

---

# Leisure Reflections

Leisure Reflections ... No. 3

## Leisure and Citizen Participation: A Salutary Reciprocity

Robert A. Stebbins



---

Professor Robert A. Stebbins pioneered the ideas of “serious leisure,” “casual leisure,” and “optimal leisure lifestyle” and has spent 30 years studying all three. He is currently Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. Author of 26 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most important works bearing on these three ideas include: *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992); *After Work: The Search for an Optimal Leisure Lifestyle* (Detselig, 1998); *The Urban Francophone Volunteer: Searching for Personal Meaning and Community Growth in a Linguistic Minority* (University of Washington, Canadian Studies Centre, 1998); and *New Directions in the Theory and Research of Serious Leisure* (Edwin Mellen, 2001). He is presently conducting a study of leisure activities: *Rocky Mountain hobbyists in kayaking, snowboarding, and mountain climbing* (funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada), and working on a grant proposal for research on grassroots associations in the lives of their amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer members and participants. Stebbins is currently awaiting release of a book in the latter area entitled *The Organizational Basis of Leisure Participation: A Motivational Exploration* (Venture, 2002). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996 and, in 1999, elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada; and has been a member of LSA since 1995.

Stebbins’s main leisure interests lie in amateur music, where he is a jazz and classical double bassist, and in various outdoor hobbyist pursuits, notably cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking and mountain scrambling (hiking to mountain tops). He is also an active volunteer in the Calgary French community, primarily as President of the Société é d’accueil francophone (an organization that helps French-speaking immigrants settle in Calgary). And, to be sure, casual leisure counts as well. For Stebbins it consists mainly of evening conversations with friends and family and dining out in Calgary’s restaurants.

---

“Citizen participation,” an old idea that seemed at one point in time to have had its day, has sprung to life again in the past 40 years or so, and is now enjoying renewed popularity, possibly in even greater intensity than in the past. Today, it has become one of a handful of warm and fuzzy concepts that, because they share several qualities, are commonly treated of together, among them community, volunteering, and democracy. Historically, in the eyes of such thinkers as John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Thomas Jefferson, citizen participation was a key process by which participatory democracy was created and sustained. Engaged citizens, typically at the local community level, were (and still are) seen as an essential element for an effectively functioning democratic society.

I think that we in leisure studies tend to overlook the fact that many kinds of leisure are, among other things, instances of citizen participation and, especially in the twenty-first century, that they, as such, make a singular and important contribution to community life. My goal in this edition of “Leisure Reflections” is to show how these two go together and why it is important that our political representatives and we, as leisure studies specialists, not lose sight of their salutary reciprocity. My argument is two-fold: first that, in satisfying their desire for leisure, many people are drawn to citizen participation; and, second, that the fulfillment and enjoyment they find there in mingling with other members of the community motivates (Stebbins, 2002) many of those same people to continue with their participatory activities.

In the foregoing conception citizen participation has a decidedly political hue to it. It is conceived of as a mechanism for enhancing the democratic workings of the state. This conception, which is much in vogue today, is not, however, the only one. For citizen participation can also mean, in a larger sense of the word, individual participation by any member (i.e., citizen) of the community in any local, collective, uncoerced action. The implication in this broader sense is that such participation helps in some significant way sustain the community of which the participant is a member. This way may be political (e.g., working for a political party, working to change a local bylaw), or it may be nonpolitical (e.g., volunteering for a local charity, coaching a youth sports team). The fact is that both *political* citizen participation and *community* citizen participation help sustain the local community, primarily by getting its members, or citizens, as friends, neighbors, relatives, and workmates to associate with one another along the lines of all manner of shared interests. A community is, among other things, a large social group in which members interact with one another (even if all

members lack contact with all other members), such that this group develops a distinctive identity, and by dint of such participation, continues to flourish as a collectivity.

Furthermore, the tendency among those who write about citizen participation is to think of it as volunteerism or an equivalent (e.g., Locke, Sampson, and Shepherd, 2001), and certainly the latter is a main expression of the former. Moreover, many of these writers take the view that volunteering is unpaid labor. This commonly-held perspective nevertheless ignores the leisure basis of volunteering and citizen participation, whether political or community. Thus Putnam (2000) argues that successful democracy rests substantially on the presence in local communities of *social capital*. Social capital is created from ties among individuals based on inter-human connections through mutual trustworthiness, social networks, and norms of reciprocity. Community members can create social capital in various ways, by no means all of which are volunteerism or have direct political implications, but which nevertheless help ensure the functioning of democracy, in particular, and community life, in general. "Social capital, the evidence increasingly suggests, strengthens our better, more expansive selves. The performance of our democratic institutions depends in measurable ways upon social capital" (Putnam, 2000, p. 349).

Even though Putnam devotes much more space to discussing forms of social capital directly related to the political, be they informal networks or formal associations, he notes, almost in passing, the role played in this sphere by leisure groups organized around interests that are anything but political:

Where people know one another, interact with one another each week at choir practice or sports matches and trust one another to behave honorably, they have a model and a moral foundation upon which to base further cooperative enterprises. Light-touch government works more efficiently in the presence of social capital. (Putnam, 2000, p. 346)

In other words, the goal of bringing people together to create and enhance democracy, government legitimacy, and general community functioning can be accomplished through many forms of social leisure, of which political volunteering is but one kind. Leisure, when it brings us in contact with other people, can be conceived of as community citizen participation or more specifically, if it has a political tone, as political citizen participation.

## What leisure constitutes citizen participation?

Clearly, to be citizen participation, leisure must be collective in some fashion; the reclusive hobbies, for example, do not qualify. Furthermore, I do not believe a case exists for privileging either serious or casual leisure as the main way of creating social capital for community citizen participation. What is important is that people come together long enough to learn about one another, learn to trust one another (where

experience warrants), and become willing to continue their association. True, many forms of serious leisure encourage sustained contact that fosters such learning, as seen in routine participation in many volunteer roles, hobbyist clubs, and arts and sports groups. Yet, casual leisure in the form of regular sessions of sociable conversation among friends or relatives (e.g., in the *kaffeeklatsch*, the gang at the pub, the weekly family gathering) perhaps joined with other casual leisure activities can certainly generate significant social capital as well.

Note, too, that project leisure can also be a source of social capital, though social capital here is of more limited scope than that found in casual or serious leisure. *Project leisure* is a short-term, reasonably complicated, one-off or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time (Stebbins, 2003). It requires considerable planning, effort, and sometimes, skill or knowledge, but is for all that neither serious leisure nor intended to develop into such. Examples include mounting a surprise birthday party, undertaking elaborate preparations for a major holiday, and volunteering for a major sports event. Though only a rudimentary social world springs up around the project, significant social capital is still generated. Thus the project in its own particular way brings together friends, neighbors, or relatives (e.g., through a genealogical project or Christmas celebrations), or draws the individual participant into an organizational milieu (e.g., through volunteering for a sports event).

This further suggests that project leisure often has, in at least two ways, great potential for building community. One, it can bring into contact people who otherwise have no reason to meet, or at least meet frequently. Two, by way of event volunteering and other collective altruistic activity, it can contribute to successful execution of community events and projects. Project leisure is not, however, civil labor, which is more enduring and must for this reason, among others, be classified exclusively as serious leisure (Rojek, 2002).

Speaking of civil labor it, too, is evidently a kind of citizen participation, even if current writing on the matter tends to picture it as a strictly volunteer activity. And just how does civil labor articulate with leisure and citizen participation? Applebaum (1992, p. 587) writes that "with increases in the standard of living, consumerism, and leisure activities, the work ethic must compete with the ethic of the quality of life based on the release from work." And as the work ethic in the twenty-first century withers further, hammered unceasingly by widespread decline in both quality and quantity of work opportunities (e.g., Rifkin, 1992; Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994), leisure is slowly, but inexorably it appears, coming to the fore. In other words leisure has, since the middle nineteenth century, been evolving into a substantial institution in its own right. At first leisure was but a poor and underdeveloped part of Western society, standing in pitiful contrast next to its robust counterpart of work.

But now the twin ideas that work is inherently good and that, when it can be found, people should do it (instead of leisure) are being increasingly challenged. Beck (2000, p. 125) glimpses the near future as a time when there will still be work to be done, but with a significant portion of it being done for no pay:

The counter-model to the work society is based not upon leisure but upon political freedom; it is a multi-activity society in which housework, family work, club work and voluntary work are prized alongside paid work and returned to the center of public and academic attention. For in the end, these other forms remained trapped inside a value imperialism of work, which must be shaken off.

Beck calls this work without pay "civil labor." Some of it, however, especially club work and voluntary work, is also leisure. Indeed it is serious leisure, since such "work" is often precisely what the amateur, hobbyist, or skilled and knowledgeable volunteer does.

Using as backdrop predictions about the future of work sketched out in the preceding paragraph, Reid (1995) argues that leisure can no longer be viewed solely as idle, casual, frivolous, and self-indulgent. Rather, some of it must be viewed quite differently, as purposeful, or more precisely, as activity leading to both individual and community development. These two together, he says, compose the foundation of "participative" citizenship, wherein citizens contribute in positive ways to the functioning of their community. Reid sees serious leisure as the kind of activity that will form the central part of this foundation:

Much of work today is only useful in that it provides a means to a livelihood. New forms of individual and community contribution will become possible once the market is no longer the only mechanism for judging contribution. Many activities which are now done a voluntary basis could be enhanced so that the community and those in need benefit. To do so requires new forms of social organization which place greater worth on those services. This is the essence of Stebbins's notion of serious leisure (Reid, 1995, pp. 112-113).

Indeed, contributing to the success of a collective project and to the maintenance and development of the group (in this instance the community) are two possible rewards of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2001, p. 13). Reid goes on to note that the need for new social organization is an especially important legacy of the Post-Materialist society in which we presently live.

The central role of serious leisure in participative citizenship has been recognized, not only in principle by Reid, and somewhat earlier by Parker (1994), but also, in more detail, by me (Stebbins, 2000, pp. 24-28) and by Mason-Mullet (1996). The latter discusses a number of career volunteer projects, which over the years, have led to community development, projects that she regards as leisure. Additionally, Arai and Pedlar (1997) found in their study of citizen participation in planning for healthy communities that such activity produces several profound benefits for the volunteers. For this reason they must be seen as pursuing serious leisure.

In sum, collectively based serious, casual, and project leisure can all generate social capital and, as such, constitute citizen participation. They do so in different ways, however, as attests Rojek's observation that only serious leisure qualifies as civil labor.

## References

- Applebaum, H. (1992) *The concept of work: Ancient, medieval, and modern*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Arai, S.M., and Pedlar, A.M. (1997) 'Building communities through leisure: Citizen participation in a healthy communities initiative', *Journal of Leisure Research*, Vol. 29, pp. 167-182.
- Aronowitz, S., and DiFazio, W. (1994) *The jobless future: Sci-tech and the dogma of work*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Beck, U. (2000) *The brave new world of work* (trans. by P. Camiller), New York: Polity Press.
- Locke, M., Sampson, A., and Shepherd, J. (2001) 'Bowling alone: Community leaders in East London', *Voluntary Action*, Vol. 3, No. 2: pp. 27-46.
- Mason-Mullet, S. (1995) 'Education for leisure - Moving towards community', in G.S. Fain (ed.), *Leisure and ethics: Reflections on the philosophy of leisure*, Vol. II (pp. 229-256), Reston, VA: American Association for Leisure and Recreation.
- Parker, S.R. (1994) 'Group life: Individual interests and social purposes', in *New routes for leisure: World leisure congress* (pp. 423-428). Lisbon, Portugal: Instituto de Ciencias Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa.
- Putnam, R.D. (2000) *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Reid, D.G. (1995) *Work and leisure in the 21st century: From production to citizenship*, Toronto, ON: Wall & Emerson.
- Rifkin, J. (1995) *The end of work: The decline of the global labor force and the dawn of the post-market era*, New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Rojek, C. (2002) 'Civil labour, leisure, and post work society', *Loisir et sociÉTÉ/society and leisure*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 21-36.
- Stebbins, R.A. (2000) 'Leisure education, serious leisure, and community development', in A. Sivan and H. Ruskin (eds.), *Leisure education, community development, and populations with special needs* (pp. 21-30), Wallingford, Oxon, Eng.: CAB International.
- Stebbins, R.A. (2001) *New directions in the theory and research of serious leisure*, Mellen Studies in Sociology, vol. 28, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Stebbins, R.A. (2002) *The organizational basis of leisure participation: A motivational exploration*, State College, Penn.: Venture Publishing.
- Stebbins, R.A. (2003) 'Project leisure: Theoretical neglect of a common use of free time'. Paper presented at the University of Waterloo Graduate Student Leisure Research Symposium, University of Waterloo, May, 2003.

**Bob Stebbins**  
**University of Calgary**  
**Stebbins@ucalgary.ca**

**Forthcoming in LSA Newsletter No. 66**  
**(November 2003): Robert Stebbins's**  
**'Leisure Reflections No. 4', on**  
**'Relaxation, Rocking-Chair Leisure and More'**