Audiences tend to see dance group movements as images of a community or larger social identity. Dance thus functions to define social identity through movement considered unique to “peoples” or social classes or categories of identity shared by “many” bodies. But on the whole, dance culture over the centuries has favored narrow, conservative images of group identity, and even within the modernist dance aesthetics of the early twentieth century, the choreographic imagination was slow in pursuing opportunities to link group movement to a new, liberating, or at any rate modern projection of identity. Germany was the site of the most advanced thinking about group movement within modernist dance culture, but these powerful innovations, which are my theme here, did not begin to manifest themselves until the end of World War I. Indeed, dance originally proclaimed itself as modern to the extent that it freed the body from socially determined identities. But this initial suspicion within dance culture that modernity was in tension with any new or emancipatory perception of group identity was a consequence of the peculiar difficulty of defining groups through movement.

Modernist dance was a vehement and sometimes violent reaction toward the authority of ballet to determine the aesthetic value of human movement. Ballet was about the power of complex rules to compel movement to embody idealized identities (fig. 1). Severe, precise regulation of both movements and bodies created an “elevated” image of human identity, in the sense that movement toward the ideal was ultimately a matter of the body’s power to transcend the force of gravity. Mastery and appreciation of ballet’s elaborate rules arose out of a deep faith in the necessity of a rigidly hierarchical organization of society. Ballet linked the beautiful or ideal representation of desires to highly systematic regulation of movement. These assumptions about the meaning of ballet entailed a grandly schematic understanding of group movement, whereby the group existed to expose the authority of the rules governing it. The ensemble in ballet was a decorative set of bodies from which or into which emerged soloists whose superior virtuosity constituted the standard for measuring mastery of the rules (fig. 2). Group movement could be complex, but it pervasively presented groups (or “societies”) as a collection of bodies unified by their performance of the same movements.
Choreography of group movements often assumed geometric patterns that further strengthened the perception of the group as a single body repeated or multiplied many times. Variations within the group consisted mostly of the same trope performed symmetrically or en vague, such as a canon or the intersection of two pirouetting lines of dancers entering from opposite sides of the stage. Before World War I, members of the ensemble usually wore even the same costumes. The power of a group depended on the skill with which its members could move synchronously. A unique identity did not emerge from conflict within or between groups; it was the result of virtuosity, a more perfect embodiment of the idealized freedom from gravity, from the weight of the world, that moved "society" as a whole toward a "higher" image of itself. Even in The Rite of Spring (1913), which contained some astonishingly complicated imagery of communal culture, Nijinsky disclosed much less interest in abandoning synchronicity of movement than in showing how a large group was able to maintain its synchronicity in response to the numerous, violent shifts of rhythm in Stravinsky's music.

Ballet cultivated a perception of itself as an aristocratic art, and its use of group movement codified an aristocratic attitude toward relations between social and individual identities. And yet, in the realm of popular culture, choreographic imagination favored an equally rigid image of group identity, in spite of sometimes extraordinary innovations. In nightclub revues and cabaret spectacles, chorus lines and ensembles habitually relied on synchronized, unison movement to represent the energy of "mass" identities (fig. 3). The repertoire of movements was narrower than in ballet, rarely capable of entering a tragic domain, while the range of costumes was considerably larger. Indeed, costume was more likely to designate the social identity of the group with greater accuracy than movement. In the nightclub culture, virtuosity was seldom of decisive importance, for people widely assumed that dancers possessed limited ability or opportunity to master a complex movement code. Choreographic imagination developed to the extent that a choreographer could combine relatively simple movements into an engaging release of energy or exuberance. The clever concatenation of simple movements by attractive bodies strengthened the impression that the performing bodies were "accessible" in contrast to the exclusivity communicated by the extravagantly idealized bodies in ballet. But whereas ballet treated the ensemble as a disciplined mass from which emerged the glorious virtuosity of the soloist, the revue ensemble ascribed such carefree, self-satisfied "vitality" to the mass that it often diminished the appeal of solo performers (fig. 4). In the 1920s, some German commentators like Fritz Giese and Siegfried Kracauer proposed that revue group dances were modern insofar as they presented a mechanized image of social identity controlling relations between movement, time, space, and pleasure in a capitalist consumer economy. From their perspective, revue