experts as the equivalents of wartime scientists who had made vast advances in electronics, servomechanisms, computers, and other projects leading to the development of industrial controls. During the war, Muzak's advertising campaign described its music service alternately as "planned" or "scientific" or "functional." In the postwar period, the company settled on the term "functional music." Noting what set Muzak apart from the competition, Vic Ratner explained, "No one else has Functional music."³⁹⁷

Muzak took all the unpredictable variables out of work music, such as allowing workers to bring in records and to make requests, and instead gave corporate managers control of this new production stimulant. Unlike R.C.A.'s music, Muzak's planned service was not "haphazard music piped to loudspeakers" that "may actually disrupt

³⁹⁶ "MUZAK While You Work," 255; "Absenteeism Reduced," 278–279.

³⁹⁷ See Noble, *Forces of Production*, "Chapter Four: Toward the Automatic Factory," for a discussion on the development of industrial controls and the "total control" ideology of postwar American corporations determined to create fully automatic factories. Noble, *Forces of Production*, 57–78; Victor M. Ratner, "A Report on Muzak," September, 1945, Part 4 "Some Basic Selling Problems," Section 7: The Product, 5, Box 223, Folder 13, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

work.” Muzak was “work music not play music,” a service under centralized control by experts in the Research Department of the New York office, who “scientifically arranged, produced, and programmed” every song. Planned music was “timed with tested exactitude,” applying the “right musical stimuli at the right times of day.” In short, Muzak’s scientifically invented music gave corporations control over their employees’ emotions.³⁹⁸

Muzak’s ad campaign represented functional music as a formidable tool. Managers could not even imagine “how great its effect is on workers” without watching the results firsthand. Muzak was “music especially orchestrated for specific effect on human nervous system” and “assembled to create happy emotions.” The service was potent enough to result in a new factory employee—“the Muzak worker.”³⁹⁹

Workers themselves testified to the dawn of joy in repetitive assembly line work: “‘MUZAK makes you really feel like working’ say Sperry Gyroscope Company precision workers,” a headline proclaimed. In case some maladjusted employees were not enjoying a renaissance of shop-floor bliss, functional music counteracted the urge to “escape” by using music “to obtain a desired emotional effect” just like the movies. The advertisements made it clear that Muzak led to “greater profits,” through “better work and sustained production.”⁴⁰⁰

The advertising campaign’s photographs also reinforced the idea of managerial control. Photographs of factory workers were shot from an overhead angle and had at

³⁹⁸ “Combat Fatigue,” 250–251; “MUZAK makes you really feel like working,” Advertisement, *Mill & Factory* 34, no. 5 (1944): 68–69; “MUZAK Has Definitely Built Up Efficiency,” 46–47; “Absenteeism Reduced,” 278–279.

³⁹⁹ “It’s The Best Morale Builder,” 40–41; “Combat Fatigue,” 250–251; “Absenteeism Reduced,” 278–279; “Labor Management Committee Specifies MUZAK,” Advertisement, *Mill & Factory* 35, no. 4 (1944): 260.

⁴⁰⁰ “MUZAK Makes You Really Feel Like Working,” 68–69; “Labor Management Committee,” 260; “Combat Fatigue,” 250–251.

least one clearly identified foreman or supervisor standing over employees while examining their work. This subtle effect assured potential clients of Muzak's ability to maintain or heighten control over the work environment. One ad featured Arthur Gardner, company president, claiming his Breslee Coporation was "probably the happiest war plant in New York City." Paired with the copy was a dismal image of a dreary shop floor filled with lurking supervisors overseeing stern, tight-lipped workers.⁴⁰¹

Muzak professed that its music made workers happy, but no photographic image in the entire campaign ever showed a single employee smiling. According to the historian Maureen Honey, female war workers were glamorized or heroically portrayed in many advertisements aimed at consumers during World War II. Similarly, R.C.A. represented the effects of playing music by photographing happy employees, including the lucky few who turned workplaces into temporary ballrooms. In contrast, the images in Muzak ads systematically portrayed the same scene of grim industrial efficiency: rows of employees in bleak settings with their heads bent down in absorption of some repetitive task diligently worked under a supervisory gaze.⁴⁰²

The discourse of functional music mirrored 1940s business ideology on several fronts. Engineers in large corporations and research universities, enthusiastic about emerging industrial control systems, looked toward a future where mass production would become almost entirely automatic. This ideology of "total control" was especially strong in industries tied closely to the military—as were many of Muzak's clients and potential purchasers—and was linked to a post-war stress on dominating labor as an end to itself. For many corporate executives there was "no room for democracy in industry,"

⁴⁰¹ "Labor Management Committee," 260.

⁴⁰² Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 126.

and despite the wartime rhetoric celebrating the contributions of management and labor, a large portion of businessmen said they felt workers were too stupid to know and pursue their own interests without ironhanded guidance from their superiors. Douglas McGregor used the term “Theory X” to describe how mass assembly techniques created alienated workers who had to be compelled to work and to obey managerial discipline. Muzak pledged to “contain” employees by giving management the ultimate tool of production: literal control over a worker’s subjectivity.⁴⁰³

This discourse of functional music, as sold by Muzak, created a symbolic universe reinforcing managerial beliefs, and vowed to fulfill the dream of maximum efficiency through a low-cost system of human engineering. Fundamentally antidemocratic, the concept of functional music anticipated B. F. Skinner’s *Science and Human Behavior* by almost ten years. The scientists and public relations experts behind Muzak believed human behavior followed a universal set of laws and they portrayed “the science” of functional music as creating order in human affairs. At the core of Muzak lay a set of beliefs essential to Skinner: the environment determined the individual; science could predict and determine human action; the emotional effects of music were conditioned (in the Pavlovian sense); and the design of culture should not be left to accident—scientists needed to make the “human product . . . meet more acceptable specifications.”⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰³ “Theory X” was an appropriate term to describe the conservative, paranoid element in managerial Cold War culture of the late 1940s (regardless of McGregor’s intent). Perhaps only by coincidence, the term resonated deeply with George F. Kennan’s 1947 article “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” published in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Kennan used the pseudonym “X” to sign the famous article establishing the necessity for “containment” of communism. The managerial ideology of the 1940s, especially in the postwar years, described by John Howell Harris in *The Right to Manage*, parallels broader anti-communist cultural beliefs in the United States. Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 99, 101; Harris, *The Right to Manage*, 101.

⁴⁰⁴ B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), 5, 447–448, 7, 56, 426.

For corporate executives, Muzak's force came from denying workers any free will, the aspect of human nature that made predictability and control impossible. In a 1952 survey of one hundred and ten Muzak clients, 67% said they selected Muzak "because of expert programming," and 40% liked the service because it helped "avoid personal difference of opinion among employees" regarding programming. R.C.A.'s rhetoric of employee participation in music for industry didn't stand a chance in the post-war business climate and the company lost its competitive advantage. Ironically, the "functional music" workers heard during World War II hardly lived up to Muzak's determinist claims.⁴⁰⁵

The arrangement, recording, and production of music based on what Muzak alleged were scientific principles was still being developed during World War II. On May 14, 1943, the company's Music Director, Ben Selvin, made a presentation at a Symposium on Music in Industry chaired by Harold Burris-Meyer. In the 1940s, people familiar with popular music knew Ben Selvin's name. He recorded more single tunes, over nine thousand, than any other artist in history and his fame gave authority to statements about why Muzak's programming was superior to the R.C.A. model. Selvin explained "what to play" to industrial workers: "We consider it important to play the type of tune the 'man on the street' understands. A program built on such principle will include current popular tunes, a sprinkling of old-time favorites, Viennese waltzes several

⁴⁰⁵ Dan Halpin knew by 1943 that R.C.A.'s emphasis on worker participation eroded its appeal. He warned: "Much harm can result to the new industrial user from a lack of knowledge and understanding of fundamental principles," but the problem was there was no way to enforce those "fundamental principles" in the R.C.A. model. Nelson, "Music in Industry," 65; Halpin, "Industrial Music," 116.

times a day, a Latin-American tune about once an hour, and a fairly large dose of ‘Americanized’ polkas.’”⁴⁰⁶

Muzak hired popular recording artists to play arrangements of songs, minus any vocals or improvisation, drawn primarily from the Hit Parade, leavened with a few offerings of ethnic or what the trade called “race” music and light classical tunes. During the war, the company recorded at a rapid pace. For example, from December 7 to 14, 1944, eight orchestras recorded ninety tunes—slightly over eleven each, ranging in length, on average, from two to four minutes. There is no evidence of nor was there time for Muzak to dramatically rearrange popular songs and hire composers to write new melodies for specific industrial needs. There was also no great variation in instrumentation. Muzak’s programs did not contain any “trick modulations” or “super-duper orchestrations,” and no vocals were allowed. Work music had to be “strictly instrumental” and Selvin insisted all orchestras recording for Muzak “eliminate all the ‘fancy lace,’” to craft a “type of music that is custom-built for each hour of the working day.” In other words, Muzak’s industrial music was based on upbeat orchestral renditions, excluding vocals, of the day’s popular hits. The improvisational style of jazz and “hot” swing was out of the question.⁴⁰⁷

Muzak mirrored the Glenn Miller sound or “sweet swing.” Starting in 1939, Miller created a clean-cut smooth sound without the tonal clashes found in big bands

⁴⁰⁶ Selvin’s 1920s version of ‘Dardanella’ was reportedly the first record to sell over five million copies. Famous sidemen who played in his bands included Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Red Nichols, and he provided accompaniment for the day’s big stars such as Kate Smith, Ethel Waters, and Ruth Etting. George T. Simon, *The Big Bands* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1981), 500, 53–53; *Oxford Encyclopedia of Popular Music Online*, s.v. “Selvin, Ben,” accessed August 17, 2011, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/>; Ben Selvin, “Programming Music for Industry,” *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 15, no. 2 (1943): 131.

⁴⁰⁷ Bruce McKagan, “Stage Reports 1: Preliminary Compilation of Master Recording Logs,” 1 September, 2008, Muzak Corporation Archives, Fort Mill, South Carolina; Selvin, “Programming Music for Industry,” 131–132.

conducted by Goodman, Dorsey, or Basie. Miller claimed his band stressed harmony, and he organized it by demanding that everyone fit into his concept of a tight arrangement. His musicians were required to follow exact patterns night after night and often complained that there was no room for inventiveness. This “unified, romantic sound” became extremely popular during the war. Miller’s band did recruit certain ethnic groups in what music historian Lewis A. Erenberg called “a religiously pluralist vision of an All-American team” intended to symbolize “an idealized middle-class depiction of the nation.” However, there was no room for black musicians in this “homogenized assemblage.”⁴⁰⁸

The arrangements and sound of Muzak followed Miller’s lead. The company went to great lengths in conditioning the aesthetic quality of work music. Selvin and Cardinell eliminated all improvisation and what was denoted as “extreme” types of musical performances; this was a not-so-subtle assault on the African-American-dominated genres of jazz, bebop, the blues, and spirituals. This programming approach ensured that any factories or offices using functional music would only play mainstream popular music created primarily by white performers, with the exception of what was considered “safe” exotic musical forms such as “Latin” or “Hawaiian.” Muzak’s creation and recording of industrial music, with slight variation, reflected and in turn helped reinforce the aesthetics of mainstream white audiences.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁸ Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 186, 187-188.

⁴⁰⁹ R.C.A. and authors who produced manuals for the use of music in industry also sought to eliminate “hot” swing, jazz, and Bebop. Dan Halpin advised R.C.A. clients to play “tunes known by workers” and avoid music that was too “involved,” “rhapsodical” or contained “extremes of tempo.” Any form of “hot” music or “unusual solo instrumentation” needed to be confined to lunchtime hours and it was never to be played during work. The “Do’s and Don’ts” section of a manual produced by the Industrial Recreation Association in 1944 suggested not to play music with tricky instrumental effects and abrupt changes of key” and concluded “a sweet-swing band” was superior to “hot” bands for industrial use. Halpin,

The staff at Muzak pressed ahead to develop a new musical genre based on scientific principles, but the realization of functional music only came to fruition in the 1950s. During the war, Selvin never explained the art behind how Muzak was programmed. He did say it should be played no more than two and a half hours per an eight-hour work day, with gaps of silence to “Make the worker ask for it!” In addition, only Muzak offered a controlled musical pattern where each “music group” had a familiar first and last number and always began “at a subnormal level” of volume that was raised after five or ten seconds. Functional music was never played at the beginning of a shift, since this suggested “a speed-up and may be resented by the employee.”⁴¹⁰

Instead of focusing on the science behind the creation of Muzak, Selvin consistently emphasized the dangers of playing the wrong type of music to workers. Companies with R.C.A. broadcasting systems and their own record libraries often allowed workers to make musical suggestions. “In many instances they will ask for certain ‘hot’ tunes they also hear on juke boxes,” said Selvin. “Experience has proven that these are not good for them or for the management.” Musical forms such as “hot swing,” jazz, and the blues distracted a worker’s attention, resulting in lost productivity. Worse still, these genres “endangered” a worker’s physical safety “by calling him away, mentally, from a powerful or dangerous machine.” Only Muzak’s industrial programming was dependably “at all times, a SUBTLE influence,” he forcefully stated. Muzak tried to obfuscate the rather pedestrian nature of its functional music during the war, but one

“Industrial Music and Morale,” 116; *Music in Industry: A Manual on Music for Work and for Recreation in Business and Industry* (Chicago: Industrial Recreation Association, 1944), 28.

⁴¹⁰ This is, in part, because Muzak had not pioneered research into programming. The company’s industrial programming followed the “principles” discovered by Wheeler Beckett, who did research for the War Production Board, and Walter A. Kerr, a rival industrial psychologist hired by R.C.A. Muzak only began extensive research into “musical preferences” and specialized programming in the postwar years. Selvin, “Programming Music,” 132.

aspect of its programming did seem effective: the conditioning of employees to think of music at work as a need.⁴¹¹

Muzak thrived because, for whatever reasons, workers actually did “ask for it” once the service was installed and became agitated if the music was turned off or removed. William Benton thought this was because Muzak conditioned its audience with a simple “on and off” pattern. He felt that adding silence within Muzak’s programming created a craving for music among the company’s captive audience. “I always have it on ‘cause I notice when it’s not on and don’t notice it when it’s on. . . . And that’s how it is habit forming,” Benton told Studs Terkel.⁴¹²

Salesmen were trained to take advantage of Muzak’s apparent ability to create a “habit” among its audience. Maurice Mitchell, who was a salesman for Muzak in the late 1940s, recalled: “Just before Christmas, a Muzak salesman would tell the manager that he would install the equipment . . . in the store for free for one month. In January, when he went to remove it, the clerks, having grown accustomed to it during the holidays, would rebel and apply pressure on management to actually purchase the system.” This also indicated the company was expanding into servicing offices during the late 1940s. According to clients, Muzak’s programming practices validated Benton’s belief that popular, recognizable music played in short bursts alternating with silence did condition human behavior.⁴¹³

P. R. Fry, Assistant Treasurer of the Manufacturers Light and Heat Company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, wrote of Muzak’s potent effect on employees:

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Terkel, *Hard Times*, 64.

⁴¹³ Hulting, “Muzak: A Study in Sonic Ideology,” 94.

On several occasions we have shut the music off to determine if it would be missed, and on every occasion, in a short time we would have a flood of requests wanting to know what happened to the music. . . . Once an installation is made, it would be very difficult to discontinue.

Many clients experimented with turning off Muzak only to find workers would rebel. At the Eastman Kodak Camera Works, “employees immediately registered” questions with the Public Relations department anytime the music was “temporarily stopped.”

Corporate executives did not seem distraught about being forced to make a concession to workers. They appeared to interpret agitation over the service being turned off as proof that functional music exercised considerable control over an employee’s emotions.⁴¹⁴

In fact, many businesses throughout the country advertised Muzak as an important employee benefit. “Music by Muzak makes the hours fly and the day cheerful and gay,” read the copy of a Spiegel ad seeking female packers. Throughout the 1940s employment offices and businesses placed classified advertisements for “girls” seeking all types of work where “music by Muzak” was listed along with other benefits such as rest periods, company paid vacations, holidays, hospitalization, and insurance. Employers used Muzak in advertisements to draw potential applicants, since they claimed it made time pass quickly and created a “cheerful” environment. The company’s sales soared in the immediate postwar period.⁴¹⁵

Muzak’s path to postwar dominance in the background music industry required overcoming several personnel difficulties. This prodigious authority on employee morale experienced its own internal unrest in the year before V-J Day, creating disillusionment among a core group of staff. With the end of the war in sight, Bertha Tallman wrote

⁴¹⁴ Nelson, “Music in Industry,” 70, 71-72.

⁴¹⁵ “Spiegel, A Good Place to Work,” Advertisement, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 12, 1946, 7; Shapiro Candy Manufacturing Company, Classified Advertisement, *New York Times*, January 17, 1944, 31; Renwal Plastic Toy, Classified Advertisement, *New York Times*, August 17, 1948, 38.

William Benton about Professor Burris-Meyer. The renowned expert on music in industry wanted to meet with Benton to discuss an article he supposedly wrote, but Tallman felt Burris-Meyer wanted “to justify his monthly check, to let you know he’s thinking Muzak!”⁴¹⁶

A month later, Benton confirmed Tallman’s suspicions. His close friend and fellow board member Beardsley Ruml found the professor’s work “superficial.” Benton “was surprised to discover that Burris does not have a strong academic background in psychology, psychiatry, medicine, engineering or any other special field.” A month later, Victor Ratner noted the confusion over Burris-Meyer’s influence on the production of functional music. After reviewing Muzak’s programming, he asked Benton, “Are there any objective methods, or is the ‘best judgment’ of our staff the best approach?” Benton kept Burris-Meyer on the payroll for two more years, but his public visibility as a company representative and his ability to shape internal studies significantly diminished.⁴¹⁷

Scientific authorities were easily replaced. Richmond Cardinell, an engineer, became the new public face of the man in a white coat who fine-tuned Muzak’s functional music. Finding effective corporate leaders was another matter. In November 1944, Benton made an uncharacteristic error in judgment leading to the loss of Bertha Tallman, the person most responsible for building Muzak into a nationally recognized brand and a force in the background-music business. Tallman ran the company, without

⁴¹⁶ Bertha Tallman to William Benton, 25 July, 1944, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

⁴¹⁷ William Benton to Bertha Tallman, 26 August, 1944, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; Victor M. Ratner, “A Report on Muzak,” September, 1945, Part 4 “Some Basic Selling Problems,” Section 7: The Product, 5, Box 223, Folder 13, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

ever being formally named as the president, but she did not have the absolute authority she felt was necessary for her to guide Muzak. “I feel I must ask you again . . . to give me complete responsibility for running Muzak. That must encompass hiring, firing, and increasing salaries” she tersely wrote to Benton in 1943. Instead, Benton became obsessed with convincing the Federal Communications Commission to grant Muzak a license for an FM band so the company could market an advertising-free subscription radio service to the public. He lured the current chairman of the FCC, James Lawrence Fly, to come work as Chairman of the Board for Associated Music Publishers in the hope he could serve as an effective lobbyist.⁴¹⁸

Fly was under investigation by a special House committee chaired by Representative Eugene Cox, a Georgia Democrat, who had “accused Mr. Fly of maintaining ‘an active and ambitious Gestapo.’” He resigned from the FCC on November 3, 1944 and announced his hiring by Muzak on November 16. Over the next six months Fly’s aloof, imperious manner of dealing with employees caused dissention throughout the company. In February, 1945, he removed Tallman as the acting president of Muzak and took the position for himself. She abruptly resigned on May 1, 1945.⁴¹⁹

Fly had poor business skills and employee confidence waned. In the beginning of November, he wrote a long, belittling letter to Benton, now the Assistant Secretary of State for public affairs in charge of implementing the Voice of America in Europe, asking for complete control of the company since the owner did not possess the skills or sophistication to guide Muzak into the future. In response, Benton told Fly to focus his

⁴¹⁸ Bertha Tallman to William Benton, 21 January, 1943, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

⁴¹⁹ “Chairman Fly Resigns as Member of FCC,” *New York Times*, November 3, 1944, 12; “Fly Music Concern Official,” *New York Times*, November 16, 1944, 10; James Lawrence Fly to C.M. Finney, 1 May, 1945, Box 222, Folder 14, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

considerable literary talents on rebuilding his law practice. Fly resigned from Muzak on November 14, 1945, two days short of a full year after he became Chairman of the Board.⁴²⁰

Benton regretted hiring Fly and was stung by Tallman's resignation. He wrote her frequently, offered her a job at the State Department, and asked for advice on possibly selling the company. All of his entreaties were left unanswered. "Why do you continue to neglect me?" he wrote in frustration. In jeopardy of losing more key employees, Benton acted quickly. In early 1946, he hired Harry E. Houghton, an extremely competent executive who had consulted on a number of war promotion campaigns, as the company's new president. The choice stabilized the company and sustained the enormous growth Tallman had catalyzed.⁴²¹

Due in large part to Tallman's leadership, Muzak accumulated enough capital reserves from industrial accounts during World War II to finance a large postwar research effort. The endeavor was headed by R. L. Cardinell and Ernest M. Werner of the Research and Programming Department. From 1945 until 1950, the company conducted "Employees' Reaction" and "Employee Music Preference" attitude surveys via standardized, short questionnaires handed out by managers to workers. Over this five

⁴²⁰ James Lawrence Fly to Muzak Corporation, 14 November, 1945, Box 222, Folder 14, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

⁴²¹ Houghton developed advertising materials for Burroughs Adding Machine Company and then became a Vice President at Geyer, Cornell and Newell, a large advertising firm. He moved on to the Brown Pulp & Paper Company and grew sales from \$16.5 to \$33 million before serving as a consultant to the National Nutritional Campaign. Benton felt strongly about Houghton's abilities and gave him Fly's old position as Chairman of the Board for A.M.P. Houghton was also placed on the board of Encyclopedia Britannica which Benton owned. William Benton to Bertha Tallman, 21 March, 1946, Box 224, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; James Francis Cooke, "Music Brings New Joy to Life and Work," *The Etude Music Magazine*, May 1946, 245.

year period, approximately twenty-five thousand employees participated in four “Employees’ Reactions” surveys based on a set of thirteen questions.⁴²²

The “reaction” surveys fulfilled two purposes. First, the results were packaged as marketing tools for Muzak’s expanding sales force and replaced advertising campaigns in trade journals. Employee voices validated the use of Muzak through scientific studies based on large pools of quantitative data. By the late 1940s, the company moved from providing businesses with comprehensive research reports—filled with bulky charts and graphs accompanied by glowing summaries—to presenting research conclusions in humorous drawings containing a scant amount of data. Since the Research Department’s methodology was a caricature of legitimate scientific endeavor, the final representation of its efforts in a cartoon format seemed oddly appropriate.

The other goal of “reaction” research was to refine collection techniques so that the results consistently proved the efficacy of Muzak in overwhelming numbers. For example, in the company’s first postwar survey, 34% of employees did not respond to the question “I wish the music would be stopped immediately.” The reasons why so many factory workers were reluctant to answer this particular question were not clear, but the reporting of nonresponses allowed a careful reader to surmise there might be a problem. For all future studies, Cardinell and Werner only provided positive responses in the research reports. This made it impossible to tell the percentage of negative and nonresponses. Questions about why workers might like Muzak were narrowed and

⁴²² Muzak’s attitude surveys were based on the research conducted by R.C.A.’s Walter A. Kerr and techniques commonly used by industrial psychologists. Werner started his career in the Market Research department at the advertising firm of Young & Rubicam. He moved to the Columbia Recording Corporation in 1940 to take charge of the Market Research division. In May 1942, he was recruited by Muzak as an Assistant Director to help create its new Research Department under the directorship of Cardinell, who formally joined the firm in January 1944. “Business Notes,” *New York Times*, February 29, 1940, 36; “Advertising News and Notes,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1942, 35.

offered little room for dissent. The changes allowed every research summary after the first 1945 study to conclude: “The unfavorable reactions to Muzak are so few in number that they can be readily dismissed.” Modifying reporting methods and survey questions heavily skewed employee responses in Muzak’s favor—hardly the approach of any legitimate scientific study. Altering research methods to meet corporate expectations also occurred with the “Employee Music Preference Surveys.”⁴²³

During the same time period, approximately twenty-six thousand employees were asked to answer whether they liked or disliked eight musical genres: Popular Dance, Swing-Jive, Semi-Classical, Waltzes, Classical, Polkas and Folk Dances, Hawaiian, and Hillbilly. Yet the Research Department’s staff believed they could scientifically predict human reactions to musical programming according to universal natural laws. This left little room for thinking employees’ preferences mattered, as one report made clear:

As a matter of fact, early research studies by Cardinell have shown that, in some cases, it is possible to achieve a direct production increase by playing a program that completely ignores employee preference . . . This study shows that as long as an industrial music program is functionally ‘right,’ music preferences are a secondary consideration.

By 1948, Cardinell explained the “principle of functionalism” as if Muzak’s programs acted in accordance to physical laws of nature. Songs were “classified according to their degree of stimulation” in an ascending progression intended to uplift a listener’s mood. So why conduct the survey research at all? One possibility was to illustrate to unions and workers that their ideas mattered. In addition, the surveys were used as a justification for creating separate programs for office and industry. This gave the appearance that the

⁴²³ Ernest M. Werner, “Survey on Musical Preferences of Factory and Office Employees in the Metropolitan Area of New York” (New York: Muzak Corporation, March 1945), 7; R. L. Cardinell and Ernest M. Werner, “Studies on the Use of Muzak in Life Insurance Company P” (New York: Muzak Corporation, August 1945), 24.

science behind Muzak uncovered profound aesthetic differences among different types of workers. Plus, the ability to market specialized programs for different clients allowed the company to avoid the stigma often attached to a generic product. The surveys also legitimated the removal of certain musical genres associated with modern African-American musicians.⁴²⁴

The route to devising distinct programs for office and factory workers began in March 1945. The office workforce was far younger than those in factories—almost 30% more were ages 18–25 and hardly any were over 50. Muzak’s research team used a straight aggregate percentage of survey results to determine musical tastes. Across all age groups, factory and office workers preferred the same top four genres of music: Popular Dance, Hawaiian, Semi-Classical, and Waltzes. Among the work groups, there were only slight variations in musical tastes with the exception of Hillbilly and Classical music. The Muzak researchers, however, interpreted the results quite differently. They wrote:

The higher education requirements for office employees are reflected in a much higher appreciation of Waltzes, Semi-Classical and Classical music. Dr. Lazarsfeld of the Office of Radio Research, Columbia University, substantiated this fact in a recent study in which he stated that “those with higher education (who also tend to be on the higher economic levels) are considerably more interested in serious music than others, while those on the lower socio-economic levels tend to be more interested in popular music.

Office workers preferred Hawaiian music, a form not considered “serious” by the Muzak staff, slightly more than Classical. They also exhibited a greater enthusiasm for Popular Dance music than their factory worker counterparts. But, the desire to pair assumptions about class and cultural sensibility overrode the research data. The traditional division between high and low bourgeois tastes simply didn’t calculate in this case, nor did it in

⁴²⁴ Ernest M. Werner, “Work Music by Muzak, 1945–1947,” Muzak Study #548 (New York: Muzak Corporation, May 1948), 12–13; R. L. Cardinell, “Music in Industry,” in *Music and Medicine*, ed. Dorothy M. Schullian and Max Schoen (New York: Henry Schuman, Inc., 1948), 361–362.

any of the preference surveys Muzak conducted during the postwar period. Cardinell and Werner glossed their data by focusing on the fact that office workers preferred Classical music more than Hillbilly music when compared to those toiling in factories. This maneuver allowed Muzak to explain why it needed separate programs for different types of workers. Adjusting research results to fulfill assumptions about class, education, and taste was the only way to reverse the overall trend in the research against “serious” music, and reinforce the “superiority” of those who worked in offices.⁴²⁵

In a much more conscious manipulation of data, the Research Department staff waged a cultural war against Swing-Jive—a genre of music not selected as one of the top four “likes” among all age groups (in theory making it irrelevant to the final research conclusions). Still, the Research Department was quite concerned over the high percentage of young people who expressed a strong “like” for Swing-Jive music. 56% of factory workers aged 18–25, and 43.8% of the same office cohort, was passionate about this sound.

Swing-Jive was the epithet for Bebop, music played at a feverish pace that was filled with dissonance and extended solo lines. African-American veterans of swing bands, such as Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, created this innovative jazz form and saw it as “part of a new racial assertiveness.” Jive music or what at times was called modernist black music constituted an assault on the comfortable status quo that Muzak promoted. The company’s surveys indicated older workers expressed a “dislike” for

⁴²⁵ The Research Department conducted an attitude survey among 2,088 employees in 15 factories doing repetitive tasks ranging from making cosmetics to precision aircraft instruments and compared them to the musical preferences of 832 office workers in 5 companies doing general clerical work and keypunch operations. The study tabulated the results by 4 age groups: 18–25, 26–35, 36–50 and over 50 years. Werner, “Survey on Musical Preferences,” 3, 9, 2, 5, 21, 10.

Swing-Jive. To eliminate the need for programming this genre, the Research Department concocted something it called the Merit Index.⁴²⁶

The Merit Index was weighted heavily in favor of groups articulating strong genre dislikes. The Index formula—“Likes” multiplied by 100 minus “Dislikes” divided by 100—always distorted the final survey results against the Swing-Jive genre. The Merit Index did not make adjustments for the number of workers in each age group. In a 1947 survey, there were 1,574 employees aged 18–25 and 570 aged over 50. The final Merit Index “average” added together each age group’s “merit percentage” and divided them by four. This meant older age groups with fewer members were considered equal in the distribution of preferences, an obvious bias toward the choices of older workers. The Index cloaked the Research Department’s objections toward Swing-Jive music in the shroud of scientific objectivity. In a vast study done from 1945 to 1947, the department argued that the results of musical preferences based on the Merit Index required the complete elimination of “jive” arrangements.⁴²⁷

The crusade against Swing-Jive and the inaccurate insistence on aesthetic variation determined by class represented how easily research practices claiming to be objective science were influenced by the worldview of the practitioners. At some times, the merger of mainstream cultural tastes and science may have been deliberate, as in the creation of the Merit Index. At others, it is most likely that Cardinell and Werner did not understand how their research was undermined by their behaviorist philosophy, their

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 224.

⁴²⁷ The best way to understand how the convoluted mathematics of the Merit Index functioned is to take an example from the 1945 research. After the Index was created, total percentages of likes and dislikes were never provided. Only by using a study where percentages were used can one understand the ramifications of the Research Department’s new statistical tool. Employee responses indicated that 83.8% liked Popular Dance, 37.8% liked Swing-Jive, and 33.3% liked Classical. Applying the Merit Index’s formula produced these results: 72.8% liked Popular Dance, 24.5% Liked Classical, and 22.0% liked Swing-Jive. Werner, “Work Music by Muzak,” 7, 13, 23.

conventional bourgeois aesthetic values, Muzak's corporate imperatives, and their lack of scientific training. What they produced strengthened Muzak's power in the market as the authority on music in the workplace and beyond. Ultimately their various research projects converged into a form of functional music Muzak called mood progression.

Muzak continued to use stock arrangements through the late 1940s, while experimenting with the effects of a rising stimulus curve and various forms of instrumentation in an attempt to locate a set of principles to actualize its assertions about functional music. By the mid-1950s, the company began to write its own arrangements and compositions. In 1956, the term "mood progression" came to represent how the science behind functional music altered human behavior. In addition to their comic book sketches of research data, the company's salesmen began to use a blue flip-book filled with delightfully enchanting, indecipherable color charts allowing them to narrate the unleashing of Nature's secrets by Muzak scientists. The company began to recognize that the combination of subjective studies with the mysterious science behind the arrangement, recording, and programming of mood progression—the elements that supposedly made functional music act according to determinist principles—were powerful enough to convince corporations to purchase its service.⁴²⁸

Looking forward to Muzak's influence on postwar American culture, Victor Ratner wrote in late 1944, "And isn't it conceivable that, in twenty or thirty years from now, music will be as familiar almost everywhere people work and shop as typewriters are familiar to business today?" Not only did Ratner's prediction come true, but his confidence reflected the broad cultural approval Muzak enjoyed among Americans in the

⁴²⁸ Though later called "stimulus progression," the basic principles stayed the same well into the late 1970s. Jane Jarvis, "Notes on Muzak," in *The Phonograph and Our Musical Life*, ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock (New York: Institute for Studies in American Music, Brooklyn College, December 7–10, 1977), 15, 13–14.

late 1940s. After the war, the company became a nationally recognized brand. An internal memorandum noted: “For a company of the limited size of Muzak, its impact on national consciousness and its acceptance is quite unusual.” Muzak began to expand its business into corporate offices and banks in the late 1940s. At the same time, advertisements and newspaper articles suggest the company also began to target consumer-oriented businesses but there is little data available to chart what happened from 1945-1960 in the consumer sector—the company destroyed its archive in the late 1990s.⁴²⁹

From 1939 until 1949, Muzak received little negative publicity in the national press, with the exception of a few barbs in *The New Yorker* about its lowbrow renditions of Victor Herbert and other popular music. In the late 1940s Muzak did not fit into any rigid cultural category. Hotels, restaurants, and nightclubs advertised Muzak as a source of sophistication and class. In the Sugar Hill neighborhood, Lucky’s Moonlight Cocktail Rendezvous proudly claimed to be the “only place in Harlem equipped with Muzak” in 1944. Lucky’s was a “first class dining establishment” with “beautiful paintings on the wall” where patrons were treated to a “note of luxury,” according to the columnist for “Tavern Topics” in the *New York Amsterdam News*. While this Harlem nightclub owned by Duke Ellington’s piano player, Lucky Roberts, tried to lure customers with Muzak’s sweet popular music, thirty blocks south at Milton’s Playhouse the bebop revolution took place nightly.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁹ Victor M. Ratner, “A Report on Muzak,” September, 1945, Part 1 “The Market for Muzak,” Section 1: The Ultimate Market, 3, Box 223, Folder 13, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; Untitled Report, Box 226, Folder 10, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library.

⁴³⁰ The club was named after a Lucky Roberts composition, “Moonlight Cocktail,” written in 1941. Ben Selvin recorded Roberts “Moonlight Cocktail” in 1941 for Muzak. The tune probably made its way into the Harlem club’s nightly program. Glenn Miller also recorded the song in 1941. The location of Lucky’s still exists and is currently named St. Nicks Pub. “Lost Chord,” *The New Yorker*, December 5, 1942, 15; E. B. White, Note and Comment, *The New Yorker*, December 16, 1944, 15; Lucky’s Moonlight Cocktail Rendezvous, Advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, February 16, 1946, 25; Ben Selvin and his

In the late 1940s, many department stores offered Muzak as a form of entertainment. Baskins in Chicago promoted a mixed message of Old World refinement and New World scientific progress. A huge harp towering above Baskin's new modernistic store played a serenade of "You Shall Have Music" to potential customers and visually evoked a sense of connection to venues of "high" art such as the Lyric Opera House or Symphony Hall. Yet the ad copy emphasized Muzak's functionality. "Our object is not to entertain," the ad read, explaining that Muzak worked "subconsciously" to relieve visitors of "shopping fatigue." The advertisement's straightforward presentation of Muzak as an ethereal form of psychological manipulation might strike a sour chord with today's audiences, but the packaging of Muzak as a health benefit to shoppers and employees was intended to convey a sense of security in progress and scientific expertise. A modern department store equipped with background music eliminated the troublesome burdens wrought by an overload of consumer goods, endless walking, impolite crowds, and the anxieties of making fashionable and tasteful choices. The company's background music was promoted in milieu of advertisements by its clients as a symbol of luxury at play, as a pleasant palliative for demanding tasks at work, and as a modern therapeutic aid to the art of consumption.⁴³¹

Near the end of the forties, Muzak expanded into cross-promotions with RKO Radio Pictures and began nationally promoting the soundtracks of films such as *Carnegie Hall* (1947) and Walt Disney's *Fun and Fancy Free* (1947). Muzak created special dinner programs of films' soundtracks, sent them to all of its franchises, and picked a

Orchestra, "Moonlight Cocktail," Music Sound Recording, ZZ-3232 Muzak, Library of Congress, 1 sound disc: analog, 33 1/3 rpm, mono., 16 in., Library of Congress, NCPC 32501; "Tavern Topics," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 26, 1944, 10; Nina Siegael, "Neighborhood Report: Harlem; at Birthplace of Bebop, Revival Blues," *New York Times*, January 24, 1999, Section 14, 8.

⁴³¹ "You Shall Have Music," Advertisement, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 28, 1947, 8.

single date to play the music in selected restaurants nationwide. In 1949, the company launched a new relationship with Twentieth Century Fox and promoted the film *Oh, You Beautiful Doll* (1949). Moving into consumer products, Muzak and Corday marketed a new perfume, *Zigane*, by creating “a delightful melody inspired” by the fragrance’s scent. In early 1950, advances in magnetic tape allowed Muzak to create special “travel music programs” for planes, trains, and ships and the company immediately signed National Airlines, three steamships, and a railroad to contracts. Word-of-mouth endorsements from factory and office workers, glamorous associations with Hollywood, exciting developments in transportation, and positive national press coverage built Muzak into a national icon.⁴³²

As the technicians at Muzak strove to perfect the world’s first art form intended to control human behavior, William Benton came under intense public scrutiny for his promotion of modern art abroad. In 1947, Benton, in his capacity as the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, oversaw the purchase by J. Leroy Davidson of seventy-nine oil paintings for the “Advancing American Art” traveling exhibition. The exhibition contained works by a range of American artists including Stuart Davis, Max Weber, Ben Shahn, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Gwathmey, Ben Zion and William Gropper. According to the official State Department catalogue, the exhibition’s artists understood their lives as part of a “continuum that includes the civilizations of Europe and Asia as

⁴³² Charles C. Cowley, “Progress Report,” October, 1949, Box 222, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; “Special Travel Music is Being Recorded,” *Washington Post*, August 6, 1950, L3.

well as of the primitive people,” making the traveling show a collective expression of one world ideology.⁴³³

The “canned music czar,” as Benton was derisively called in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, was scrutinized for “blowing \$49,000 of hard earned tax money on any kind of art, whether good or bad.” Soon “Advancing American Art” came under a strident anticommunist attack from the press and Congress because a few of the painters—Zion, Davis, Shahn, and Gropper—supposedly had affiliations with communist organizations. Benton and the exhibition had already been sensationally vilified by Hearst-owned newspapers when President Truman publicly rebuked his Assistant Secretary of State. In a letter written to Benton that was released to the press, Truman said, “I am of the opinion that so-called modern art is merely the vaporings of half-baked lazy people.”⁴³⁴

The hullabaloo gained widespread national attention when *Look* magazine published an intensely derogatory article and suggested that disgusted readers write their Congressmen. The representational form of the paintings became the central issue, and not the political backgrounds of the artists. The exhibit was considered “disloyal” because the paintings did not depict American values or traditions in a familiar form. Representative Busbey, a Republican from Illinois, attacked the exhibit for not representing facial features as they “would be naturally” and felt the portrayal of

⁴³³ Taylor D. Littleton and Maltby Sykes, *Advancing American Art: Painting, Politics, and Cultural Confrontation at Mid-Century* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 19, 20-23; United States Department of State, United States Information Services, *Advancing American Art*, Introduction by Hugo Weisgall, Prague, Czechoslovakia, 1947, 10.

⁴³⁴ John Fischer, “Benton Boasts He Gave Radio a Soapy Jingle,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 24, 1947, 4; “Benton’s Boondoggle,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 18, 1947, 14; Littleton and Sykes, *Advancing American Art*, 20; Arthur Sears Henning, “Truman Gibes at Benton for ‘Art’ Exhibition,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 4, 1947, 15.

American people as “despondent, broken down or of hideous shape” proved the exhibit’s Communist or “other extremist” agenda.⁴³⁵

Benton, who grew tired of the vitriolic personal criticism, resigned from the State Department on September 25, 1947. His defense of the exhibit, that it existed to counteract impressions abroad about Americans being “a materialistic, money-mad race, without interest in art and without appreciation of artists or music,” was especially ironic. As Muzak sought to purge its programming of all “Swing-Jive” music, it was following a Cold War trend. Bebop or “jive” music was most closely related to the modernist movement in art, and musicians such as Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie were under attack for playing “decadent” music. The paradox of Benton defending modern art while Muzak sanitized its musical programs to match “traditional” white American tastes went unnoticed.⁴³⁶

Though the controversy surrounding the “Advancing American Art” exhibition drew widespread national attention, it paled in comparison to the moment in late 1949 when Muzak’s reputation faced its first serious challenge. In February 1949, Capital Transit in Washington, D.C., launched “Operation Radio” into what became a strengthening firestorm of public anger over the “imposition of forced listening.” A furor developed over Capital Transit playing Muzak and one commercial every five minutes in speaker-equipped buses. This raised constitutional issues about personal rights versus the rights of private enterprises and resulted in a case accepted by the Supreme Court. Eight months later, controversy erupted again over public address broadcasts of Muzak and commercials in Grand Central Station. No nationally acclaimed newspaper or magazine

⁴³⁵ Littleton and Sykes, *Advancing American Art*, 30, 27; Henning, “Truman Gibes at Benton,” 15.

⁴³⁶ “Mr. Benton Resigns,” *New York Times*, September 26, 1947, 22; Henning, “Truman Gibes at Benton,” 15.

ever criticized corporations for playing Muzak to a “captive audience” at work, or expressed outrage about factory and office workers’ privacy rights being invaded. Yet, from 1949 until the Supreme Court’s decision in 1952, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker* helped fuel protests demanding the broadcasts end in sites where commuters roamed.⁴³⁷

From February until late October 1949, the implementation of transit radio in Washington, D.C., buses generated an unusually sustained amount of public agitation. One month after Capital Transit began transmissions on ten buses, *The Washington Post* received forty-five letters to the editor—thirty-five opposed and ten favored the practice. Citizens who wanted to stop Muzak-plus-commercials on the buses argued that the broadcasts invaded their privacy. “The small comfort of having our community hours to study, or read, or mostly think, will now be denied. . . . Must our rights be trampled?” asked Ione Conway. *The Washington Post* agreed, as an editorial writer made evident: “Any way you look at it, this prospect amounts to an imposition on the rider’s privacy.”⁴³⁸

Those in favor told stores about how the music made riding the bus more enjoyable. “The music is really very nice . . . just relaxing and pleasant to hear,” declared E. Gillerton. Often bus patrons found Muzak inoffensive because of its nonthreatening programming aesthetic. “They will play good, sweet music, not re-bop” was a fairly typical comment (the term “re-bop” was an early name for Bebop). The rhetoric of pleasure and comfort overshadowed the issue of central concern to Muzak, transportation

⁴³⁷ Charles E. Davis, Jr., “Yes, You Still Can Stop the Bus But You Can’t Stop the Music,” *Washington Post*, February 6, 1949, M17; “Civil Liberties Union Attacks Transit Radio,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 1951, 4; “Musical Fares,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 1949, 12.

⁴³⁸ “Transit Radio Poll,” *Washington Post*, March 6, 1949, B4; Ione Conway, “Transit Radios,” *Washington Post*, January 19, 1949, 12; “Musical Fares,” 12.

companies, and many citizen counsels—government intervention in the system of free enterprise.⁴³⁹

In October 1949, the number of buses and streetcars playing transit radio from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. had grown from ten to two hundred. The *Post*'s continued publication of oppositional letters plus 372 missives sent to the District Public Utilities Commission (PUC) forced a public hearing "to determine whether the idea of feeding music and commercials to transit passengers is 'consistent with public comfort and safety.'" On October 26, the hearings opened on a stormy note. PUC officials told a reporter "they recalled no other District issue that had brought the public to so high a pitch of bitter tenseness."⁴⁴⁰

The five-hour session, attended by three hundred people, was punctuated with "applause, cheers, catcalls, and guffaws." John H. Connaughton, president of the Federation of Citizens Associations, characterized opponents as mentally defective since normal people felt no ill effects from transit radio. George A. Corbin, representing Mannes Park Citizens, believed Muzak was "an instrument of progress." Most of those in favor were less inflammatory or philosophical—they just found the broadcasts "soothing and relaxing." The antis, who outnumbered the pros, presented a unified message best expressed by R. A. Seeling, president of the newly formed Transit Riders Association, who condemned the transmissions as "an immoral, unwarranted invasion of personal

⁴³⁹ E. Gilleran, "Transit Radios," *Washington Post*, February 18, 1949, 22; Rudolph Volin, "Transit Radios," *Washington Post*, February 8, 1949, 12.

⁴⁴⁰ There were 265 letters in opposition to and 107 in favor of transit radio. Davis, "Yes, You Still Can Stop the Bus," M17; "Storm is Due At Hearing," *Washington Post*, October 24, 1949, B3; Edward F. Ryan, "'Twas 'Anvil Chorus' vs. 'Let Band Play On' As 300 Jam Transit Broadcast Hearing," *Washington Post*, October 28, 1949, 1.

liberty and privacy.” On the surface, the controversy seemed to pit proponents of privacy rights against advocates of mainstream popular culture.⁴⁴¹

On the second day of hearings Donald O’Neill, Program Director for Muzak, attempted to turn the whole affair into a matter of taste. When asked why he believed people objected to playing music as a violation of privacy rights, O’Neill testified that the protestors were “generally people with high musical training” who did not “care too much for popular music.” The majority of transit riders approved of Muzak naturally and automatically because they responded to the scientifically proven Merit Index which predicted the “likes and dislikes of our audience.” O’Neill questioned how any person could be offended by programming where “swing and jazz and heavy symphonies are avoided” and “there is no be-bop.” The public relations strategy developed by Muzak and Capital Transit avoided legal issues by dismissing opponents as highbrow snobs—anticipating the culturalist pseudo-populism routinely adopted by right-wing politicians in the late twentieth century. This tactic, coupled with the instrumental testimony of I. S. Nichols, Supervisory Instructor for Capital Transit, who noticed that Muzak had “a tendency to keep the passengers in a better mood and they are easier to handle that way,” deeply influenced the PUC.⁴⁴²

As the PUC considered its decision, *The Washington Post* held a straw poll. On Sunday, November 5th, the paper contained a printed ballot. Residents had a week to cast their vote. On November 13, the results made front-page news. Of those responding, 3,015 voted against (55.8%) and 2,387 voted for (44.2%) the continuation of transit radio.

⁴⁴¹ Ryan, “Twas ‘Anvil Chorus’ vs. ‘Let Band Play On’,” 1; “Street-Car Radio Booed as ‘Immoral’ in Capital,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1949, 16.

⁴⁴² Edward F. Ryan, “Video Option Included in Transit Radio Pact,” *Washington Post*, October 29, 1949, B-1.

The *Post* claimed “the results were neither intended nor expected to influence the PUC decision.” The paper’s editorial board’s expectations were not disappointed. Capital Transit’s broadcasts were approved by the PUC on December 19. “It is evident that public comfort and convenience is not imperiled and that, in fact, through the creation of better will among passengers, it tends to improve the conditions under which the public ride,” read the Commission’s press release. With a distinct undertone of Muzak’s determinist discourse, the PUC cleared plans for Capital Transit to install broadcast systems in 1,500 vehicles.⁴⁴³

Meanwhile, in New York City, a public address system playing Muzak and 240 commercials from 7 a.m. to midnight began broadcasting on October 1, 1949 in Grand Central Station. Harold Ross, editor of *The New Yorker*, collaborated with E. B. White to mobilize public protests against the New York Central Railroad. Starting in early November, White’s “Talk of the Town” column attacked the Grand Central broadcasts. A commuter walking through the station became “the captive of the soundmakers” and White “strongly advised” readers who were forced to listen “in hospitals, terminals, or common carriers to protest to the management or call the police.” White compared attempts to manipulate an “audience in captivity” to the policies of Hitler and Soviet leaders—an interesting comparison, taking Professor Burris-Meyer’s boast about Goebbels into account—and he argued the American Republic was based on “the right to privacy . . . the right to be let alone.” He asked readers to write letters and circulate a petition addressed to the New York Public Service Commission (P.S.C.) demanding the

⁴⁴³ “Here Are Straw-Vote Ballots Pro and Con Streetcar Radio,” *Washington Post*, November 6, 1949, M1; Edward F. Ryan, “55.8% in Balloting Say ‘No’ to Streetcar and Bus Radio,” *Washington Post*, November 13, 1949, M1; Edward F. Ryan, “Transit Radio Approved by D.C. Utilities Commission,” *Washington Post*, December 20, 1949, 1.

offensive sounds be silenced. On December 14, the P.S.C., after receiving 175 complaints criticizing the Grand Central Transmissions as “an invasion of privacy,” announced it would hold public hearings.⁴⁴⁴

The “upper class uprising” against Muzak and commercial broadcasts gained momentum on the first day of P.S.C. hearings. Harold Ross, who was characterized as the editor of “an adult comic book,” by Kenneth F. Stone, counsel for the New York Central, testified passionately against the broadcasts as an invasion of privacy. Stone argued the Railroad had the rights of private enterprise and they “should not be infringed upon.” Like the Capital Transit hearings, the forces for broadcasting provided witnesses who tried to portray the opposition as out of touch. Dr. George Hyslop, a psychiatrist, testified that only mentally ill people would be aggravated by the music, since “normal people could shrug-off things like that.” Clarence DeWitt Rogers, Jr., “found the music soothing,” just like the majority of commuters who (he claimed) enjoyed hearing the popular tunes as they rushed to their trains.⁴⁴⁵

The P.S.C. never had the opportunity to reach a decision. On January 1, 1950, the New York Central Railroad issued an unexpected announcement. The “canned music and commercials” would cease at midnight. “We just threw in the towel,” said a company spokesman. The *Post* felt the Railroad was “overwhelmed by a surprising voluble commuter element” that insisted on “an inalienable right to privacy.” Seventeen days later, Muzak announced it would not renew its contract with Capital Transit once it

⁴⁴⁴ “P.S.C. Plans Study of Rail ‘Noise Box,’” *New York Times*, December 15, 1949, 37; Warren Moscow, “Protests Cause End Tonight Of Grand Central Broadcasts,” *New York Times*, January 2, 1950, 1; E. B. White, “Notes and Comments,” *The New Yorker*, November 5, 1949, 25; E. B. White, “Notes and Comments,” *The New Yorker*, December 10, 1949, 30; E. B. White, “Notes and Comments,” *The New Yorker*, November 19, 1949, 25.

⁴⁴⁵ Warren Moscow, “Irate Travelers Are Scornful Of Grand Central Programs,” *New York Times*, December 22, 1949, 1, 6; Warren Moscow, “Expert Says Only ‘Tetched’ Suffer From Terminal ‘Ads,’” *New York Times*, December 23, 1949, 12.

expired in May 1950. The “public uproar” over transit radio caused William Benton, who had just been sworn in as the Senator from Connecticut on January 3, to terminate this new source of revenue for Muzak.⁴⁴⁶

Capital Transit continued its transmissions using a new transcription library until June 2, 1951, when the District of Columbia Court of Appeals unanimously ruled that it was “the Constitutional right of a citizen not to have to listen to commercial radio broadcasts.” A defiant Capital Transit declared it would continue broadcasting and appealed to the Supreme Court. On October 15, 1951, the Supreme Court accepted the case and overturned the Court of Appeals by a vote of 7–1 on March 3, 1952. Associate Justice Harold H. Burton, writing for the majority, stated transit radio broadcasts did not violate freedom of speech and that “passengers were not deprived of their rights, including privacy, without due process.”⁴⁴⁷

Associate Justice William O. Douglas, the lone dissenting voice, connected privacy rights to whether an individual was held as a captive audience and forced to listen “to another’s ideas.” He argued that a streetcar passenger rode out of necessity and not choice. According to the Justice, the meaning of liberty in the Fifth Amendment meant the “right to be let alone is indeed the beginning of all freedom.” The First Amendment honored “the sanctity of thought and belief.” Justice Douglass’ conclusion addressed the core issue about the use of functional music: “The right of privacy, today violated, is a powerful deterrent to any one who would control men’s minds.” Unlike the reaction against Capital Transit and the New York Central Railroad, the Supreme Court decision

⁴⁴⁶ Moscow, “Protests Cause End Tonight,” 1, 38; “Disc Company to Drop CTC Radio Contract,” *Washington Post*, January 19, 1950, 6.

⁴⁴⁷ Paul P. Kennedy, “Court Bars Broadcasts on Buses As Denial of Passengers’ Liberty,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1951, 1, 23; “‘Captive Audience’ Goes to High Court,” *New York Times*, October 16, 1951, 44; “High Court Upholds D.C. Transit Radio Broadcasts,” *Washington Post*, May 27, 1952, 1.

interpreting commercial musical broadcasting in the public sphere as a Constitutional right did not elicit public outrage.⁴⁴⁸

Charles L. Black Jr., one of the country's leading authorities on constitutional law, lamented the population's "acquiescence to audience captivity." He felt that social commentators evaluated background music "in terms of the incontrovertible triviality and even trashiness of much of the stuff," and turned the "sinister" invasion of "the mental and spiritual integrity of the citizen" into an inconsequential matter. For most of the late twentieth century, other critics dismissed Muzak on aesthetic grounds and used it as a symbol for the degraded state of culture in American life. Martin Williams, director of jazz programs at the Smithsonian Institution, told an audience at Brooklyn College in 1977 that he cringed at hearing Muzak and he didn't "even want to be in the elevator to get to the third floor with it going on." Cultural historian William Graebner, writing in 1991, called Muzak "musical Velveeta," while describing it as "the purest example of the homogenization of music." The sustained portrayal of Muzak by intellectuals as one of the most repellent products of a conformist, mass-consumption society validated Black's diagnosis—fundamental issues of power relations were turned into mere matters of taste.⁴⁴⁹

In 1947, Muzak surpassed R.C.A. as the leading supplier of music to factories and offices. A report written for William S. Paley, another of William Benton's friends and

⁴⁴⁸ *Public Utilities Commission v. Pollack*, 343 U.S. 469 (1952). *Public Utilities Commission v. Pollack*, 343 U.S. at 469, 467, 468, 469.

⁴⁴⁹ This discussion is informed by Jackson Lears's essay "A Matter of Taste." Lears characterized postwar public intellectuals who attacked "corporate-induced conformity" and protested against the repugnant effects of mass culture as reducing politics "to questions of personality and style." Charles L. Black, Jr., "He Cannot Choose but Hear: The Right of the Captive Auditor," *Columbia Law Review* 53, no. 7 (1953): 972, 962, 971; Jarvis, "Notes on Muzak," 18, 91; Graebner, *The Age of Doubt*, 79; Jackson Lears, "A Matter of Taste," *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 45, 54.

the Chairman of Columbia Broadcasting System (which was considering purchasing Muzak), stated that no company including R.C.A. posed any future competitive threat. By 1950, Muzak had expanded to sixty-seven franchises with 47% of gross sales in work-related companies. In 1952, Robert Lee Nelson, who coauthored the pro-R.C.A. self-help manual *Music in Industry*, expressed admiration for Muzak. He attributed the company's market dominance to the fact that it "alone held to the line of functionalism." Muzak continued to market itself throughout the twentieth century as a functional "tool of management" with astonishing success—today over 100 million people listen to the company's programs every day.⁴⁵⁰

In 1977, Jane Jarvis, a Muzak vice president, told a conference audience that Muzak furnished music "in work areas, primarily in offices and factories." Functional music still enhanced productivity by creating an "environmental situation of a euphoric nature." Executives at Muzak now conceptualized all humans, regardless of what part of the planet they called home, as victims of work-related monotony and still paired boredom with "declining productivity."⁴⁵¹

What historians and social commentators missed with their denunciations of "elevator music" was that from 1943 into the next millennium, Muzak sought to perfect its determinist vision of controlling the emotional lives of the world's workers. In this

⁴⁵⁰ Muzak's 48 franchises counted 1,035 work-related clients and the New York office numbered 323 factories and offices. The report to Paley estimated R.C.A. had 1,000 public address system clients in 1947 and explained Muzak's private library of 4,500 specially recorded songs could not be replicated by any competitor for the foreseeable future. Paley did not purchase the company; he considered the asking price of \$3.5 million too high. Approximately 42% of gross sales were for installations in hotel and restaurants. Only 6% of gross sales were for stores. N. L. Halpern to William S. Paley, 3 November, 1947, 6–8, Box 221, Folder 2, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; "Muzak Corporation's Treasurer's Report," 6–8, Box 226, Folder 1, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; Untitled Document, Box 226, Folder 10, William Benton Papers, University of Chicago Library; Nelson, "Music in Industry," 76; Jarvis, "Notes on Muzak," 13.

⁴⁵¹ Jarvis, "Notes on Muzak," 13–14.

quest, the company's practices did more than inform the "poor democracy" of Victor Ratner's days. Over time, the use of background music as an accompaniment to work became naturalized. Silence became a rare privilege and not a basic human right for Americans.

The consequences of having almost every waking moment of life accompanied by a soundtrack are still not well understood. Protests against being made a "captive audience" no longer make front-page news, as people throughout the world practically dance up to their shopping carts. In factories and offices, workers continue to relinquish control over important structural issues and the self partially in exchange for "benefits," including the emotional uplift of background music. Muzak's pursuit of pleasurable production, the amalgamation of behaviorist ideology, and the reconstruction of democratic ends as the right to feel good, unleashed the most powerful form of musical technology ever known. Yet the company's largely undetected history and its influences on everyday life linger unremarked in the background of our lives.

Epilogue

Anxiety over boredom emerged for the first time in American society during the late nineteenth century. Repetitive work was seen as causing the “problem of monotony,” which became intertwined with concerns over racial decline, the proper use of leisure and industrial inefficiency. From the start, ideas about boredom connected the psychological condition with deviant behavior in need of solutions intended to adjust workers to desirable social norms—the stimulus for groups of people to organize and advocate changes in personal, social and business practices. In the early twentieth century, ideas about monotony remained focused on the workforce. Critics of consumer culture, who claimed boredom was responsible for making workers seek thrills in mass entertainment and cheap material goods with the subsequent degradation of human subjectivity and bourgeois aesthetics, were confronted by union leaders and their allies who offered an alternative vision: the therapeutic potential of recreation to revitalize bored minds. The ensuing debate over the problem or potential of leisure revealed how ideas about boredom became closely linked with cultural definitions of personal happiness and self-fulfillment.

Until the 1920s, ideas about boredom were primarily created and disseminated by educated elites: journalists, settlement house workers, novelists, union leaders, religious figures and social scientists. After World War I, industrial psychologists and popular medical experts began to represent boredom as a pathological condition. Simultaneously, cultural trends converged with over two decades of discourse about the effects of boredom on workers. Only during the Roaring Twenties did the term “boredom” transcend association with the workplace and gain widespread social usage. For the first

time, a number of Americans began to claim problems in domestic life—lack of communication, adultery, and divorce—were caused by feeling bored. Ideas about domestic tedium proliferated in popular culture and were reinforced by the complaints of religious leaders over secularization and the commodification of boredom by advertising agencies.

By the end of the decade, boredom became naturalized as many Americans began to believe it was an immutable, normative psychological response to “modern” life—a collective, universal referent for disenchantment. Boredom also began to be seen as mysterious, determinant force—like the concept of “evil”—that possessed the power to cause a wide range of aberrant behaviors. As its own history became obscured, the concept of boredom functioned as a symbolic substitute for explaining the complex, systemic problems of advanced capitalism—a mask for gaining a fuller understanding of the root causes behind frustrations with life in an rationalized, remote, and impersonal web of bureaucratic social institutions.

Today, American boredom appears to be a plague of epidemic proportions—one considered responsible for almost every type of undesirable behavior running counter to what are considered acceptable social norms. By the late twentieth century, self-help books cited boredom as the cause of a broad range of social and personal problems including:

civic disengagement, family dysfunction, the loss of spirituality, sexual addiction, a desire for pornography, increased aggression, violent crime, drinking, drug addiction, vandalism, eating disorders, gambling, job dissatisfaction, poor academic achievement, inability to enjoy classical music or intellectual pursuits, a retreat from community participation, political apathy, the drive for seeking thrills in consumer culture, engaging in extreme sports and playing destructive video games, depression, anxiety and loneliness.

These encyclopedic attributions are drawn from an even more voluminous catalog of boredom's reign of terror in American society, a catalog created by social science professionals. These "problems" are only a slight register of the widespread contemporary belief that boredom is a repugnant congenital malady—a consequence of how the history of boredom developed in American culture.⁴⁵²

The definition of boredom, the problems it causes, and the types of solutions proposed by various groups are all historically contingent. One of my major themes is to show that boredom is not an innate human trait but a historically constructed emotion. How, then, did boredom become an emotional construct? Why by the late twentieth century did it become an all-embracing term to describe a lack of personal fulfillment and almost every form of socially undesirable behavior? Answering these questions requires more historical research, but a glance at the vast number of articles, books, and research publications produced after 1950 suggests an interpretive model. My contention is that discourses about monotony preceded and helped shape what became understood as the experience of boredom.

Whether industrial workers felt "bored" due to the conditions of specialized labor and reacted by turning to commercial entertainments and vice in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth century is unclear. The formative popular and scientific narratives of repetitive work, boredom, and leisure did not contain the voices of employees. For the concept of boredom to make the transition from external social forces (ideas, activism, and the establishment of institutional and therapeutic responses) to an internalized

⁴⁵² Richard Winter, *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 24, 34, 40, 51, 90, 102, 104, 111; Linda Deal, *The Boredom Solution, Understanding and Dealing With Boredom* (San Luis Obispo, CA: Dandy Lion Publications, 2003), 5.

emotional construct took time and it was not an immediate or inevitable response to “modernity.”

After the 1920s, ideas about boredom continued to spread throughout the United States but after World War II they proliferated at an unprecedented rate. From 1950 until the present day, contact with representations of boredom became unavoidable. Advertisements, cartoons, television, films, novels, music, newspapers and magazines, self-help books, and as of late the Internet were and are filled with depictions of boredom. Many children and adults are bound to come across teachers, peers, parents and medical experts who attempt to channel inattentive, “unproductive” behavior into what are considered more socially responsible endeavors. Over time, through the integration of discourse and lived experience (the direct contact with other people or institutions that defined and provided solutions to boredom), Americans learned to feel what today is described as the experience of boredom.

An observation based on case studies, provided by the child psychotherapist Adam Philips, indicates how boredom might become a learned emotional state. Philips defines what adults call boredom as “free-floating attention” in a child—a feeling of emptiness where the child is seeking to locate what she or he desires. Philips describes how parents “sabotage” these childhood moments of inquisitiveness as:

How often, in fact, the child’s boredom is met by that most perplexing form of disapproval, the adult’s wish to distract him—as though the adults have decided that the child’s life must be, or be seen to be, endlessly interesting. It is one of the most oppressive demands of adults that the child should be interested, rather than take time to find what interests him. Boredom is integral to the process of taking one’s time.

The child, in Philips view, is socialized to understand feelings of waiting for a desire to materialize—where “hope is secretly negotiated”—as an unwanted experience called

boredom where elongated time becomes harmful and requires some form of immediate diversion. Philips explains one aspect of how boredom becomes an emotional construct, but a fuller historical explanation to determine what occurred in American society after 1950 must take into account how cultural representations and personal interactions with peer groups and experts shaped boredom as a subjective experience and examine what these encounters reveal about broader social concerns.⁴⁵³

Another of my primary aims is to illustrate how ideas about the problem (and infrequently the potential) of boredom are connected to anxieties about America's status among "civilized" nations and to fears over why citizens fail to follow social norms. By the late 1920s, a basic typology began to emerge of the general categories under which social commentators, activists, and social scientists grouped the effects of boredom. Work, leisure, addiction, domestic life, religion and spirituality, education, criminality, and subjective pathological conditions such as mood disorders were the main areas of classification. These categories remained relatively stable throughout the 20th Century and still are rubrics for most representations of boredom in contemporary American life.

Over the past seventy years, advice columnists continued to write about the relationship of boredom to marriage, dating, housework, and divorce. Self-help books offered advice on a variety of topics ranging from "outwitting boredom" to live fuller lives with Attention Deficient Disorder to preventing "bedroom boredom" to overcoming "spiritual boredom" as a way to rediscover the joys of religion.

From 1950 onward, journalists continued to write a wide array of articles on the problem of boredom in American life and they increasingly wrote sensational stories

⁴⁵³ Adam Philips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored, Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 69-70.

about criminality, especially homicide, and drug abuse. For example, in 2002 a story reminiscent of articles about country life and Klan violence ran in the *New York Times*. In Palermo, New York, a young man, Spencer Lee King, 17, met Nonie Drummond, 14, for the first time after a nine month Internet and telephone courtship. King told Nonie (who believed they would get married under the apple trees on her grandfather's farm) he had a surprise for her. After covering her eyes with a bandanna, King "stabbed her repeatedly in the throat with a kitchen knife," and beat Nonie with a stool, a television and a fan. King's murderous actions, Nonie's death and her inability to detect King's controlling behavior were blamed on an "aching hunger to escape the loneliness and boredom" of rural, teenage life.⁴⁵⁴

After World War II, an alternative way to signify boredom developed in American culture. Subcultures and individual artists began to explore the concept of boredom as a way to mine creativity and to destabilize normative values, instead of as a drag on civilization or a social problem. Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961), Andy Warhol's films *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1964), Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* (1976), the Buzzcocks's *Spiral* and *Scratch* (1977) and Iggy Pop's *New Values* (1979) deployed representations of boredom to rebel against mainstream society. These artists were at the forefront of what became, in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century, a new wave of alternative artistic productions where boredom served as a means to parody consumer culture, the American work ethic, and the irony of self-fulfillment being based on the cultural imperative to fill every conceivable open moment in time with some

⁴⁵⁴ The story of Nonie Drummond has a haunting resonance with how Stephen Crane portrayed Maggie Johnson's inability to discern Pete's corrupting influence due to her mentally dulled state. Instead of repetitive work, the tedium of rural life is considered integral to Nonie's blindness about "reality" and the danger King posed. Andrew Jacobs, "After Telephone Courtship, A First Date Ends in Death," *New York Times*, August 17, 2002, B1.

diversion. Ideas and representations about boredom offer historical insights into the aspects of life people find most disturbing about their social conditions and reveal important shifts in the intellectual and cultural life of Americans.

Meanwhile, back in the byzantine world of industrial psychology, my research establishes the association of boredom with depression. After 1950, social scientists who conducted research on the effects of boredom reflexively accepted and failed to challenge the scientific paradigm created by Stanley Wyatt in 1927 and the research conducted for Smith, Kline and French in the 1930s. In the late 1930s, Joseph Barmack connected depressed vital activity to the feeling of boredom. Today, research conducted with the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS) has shown “the unpleasant aspects of boredom” are due to less than “optimal levels of cortical arousal.” Abraham Myerson and Barmack claimed boredom was a form of mild mood disorder, a symptom of depression. Researchers using the BPS have consistently shown boredom to “be significantly and positively related to depression.” The creators of the BPS, Richard Farmer and Norman D. Sundberg, concluded that boredom is associated with “responses to depression scales.”⁴⁵⁵

One of the biggest debates about boredom and mood disorders is over whether Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are caused by boredom. Leading experts have consistently pathologized boredom proneness as an indication of ADD. Self-help author Linda Deal argues the linkage between ADD and boredom represents a “misdiagnosis” but she advocates the American Medical Association’s position that boredom is a contributing factor to ADHD and its elimination removes “the problem of inattention.” There is a direct relationship

⁴⁵⁵ Farmer and Sundberg, “Boredom Proneness,” 5, 11-12; Vodanovich. “Psychometric Measures of Boredom,” 579, 577, 57.

between contemporary boredom research and the past. The “facts” discovered by Wyatt, Myerson, and Barmack have gone unchallenged and serve as a troublesome reminder of the difficulty scientists have replacing established paradigms—today, the concept of boredom is embedded in popular culture and the social sciences as a pathological condition in need of therapeutic relief.⁴⁵⁶

The number of published research findings in peer reviewed journals after World War II—over 2,000 studies from 1950-2011—helps illuminate the American obsession with boredom. Here is a small sample review of the 132 research topics from the past two years (2010-2011) where the effects of boredom were being examined in relationship to:

adolescent depression, juvenile delinquency, alcohol abuse, smoking, gambling, crystal methamphetamine abuse, problem behavior, use of pornography, marital infidelity, hypersexual behavior, personal relationships, suicide, sensation seeking, Internet addiction, excessive online poker playing, compulsive use of video games, consumer preferences, leadership ability, learning disabilities, ability to complete homework, student interest in high school, motivation in university students, counterproductive work behavior, job performance, mind-wandering, and occupational boredom.

All of these research projects assume boredom is a pathological condition which approximately matches Wyatt’s categorization of boredom as a subjective state characterized by the symptoms of an inhibited work ethic with a high potential for individual and socially disruptive behavior. It seems almost implausible, given the deep faith Americans place in scientific practice as a progressive continuum where new innovations overturn antiquated paradigms, that contemporary boredom research is founded on unsubstantiated and flawed “truths” established eight decades ago.

A goal of all industrial psychologists conducting boredom research from 1913-1937 was to develop a quantitative basis for determining boredom proneness. After 1974,

⁴⁵⁶ Roland Rotz and Sarah Wright, *Fidget to Focus: Outwit Your Boredom: Sensory Strategies for Living with ADD* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse Books, 2005), 78; Deal, *The Boredom Solution*, 40.

a series of susceptibility tests were developed for applied use in vocational selection, educational testing, and the detection of “personality disorders.” Self-reporting measurement tools—The Job Boredom Scale (1975), The Boredom Susceptibility Scale (1979), The Boredom Coping Scale (1984), The Boredom Proneness Scale (1986), The Leisure Boredom Scale (1990), Sexual Boredom Scale (1996), Free Time Boredom Scale (2001), Multidimensional State Boredom Scale (2010)—form the basis for the majority of contemporary research studies on the problem of boredom. The profession’s gold standard is the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS), a 28 question survey based on “true” or “false” answers intended to measure the “temperamental qualities of people.” Besides forming the theoretical basis for most boredom research, the BPS is reproduced in popular self-help books and the most recent history of boredom to help readers diagnose their mental health.⁴⁵⁷

The central issues studied by English boredom researchers in their attempt to eradicate boredom from the workplace are replicated by practitioners who use the BPS. Researchers have “proved” boredom causes high levels of worker discontent and absenteeism by measuring experimental test subjects’ responses to the BPS. The goal of achieving maximum efficiency is a main concern of industrial psychologists. Their research connects high boredom proneness scores with “performance decrement” and “lower vigilance performance” in employees engaged in repetitive tasks. The English boredom researchers concluded low intelligence was the key indication of boredom tolerance. Farmer and Sundberg, determined “more bored children generally had lower

⁴⁵⁷ Vodanovich. “Psychometric Measures of Boredom,” 570; Shelley A. Fahlman, “Development and Validation of the Multidimensional State Boredom Scale” PhD dissertation, York University, Toronto, Canada, 2010); Winter, *Still Bored*, 55-57; Deal, *The Boredom Solution*, 49-56; Toohey, *Boredom, A Lively History*, 48-52.

scores on general ability tests” and that there is an irrefutable “association” between boredom and intelligence test scores.

Research on inefficient production in the workplace has led psychologists to assert that the BPS must be administered during vocation selection to ascertain “individual differences in employees” so the right individuals can be matched to monotonous work processes. The leading proponents of the BPS, Stephen J. Vodanovich and Steven J. Kass, have repeatedly called for more research to “investigate individual differences in boredom-proneness factors.” Popular self-help books also make the connection between boredom and acquired individual differences —“brain structure” and inherited “personality characteristics” explain the etiology of boredom. The role of daydreaming as a response to monotonous work was a central element in Stanley Wyatt’s research and ultimately led to the solution of playing background music. Psychological studies, based on the BPS, have concluded that people who are bored “have higher rates of daydreaming.” Wyatt asserted extroversion indicated boredom proneness—another “fact” the BPS has validated.⁴⁵⁸

A corollary to the “problem of boredom” is finding a solution to remove what is considered an emotional burden or an obstruction to being a productive citizen—the final theme of my research. Since Americans began worrying about boredom in the late nineteenth century, the solutions people have proposed to alleviate it have always sought to adjust individual behavior away from “inattentive” states of mind. Organized groups generally tend to position solutions to boredom as benefiting the greater social good even if they also “improve” individual lives. Though there is some overlap, proposed solutions

⁴⁵⁸ Vodanovich, “Psychometric Measures of Boredom,” 581, 579, 577, 57; Vodanovich and Kass, “A Factor Analytic Study,” 120; Farmer and Sundberg, “Boredom Proneness,” 12, 14; Winter, *Still Bored*, 54; Deal, *The Boredom Solution*, 21.

to boredom are intended to adjust human behavior in four spheres: the workplace, public leisure time, the domestic world of family affairs, and the organic body processes (psychological and physiological) of an individual.

Today, industrial psychologists continue to seek ways to eradicate boredom from the workplace to increase productivity. The technology has changed—researchers now write about using “state-of-the-art Bayesian Networks...to measure and to predict human boredom at work”—but the basic goals of increasing efficiency, eliminating unrest, mind-wandering, and absenteeism coupled with identifying workers best suited for monotonous tasks remain similar to the past. In spite of the intensive research efforts of psychologists, the eradication of workplace boredom is still a chimera. A 2009 research report noted how psychologists all realize “boredom is associated mainly with negative individual and organizational outcomes” but the profession is plagued by “contradictory findings in the literature” on how to locate effective solutions. In effect, the workplace is still an experimental laboratory where workers serve as test subjects for the latest theories—how this affects their daily lives is in need of further historical research.⁴⁵⁹

Throughout the late twentieth century, corporations continued to purchase Muzak as a “scientific” method to alleviate boredom and condition employee behavior. From 1950 until at least the mid-1970s, Muzak continued to conduct research in factories and office settings as a means of proving its programming increased worker productivity and morale while it diminished personnel turnover, employee errors, and dissatisfaction with working conditions. The “planned music” of the 1940s was marketed in the post-war

⁴⁵⁹ Nader Azizi, “Manufacturing Productivity Improvement: A Study of Human Boredom, Job Rotation and Scheduling” (PhD dissertation, University of Ottawa, 2009), ii; Lia Loukidou, John Loan-Clark and Kevin Daniels, “Boredom in the Workplace: More Than Monotonous Tasks,” *International Journal of Management Reviews* 11, no. 4 (2009): 381, 392.

years as “functional music”: the combination of scientifically arranged music—composed to increase efficiency by manipulating “rhythm, color and tonality”—with “stimulus progression,” a secret programming technique intended to act subconsciously to increase employee performance at peak times of inattention (moments based on Wyatt’s original monotony curves). Starting in the mid-1950s, Muzak began to create sonic landscapes for retail stores as a means to increase consumer purchases.

By 1982, the company estimated that one-third of people living in the United States heard Muzak during the day. Today, over 100 million people throughout the world hear the company’s product each day in airports, casinos, hospitals, retail settings, spas, restaurants and at work. The company’s “music architects,” claim they can craft specialized programming to make people stay longer in a romantic bar, leave sooner in a fast-food restaurant, or spend more time in a retail store. Muzak grew from a humble supplier of music intended to alleviate boredom and increase output in war industries into the largest social engineering project ever devised and implemented by any corporation in the twentieth century. More historical research is necessary to determine how people react to functional music and what influence this inescapable accompaniment to life has had on cultures across the globe.⁴⁶⁰

Another disturbing solution to the “problem” of boredom, one that has the potential to affect as many people as Muzak, was its medicalization. The research of Myerson and Barmack allowed Smith, Kline, & French to market amphetamine as a treatment for mild mood disorders—the metonym for boredom. Following this new

⁴⁶⁰ William Wokoun, James J. Keenan, and Dunwodie Consultants, *Significant Studies on the Effects of MUZAK on Employee Performance* (New York: Muzak Corporation, 1974), 11, 13, 24; Husch, “Music of the Workplace,” 65-66; Carol Berman, “Muzak: It’s Not Just Elevator Music Anymore,” Yahoo.com, April 20, 2010, accessed August 25, 2011, <http://jobs.aol.com/articles/2010/04/20/muzak-elevator-music/>.

development in the late 1930s, pharmaceutical companies continued to create new drugs for psychological conditions associated with the symptoms of boredom and medical experts prescribed them as cures for an ever widening number of associated afflictions. Stephen J. Vodanovich, a renowned psychologist, recommends “interventions focusing on skill acquisition, cognitive restructuring, and/or medical or pharmacological approaches” as beneficial solutions to assuage boredom’s detrimental effects. The history of this phenomenon is yet to be written but there are a small number of voices criticizing the over-prescription of pharmaceuticals for behavior requiring no cure.⁴⁶¹

Edwin W. Brown’s article “No Letup in the Demand for Prozac,” expresses concern over Prozac being prescribed for people exhibiting boredom proneness. “Some health professionals have doubtless been guilty of their questionable use for such minor problems as shyness or boredom,” writes Brown. Adderall, Concerta, and Ritalin are all prescribed to help children and adults with the symptoms of ADD and ADHD. Richard Wright argues that these drugs are being prescribed for boredom and “behavior problems that could be helped without medication.” Peter Toohey’s *Boredom, A Lively History* can be read as a tract against the medicalization of malaise and, following in the footsteps of Bertrand Russell’s *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930), makes a case for people to view boredom as a beneficial state of mind.⁴⁶²

Therapeutic solutions for boredom circumvent self-reflection and seek to alter subjectivity by making people feel they are “happy.” The benefits to society are a more attentive workforce, an increase in social harmony, and a mass, vigorous engagement with consumer culture—one contemporary variation on what constitutes liberty and the

⁴⁶¹ Vodanovich and Kass, “Psychometric Measures of Boredom,” 588.

⁴⁶² Brown, “No Letup in the Demand for Prozac,” 5; Wright, *Still Bored*, 55.

common good in American democracy. The innovative disciplinary technologies of our time, personal digital assistants and the Internet, create a compulsive need for a constant flow of mediated stimuli but even these prodigious destroyers of subjective contemplation and mindfulness have not eliminated the core of what is behind what people experience as “boredom”—the feeling of being unfulfilled. The specter haunting all ideas about American boredom is a fear of waiting, a conditioned refusal—when time and space begin to unfold without delineation—to pause in solitude and find opportunity in desire seeking a desire.

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