

# Leisure Reflections No 44: The Role of History in Leisure Studies

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History figures in the study of leisure in at least three crucial ways: as general history, history of leisure provision, and activity-specific history. Over the years I have remarked sporadically on all three, and with this article, am now attempting to elucidate more systematically the role of each type. Let me be clear from the outset that I am not privileging one or the other. In many instances a complete explanation of leisure rests on two or three of these histories.

## General History

The general histories track and explain the emergence and change of leisure as an institution or segment of that institution such as sport or the hobbies. These histories explain leisure in macro-contextual terms; they present a big chronological picture of leisure. Below are some highlights, showing together a number of the crucial developments leading up to today's leisure institution as experienced in the West. My object is to provide a sense of the general of history sufficiently clear to set it off from its leisure provision and activity-specific counterparts. Many excellent general histories have been written over the years (e.g., Sylvester, 1999; Spracklen, 2011; Goodale & Godbey, 1988), obviating here the need to go into further detail. The general history also includes discussions of the various leisure trends, some of which I have recently reviewed (Stebbins, 2017, Chap. 8).

Viewed from the standpoint of work and leisure, much of the history of mankind has been about subsistence as a livelihood, with free-time activity taking place in the comparatively few hours left over after seeing to life's basic needs. Hunting, fishing, and gathering food; raising and harvesting crops; and moving to new land that facilitates all of these, along with defending against enemies, human and animal, occupy a lot of time in a pre-industrial society. But life on this subsistence level must necessarily include a few hours off for games, dancing, music, relaxation, sexual activity, casual conversation, and the like. Hamilton-Smith (2003, pp. 225-226) wrote that archaeological findings on this sort of leisure gathered from artifacts, living sites, cave painting, and so on date as far back as the prehistoric cultures.

## Western Societies

Sylvester (1999, pp. 18-23) writes that, from classical antiquity through the Middle Ages, two streams of thought influenced modern-day Western beliefs about and attitudes toward work and

leisure. One had its roots in Ancient Greece, especially in the city-state of Athens, while the other emerged later in the ferment of early Christianity.

### **Classical Greece**[\[1\]](#)

The actual patterns of work and leisure among ordinary people during this period, it appears, were quite different from what its “gentlemen-philosophers” – most notably Plato and Aristotle – had to say about them (Sylvester, 1999, p. 18). These intellectuals were unusual people in Greek society, for they had sufficient free time during which they could philosophize about these two domains and their relationship. We will concentrate in this section on some of the key ideas of the two men, primarily because those ideas have had considerable impact on Western thought on work and leisure and because the historical record of these domains in the rest of ancient Greek society is inadequate.

Plato argued that leisure was a necessary condition for anyone devoting himself to the activity of discovering truth (use of masculine gender is intentional here, for females were not considered part of this class). The thinker engaged in this pursuit had to be free from the demands of securing a livelihood. As for the discovery of truth, this was strictly the province of intellectuals of superior breeding. In particular these intellectuals were philosophers; they were the only people capable of discovering truth, or “knowledge,” while also providing civic leadership. The truth in question, by the way, was not knowledge based on sensory experience (sight, taste, touch, etc.), subject to change in light of new empirical evidence – scientific knowledge — but rather knowledge in the unchangeable, transcendental shape of ideas, or “forms” – philosophical knowledge.

In this system, the common man, who was sometimes a slave, labored for his own livelihood as well as that of the gentlemen-philosophers. Such was his lot in life. Work is honored here because it supports someone else’s freedom from work and that person’s pursuit of excellence in the creation of knowledge. Of course, the ordinary worker gained little more from all this than his livelihood.

Aristotle wrote about what has been translated into English as the “good life.” Integral to this life, he said, is achieving excellence in morality and intellectual pursuits. Moral excellence, he argued, comes with contemplating how best to live both individually and socially, whereas intellectual excellence grows from understanding and delighting in the true principles of the universe. Also included in the good life is engaging in such activities as speech (oratory), music, friendship, gymnastics, and citizenship. Moreover, according to Sylvester (1999, p. 20), Aristotle viewed work as “severely encroaching on the good life. Only when people were liberated from having to work for the necessities of life could they turn to the good life.” It follows that leisure, which in ancient Greece was freedom from having to work, is itself a condition of the good life. Consistent with this line of reasoning was Aristotle’s assertion that happiness also depends on leisure.

### **The Judeo-Christian Era**

During the Judeo-Christian period work came to be glorified, particularly as an avenue leading to spiritual development. Beside its necessity as a livelihood, work was thought to foster desirable habits, among them, sobriety, discipline, and industry. Furthermore work engendered a certain independence in the worker and, apparently (Sylvester, 1999, p. 24), a sense of charity. Unlike in the days of ancient Greece, work in the Judeo-Christian tradition was ultimately held to be undertaken for the glory of God as well as to instill a level of sacredness in those who worked here on Earth.

In the Middle Ages Christian monasticism revolved around work, through which the monks in retreat in monasteries sought religious purity in manual labor and the reading of divine literature. Leisure, in this situation, was held in low regard. It took St. Thomas Aquinas to restore it to the dignified position it enjoyed in ancient Greece. Aquinas argued that, if a man could live without labor, he was under no obligation to engage in it. Indeed spiritual work was only possible when the thinker was freed of physical labor. The elevated place of the contemplative life was thus restored, and with it the value of leisure.

With the advent of the Renaissance the balance of prestige between work and leisure shifted somewhat. This was a period of creative activity, which rested substantially on practical achievements in art and craft. Experimental physical science also took root during this era, initially as a (serious) leisure pursuit. Nevertheless the skilled artist, craftsman, and scientist were, themselves, special people. Ordinary manual laborers were still regarded as lowly by this group and the rest of the elite, thereby enabling these higher ranks in society to retain their superiority, backed by leisure as one of the differentiating principles.

### **The Protestant Reformation**

Al Gini (2001, pp. 20-21) has observed that, together, the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation have served as a cardinal reference point in the development of the modern work ethic. He points out that “it was during this period that work, no matter how high or low the actual task, began to develop a positive ethos of its own, at least at the theoretical level” (p. 20). More particularly, Sylvester (1999, p. 26) writes: “the Protestant work ethic was one of the central intellectual developments in changing attitudes toward labor and leisure. In it work is more than a livelihood, it is also a man’s *raison d’être*.”

The Protestant ethic, seldom mentioned today in lay circles and possibly not much discussed there even during its highest point in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, has nevertheless been a prominent social force in the evolution of Western society. Culturally and structurally, this powerful personal orientation motivating the small-enterprise capitalists of the day left its mark (Weber, 1930), one so powerful that it is still being felt in the present. This is because the Protestant ethic is, at bottom, about the will to work.

### **Modern Times**

If, in the later nineteenth century, the Protestant ethic was no longer a driving force for much of the working population, its surviving components in the work ethic were. Gary Cross (1990, Chap. 7) concluded that, during much of this century, employers and upwardly mobile

employees looked on “idleness” as threatening industrial development and social stability. The reformers in their midst sought to eliminate this “menace” by, among other approaches, attempting to build bridges to the “dangerous classes” in the new cities and, by this means, to transform them in the image of the middle class. This led to efforts to impose (largely rural) middle-class values on this group, while trying to instill a desire to engage in rational recreation — in modern terms, serious leisure — and consequently to seek less casual leisure.

By mid-nineteenth century in Europe and North America leisure had, with the weakening of the Protestant ethic, nonetheless gained a margin of respectability. Gelber (1999, p.1) observed that “industrialism quarantined work from leisure in a way that made employment more work-like and nonwork more problematic. Isolated from each other’s moderating influences, work and leisure became increasingly oppositional as they competed for finite hours.” Americans, he said, responded in two ways to the threat posed by leisure as potential mischief caused by idle hands. Reformers tried to eliminate or at least restrict access to inappropriate activity, while encouraging people to seek socially approved free-time outlets. Hobbies and other serious leisure pursuits were high on the list of such outlets. In short, “the ideology of the workplace infiltrated the home in the form of productive leisure” (Gelber, 1999, p. 2).

Hobbies were particularly valued, because they bridged especially well the worlds of work and home. And both sexes found them appealing, albeit mostly not the same ones. Some hobbies allowed home bound women to practice, and therefore understand, work-like activities, whereas other hobbies allowed men to create in the female-dominated house their own businesslike space – the shop in the basement or the garage. Among the various hobbies, two types stood out as almost universally approved in these terms: collecting and handicrafts. Still, before approximately 1880, before becoming defined as productive use of free time, these two, along with the other hobbies, were maligned as “dangerous obsessions.”

Gelber (1999, pp. 3-4) notes that, although the forms of collecting and craftwork have changed somewhat during the past one-hundred fifty years, their meaning has remained the same. Hobbies have, all along, been “a way to confirm the verities of work and the free market inside the home so long as remunerative employment has remained elsewhere” (p. 4).

The work ethic in the West continues to figure in the history of leisure in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. By mid-twentieth century the salvation component of the Protestant ethic can be observed, as already noted, only in the outlook of David Riesman’s (Riesman et al, 1961) inner-directed man, who by then, was nevertheless a vanishing breed. What was left by that point in history of the West’s distinctive orientation toward work has been known all along simply as the “work ethic.” This more diffuse ethic, in fact, shares two of the three components of the Protestant version. It shares the same attitudes: a person should work, work hard, and avoid leisure as much as possible. It also shares the same values: work is good, while leisure is not. Only the third component is missing – that of belief: by hard work people can demonstrate their faith that they number among the chosen. In short, the work ethic is but a secular version of the Protestant ethic. Stebbins (2009, pp. 37-42) covers this theme under the headings of workaholicism, some of which is really occupational devotion and do-it-yourself, some of it being conceivable as hobbyist activity (of the making and tinkering variety).

## **Leisure Provision**

Many a service and facility have been established to help people pursue particular leisure interests. Each service and facility has its own history, though it may not be available in written form such as a report, article, or book. Thus, such a history seems not to be readily available for lifeguarding, picture framing (for amateur artists), and piano tuning. But formal histories of swimming pools, amusement parks, casinos, the seaside, resort hotels, sports stadia, Harlem as a leisure district in New York, and the like are reasonably abundant (e.g., see Wikipedia and “Books” in Amazon.com).

The physical facilities typically cater to a variety of serious and casual leisure uses, while constituting as such, crucial conditions in the pursuit of the leisure activities that unfolds within them. By way of example, some ocean beaches offer an opportunity to swim, surf, and sunbathe, but lose their appeal for these interests when an oil slick washes up on shore. Knowing the history of a particular service or facility informs its users of, for instance, the improvements, regulatory changes, and current and past risks encountered over the years. Furthermore, it is through the history of the provision of leisure services and facilities that people learn in detail about some of the constraints and facilitators that frame their cherished activities.

## **Activity-Specific History**

As the term implies individual leisure activities have their own histories. The history of some casual interests may not have ever been written or even passed on informally, as is probably true of napping (in countries where it is not a tradition), doodling, and watching pigeons in urban squares. Other casual interests, however, have an obvious and sometimes rich history, with it being one that informs participants in profound ways. Thus, the casual consumers of popular music commonly know who started their genre of the art, who are its best current and past exemplars, which are its finest recordings and live performances, and the like. Casual consumers, as opposed to hobbyist buffs (Stebbins, 2002, pp. 70-71), do have a comparatively superficial idea of the history of the professional basketball or hockey team they routinely follow. This would seem to include knowledge of wins and losses in recent seasons; team standings; injured, traded, and acquired players; outstanding players; coaching changes; and so on. Such history is widely known among fans, and serves as a lively subject of sociable conversation among the local consumers who follow that sport.

The buffs are hobbyist sport and entertainment fans and followers of the fine arts who, compared with the consumers, are more substantially immersed in the history, lore, and blow-by-blow production of their leisure interest. In general, they pursue their leisure with an analytic eye, being able to evaluate and appreciate the art or sport based on their considerable knowledge of its values, history, production, standards of excellence, and occupational culture. Amateurs in the art, sport, science, and entertainment fields along with certain hobbyists are in this regard at least as knowledgeable as the buffs, but are distinguished by the fact that the former also routinely practice the art, sport, and so forth.

Still, there appears to be variation on how influential a role history plays in executing the amateur and hobbyist pursuits. My fieldwork on entertainment magicians, stand-up comics,

barbershop singers, and jazz musicians (mostly by participant observation) revealed not only a working knowledge of past performers and styles but also a tendency to model their own performances after some of them (for references see [www.seriousleisure.net/Bibliography/Amateurs/Hobbyists](http://www.seriousleisure.net/Bibliography/Amateurs/Hobbyists)). By comparison, amateur interest in the histories of the sports and scientific fields seems largely confined to present concerns.

## Conclusions

When we speak of history in leisure studies, we must be sure to specify which kind we are referring to. General history (it includes the leisure trends) is the broadest, and some might argue the most esoteric, of the three types and therefore the most inaccessible to the common mind. Yet, for all that, this type is extremely important for understanding leisure's institutional footprint across time. Meanwhile, the histories of leisure services and facilities are more accessible to *Homo otiosus* should he care to inquire about them and thereby learn more deeply about how his interests articulate with them. Nevertheless, it is the activity-specific history that, of the three types, occupies the most prominent place in the outlook of some casual and serious leisure participants. Here, these enthusiasts can place themselves with reference to past greats, events, legacies, style changes, and the like as they bear on the pursuit of their passion. Here leisure history is at its most personal.

## Endnote

[1] This section and the next draw substantially on Charles Sylvester's (1999) excellent description and analysis of leisure, as philosophized in ancient Greek and early Judeo-Christian thought.

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On 'Annoying Free-Time Pursuits: Leisure as Social Issue'