

believed that the modern economy demanded rationalization that transcended petty private interests. The racketeer, R. L. Duffus explained in the *New Republic*, "steps in because other agencies have failed. He meets a need for order that otherwise would not be met."¹⁰⁴ "The underworld through its very crude devices," Lippmann concurred, "serves that need for social organization which reputable society has not yet learned how to satisfy."¹⁰⁵ Dangerous and marvelously capable, the gangster again exposed the complex meanings of organization.

Various commentators, responding to the standout gangster films of the early thirties, have recognized the genre's critical assessments of modern business culture and the success ethic. Failing to note the close similarity of these films to earlier stage, print, and even celluloid portrayals, they have generally concluded that these criticisms resulted from disillusionment prompted by the stock market crash of October 1929 and the subsequent economic upheaval.¹⁰⁶ Yet even the racketeer, the gangster incarnation most obviously expressive of concerns about the business order, predated the Crash by more than a year. A more comprehensive examination reveals that continuity after the collapse was more important than change in depictions of gangsters as businessmen. Nevertheless, significant changes did occur.

Depictions shifted somewhat during the early 1930s precisely because gangsters had already been portrayed as businessmen. As a business, crime was subject to general economic forces. Gangster-businessmen had therefore risen on the swell of prosperity throughout the 1920s. In the early 1930s, however, according to many observers, they began to feel the effects of the Depression, which were exacerbated by the repeal of national prohibition. Prices for bootleg alcohol reportedly dropped, and rackets in struggling industries yielded shrinking profits.¹⁰⁷ Scrambling to replace lost income, gangsters jacked up their levies on legitimate businesses and turned to a new, highly organized enterprise, kidnapping.¹⁰⁸ Economic necessity had driven the gangster to dangerous, provocative actions he had avoided in more flush days. As a result, the criminal businessman seemed to hit closer to homes already vulnerable because of the economic collapse.¹⁰⁹ But as a businessman he acted in ways set long before October 1929.

* "invented" vs. "real" gangster *

* gangster participates in conspicuous consumption *

"cult of personality"

3

Dressed to Kill: Consumption, Style, and the Gangster

} part of our fascination with gangsters in real life and fiction & films

A journalist in 1930 could credibly explain why Chicago area police had no difficulty labeling the headless, legless torso pulled from the bottom of a local canal: "Pin stripe tailoring, diamond stick pin and silk shirt proclaimed him a gangster and a gang victim."¹ For along with business organization and violent criminality, stylish consumption defined the public enemy. As Americans developed a new kind of consumer society, many deployed the gangster in efforts to understand its promises and control its course.

As they dressed the criminal in fine clothing, adorned him with jewelry,² and placed him in a luxurious nightclub, writers, filmmakers, and their audiences explored the abundance of goods that had transformed their society. Through the gangster image Americans previewed new paths to individual fulfillment apparently opened by a mass-consumption economy. At the same time they pondered how the new standards of consumerism affected older categories of social

* gangsters clothes both blur class and ethnicity but also draw attention to his difference or otherness (Paul)

order, especially class and ethnicity. These were crucial cultural concerns, and the gangster offered not just illumination but guidance as well. The inventors of the public enemy used him to promote values about the urban consumer society he epitomized.

It was at the culmination of the development of a new consumer society that Americans became fascinated with the gangster. The new consumerism had its roots in the revolutionary innovations in production, management, and distribution that swept across the American economy in the decades around the turn of the century.³ The scale of consumerism increased most dramatically in the 1920s, when a flood of goods transformed the daily lives of millions of Americans, particularly within the urban middle class. Easy credit brought more and more goods within the reach of the middle class. Automobiles were the most significant single item, with production jumping from four thousand annually in 1900 to 4.8 million in 1929, the majority of the increase coming in the 1920s. Telephones, radios, refrigerators, prepared foods, and a host of other goods saw comparable gains. Sales of the commodity of entertainment increased apace, with the major industry, movies, jumping from forty million admissions a week in 1922 to 100 million in 1930.⁴

To a remarkable extent the consumption patterns established in the prosperous 1920s persisted in the next decade. Aided by lower prices and credit purchasing, families struggled, often successfully, to maintain the standard of living they had enjoyed in the 1920s. Even as Americans scrambled to live on smaller, less reliable incomes, many of them continued to regard as necessities goods and services that ten or twenty years earlier had been luxuries. Automobiles, telephones, and commercial entertainment had become essential products.⁵

The new consumerism involved more than just quantitatively greater use of purchasable goods. Sellers sought to invest products with intangible value beyond any utilitarian function they served, a strategy that buyers seemed to validate with each purchase. Increasingly, mass-production goods were routed on the basis of mysterious qualities that had little to do with the product's actual use. To exploit the diverse associations that consumers might make with specific goods, manufacturers marked their products with racy brand names and graphically appealing logos. Sellers attempted to make their of-

gangster as an advertisement of lifestyle, style, masculinity, status

increase 60 million in 8 years

ferings exude gentility, sophistication, modernity, or any of a multitude of other desirable traits. In the 1920s, department stores staged spectacular pageants to impart new meanings to featured goods, and manufacturers introduced a spectrum of color to automobiles, telephones, kitchen appliances, and even furnaces to imbue them with distinctiveness. In sum, what the new economy promised in abundance was style, once limited to a small number of product groups and available to a relative few. More than ever before, products were important not only because of the immediate function they served, but because of the images they conveyed.⁶

Leading in the promotion of style was the burgeoning advertising industry, which achieved unprecedented cultural influence in the 1920s. National advertising volume, just 682 million dollars in 1914, jumped to 1,409 million dollars in 1919 and then to 2,987 million dollars in 1929. Magazines carried six times as much advertising in 1926 as they had ten years earlier. Moreover, the content of ads changed to emphasize stylistic appeals. By the early 1920s advertisers abandoned the sober text extolling tangible qualities that had been the staple of earlier ads. Instead, sensuous illustrations, often evoking scenes far removed from a product's putative function, sold the rewards of style. Soap ads promised business success, mouthwash promised love, automobiles promised a return to Arcadia.⁷

The promoters of style sought to capitalize on the erosion of old values and social arrangements, especially those that had provided middle-class Americans with a sense of place and identity. Employment in corporate hierarchies deprived many men of the sense of visible, invigorating accomplishment enjoyed by the owners and employees of smaller units of production. The new work-place emphasis on specialized skills, education, and professional identification undermined the culture of character, in which status had depended more largely on the quality of one's reputation. The new celebration of play toppled the older producer ethos, long tottering, that exalted hard work and condemned frivolous consumption and aimless leisure. Heightened perceptions of geographic mobility, ethnic divisions, and class-segregated neighborhoods weakened the notion of elite social stewardship and the obligations of social-uplift work that had provided a mission for respectable women's activities outside their homes. Elite women saw their traditional roles further eroded by professionals' usurpation of uplift and relief work. Women's role as

increase in advertising quantity

moral uplifters within their own homes was weakened by the growth of commercial amusements that increasingly left parlors empty and lessons untaught. For some, even the certainties of religion seemed to succumb to modernity as liberal Protestantism moved ever further from the stern absolutes appropriate to a hierarchical society. Because of these changes wrought by modernization, T. J. Jackson Lears suggests, for many educated Americans the "sense of selfhood . . . had grown fragmented, diffuse, and somehow 'unreal.'"⁸

It was an audacious promise to satisfy Americans' yearning for fulfillment and identity that distinguished the new gospel of spending, to which the unprecedented flocks of buyers seemed to be eager converts. Beyond meeting tangible needs, consumption had long served to announce social status or ideological commitment. Never before, however, had such a profusion of goods promised to transform their purchasers. As society became increasingly impersonal, goods were correspondingly personalized, celebrated as amulets that empowered the individual holding them. Mass-produced goods paradoxically promised distinctiveness and identity; purchasers could re-style themselves at will.

As the inventors of the gangster explored the new consumerism, their most persistent message was that achievement could be measured by an inventory of goods. Possessions constituted the main rewards for whatever combination of ability, hard work, good fortune, and ruthlessness the gangster exploited. To a large extent, the glamour of consumption served to make the criminal an attractive figure enjoying the fruits of his labors. As such, the invented gangster served a role not unlike the film stars and other celebrities who came to prominence in the 1920s: he illustrated the possibilities for fulfillment and display offered by the new consumer society.

The gangster's status as a glamorous consumer was most apparent in his attire. Journalists routinely noted that bank robbers, hijackers, or racketeers were "well-dressed," and they often offered painstaking descriptions.⁹ Recurring symbols of consumption—expensive suits, tuxedos, spats, jewels, precious-metal cigarette cases and lighters—were the rewards of success. A *New York Times* writer in 1928 summed up the accomplishments of bootlegger Frankie Yale with a catalog of "His new automobile, his tastefully furnished apartment, his diamond stickpin, his two diamond rings, his belt buckle or-

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namented with seventy-five brilliants, his fifty suits of clothes, his twenty-five pairs of shoes." Lest the numbers fail to impress, the reporter noted that the suits cost two hundred dollars apiece and hats twenty-five dollars.¹⁰ Another gangster, a "particularly careful dresser," according to Edward Dean Sullivan, had "twenty business suits of fine materials, golf, riding and hunting costumes, and four outfits of evening clothes."¹¹ The latest styles marked the gangster as an avid consumer who invested the time and expense necessary to stay on the leading edge of fashion. A *Collier's* writer in 1929 described a color-coordinated racketeer who "wore a faultlessly tailored blue suit, a blue silk shirt of a texture almost as thick as flannel, a blue tie, blue collar, blue socks, and a wide-brimmed Panama hat of the \$500 woven-to-order variety. The hat band was a wide, wrinkled and most carefully folded blue silk scarf. A lapis lazuli ring and tie pin completed the youth's ensemble." He appeared in similar outfits, tan and soft green, on later days.¹²

Hollywood matched these sartorial displays, notwithstanding the limitations of black and white. In *Playing Around* a switchboard operator offers an enthusiastic description of the stylish crook: "swell clothes, fit him like powder fits your face—the edge of a silk handkerchief sticking out of his pocket on the port side—high-class duco job on the shoes." In *The Finger Points*, a reporter who joins his mobster subjects immediately trades the drab style of his past for the slicked hair, flashy jewelry, and double-breasted suits favored by his underworld associate Clark Gable.¹³

Along with fashionable attire the gangster acquired other possessions that marked him as an exemplar of consumption. Whether he lived in a traditionally furnished mansion or an ultramodern penthouse, the gangster surrounded himself with a wealth of goods, from antiques or art deco furniture to Persian rugs and priceless works of art.¹⁴ New automobiles appeared with iconographic regularity. While news reporters stressed the ability to elude local police that high-powered automobiles gave the gangster, films emphasized their sweeping contours and shining chrome. *Playing Around's* most prominent prop is the gangster's sporty roadster. An old woman describes the protagonist as "mister diamonds with automobile with fancy horn."¹⁵ In *The Public Enemy* James Cagney's rise in gangdom is clear when he switches from riding in a truck to a gleaming convertible that turns the heads of envious pedestrians. The camera's

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admiring sweep of its graceful lines hints at the enjoyment such a fine automobile brings its owner.¹⁶

The excitement offered by the consumer society, and its urban focus, were most apparent in the commercial amusements central to the gangster's image. He and his companions enjoyed a fashionable downtown nightlife of expensive restaurants, theaters, and cabarets. The gangster's patronage received regular attention in news stories, but fictional accounts offered the most enthralled, voyeuristic portrayals. Films lavished attention upon banquets, theatrical opening nights, and spectacular cabaret reviews. When burglar Chick Williams, in an early scene in the 1929 film *Alibi*, stops his car in front of a rich canopy entrance, strolls past a uniformed doorman, steps over the name "Bachmans" embedded in the tile floor, and enters an elegant cabaret, he introduces movie viewers to an extravagant world of sensuous consumption.¹⁷

Like molls and machine guns, cabaret scenes were an almost obligatory element of late twenties and early thirties gangster films. Much of the action in *Sweet Mama* takes place in the Club Palmer, which includes a huge stage with a revolving floor on which seminude chorines perform elaborate routines. In *The Finger Points*, gangsters operate and patronize the Sphinx Club, an ornate casino in a mansion graced by exquisite chandeliers and an immense grand staircase. The Corsair nightclub, of *Murder on the Roof*, is a luxurious Manhattan roof-garden cabaret that features a tuxedo-attired orchestra and tabletop telephones to facilitate introductions. The interior of Broadway's Paradise Club, one film historian quips, "was as high as a cathedral, possibly to accommodate the extravagant headgear of the chorus girls."¹⁸ In these temples of consumption the gangster spent with appropriate abandon. *Weary River* opens with dashing Jerry Larabee—in tuxedo, white gloves, and white silk scarf—entering a fashionable cabaret and bestowing lavish tips on fawning employees. *Playing Around* begins with the gangster, played by Chester Morris, in a spectacular nightclub with a large orchestra and fifty costumed pirates dancing on a huge shipboard set. So exceptional is the night's entertainment that it is being broadcast by radio. On another night Morris's date worries that their show tickets are too expensive. "Only" ten dollars apiece, he replies smugly. "Say, who do you think you're out with—a soda jerker?"¹⁹

Again the gangster was illuminating changes in the lives of his

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respectable counterparts, for, since the 1890s, an increasing number of them had forsaken the decorous amusements of their forebears for the sensuous world of urban pleasure promised by institutions of commercial leisure. Around the turn of the century, satisfied customers of amusement parks included middle-class city dwellers who reveled in the opportunity to shake off the restraints of everyday propriety. In the 1910s middle-class Americans became enthralled, as had less affluent city folk before them, with the sensuous world of the moving picture. By the 1920s, recreation districts like New York's Times Square and Chicago's State Street had replaced governmental and business districts as the most central, publicized, and widely recognized urban spaces. In large cities like Chicago and New York the popularity of cabarets in the 1910s and 1920s typified the ascendance of commercial urban entertainment. Cabarets were successful because they celebrated spontaneity and sexual expressiveness. Dancing, syncopated music redolent with the supposed abandon of black performers, and the indiscriminate mixing of entertainers and audience offered an infusion of vitality to patrons eager to shed the constraining remnants of nineteenth-century respectable morality.²⁰ The gangster was an oversized projection of the urban American seduced by the promises of consumption.

In portraying the gangster as an exemplary spender often promoted the new consumer values. Fine clothing, and expensive nightlife frequently brought the pleasure and fulfillment they promised. As critics regularly pointed out, Hollywood's perfunctory moralistic endings did little to counter its approving depictions of the enjoyment of ill-gotten gains. Happiness, the gangster genre often announced, could come through carefree spending.

So, too, could spending bring the individual distinctiveness many craved. In several films, the gangster's fine automobile causes lesser characters to see him as important and worthy of notice.²¹ Costly attire set the gang leader apart from his more commonly dressed counterparts on both sides of the law. In *Broadway*, Steve Crandall's elegant overcoat, hat, tuxedo, black tie, cane, white gloves, and carnation are more than sufficient to mark him as a dominating criminal leader.²² A staple Hollywood scene most vividly made this association of fine clothing with individual recognition. In *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and several of their imitators, a tailor's fitting marks the young gang leader's rise. The gangster stands on a small platform,

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looking down on the obsequious little man literally bent to his service. When he finally wears the sharp new suit the gangster has also donned a new identity.²³

Significantly, the identity that stylishness created could be internalized as well as projected, an insight expressed in the recurring motif of the gangster's self-evaluation in a mirror. In *Quick Millions*, Bugs Raymond, played by Spencer Tracy, admires his tuxedoed image as he prepares for an evening at the opera. His pleasure with the transformation is evident: "You could never picture me in overalls now, could you!"²⁴ In Charles Francis Coe's serial novel *The Other Half*, Antonio Scarvak admires himself in a full-length mirror. "The well-tailored clothes, the silk shirt and cravat, the lovely diamond on his finger—all these things bespoke success," Coe explains. Reflecting Scarvak's fine new clothes and jewels, the mirror confirms to Scarvak that possessions have remade him.²⁵

→ As men and women used the criminal to explore the consumer society, they examined the shifting meanings of class in urban America. The gangster's extravagant consumption seemed to suggest that economic mobility had blurred class distinctions. Walter Green traced the mercurial rise of successful criminals in a *Saturday Evening Post* feature in 1926. "The coke peddler or white slaver who has done a stretch of ten years or so comes up from Atlanta to find a new and splendid world of criminal opportunity. His mind turns to the higher and finer things of crookdom. He decides to become a respectable bootlegger. In a few short months he is driving downtown in his car, talking to his customers across a mahogany desk, slipping a careless hundred here and a careful thousand there."²⁶ No longer were criminals unable to transcend their shabby origins. The members of a motley New York gang, according to a 1922 *Literary Digest* writer, soon after entering the alcohol business, "began to change in appearance. I saw and heard of diamonds, ultra-fashionable clothes, limousines, stories of nightly debauches, where fortunes were spent in an evening."²⁷ In another early report *Saturday Evening Post* writer Will Irwin explained that "Shifty-eyed boys of the slums who were before the war content to play extra men in pool-room swindles, to act as lookouts for an occasional second-story game, or even, in hard times, to snatch hand bags, suddenly began to wear two-hundred-dollar suits of clothes, to flash five-carat diamonds, to drive high-powered

cars, to shoot craps for a hundred dollars a throw." Only the caps that accompanied their "Fifth Avenue" attire gave evidence of their working-class, ethnic origins.²⁸ "Conditions have changed," a feature on Chicago crime concluded in 1926. "Hoodlums that used to sleep on benches half the time have suites in lake-front hotels now. They have their hands manicured and dress for dinner."²⁹

Innumerable films showed that once formidable class barriers were now easily vaulted. *Doorway to Hell* dramatizes gang leader Louis Ricarno's rise in a scene in which he drives by and reminisces about the fifth-floor tenement where he grew up. The drab street, vendors, and fluttering laundry are of a different world than the one he now inhabits, and the chauffeur-driven limousine in which he sits represents the distance between the two.³⁰ The spectacular rise of a young man from the lower ranks of criminality toward gang leadership, one of the genre's most popular story lines, provided the basis for the three most successful and critically praised gangster movies of the early thirties—*Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*. Each of these films emphasizes the humble origins of its magnificently successful antihero. *Little Caesar's* Rico Bandello first appears as a small-town crook holding up a gas station, eating in a greasy-spoon diner, and dreaming about success in the big city. Tom Powers, in *The Public Enemy*, is the son of a hard-working woman and an Irish beat cop who provides more discipline than luxuries. *Scarface's* Tony Camonte is a product of a poor Italian tenement district family. The origins of these gangsters, and of dozens of their celluloid contemporaries, could not have been farther from the world of tuxedos, jewels, cabarets, and shining automobiles they came to inhabit.³¹

The inventors of the gangster often suggested that the new criteria of stylish consumption threatened to undermine older categories of social classification. They highlighted modern society's apparent erasure of older class lines by placing the criminal in close contact with men and women from the highest echelons of respectable society. Crook and trustee most frequently mixed in stylish pleasure palaces. "For several years now," *Cosmopolitan* writer O. O. McIntyre noted in 1931, "gorillas have almost completely abandoned their lower East Side cellar haunts and moved up to Broadway, to sit in Tuxedoed elegance at the ring side of the supper clubs."³² According to a *New York Times* feature, in earlier decades one interested in observing New York's underworld needed to travel to a gaslit,

sawdust-covered Bowery saloon like "Chick Tricker's Fleabag." By 1930, though, it had become "a waste of time to journey so far from the haunts of supposed respectability."³³ As the reference to "supposed respectability" suggested, traditional social divisions seemed to be blurred not only by lower-status people laying claim to the rewards of the consumer society but by higher-status people abandoning the moral high ground for vaguely disreputable pleasures. As one concerned writer asked, "Has the racketeer leveled himself up or has society leveled itself down?"³⁴ In the Palais d'Argent nightclub, featured in William E. Weeks's novel *All in the Racket*, "college boys and big butter-and-egg-men, prostitutes and bankers, dancing mothers and politicians rubbed shoulders with racketeers and citizens of the underworld with the greatest joviality."³⁵ "Any one acquainted in the least with Broadway," *New York Times* writer James C. Young asserted with some irony, "knows that the city's 'best people' as well as the worst may be found in the night club."³⁶ No longer distinct species, the respectable and the disreputable were linked as consumers of the same expensive pleasures.

→ The shifting landscape of the consumer society's class relations was extraordinarily confusing social terrain to early twentieth-century Americans, especially those who counted themselves among the middle, respectable class. Never precise, "middle class" in the late nineteenth century connoted inclusion in several categories, generally linked, of occupation, income, ethnicity, religion, and public behavior. After the turn of the century disparate social changes combined to make the category more and more problematic—but no less important—than ever before. Some of the changes involved the working class, including immigrants. The widespread availability of inexpensive mass-produced clothing lessened differences in attire. During the First World War, the income gap shrank as unskilled workers enjoyed substantially increased real wages, while white-collar earnings stagnated. Families of skilled laborers often lived on a larger income than those of white-collar clerks. It was also change in the lives of those who considered themselves middle-class that made the category more problematic. "Middle class" became increasingly amorphous as new occupations displaced independent professions and small entrepreneurship as the typical pursuits of white-collar males. More important, Americans from across the class spectrum increasingly participated in the indulgent quest for gratification and pleasure that had

once marked immigrants and the working class as different. Cabaret-going, joy-riding, and jazz dancing seemed to situate many of those who claimed middle-class status far beyond the borders of respectability.³⁷

→ Just as the stylish gangster invited consideration of changing class relationships, he also offered an exploration of the meanings of ethnicity, another vital cultural concern of urban Americans. In the 1920s and 1930s the social upheaval once occasioned by massive immigration had been replaced by tensions resulting from the expanding occupational and residential mobility of immigrants and their children. Prominently featuring Italians, Irish, and Jews,³⁸ the invented underworld offered guidance to urban Americans of all sorts as they negotiated the shifting ethnic terrain of their diverse society. Despite the continuation of the long-standing cultural association of ethnic otherness with criminality, the genre usually permitted a relatively tolerant assessment of the ethnic minorities it spotlighted. Three factors—the inclination to see criminals as essentially ordinary, the insistence on individual moral responsibility, and the desire not to offend large segments of a prospective mass audience—generally checked any outright attribution of criminal behavior to innate ethno-racial traits.³⁹ Instead, ethnicity was treated primarily as a matter of style. As the gangster rose in crime and in society he came into his own as a consumer and usually shed the obvious markers of his ethnicity. He favored cosmopolitan downtown restaurants over the cheap neighborhood joints of his past; he moved away from the ghetto; he purged his clothing and his language of ethnic markers; his suavity, as in his organization and planning, the ethnic gangster exhibited a range of stereotypical urban attributes. Observed him less as a member of an outside group than as a successful American. The inventors of the gangster offered a useful lesson to their audience: for whites in a consumer culture, social categorization was less determined by ethnicity than ever before. Ethnicity was becoming more a signifier of background than a determinant of opportunity or behavior. The gangster's origins suggested how far an ambitious person might rise in society and how insubstantial old barriers had become. Ironically, the ethnic gangster, partly through his smooth style, contributed to the replacement of complex, progressive-era racial taxonomies with the emerging conception of a monolithic white race.

Casting the gangster as a stylish, successful American, and

gangster's new identity
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based upon his conspicuous consumption
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gangster as a successful American

ethnic identity ≠ new consumer identity

suggesting that ethnicity had lost its former ordering power, did not preclude an ethnocentric reading of the images of the underworld. For one of the sources of the genre's success was that its multilayered symbols permitted alternate interpretations by different audience members.⁴⁰ Swarthy skin and Jewish or Italian surnames were among the recurring markers that might be seized upon by those inclined to racist understandings, even in the absence of explicit ethnic condemnations. For some audience members the mere association of crime and particular ethnic groups justified more than a hint of racial determinism. Relatively benign mass-culture images probably fueled the hatred of one anonymous letter-writer to the Chicago Crime Commission: "There is no way to get rid of these Italians and Irish but extermination. . . . Why isn't someone big enough to put a gun to the head of that dirty Italian Capone?"⁴¹ Any portrayal of Italian, Irish, and Jewish Americans as criminals undoubtedly fanned xenophobic fears of dangerous others.⁴²

The ethnic gangster's rise from the slum to a life of lavish consumption, his mixing with refined men and women from the upper echelons of society, and their willingness to patronize sensuous palaces of commercial entertainment and to tolerate his presence there: all illuminated upheaval in a social order that, at least in memory, had seemed stable and enduring. "A new social strata is in the making," journalist Fred Pasley explained in his expose of racketeering. "The old order is being undermined and threatened."⁴³ In the view of an *Outlook and Independent* writer on "the new underworld" in 1929, "the old lines of demarcation are gone."⁴⁴

Faced with the apparent disintegration of "the old order" of class and ethnicity, some observers suggested that the changes were more superficial than substantial. They used the criminal to contend that fundamental differences separated members of various, still distinguishable social groups. Though the gangster might come into close contact with respectable society, he would inevitably remain distinct from it. Stylistic uniformity was patently superficial. James C. Young, using the rhetoric of class distinction, wrote that "the 'gentleman crook'" was a product of the imagination. Though the gangster "indulges his fancy to live as the other half," wrote Young, "A dinner coat and a motor car cannot make the typical crook appear a 'gentleman.' He may learn how to comb his hair and where to put his hands

facade
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respectability
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at a dinner table, but he still remains a social pariah."⁴⁵ "Home Life of the Gunman," an editorial cartoon reprinted in *Literary Digest* in 1924, carried a similar message. The crook has acquired the trappings of respectability but his background pollutes everything around him. The framed family portraits are mug shots, the many books are about crime, guns, and death statistics, the vase of flowers and dainty, lace tablecloth are atop a beer barrel, and guns lie on the fold-out desk. His youngest child plays innocently, but with a loaded pistol, and two older children, a boy and a girl, compose their Christmas requests—for, respectively, "a nise new gat" and "lip stick and a pare of flesh colored stock[ings]."⁴⁶ Despite a few of the right purchases, this family would never be mistaken for the Astors. In *Scarface*, Tony Camonte's new tuxedo cannot hide his simian carriage.⁴⁷ *Little Giant*, a 1933 comedy in which Edward G. Robinson reprised his role from *Little Caesar*, culminated the occasional tendency in films to portray gangsters as laughable pretenders to respectability. After retiring from his career as a Chicago bootlegger, Robinson buys a California estate and vows "to mingle with the upper class. I'm going to be a gentleman." His attempts at playing polo, ordering from French menus, and choosing appropriate formal attire turn out disastrously.⁴⁸ Society need not fear unknown contamination by Little Caesars and their social peers.

This showcasing of gangster buffoons was a central component of many Americans' efforts to use the criminal to accommodate to the consumer society, because it represented a reconciliation of the new consumer values and the older urge to give order to society through definition, ranking, and exclusion. As many of these examples suggest, it was the gangster's misadventures in the realm of consumption itself that marked his real inferiority. The hopeful message was that style, which superficially shrouded social differences, on a deeper level—yet one readily apparent to discriminating eyes—provided the means for necessary social ordering. Style continued to provide crucial information because the gangster, in his frenetic pursuit of fashion, revealingly overstepped the boundaries of good taste. One writer noted that his gangster subject's suit was not only "expensive" but "perhaps a bit too obviously so to be in good taste."⁴⁹ In *Scarface* an understated upper-class moll tells Tony Camonte that his new apartment, with which he expects to impress her, is "kind of gaudy." "Ain't it, though!" he replies proudly. The flamboyant

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gangster, highlighting the promise for self-expression at the heart of consumerism's appeals, served as a warning that overindulgence would lead to hideous excess. But he also suggested that the standards of tasteful consumption themselves could serve as a reliable tool for distinguishing the socially respectable from the disreputable. Respectability was manifested in refined consumption. The boldly striped suits and absurdly large diamonds of those aping their social betters betrayed a lower-class background and its attendant moral flaws. Sartorial excess revealed that despite lower-class pretensions there were real differences between groups of people. Far from hiding these differences, clothing and other consumer goods highlighted them. Accurate social classification merely required good taste, the preserve of respectable men and women. Moreover, the overadorned gangster buffoon carried a clear message to people from working-class and ethnic backgrounds: attempts to use possessions to rise above one's proper place in society are futile.⁵¹

Despite the sanguine suggestions that style itself might provide the basis for the essential task of social differentiation, many observers believed consumerism's blurring of important categories was not just superficially misleading but dangerously disorienting. Some critics, concerned about consumerism's effect on workers and immigrants, used the criminal to show that the pursuit of extravagance and unnatural mobility could result in a fearsome loss of moral bearings. William McAdoo, considering the "Causes and Mechanisms of Prevalent Crime" for the *Scientific Monthly*, blamed the enthusiasm for spending money of lower-class Americans. Crime originated in the pernicious new tastes of those who spent "recklessly in a style of living to which they ordinarily would not be accustomed."⁵² A *Literary Digest* article, offering the same message, deplored the "extravagant living standards" and "newly acquired expensive tastes" that resulted from high war wages. Finding the falling real wages of the early twenties "insufficient to satisfy their desires," some workers turned to crime.⁵³ Embedded in these analyses were extraordinarily censorious attitudes about spending and mobility. For some Americans, the violent, be-dazzled gangster showed that the new era's emphasis on purchasable pleasures undermined a proper class and ethnic order and threatened the morality and docility of groups now lamentably unwilling to recognize themselves as a lower sort.

Sartorial excess

Many who observed the new spectrum of spending rejected the notion that stylistic cues remained as important tools of social differentiation. Not only had the gangster come to Broadway, but once there he went unrecognized or, at the least, unremarked. The gangster's smooth exterior and fashionable leisure activities enabled him to blend with respectable society. Cabaret-going film gangsters partied alongside men and women of wealth and refinement. Anti-crime crusaders sat at cabaret tables adjacent to those of criminal leaders. "Gangsters now wear evening clothes," the *Saturday Evening Post* explained, "and mix unknown with decent citizens."⁵⁴ "In one instance in an intimate jazz mosque," a *Cosmopolitan* writer claimed, "I saw three reputed killers sitting at a table next to Vincent Astor and his party."⁵⁵ Ed X., a "typical criminal" featured in a *Saturday Evening Post* article by Richard Washburn Child, "could stand about at an afternoon tea on a Long Island estate without exciting the suspicions of some of the guests—or the butler."⁵⁶

As Americans used the criminal to grapple with the impenetrability of the stylish exterior, they often emphasized the role of malleable, superficial behavioral traits. For the gangster often brandished a stylish "personality"—a combination of agreeable mannerisms and pleasant banter—that complemented his consumption. Superficial personal behavior, along with possessions, did much to establish identity in modern society. Child emphasized the personality of Ed X., whose polished facade concealed his slum origins and criminal career. Ed sported "well-tailored" clothes, a new straw hat, and manicured nails. His "graceful" gestures, unforced habit of looking straight into the eyes of a questioner, and easygoing demeanor gave him "the outward appearance of one who is used to good manners. There is nothing coarse or gross about him." Those who met Ed liked him. "How easy it would be," Child warned, to "develop, instinctively, a sympathy for some very likable and appealing personality." "I like this Ed X.," a friend of Child's proclaimed; "He is an impulsive but warm-hearted boy."⁵⁷

The gangster genre, borrowing a page from contemporary advice books, taught that a successful personality could be achieved by the mastery of the art of small talk.⁵⁸ No longer were crooks "addicted to the 'Toity-toid Street and Toid Avenue' school of enunciation."⁵⁹ Ed X. spoke with "quiet restraint."⁶⁰ Another racketeer had made himself "a fine conversationalist."⁶¹ Earning a reputation "as a regular

fellow" in the underworld, an infiltrator wrote, required lavish spending and mastery of the art of amiable chatter: "Introduction followed introduction. 'Awf'ly glad to meet you'; 'Pleased to know you'; 'It is a pleasure, indeed'; 'Interesting to know you, I am sure, my dear fellow,' were some of my stock phrases."⁶² A conversation among gangsters at a cafe, according to O. O. McIntyre, "was the persiflage of the average group of young fellows around a restaurant table."⁶³

Writers and filmmakers linked the artifice of personality with the urban consumer society by showcasing the gangster's glibness in expensive arenas of commercial entertainment. It was in these highly theatrical environments that the gangster's front was most convincing. In Charles Francis Coe's 1932 novel *Payoff*, serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post*, racketeer Cut Cardozzi exudes "personal magnetism" after entering a swank downtown casino. "The gleam in his eye and the breadth of his smile were attractive. The gusto with which he did every little thing was almost magnificent." His smile, according to the narrator, "is worth a million dollars." Cut is soon on a first-name basis with new acquaintances, whom he addresses as old friends. He chats about his ineptitude at the gaming tables, buys drinks, and lights his companion's cigarettes. The narrator later comments, "I had been able to . . . feel the power of the man's personality."⁶⁴

Americans' fascination with the charming gangster represented an effort to understand what Warren Susman has called the transition from a "culture of character" to a "culture of personality." In nineteenth-century bourgeois society, according to Susman, respectable folk based their evaluations of each other on character, a complex of traits that emphasized moral conformity and industriousness. A solid reputation depended on lifelong rectitude before an audience of vigilant community members. Recasting David Riesman's analysis of the other-directed personality, Susman contends that by the turn of the century new standards emerged that were geared to modern mobility, abundance, and corporate employment. Advice writers who had once counseled on the nurturing of character now publicized the requirements of personality. Positive evaluations from the ephemeral acquaintances of modern life, like success in corporate hierarchies, seemed to depend less on deep-seated qualities of character than on charm, good humor, and general attractiveness, which was in part a function of the careful assembly of consumer goods. By the 1920s,

(Tom)
from
Culture
of
Character
to
culture
of
personality
(Gatsby)

the external, malleable traits of personality had largely replaced character as key standards by which urban Americans evaluated their acquaintances.⁶⁵

As these inventors of the gangster explored the leveling consequences of consumerism, they put forth an alternative set of values that sought to reestablish the primacy of social distinctions based on the standards of the old culture of character. For this vision of the consumer society did not include the comforting message that in the midst of change were the sources of a safe new order. Depictions of stylish criminals mixing with respectable citizens constituted a serious critique of the culture of consumption's new standards of social classification. The men who had achieved status and mixed with leading citizens on the basis of consumerism's new standards were exposed as untrustworthy and dangerous. Style offered no reliable guide to the individual's true nature, for men and women had a deep moral center unrelated to superficial display. Depictions of stylish gangsters implicitly urged a return to the exclusivity of the respectable folk in nineteenth-century society who had screened their acquaintances through the tight guidelines of the culture of character.

The smooth exterior, the gangster suggested, could be a powerful tool for deceit. Walter Davenport's description of a young robber's smile that "disarmed" reflected a common theme in portrayals of criminals.⁶⁶ Thus it was essential for Americans to learn, as had the heroine of Frank L. Packard's novel *The Big Shot*, a wise newcomer to the big city, "that appearances in Gangland, even to the extent of expensive and butler-equipped apartments on Park Avenue, might very easily be misleading and deceptive."⁶⁷ Although a violent or larcenous nature might be submerged by stylishness, it would eventually surface. The criminal inevitably exploited his contacts with respectability in ways that revealed his true moral nature. *The Whole Truth About Racketeers* developed the theme at length and emphasized the dangerously distractive quality of the new criteria for social status. "It is wise to remember that the greatest asset to the modern crook is a charming personality. Unlike his gorilla-like forebears in thugdom, he has abandoned his jimmy and his bludgeon for a winning smile and a suave voice." The careful assembly of consumer goods was essential to successful deceit. "The modern crook prefers donning slick attire, swinging a cane, driving a fast roadster, and trusting to his ingenuity and 'gift-o'-gab' to bundle up more 'sugar' than he

What is the
critique?

ever found in a night's ramble through a quiet apartment."⁶⁸ If respectability could be donned as easily as a suit jacket, no one was safe.

The realm of sophisticated urban leisure, the symbolic center of the consumer society, seemed especially conducive to the fraudulence of style. In this frontier of the upperworld and the underworld the gangster revealed his real nature by preying on men and women lured into complacency by his smooth manners and fine clothing. Accounts of jewel thefts arranged by criminal carousers were a standard of the gangster genre. One Chicago gang, according to the *Outlook and Independent*, included a "spotter" who "dresses well [and] conducts himself fashionably" in order to identify the best targets among wealthy nightclub patrons.⁶⁹ In another account, the gangster host of a party overheard an inebriated guest's excited description of another woman's extravagant jewels and art collection. He "listened attentively, smiling and courteous. . . . bade his guests a most gentlemanly good-night," and arranged a burglary.⁷⁰

This concern about the unreliability of the veneer of stylish sophistication was the central theme of a 1923 *Collier's* short story by Octavus Roy Cohen, better known for his racist "darky tales" of life in the Deep South. "There was nothing about Mr. Thomas Matlock Braden to mark him as being other than a perfect gentleman," the story began. It took place at a fashionable resort hotel, where Braden "blended perfectly into the tinsel background." Distinguished in appearance, he had an "easy grace of bearing," spoke well, and "dressed with scrupulous care" in "ultraconservative" attire. The consequences of the modern obsession with personality were among Cohen's key concerns. Though capable of icy haughtiness, Braden could put an anxious stranger "instantly at ease." "He had an infectious laugh, and he . . . injected the full radiance of a pleasing personality into the laughter and good humored glance he bestowed upon" his acquaintances. But Braden's facade was a carefully constructed sham, and his true nature was better captured by the working-class "Tommy" than the patrician "Thomas." "In cultivating this external aspect . . . Tommy assumed a virtue he had not," Cohen wrote; "Morally, Tommy was a total loss. He was courteous and suave and cosmopolitan. And unscrupulous." Braden, who used this carefully groomed personality to sell stolen goods, showed the deceptive power of suavity, spending, and a ready smile.⁷¹

Writers emphasized the unreliability of social classifications

based on style by portraying women—believed to be especially enthusiastic adherents of consumer values—as most susceptible to the gangster's trickery. Criminal gigolos, regularly exploiting their contacts with easily duped wealthy women, received considerable attention as perhaps the most accomplished manipulators of style. They operated "in the swankier night clubs and at times in the sedate surroundings of a good hotel or restaurant," according to the *New York Times Magazine*. "These highly polished individuals, with the latest in dress clothes, socks and ties . . . glib of tongue and wise in the ways of the world. . . . handle their teacups with feline grace and know the latest in dancing steps." Hapless women, embracing them and the consumer values they embodied, made for easy victims of the gigolos' criminal plots.⁷²

The strongly anticonsumerist subtext of these cautionary tales was evident in their implication that it was the ostentatious display of affluent victims that provoked theft. Middle- and upper-class city dwellers who embraced the values of consumption seemed to bear some responsibility for the apparent upsurge in crime. Child, a staunch critic of luxury and spending, saw an "increase in temptation offered by the show of wealth used as personal adornment. The past ten years has seen much more display on the person—jewelry, expensive furs, and even large sums in folds of crisp new bills. Whatever good or bad taste may dictate this display, it is always crime bait."⁷³ The *Literary Digest* concurred that "lavish and unseemly display of valuables in public places has produced envy and resentment among the unfortunate and evil-minded."⁷⁴ The message was clear. Rampant crime testified to a crucial need for sobriety, modesty, and humility—the professed virtues of the nineteenth-century middle-class American untainted by the dawning age of extravagance. In sharp contrast to those who believed that style offered the means for differentiating the respectable from the disreputable, these writers indicted all the new extravagance as productive of terrible disorder.

While the gangster's disarming stylishness enabled him to execute specific criminal acts, its more pernicious consequence was to lure respectable citizens into dangerous complacency. The narrator of *Pay-Off* typically reported that Cut Cardozzi's personal magnetism not only impressed his observers but "dissipated suspicion."⁷⁵ Because their evaluations of others were clouded by the misleading criteria of consumption and personality, even civic-minded men and women

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failed to see or overlooked the criminal's nefarious activities. As a result, according to many observers, good citizens failed to unite in the righteous indignation necessary to purge the evildoers.

Charles Francis Coe's serial novel *The Other Half* focused on this confusion of identity in modern society. Bootlegger and killer Antonio Scarvak poses as a hardworking merchant who has amassed an honest fortune. Leading citizens of his unnamed city offer effusive praise for this immigrant whom they believe to be the embodiment of American opportunity. Scarvak's "palatial home," butler, moralistic pronouncements, and substantial contributions to the city's crime commission cause reporters, industrialists, and bank board members to see him as the victim rather than the perpetrator of gang outrages. Only when a tough newspaper editor sees through this facade and declares that Scarvak is "a wop gangster" does society begin to protect itself. Consumption and style were misleading guides to the true nature of Antonio Scarvak, and older guides, including ethnicity, seemed more reliable.⁷⁶

Several writers, emphasizing the connection between stylishness and duplicity, suggested that only people blind to the dictates of style could see through the shroud covering men like Scarvak. Coe dwelled on the personal traits that enabled a detective finally to get to the bottom of Scarvak's criminal activity. Secret Service agent Lemuel Tobias Bekins lives up to his unfashionable name, which sounds as if it were lifted from an Horatio Alger novel. Bekins wears a grimy, battered hat, worn-out clothes, and thick glasses, smokes frayed cigars, speaks in a tremulous voice, ignores customary courtesies, and, to the annoyance of his listeners, continually "suck[s] his teeth." He is "a queer nut," Coe is at pains to establish. Reversing the message about men like Scarvak, a character wisely advises, "don't accept Lemuel Tobias Bekins on his mannerisms and outward characteristics alone."⁷⁷ A similar admonition appeared in Cohen's "Pink Bait." Only a slovenly detective, whose "grotesquely misfit . . . suit glistened with a sheen begotten of arduous wear," is able to expose the slick Tommy Braden.⁷⁸ Remoteness from consumer values made it possible to see through the veil of stylishness.

The seeming dangers of the consumer society included not only infiltration but moral contamination as well. The criminal showed

that the lure of the consumer society's bounty might draw men and women from anywhere in the social order, even its supposedly virtuous middle, to immoral acts. More generally and thus more menacingly, the love of pleasure so weakened otherwise good citizens that they became accomplices in the criminals' misdeeds. The inventors of the gangster joined other recent social critics in suggesting that the deleterious moral effects of extravagance endangered the middle class as much or even more than they did the lower class previously perceived to be most at risk.⁷⁹

In blunt parables, people resorted to crime so they could enjoy the luxuries and thrills of the big city. Youths, perceived as the vanguard of the pleasure seekers, seemed most susceptible to moral disaster. "Damned Young," a 1926 *Collier's* feature on young prisoners by William G. Shepherd, made the case with typical indignation. The up-to-date, mostly purchased pleasures of ordinary youth—movies, flashy clothes, jazz music, joyrides, dancing—easily led to moral corruption and criminality. "As clean cut a young fellow as you could want to see plays a saxophone in the band of one of our penitentiaries. He knew all about saxophones," Shepherd explained; "he was that kind of a pleasure lover." His criminality proclaimed a bleak message about the dangers of the all-too-common reckless pursuit of pleasure. "This boy had been a thrill seeker," Shepherd warned, and in his search for thrills he tried the heroin that led him to shoot a man. But "there was something more than drugs that made him a criminal. It was kick hunting that set him wrong." Another boy had stolen an automobile and had "joy-riden in it nightly . . . with a short-skirted, painted, sixteen-year-old, dance-loving, movie-mad 'sweetheart.'" "For gasoline, dance and movie money" the boy and a companion held up gasoline stations, eventually killing a police officer. Looking at him, Shepherd wrote, "you could see his life" and, he implied, the consequences of the new ethos of pleasure:

the jazz, the girls, the parking, the hip bottles, the movies, the latest foolish songs, the latest comic strips, the latest slang, the crazy hunt for thrills, the gasoline that must be got by hook or crook for the nightly rides; the new suits, with the widest possible trousers; the new neckties; the latest hats with the gayest ribbons, that must come from somebody's pockets while he idled away his daylight hours in pool

halls, drug stores or moving-picture theatres. . . . He was the new American criminal personified; the laughing, twentieth-century, thrill-hunting killer of our great cities.⁸⁰

"A larger measure of leisure and a larger sphere of experience in which to spend it," a Chicago editor concurred, "have brought new perils to bear upon youth."⁸¹ Youth was "drunk on thrills and excitement," Richard Washburn Child less soberly agreed.⁸² The new purchasable pleasures, the criminal showed, could draw ordinary people to moral disaster.

While youths often seemed at greatest risk other Americans were far from immune from this moral contamination. Indeed, writers regularly contended that it was middle-class parents' pursuit of pleasure that spurred youthful criminality. Child, tying extravagance to the vogue of irresponsibility, contended the crime problem resulted from "boys and girls who are neglected, who are ruined by being given too much money to spend and altogether too little responsibility." Carousing parents failed in their moral duty to rear children with attentive discipline. More generally, acquisitiveness and pleasure-seeking seemed to have rotted Americans' moral fiber. For Child, the subject of crime offered the opportunity for a jeremiad about "a nation with too much money to spend, too much ease, too much excitement and too much restlessness."⁸³ Couching his critique of the moral dangers of consumption in medical terms, a neurologist quoted in the *New York Times* attributed criminality to "the tremendous growth of pleasure automobiles and moving pictures in this country . . . and the phenomenal sweep of jazz across the country [that] have drained off far more nervous vitality from our people than those of other countries without putting anything in the way of energy into the reservoir of our national strength."⁸⁴

The new pleasure ethos, leading so-called respectable people to immoral acts, seemed to erase conventional distinctions between good and evil and replace them with a pervasive moral ambiguity. At cabarets, leading citizens enjoyed the same salacious entertainment and illegal alcohol that thrilled their gangster counterparts.⁸⁵ Especially for supporters of prohibition, the respectable purchaser's complicity with violent bootleggers provided the sharpest evidence that the pursuit of pleasure had triggered a deeply disturbing moral breakdown even at the top of the social hierarchy. As a *Woman Citizen* editorial suggested, the moral equivalents of the bootlegger were

"men and women who think of themselves as the better element in the community."⁸⁶

A bitter 1932 editorial reprinted in *Literary Digest* lambasted the moral laxity that seemed to accompany the modern pursuit of pleasure. The editorial, originally in the *New York World-Telegram*, expressed outrage and despair after the discovery of the body of the kidnapped infant son of Charles Lindbergh and his wife. For many, the kidnapping and murder had come to symbolize American lawlessness. The crime seemed to result from the duplicity that had become an accepted part of modern life:

Much of the trouble we are in harks back to the illusionment that people can be crooked in certain respects and straight in others, that collateral is better security than character, that cleverness brings greater reward than reliability, and that success is not the real thing unless it can be measured by money. . . . Indirectly the wicked, wanton, causeless crime can be attributed to the wise-cracking, jazzed-up, hypocritical age in which we live.⁸⁷

Once again, criminal and respectable citizen merged in a single crooked figure. The problem was not merely the duplicity of the dangerous other but that the insider, too, had been rendered amoral by the values of the consumer society. A return to the unyielding standards of character that had supposedly prevailed in a more upstanding era seemed the only possibility of redemption. The heinous crime showed that cleverness, wisecracking, and self-gratification, the stylish, valued activities of the new era, could result in nothing but fatal hypocrisy and "illusionment."

Many of the aspects of the consumer society that troubled journalists and genre novelists also concerned F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose *Jay Gatsby* was a close cousin to Coe's *Antonio Scarvak*. *Gatsby*—defined by his palatial home, fabled parties, gleaming motorcar, and wardrobe of expensive suits and thick silk shirts—was not the man he at first seemed to be. This bootlegger was a master of "personality," that "unbroken series of successful gestures." *Gatsby's* mastery of the superficial inevitably brings narrator Nick Carraway, like others, under his spell:

He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that

