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‘Continuity, change and performativity in leisure: English Folk Dance and modernity 1900-1939.’


Abstract
In post-industrial countries, folk dance may be considered as an embodied performance of a perceived tradition and is representational of values attached to an imagined past. The English Country Dance is one such form of folk dance, having been revived, or re-invented in the early twentieth century by Cecil Sharp who claimed it to be a national dance of England. However, Sharp re-defined it not as a popular and spontaneous leisure activity but as a serious middle-class art form representing an English sensibility and the virtues of a pre-industrial pastoral collectivism. After the hiatus of the First World War the English Country Dance continued to offer a resistance to the modern, this time in the form of a burgeoning popular dance culture which embraced urban sophistication and jazz dance.

Using the concept of performativity this paper attempts to demonstrate that the leisure context of the English Country Dance, in terms of spatiality, style, consumption and gender, enabled a continuity of resistance to the modern in a changing socio-cultural environment. The paper draws upon on primary research in the archive of the Manchester Branch of the English Folk Dance Society and upon records of contemporary dance in the Mass Observation archive.

Keywords: history; dance; identity; jazz; representation; gender; Mass Observation

Introduction
Although dancing has historically been a universally popular form of leisure, it remains relatively under-explored within the literature of leisure studies. Yet, as Langhamer (2000 p.66) observes, dance is a complex leisure experience with fluid social and cultural dimensions. As an embodied leisure practice, dance is amenable to methodological approaches which explain the capacity of leisure to create cultural identity (Atenico, 2008; Bramham, 2007; Critcher, 2000; Lashua, 2007; Shoupe, 2001; Urqufa, 2005). Furthermore, spatial analyses of dance in terms of its performance, regulation and venue, provide insights to the creation, control and meaning of leisure spaces (Crouch, 2007; Silk, 2007). This paper draws from these methodological perspectives to explore the historical formation of identity and leisure space through a case study of folk dance, in particular the English Country Dance. It provides an analytical narrative of this still popular form of social folk dance (now often erroneously referred to in England as a ceilidh or hoedown) from its revival in the early twentieth century to the outbreak of the Second World War and suggests that while the underlying meanings of identity, place and space embodied in the English Country Dance appear to remain relatively stable, they are historically re-invented and re-contextualised in response to social and cultural change.
Folk dance as a leisure activity

Folk dancing is a geographically distributed leisure activity which is practised in many countries, notably the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Ireland, New Zealand and the United States. In developed countries such as these folk dance tends to be performed as a revival of an older pre-industrial form of dance, not only for its intrinsic enjoyment but also because the dancers engage, to varying degrees, in the preservation or re-creation of a national or regional tradition. In this process, the performance of folk dance acquires a layered meaning in that it becomes a conscious symbolic act, representational of something beyond its immediate occurrence. In contrast, the spontaneous unmediated forms of dance it purports to re-create were not conceptualised as “folk” dances by participants and were undertaken simply for their immediate and non-intellectualised enjoyment, and may thus be considered as non-representational (Cresswell, 2006; Nash, 2000; Reviel, 2004; Ruyter, 1995).

However, the authenticity of revived folk traditions has been questioned, notably by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) who suggest that many supposedly traditional practices were invented for national purposes in the late nineteenth century. While this has engendered critiques of folk dance based upon Anderson’s (1991) concept of imagined communities and the alignment of the folk tradition with a nascent nationalism (Abrahams, 1993; Feintuch 2001), the precise nature of the relationship between folk dance and national identity remains indeterminate and differs between countries. Scottish folk dance, for example, is one facet of a wider folk tradition that also includes music, musical instrumentation, dress, poetry, language and the memory of subjugation, and a similar argument has been made on behalf of Irish folk dance (Wulff, 2005). The English folk tradition, in contrast, is more resistant to such analysis, largely because England, unlike Ireland, Scotland and Wales did not experience a prominent nationalist movement in the late nineteenth century and, as Kumar (2003, p. 76) suggests, there was instead a “moment of Englishness” that was essentially cultural rather than political. This in turn raises questions about the representational content of English folk dance as an embodied leisure activity; in particular those concerning its meanings and associated forms of identity.

As English folk dance evolved from a non-representational to a representational activity, its performativity was subject to historical change. Performativity is a concept developed by Judith Butler (Salih, 2004) which takes as its premise that a word may not only name, but in some sense may perform what it names. Transferring this notion to performance, Butler states that performativity explains meaning, which is not established by the actor as an individual because what is performed are “the cultural norms that condition and limit the actor in the situation [and] the cultural norms of reception” (Salih, 2004, p. 345). The performance of folk dance is thus imbued with cultural meanings determined by the situated context of both dancer and spectator and, following the emergence in the nineteenth
century of a distinction between “folk” and other forms of music or dance (Francmanis, 2002), the term “folk” began to ascribe a representational meaning to embodied and performed dances categorised as such. In particular, folk stood in contradistinction to the normative and fashionable modern, reflecting Crouch’s (2007) observation that performativity is useful in explaining the reconfigurative potential of performance to challenge dominant contexts. While performativity has been interpreted in subtly differing ways by a number of writers (Crouch, 2007, p.134; Franklin, 2006, p.397; Markusen, 2005; Nash, 2000; O’Shea, 2008; Rojek, 2006, pp. 482-3), there is a consensual view that the performative dimensions of an activity, in the context of the space in which these are performed, are the means by which meaning and identity are structured. Thus, according to Lloyd (1999), identity is not something simply acquired but is constituted by action; it is a symbolic realm within which the performative enactment of identity occurs. Barker (2006, p. 501) develops this interpretation in commenting upon the performativity of style as a signifying practice in the formation of identity, while Rostas (1996) has described performativity simply as the loading of an act with meaning. Synthesising these interpretations, an analysis of the English Country Dance as a performative leisure practice might explore the meanings of its stylistic and spatial aspects within a contemporaneous social and cultural environment.

Whereas previous work has investigated the early twentieth century revival of English folk dance in the context of education (Bloomfield, 2001), of class (Harker, 1985, p. 200) and of cultural theory (Boyes, 1993), this paper approaches English folk dance from a leisure studies perspective. It focuses on the inter-war years as a crucial period of cultural change in which dancing experienced rapid growth through the expansion of commercial dance halls (Jones, 1986, p. 44), while there was simultaneously a marked decline in the authority of English culture and nationalistic fervour (Green, 1977), both of which were inimical to the idea of a national folk dance. This paper argues that the representational content of English folk dance displayed both continuity and change in response to social change and the emergence of a new popular dance culture. The next section provides a brief account of the revival of folk dance in England and the founding of the English Folk Dance Society in the period immediately prior to the First World War. This is followed by an empirical analysis of the English Country Dance in England in the period 1919-1939.

The revival / re-invention of the English Country Dance
The principal figure in the revival / re-invention of English folk dance and song was Cecil Sharp who, between 1907 and 1924, published fifteen collections of dances gathered from John Playford’s *The English Dancing Master*, first published in 1651, and on field trips in rural southern England and the Appalachian Mountains, where authentic forms of traditional English dances were believed to survive. Sharp identified three categories of English folk dance: the Morris, the Sword Dance and the English Country Dance, the latter being in Sharp’s (1909, p.15) view, an easily learned “social, recreative diversion” undertaken by ordinary men and women as part of everyday life. The principal distinguishing features of the country dance were its inclusion of women and its figurative form, which required at least four
dancers to perform steps and movements in concert with each other but which was also sufficiently adaptable to accommodate many more people. The English Country Dance, thus defined as a recreational social dance, may accordingly be investigated as a leisure practice within the discourses of dance and embodiment as variously outlined by Crouch (2000; 2007), Horton (2001) and Shoupe (2001) and is adopted as the focus of this paper.

As Sharp was aware, the dances described in Playford’s collection were corrupt versions of earlier dances (Karpeles, 1967, p. 105). Most were believed originally to have been popular amongst the peasantry and to have later been adopted by the aristocracy as an “agreeable alternative” to classical dances such as the Minuet or Gavotte. As a result, country dances became embellished in style through fashion and individual whim (Sharp, 1927a, p. 9) and consequently the degree to which the dances that Sharp promulgated were in reality versions of a national traditional dance has been questioned (Whitlock, 1999). Mary Neal’s contemporaneous Esperance Club, for example, which organised folk dancing as a recreational pastime for working-class girls in London, insisted it should be learned directly from a traditional dancer rather than from a theoretical and retrospectively mediated reconstruction (Szczelkun, 1993). Furthermore, Sharp and Neal held conflicting views on the nature and function of English folk dance, Sharp being concerned primarily to preserve a perceived authentic dance as an art form while Neal (1910) encouraged its popularisation and enjoyment, and resisted “the hindering touch of the pedant” and music teacher. This crucial distinction aroused tensions within the folk dance movement over the “danger of over-emphasizing the art-side at the expense of the unconscious joy side” (Karpeles, 1967, p. 87); however, the alleged technical inaccuracies of the Esperance dancers allowed Sharp’s approach to prevail. Consequently, English folk dance was revived primarily as an art rather than a social leisure form and Sharp’s mediated versions of country dances were offered and, in the main, received as authoritative and authentic. Unlike the Morris dance which was thought by some to be Moorish in origin, the country dance was re-constructed as being “wholly and demonstrably English” (Sharp, 1909, p. 11); it was the invention of the English peasant, a “sole survivor of a homogeneous society” whose chief characteristics were “reserve, personal detachment and dignity” (Karpeles, 1967, p. 178) and the only folk dance in Europe to have been practised by all social classes (Sharp, 1924, p. 20). The claim to authenticity was problematic in that, as Nash (2000) observes, authenticity is incompatible with the process of mediation. As Hetherington (1998) and Macdonald (1997) note, the idea of authenticity requires an inauthentic which, for Sharp, was the modern and industrialised England (Colls, 2002, p. 303) which he claimed to have been responsible for the demise of the country dance in rural areas through the displacement of traditional songs and dances by their urban counterparts, namely the polka, quadrille and waltz and “tawdry ballads and strident street songs” (Sharp, 1909, p. 7). Nevertheless, the perceived authenticity of the English Country Dance provided the foundation for its representational identification of the imagined cultural values of pre-modern and pre-industrial communities, with the English
country dancer reflecting Crouch’s (2000) idea of the capacity of the body to serve as both the focus and the content of cultural representation. It is important to note that the folk dance revival was not an isolated phenomenon but was one facet of a wider contemporary cultural prioritisation of the pastoral which idealised the peasant and English village life while excluding the contemporary popular culture of the urban working classes (Wiener, 1981, pp. 50-51; Williams, 1975, p. 309).

Sharp’s instructions on the correct performance of the dance placed a pronounced emphasis on style. In contrast to the ornamented, ostentatious and individualistic style of the formal dances of polite society, the country dance was to embody the unsophisticated style of the “unlettered classes” amongst whom the dances were thought to have originated (Sharp 1909, p.12). It was thus characterised as “a unique instrument for the expression of those ideas that are held and felt collectively, but peculiarly unfitted for the exploitation of personal idiosyncrasies” (Sharp, 1927b, p. 37). It was specifically a country dance, an embodiment of English pastoral values of simplicity, naturalness and collectivity, in that the dancers should do no more than follow the steps exactly as instructed and avoid all expression of individuality. The country dance allowed for none of the spontaneity associated with non-representational dance; rather it was “not the place for the display of those self-conscious airs and graces, fanciful posings and so forth, that play so large a part in dances of a more conventional order” (Sharp, 1927a, p. 61). Through its style the dance became an embodied representation of a simple communal form of dance in which the dancer “should fulfil this purpose effectively and in the simplest and most direct way”. (Sharp, 1927c, p. 29). Moreover, its style was argued to embody moral virtues, expressive of an “upright nature of character”, and to be alien to those whose experience was limited to contemporary urban and non-traditional popular dances such as the cake-walk, then recently arrived from America, the “skirt dances of the music hall” and the “monotonous circlings and ‘kitchen’ lancers of the drawing room” (Sharp 1909, p.15). Finally, the revival of the English Country Dance would aid the “quickening of the national spirit” and encourage dignified behaviour (Sharp, 1909).

Sharp positioned the English Country Dance as the cultural antithesis of the urban, the sophisticated and the modern. It was promoted not as a popular recreation or spontaneous non-representational activity but as a fine art (Sharp, 1909, p.15), a representational practice with characteristics of serious leisure that all but precluded casual involvement (Stebbins, 1992). In 1911 Sharp formed the English Folk Dance Society (EFDS) out of the existing Folk Dance Club, to promote folk dancing and to function as a guardian of its form and style. Although Sharp (1927a, p.12) insisted he was reclaiming the country dance from the “injurious effects of its excursion into the drawing rooms of the upper classes”, he did not involve in its revival the rural poor upon whose cultural and moral values the dances were supposedly based, but depended in the main upon middle class women such as Lady Mary Trefusis, Lady Margaret Ampthill, Mrs. Arthur Sidgwick, wife of an Oxford don, and Helen and
Maud Karpeles (Karpeles, 1967, p. 115). The Society’s middle-class tendency was further emphasised in the choice of London’s Suffolk Street Galleries for its launch and the active support of Ralph Vaughan Williams. The preservation of supposed authenticity required accuracy in the steps, movements and style of performance of the dance and these were codified through an examination syllabus and Vacation Schools to train instructors. The Society’s staff assumed the role of experts and formed a demonstration team which travelled widely throughout England until the beginning of the First World War to introduce people to the dances. Demonstrations were also performed at the Savoy Theatre and in Paris and New York. By the end of the war the Society had established 23 branches throughout the country (Karpeles, 1967, p. 176).

The English Country Dance 1919-1939.
The First World War temporarily curtailed the progress of the English Folk Dance Society and it re-emerged into a post-war environment profoundly altered from that of the Edwardian era. Of particular significance was the changed cultural context of dance through the dance boom of the nineteen-twenties and the rapid growth in popularity of jazz and swing music and dance. Whereas in the pre-war period the English Country Dance had represented an essentially rustic and simple form in contradistinction to urban sophistication and industrialisation, its representational content in the post-war era continued to oppose sophistication but, for many of its practitioners, embodied a resistance to emerging mass cultural forms, particularly new forms of music and dance originating in America. These changes are evident in documentary records of dance in the inter-war period and in contemporary observations.

The level of interest in the English Country Dance in this period is difficult to discern, partly because it is hidden within sources that refer only generically to folk dance and music and partly because in some instances it was practised outside the jurisdiction of the EFDS and was thus not officially recorded. Fowler (2008, pp. 21-2), for example, notes that through the work of the Esperance Club in the pre-war years, it survived into the inter-war period in working girls’ clubs. A further account of the Esperance Club indicates that both morris and country dancing were practised in Liverpool and Yorkshire prior to the formation of the English Folk Dance Society and this may have continued after the war (McCrindle, 1931). Its later popularity as a recreational activity in various girls’ clubs was noted by Rooff (1935) albeit with the cautionary note that the fees raised by professional teaching members of the EFDS were prohibitive to many young workers. Yet another example of folk proselytization not sanctioned by the EFDS was Rolf Gardiner’s ‘Travelling Morrice’ which, aiming to promote “authentic” forms of dance, toured Yorkshire in 1931 to bring folk dance to the working classes of the industrial north, though it remains unclear if this led to a greater general involvement in the country dance (Fowler, 2008, pp. 55-7; Moore-Colyer, 2001). Although they almost certainly do not portray the full extent of the popularity of the English Country
Dance in the inter-war years, the most authoritative sources remain those collated by the EFDS at both a national and local level. In 1930-31 the Society had a membership of 1,818; by 1931-32 this had risen slightly to 1,891 and was distributed between 49 Branches in the United Kingdom and two in the United States of America. The United Kingdom Branches were predominantly in the south of England, and this is also where the largest Branches were located; the Dorsetshire Branch, for example, had 50 Centres, the Kent Branch 40 and the Berkshire Branch 39; the North Lancashire Branch in contrast had four Centres. Some Branches were local rather than regional but again there were marked differences as the York Branch operated ten Centres compared with Sheffield’s two (EFDS 1932a). The geographical distribution of the membership reflected that of the Branches and was heavily skewed towards London and the south of England with relatively fewer members being located in northern regions, with the exception of Cumberland and the Lake District. However, this does not mean that the English Country Dance remained unknown in the industrial North; for example, the Mersey and Deeside Branch covered several densely populated areas which included Birkenhead, Liverpool, Wigan, Warrington, Wallasey and St. Helens (EFDS 1932b).

Many of the national trends in the development of the folk dance movement in general and the English Country Dance in particular can be seen in the progress of the Manchester Branch of the EFDS which was formed in 1912 and adopted the national EFDS objectives of disseminating knowledge of English folk dances and encouraging the practice of them in their traditional form through the provision of graded classes and examinations in morris, sword and English Country Dance (EFDS, 1928). Accuracy in style was maintained by a Branch head teacher approved by the Society’s Board of Artistic Control. In addition to taught classes, the Branch performed demonstration dances in Manchester’s public parks in the summer months as a means of attracting new members. Its membership grew rapidly after the War from 82 members in 1919 to 366 by 1923 and by 1926 it had established eight centres. Though not insignificant, these figures must be interpreted in light of the roughly contemporaneous existence of over two thousand commercial dance musicians in Manchester and of numerous dance halls in both the city centre and the suburbs (Nott, 2002 p. 132) and they subsequently indicate that folk dance appealed to a small proportion of the population and remained a sub-cultural leisure practice (EFDS, 1938).

**Gender, class, space and style**
The post-war context of the English Country dance was configured by a variety of factors amongst which gender, social class, and the venue and style in which it was performed were important. The significance of gender was crucial, not least because the continuity of the folk dance revival in the period immediately after the War was heavily dependent on the contribution of single women. This was precipitated by changes in the demographic status of women which resulted in an increase in the ratio of women to men from 1,068 to 1,000 in 1911 to 1,096 to 1,000 in 1921 (Mowat, 1955, p. 226). Within this overall pattern the greatest
proportional change occurred amongst women aged between 20 and 45 in 1921, principally because of the heavier mortality rates of males in the War (www.visionofbritain, 2008). As a greater proportion of the Officer class was killed in the War, middle class women in particular found their chances of marriage within their class to be diminished and this produced a need for social leisure outlets for single young women (Nicholson, 2008, pp. 218-221). Folk dance provided such an opportunity. The Manchester Branch, for example, was founded by single women teachers who had met at the EFDS Stratford Summer Schools before the War and survived only because of their continuing involvement after it. Its committee in 1920 comprised six unmarried and two married women (EFDS, 1920); in 1921 13 unmarried women and one man (EFDS, 1921) and in 1926 five unmarried women, one married woman and one man (EFDS, 1926a). Furthermore the Branch Chief Instructor was a woman and in 1922 only one of its eight local centres was led by a man. For many years immediately after the war there were insufficient men to enable some forms of dance to be performed, notably the Morris, and as late as 1925 the Branch was actively pursuing the recruitment of males (EFDS, 1925a).

The appeal of folk dance to single women can be partly explained by locating the English Country Dance within a context of demographic change, the advent of jazz and the commercial dance boom of the inter-war period. It should be noted that although jazz and commercial dance music were distinctive forms, they were loosely defined terms and were interchangeable in popular discourse (Nott, 2002, p. 129). Moreover, jazz itself was subject to layered meanings as versions of a white British melodic jazz competed with American black rhythmic jazz (Frith, 1988). Nevertheless, while it remains probable that some women enjoyed both commercial and jazz dance and the English Country Dance, there remained marked cultural distinctions between them. These were replicated in the spatial characteristics of different types of dance venue. As Langhamer (2000) has noted in her study of women's leisure in this period, consumption, place and physical movement were important aspects of dance, and all three became inter-connected in the dance hall. Halls such as the Hammersmith Palais de Danse, which opened in 1919, became popular venues for American-style jazz and dance bands and by the nineteen-thirties were geographically widespread (Stevenson, 1984, p. 397). By 1920 jazz had become universal, danced with "shameless abandon" and allowing a near-sexual closeness between partners; it was also closely associated with London night clubs, louche society and illegal after-hours drinking (Graves and Hodge, 1991). The less restricted style of jazz dance, whose enthusiasts were predominantly the young, raised widespread moral concern, typified in the Home Secretary Joynson-Hicks’ remark that as dancing clubs increased, dancing clothes appeared to decrease (Montgomery, 1957, p. 187); indeed, the moral panic provoked by jazz in the nineteen-twenties led at least one local authority to refuse to let municipal buildings for jazz dancing (Graves and Hodge, 1991, p. 119). Furthermore, the popularity of American dance bands not only chimed with emerging cultural concerns about cinema and other mass cultural
exports but exposed underlying tensions arising from its Afro-American origins (Stevenson, 1984, p. 397). Many commercial dance halls were considered unrespectable and as women who frequented them gained a tarnished reputation, some preferred private or club dances. This broad categorisation was further refined by social class and a tendency, reported by Mass Observation (1939a) for a greater preference for jazz among the working classes than the middle classes. In addition, while the popular commercial dance market was largely driven by young working class women in search of a marriage partner, middle class women were effectively restrained from overt competition through fear of being thought “cheap” (Nicholson, 2008, pp. 69-78). It was, for example, socially impossible for a middle class woman to approach a man in a commercial dance hall. The folk dance venue was, in comparison, safe and respectable. In Manchester the English Country Dance was typically practised in a culturally conservative public space such as a church hall or school room and similar places devoid of sexual undertones. In Liverpool too folk dancing was restricted in the main to dedicated clubs and church halls (Caradog Jones, 1934, p. 278). Indeed, the use of church halls as venues for folk dance appears to have been widespread as Graves and Hodge (1991, p. 29) suggest that the folk dance revival of the post war period owed much to Church patronage. As Norris (2001) argues, the embodied and collective style of folk dance engenders a sense of belonging to a community, and conformity to the patterns of the other participants in the English Country Dance seems likely to have appealed to many young women without male companions. While it enabled women to dance with men, this was in a communal rather than an individualistic context and it was simply necessary for a woman to join a set rather than attract the notice of an individual man.

The adoption of folk dancing in the school curriculum was a further contributory factor to the growth of interest in the English Country Dance after the War. Between 1911 and 1931 the number of female school teachers rose from 18,000 to 210,000, 85% of whom were unmarried in the inter-war years (Nicholson, 2008, pp. 126-7). This had a twofold relevance to the popularity of the English Country dance. First, as English country dancing formed part of the school curriculum, Sharp having been appointed Inspector of Training Colleges in Folk Song and Dancing (Karpeles, 1967, p. 174), many teachers would have developed the skill to teach the dance and would have been in a position to use this in a leisure context. In Manchester, for example, Edith Emmett, a school teacher, was introduced to folk dance through being instructed to join a local folk dance class as a precursor to teaching folk dancing at her school and later became a long serving committee member of the Branch (EFDSS, 1972). Second, most local Education Boards would not employ married women (McKibbin, 1998, p. 48) and therefore single female teachers who enjoyed dancing but were not in a position to seek a marriage partner would have found the folk dance venue a culturally safer place than a commercial dance hall. However, while the daily contact such teachers had with children in Manchester enabled public demonstration dances to be performed by pupils from their schools, this raised a concern within the Branch that folk
dancing might be perceived by the public as essentially a children’s activity (EFDS, 1927). In essence there was some truth in this view and as a member of the Manchester Branch noted, because little effort was invested in maintaining the interest aroused at school, many potential members were lost as the focus on teaching the dances tended to divert attention from the provision of a social element (EFDSS, 1972, p.7).

The distinctions between folk dance and commercial dance venues described above are corroborated in contemporary reports submitted to Mass Observation which, although they relate only to the closing years of the inter-war period, provide first-hand accounts of the social context of the English Country Dance. A 32 year old single woman in Birmingham, responding to a Jazz Survey in 1939, imagined the ordinary respectable dance halls she had visited as “places where people meet for dancing and social life like the old village hall or the barn of long ago” but very different to dance halls incorporated in public houses where “the dancers and other people frequenting them get drunk and are not very nice” (Mass Observation, 1939b). A further Mass Observation (1939c) diary offers an insight to the importance of folk dance to the cultural identity of a 41 year old single middle class woman in London who is a member of a Business and Professional Women’s Club. The first entry is written in Stratford upon Avon where she is working for an advanced examination at a Summer School in Folk-Dancing. On returning to London she regularly attends the folk dances at the respectable venues of Morley College on Friday evenings (attended by approximately sixty people) and Cecil Sharp House on Saturday afternoons, which have been fixed points in her social life for at least ten years. She is able to attend without a partner while maintaining social respectability and occasionally takes a female friend. Her regular involvement in folk dance creates other leisure opportunities such as a Sunday Folk Dance Ramble which includes an impromptu country dance on Farleigh Common. For such middle class and single women folk dance offered a safe environment for socialisation with people of a similar standing while also offering a degree of independence in leisure.

The style of performance was a further distinction between the English Country Dance and popular commercial dance. As we have seen, Sharp emphasised the importance of style in the English Country dance both to ensure its embodiment of an imagined Englishness and to distinguish if from other forms of dance. As the strictures on the style of popular dance became relaxed in the post-war cultural milieu, the English Country Dance stood in increasing contradistinction to popular and especially jazz dance. In contrast to the controlled and prescribed style of the country dance in which restraint was seen to be crucial (‘Damocles and the Lamb’, 1934), jazz embodied an individualistic style that was free in form and placed the body on display for sexual consumption. As described by Green (1977, p. 208), jazz was a “choreographic defiance of an older statelier measure”; moreover, jazz dance was overtly American in origin and invoked widespread social disapproval. The “jazz flapper”, as Nicholson (2008, p. 60) notes, wore over-revealing garments and displayed her
body, and this was not an option many provincial young middle class women would have felt able to pursue. Sharp’s differentiation of jazz dance and the English country dance was based upon the essentially individualistic style of the former which entailed sawing movements of the arms, a “restless vibratory shakings of the shoulders and the close embrace” and the “merciless tom-tom rhythm and clatter of the music”, all of which he attributed to its “negro influence” (Sharp, 1924, p. 32). The “otherness” of jazz dance served as a compass point against which the cultural content of folk dance could be fixed by its adherents, reflected, for example, in the comment by the Secretary of the Manchester Branch that “most of our people have tried jazz, but once they have done folk dancing they have no time for jazz” and a newspaper report which described a demonstration folk dance as more than just “a noise for dancing” (EFDS, 1925b). To what extent this antipathy to jazz reflected a conscious sense of nationality is difficult to establish, though Rolf Gardiner’s promotion of English folk dance as a pursuit to challenge the notion that the English were interested only in American mass culture would surely have resonated with some of its enthusiasts (Fowler, 2008, p. 52). Indeed, the perception of English Folk Dance as a resistance to jazz sometimes assumed a near-literal meaning; one writer, for example urged the spread of folk dance in an England “half inclined to surrender to the jazz habit” (Marrett, 1932). The perceived cultural incompatibility of folk and jazz dance also resonates with concerns about ‘Americanization’, and certainly the opposition within the English folk dance community to the extreme individuality of style of jazz dance might be interpreted as a resistance to a specifically American cultural form. However, English folk dance does not fit neatly into theoretical discourses of Americanization in the interwar period which, as Waters (2007) notes, were more about the general need to protect taste from becoming debased than about preserving a newly-defined national heritage against external threats. It is arguably the case that at the level of practice, the reactions of the English folk dance community to jazz dance did not conform to this pattern as they were, as the evidence above suggests, based upon a conflation of issues of taste, as expressed through style, with a sense of national heritage as embodied in the dance.

Style also regulated the spatial aspects of the English Country Dance. Low (2008) has argued that spaces are created through performative action by synthesising and relationally ordering objects and people. The spatial constructions of the jazz and country dance both reflected and reproduced their cultural differentiation. Sharp’s instructions on the performance of the English Country Dance were based on the relational movements of all the dancers, each of whom necessarily occupied a specific position at any given point of the dance which was defined by spatial distance from the other dancers. The use of space in the English Country Dance was thus controlled and normative and allowed for no bodily contact beyond the holding of hands or linking of arms to perform certain movements. Jazz on the other hand imposed minimal regulation of movement and allowed for close physical contact. Not only did slow dances, such as the waltz, offer opportunities for intimate bodily contact and
embrace, but the common practice of lowering the lights for slow dances, as Mass Observation (1939a) reported in Worktown (Bolton), Blackpool and other places, changed the material environment of the dance space in a way which encouraged this.

The representational content of the country dance was further enhanced by the nature of its relationships to other leisure associations. In 1926 the Manchester Branch committee developed contacts with the Boy Scouts, Girl Guides and the Girls Friendly Society to encourage their interest in the English Country Dance. This was only possible because it embodied the values of simplicity, non-commercialism, respectability and rational leisure upon which these organisations were themselves founded (EFDS, 1926b). In 1931 the local branch of the Holiday Fellowship, an organisation which promoted communal and non-commercialised rambling holidays with simple accommodation requested a demonstration dance and in 1933 a national Holiday Fellowship Branch of the Society was formed (EFDS, 1933a). The Fellowship and the Folk Dance Society too shared many values, notably the idealisation of the communal rather than the individual and both offered a resistance to the commercial mass leisure culture of the period. As a Mass Observation (1939d) directive report noted:

“Jazz plays no part in our home life we have no radio and if we had we would not put jazz on [sic]. I never go to dances except country dance partys [sic] which is to me a much jollier kind of dancing. When I get the chance of going to one of these I look forward with great pleasure. I talk about dancing camping hiking people that I have met at previous dances, Albert Hall festivals, folk dances.”

From the nineteen thirties onwards the Holiday Fellowship included folk dance as a recreational activity at its guest houses (Wroe, 2007, p. 33). This coincided with a gradual shift of emphasis from the idea of the English country dance as a fine art form to that of a social leisure practice. In Manchester in 1931 the emphasis on the country dance as a performance art was challenged when a group of members began to organise social country dances in the suburbs at which the emphasis would be on leisure. The first of these dances was described as follows:

The Beehive is the outcome of a meeting of a few enthusiastic members of the English Folk Dance Society who are of the opinion that much can be done to popularize and advertise folk dancing in Manchester by organising social country dance parties in the various suburbs. It was decided to try an experimental dance and this we did on Saturday November 26th. It proved to be an undoubted success .... Over 40 persons were present and spent an enjoyable evening. (EFDS, 1931)

The following year it was argued that there should be a further change of emphasis from examinations and classes to social dancing and that to popularise folk dance, other forms, for example Scandinavian dances, should be incorporated in Branch activities (EFDS, 1932c). The Branch also developed a wider leisure base which, in 1933, included a Christmas party and the formation of a band (EFDS, 1934a). Certainly by 1934 Country Dance Parties were
widely organised nationally, as were the more formal Country Dance Balls (EFDS, 1934b). The social nature of these events was successful in attracting people who may not otherwise have become involved in any form of folk dance; the Northamptonshire Branch for example recruited several new male members through this means. (EFDS, 1933b). Throughout the remainder of the decade there was a weakening of the exclusive focus on English dance, reflected in the several joint social events organised in co-operation with the Caledonian and Irish dance communities in Manchester. By the mid-nineteen thirties the long-term effect of Sharp’s insistence on reconstructing English folk dance as an art form rather than a social leisure experience was recognised by the English Folk Dance and Song Society in its annual report for 1933-34 in a telling description of a typical evening class (quoted in EFDSS, 1972, p.15):

the stronghold of the Society in the majority of towns remains the dusty, draughty drill hall with its questionable piano and its complete absence of warmth, gaiety and decoration, where some twenty or thirty women in every-day dress await the arrival of the visiting teacher …. What is conspicuous by its absence is the social group of men and women meeting together to dance for recreation.

Eventually, in 1935, the Society conceded that folk dance was a social and recreational activity as much as it might be an art form (Kennedy, 1935). Even then, however, an absence of the spontaneity of the popular commercial dance venue and an element of serious leisure seems to have remained; in Manchester, for instance, neither parties nor members’ evening were entirely free of the “school influence” as the programme of dances was circulated in advance and rehearsals were held in the preceding week (EFDSS, 1972, p.16).

Conclusion

Between its re-emergence in the decade preceding the First World War through to the beginning of the Second World War, the English Country Dance exhibited continuity and change in its representational content. In both the pre-war and post-war periods its performative enactment constructed a cultural identity of resistance to the modern in dance form, style and space. In the first phase of its revival prior to the First World War the English Country Dance represented an imagined though not fully articulated Englishness and a celebration of the pastoral in response to industrialisation, the dances of the urban music hall and a nascent nationalism in other countries within Great Britain. Although valorised as an essentially traditional rural dance it was a mediated re-construction of dances published for a literate audience in the seventeenth century and was reinvented not as a popular leisure form but as a middle class art form and transposed from the field and cottage to the drawing room and concert hall. In the inter-war decades the English Country Dance developed as a sub-cultural leisure form which embodied a resistance to a new manifestation of modernity in the form of popular commercial dance which, in its most extreme form, posited the English Country Dance as the cultural antithesis of jazz dance. It combined a sense of an imagined English identity rooted in an idealised, collective and simple rural past with notions of
respectability and an awareness of its cultural differentiation from commercialised urban forms of dance. In their performance of the English Country Dance, dancers subjectively created their own identities and leisure spaces in contradistinction to those of modern commercialised dance and dance venues. That its prescribed style precluded individuality and sexualised bodily display strengthened its appeal to single middle-class women who, for various reasons, were not in a position to marry or who, to maintain respectability, were unable to visit commercial dance halls.

Today, the English Country Dance remains a dynamic if minority interest, continuing to exhibit distinctions between dance as performance art and dance as social leisure experience described above. The English Folk Dance and Song Society promotes the dance as does the Country Dance and Song Society in America. However, the English Country Dance is also practised in other contexts not immediately regulated by a central body, as for example in English ceilidhs, in which both English and Celtic dances and music are inter-mixed and callers devise new dances based on the English style. Both of these forms retain a representational content in their performativity of “folk” and display aspects of serious leisure, though the culturally diverse and modernist tendencies of the latter have not been universally welcomed by adherents to the former. However, the least regulated and most common occurrence of the English Country Dance is as an entertainment at weddings, parties and general social occasions in which it is enjoyed for fun on a casual basis by dancers, where seemingly little representational content is attached to it; it is in this context more akin to a spontaneous performance of social dance for its own sake. Further research might test the hypothesis that in this context its performativity may have recovered some of the imagined communal, classless and non-representational social dance that Sharp believed he had found.

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