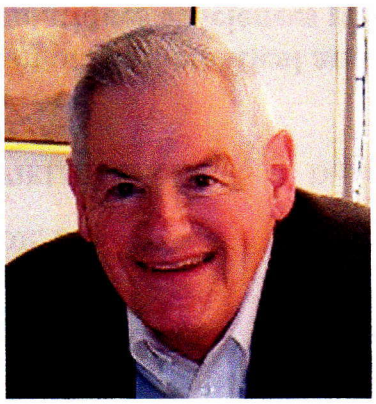
Leisure Reflections



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Leisure Reflections . . . No. 32

Homo Otiosus: Who Is This Creature, Does It Exist, Should It Matter?

I introduced *homo otiosus* to the field of leisure studies four years ago (Stebbins, 2009, pp. 5, 125). It was a fleeting encounter, as it were, during which I only briefly compared this creature to three other close relatives — *homo faber, homo ludens and homo voluntas.* The concept of *homo otiosus* includes, but is significantly broader than, *homo ludens* (Huizinga, 1955) and *homo voluntas* (Smith, 2000, pp. 259-261). Meanwhile, use of the term *homo faber* is so old as to seemingly lack a clearly identifiable progenitor. In fact, describing humanity in this fashion is a remarkably common practice, as attested by Wikipedia's 'List of Alternative Names for the Human Species' (retrieved 17 October 2012). In -addition to *homo sapiens* it inventories 42 such types. Moreover, the site's author states that the list is incomplete. Indeed it is, for neither *homo otiosus* nor an equivalent is ever mentioned. In the present article I will flesh out much more richly than earlier the nature and use of this idea.

Do We Need the Term *Homo Otiosus*?

Do we need this term and hence yet another Latin-based descriptor of humankind? Yes, and for at least three reasons. First, after examining the University of Notre Dame Latin Dictionary and Grammar Aid (www.nd.edu/~archives/latin.htm, retrieved 19 October 2012), it is evident that none of the others so crisply identifies leisure man as does *homo otiosus. Homo* in Latin denotes a human being, while *homo otiosus* refers to a human oriented toward leisure. The English translation of 'leisure man' will do, providing both sexes are always included in this general conception. Meanwhile, *homo ludens* comes from the Latin verb *ludere,* meaning 'to play, sport; to play at or with; to imitate, banter; deceive, delude'. *Homo ludens* goes in for certain types of casual leisure, especially that of play. *Homo voluntas* expresses his or her 'will, wish, inclination; esp. [goodwill]; [last will, testament]; of words, etc. [meaning, sense]'. This is man the volunteer, casual, career, and project-based.

By contrast *homo otiosus* seeks *'otium'*, or 'free time, leisure, ease; peace, repose'. As a concept *homo otiosus* is by far the broadest of the three. It subsumes play, volunteering and much more (e.g., amateur and hobbyist activities, such casual leisure as entertainment and relaxation, and project-based leisure).

Second, it is true that much of the time we should not be speaking of leisure in such general terms, for it varies immensely by culture, demographic category, historical period, structural location, and many other differentiating conditions. Yet, there are occasions where we must discuss leisure in general. A stirring example is the United Nations guarantee of leisure for all. Additionally, we sometimes want to compare the institution of leisure with other institutions in society, most often that of work. In religion the historical analysis of the Protestant Ethic showed leisure in general to be anathema. And, for several decades there has been discussion about whether the leisure society has arrived and the conditions leading toward or away from this state (see most recently Veal, 2012). On the psychological level John Neulinger (1981)

argued that leisure is a state of mind. In all these instances leisure is treated of holistically, the activity of *homo otiosus*.

Finally, in discussions about enhancing well-being we could surely argue that people must first of all find more free time, without specifying at that point how it might be filled, such as with serious, casual, or project-based leisure. Finding free time is a major, albeit, initial step in improving the quality of life. For those who have succeeded in this regard, there might then be discussion of how to use free time, a discussion in which *homo otiosus* would learn about particular kinds of leisure and their costs, rewards, and place in his life (in effect a kind of leisure education).

Homo Otiosus as Actor

Third, the concept of *homo otiosus* also presents an active conception of leisure. This constitutes a crucial theoretic addition, since leisure itself, which though essentially activity (Stebbins, 2012), cannot act; it cannot initiate itself. In the above-mentioned book Neulinger tried to solve this linguistic puzzle by creating a new verb, whereby he could argue that people are able 'to leisure', are able to express their leisure state of mind. But would it not be theoretically more parsimonious, not to mention grammatically less problematic, to anchor the analysis of leisure in general in an acting, behaving human being?

This type of humanity --- that is, *homo otiosus* --- may be conceived of as being in a leisure frame of mind. Additionally, this type may also be understood as someone who pursues one or more leisure activities. True, if we want to state more precisely how this process works, we must identify which kinds of people pursue which kinds of activities (e.g., women make quilts, most readers are female, most participants in rodeo and motorsport are working-class males, and members of some fundamentalist religious groups try to eschew leisure). A general conception like *homo otiosus* can by no means fully explain these more particular instances, for it fails to admit such important details as gender, class-based preference and religious influence. Furthermore, it would for the most part be inadequate when referring to people who go in for amateur, hobbyist and volunteer pursuits; these three concepts describe and explain better what the three types do than *homo otiosus* does.

What *homo otiosus* does do for the general conception of leisure is what terms like amateur, volunteer, casual leisure participant (hedonist) and project enthusiast do for particular types of leisure. Namely, inherent in all these concepts is the tendency toward personal agency, or 'intentionality' (Rojek, 2010), in human action. The assumption here is that humans can and do act, whereas leisure lacks this property when conceived of as, for example, an activity, a social institution or even a value or a state of mind. In other words, *homo otiosus* pursues, or does, leisure in general, while more particularly, for example, amateurs play violin or sport, hobbyists collect stamps or build furniture and casual leisure participants enjoy scenery or entertainment television. Additionally, through their agency, *homo otiosus*, the amateurs and the others can plan for the future of their leisure as well as think about its past.

Thus, when we hold that leisure in general can be a major source of social change, we are saying in effect that some people do something in their free time that eventually leads to such a transformation. Put more concisely, when *homo otiosus* acts, social change may follow. In short, arguing that leisure, leisure activity or a leisure state of mind sometimes engenders change is a reification. Logically speaking only an individual or type of individual can do this, although it can only be accomplished through a leisure activity in a leisure frame of mind as an element of the institution of leisure and so on.

Defining Leisure using *Homo Otiosus*

Homo otiosus is in one way or another at the centre of many definitions of (general) leisure. Perusing Kelly's (1990, pp. 16-23) lengthy discussion of these statements reveals the validity of this assertion. He summarizes them under the three headings of leisure as time, activity and experience. The second two presuppose an acting person, whereas the first does not.

In my definition of leisure, which consists of the following eight principles (Stebbins, 2012), numbers 4, 5 and 8 may be regarded as at most indirectly related to *homo otiosus*. Indirect in the sense that we must posit that it is people who ultimately develop social institutions, use geographic spaces and create collective images.

1) leisure is un-coerced (general) activity;
2) leisure is core activity that participants want to do;
3) leisure is pursued in free time, defined as time away from disagreeable obligation;
4) leisure is a social institution;
5) leisure has its own geographic space;
6) leisure is the fulcrum for work/life balance;
7) leisure is what a person does in free time;
8) leisure is known in the larger world by a unique image.[1]

The remaining five principles rest on the assumption that individuals act in their free time. These individuals pursue activities in their free time and during that period try to balance work and life.

Homo Otiosus versus *Homo Sapiens*

Homo sapiens, or man regarded as a species, subsumes all the more particular Latin-based designations for humankind, including *homo otiosus*. It follows that people may be studied as members of several of these categories. Thus, they are sometimes *homo otiosus* and sometimes *homo faber, homo amans* (loving man), *homo aestheticus* (aesthetic man) and many other combinations. Only homo sapiens refers in the abstract to the whole person.

Moreover, it has been proposed that individuals (i.e., *homo otiosus*) have leisure personalities. Exemplifying work in this area, Oldham and Morris (1995) have listed seven traits of such character, among them being relaxed about time, assuming one has a right to leisure and having a capacity to resist unreasonable demands. Without assuming the existence of a leisure personality Mannell and Kleiber (1997, chap. 6) examine a range of character traits and personal conditions that lead people to seek leisure in general. The acting individual in their observations is, in effect, *homo otiosus*.

Homo Otiosus versus Leisure Man

These two are synonyms, with 'man' being the standard translation into English for *homo*. Nonetheless, in English 'leisure man' carries some gender relations baggage that we avoid when using *homo otiosus* (and any of the other Latin-based names). *Homo* in Latin is gender neutral and, though its translation into English as 'man' should convey the same meaning, it may oc-

casionally fail to do so. For instance, stating that leisure man sometimes goes in for sport could skew the understanding of that observation toward sport as being a male-only activity.

This kind of bias seems possible mainly because of past or present popular stereotypes of certain kinds of leisure activities, in this case those believed in common sense to be of interest only to males. Furthermore, even where exclusive male participation in sport is presently no stereotype, which is true for motocross and rodeo, for instance, females might take up the activity in the future. In fact, this is precisely what has happened over the centuries with many other sports. For, according to the History of Women in Sport Timeline developed by the American Association of University Women, participation by females in this kind of activity was a long, slow process (http://www.northnet.org/stlawrenceaauw/timeline.htm, 23 October 2012). The Timeline starts with ancient Greece, where they were completely barred from either observing or playing sport. Barbershop singing offers a much more recent example, wherein women were excluded from the all-male Society for the Preservation of Barbershop Quartet Singing in America (SPEBSQSA). They were therefore forced to start their own organisation, the Sweet Adelines (Stebbins, 1996, p. 27).

Still, as far as gender neutral writing about *homo otiosus* is concerned, at least one pitfall threatens acceptable literary practice. It is common in English to use the pronoun 'he' when referring to the Latin-based names. And this usage prevails, even while all of them are, in their Latin form, gender neutral. One literary solution for this dilemma is to substitute 'he' with 'this type', 'this actor' or a similar locution. 'He' may also be used sporadically, as long as it appears with wording that is gender neutral. Such linguistic manoeuvring is *de rigueur*, if the writer is to respect the highest literary canon, which inveighs against use of such inelegant phraseology as 'he or she' and 'him/her'.

Conclusion

It may seem strange to some readers that I should be championing a generalized conception of leisure and its expression through *homo otiosus* when serious and casual leisure and subsequently the entire serious leisure perspective (SLP) were all conceived of in reaction to such a conception. I have contended all along that leisure is immensely complex and that to understand it adequately we must fully explore its many forms, types and subtypes. Be that as it may, I have found considerable use for the generalized view of leisure, formally expressed for the first time in Stebbins (2009).

Part of this use is reflected in my solution of a main figure-and-ground problem in leisure studies: to understand fully, say casual leisure, we must know what leisure is, in general. To that end, I have been working for more than a decade on a definition of (general) leisure. This project began in 2002 with the first 'Leisure Reflections' article (see also Stebbins, 2005) and led eventually to a book on the matter (Stebbins, 2012). Because the SLP roots in part in personal agency, so logically, the 'ground' of that 'figure' must also be so rooted. Enter the preceding portrayal of *homo otiosus*.

Another way in which I have drawn on the general conception of leisure is in my conceptualization of the three domains of life (Stebbins, 2009). Life, I argue, may be understood as composed of the domains of work, leisure and non-work obligation. Here lie the spheres of action for, respectively, *homo faber, homo otiosus* and 'man the drudge'.[2] Most people function throughout adult life in all three types (full-time retirees being a main exception).

So *homo otiosus* is a useful concept. It helps us avoid reifying the concept of leisure by offering a conceptual avenue for human agency. It also gives further voice to the generalized conception of leisure. Additionally, this idea facilitates conceptual movement between the planes of the general and the particular in the study of leisure. A complete science of leisure rests on finding a solid theoretical and empirical foundation in both.

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Notes

1 These eight principles are summary statements. They are explained in much greater detail in Stebbins (2012).

2 The word 'drudge' has no Latin base, while *homo obligatus*, though lexicologically correct, refers to all obligations, both agreeable and disagreeable. The latter, however, is inapplicable here. Why? Because *homo otiosus*, though he might occasionally be obligated to engage in a leisure activity, can, by definition, only be agreeably obligated in this domain.

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