



# Entertainment, Leisure and Identities

*Roger Spalding and Alyson Brown*

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## **Entertainment, Leisure and Identities** Roger Spalding and Alyson Brown

This wide-ranging collection of essays seeks to challenge the common-sense assumption that entertainment activities have no function but to fill up otherwise empty moments. As such it builds on the term coined by the Victorians Recreation, and argues that in the entertainments people pursue they do not simply divert themselves, but actively create and re-create their identities. The collection shows this process can only take place for those who enjoy the benefits of leisure; hence, in the medieval period leisure and entertainments are largely confined to the wealthy minority. In periods of rapid social change, like 19th century Britain, the inter-linked question of identity and entertainment became an issue of great concern. Orderly and respectable activities were seen by many commentators as the key to containing the potential menace of the new urban population. In the 20th century the development of new forms of mass entertainment, such as cinema, radio and television, has generated new debates, in particular about the potential of these new media to manipulate their audiences. The essays, arranged in broadly chronological order, give fascinating and detailed snapshots of these processes as they unfold from the middle ages to the present-day. As such the collection makes a very valuable contribution to the historical study of the social and, broadly defined, political role played by entertainments in shaping and reinforcing identities. 'In recent years the history of leisure and, more particularly, the history of leisure pursuits, amusements and 'entertainments', has engaged the attention of social historians who, as well as highlighting their intrinsic interests, have demonstrated the contribution which such studies can make to an understanding on social identities and class relationships. This collection of essays explores a wide and eclectic range of 'entertainments' - from medieval pet-keeping, Victorian chess tournaments and late 19th century museums of curiosities to French anarchist theatre and the career of Harry Belafonte - themes which until now received little or no scholarly analysis. As such it fills a significant gap in the historical literature.' G. R. Searle, Emeritus Prof. of History, University of East Anglia and Fellow of the British Academy

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