

# Leisure Reflections by Robert A. Stebbins (No. 61)

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## **Freedom of Expression is not a Diktat to Read, View, or Listen to What is Expressed**

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Exercising the freedom of expression is enshrined in, among other places, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights set out by the United Nations is often part of a leisure activity.

### Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20 holds that (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association and (2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

The leisure activities that are arguably the most common areas for freedom of expression are political participation and involvements in a social movement. The first is evident in communicating with the public relative to, for example, political policy, policy implementation, political party platform, and partisan views of the political opposition. Whereas such activity is often undertaken formally by volunteers serving political organizations, it can also be done informally, as when a person expresses on social media a political opinion or expresses it during a conversation with friends or family.

Social movements are collectivities that work from a shared ideology trying over time either to effect social change or to maintain the status quo. They often use unconventional political voluntary action (e.g., protest activities, graffiti) to express their views (Smith, Stebbins, & Dover 2006, p. 213). Modern movements have formed around environmental, religious, gender, political, and educational issues, among many others. A substantial amount of what is expressed occurs as written material, ranging from books and articles to mass media commentary to posters and at times graffiti. Nevertheless, spoken statements are also common, such as those heard at meetings, street gatherings, parliamentary sessions, social media platforms, and public talks.

Political participation and involvement in social movements gives life to Article 19 of the UN Declaration as well as Article 20, when done in peaceful assembly and association. From the standpoint of the serious leisure perspective, such leisure is either casual – mainly sociable conversation – or serious – a hobbyist liberal art centered on learning about and disseminating a particular political position. There may be a sense of obligation in hobbyist variety, but one that is agreeable and therefore something the participant wants to do (Stebbins 2000).

This said, these hobbyists commonly need an audience to hear, see, or read the ideas they are freely expressing. They use the rights of Articles 19 and 20 as justifications for expressing their ideas, which however, raises the question of who wants to observe these expressions? The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights also weighs in on this matter:

#### Article 29

1. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.
2. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

In other words, certain duties come with the freedom of expression in a democratic society, namely, respecting the legal framing there of morality, public order, general welfare, and other peoples' rights with respect to that which is expressed.

Yet the UN Declaration fails to mention directly another basic right in democratic societies: the right to remain ignorant of the opinions and beliefs that others may freely express. In such societies members are also free to ignore what those others are saying, writing, or portraying (in a painting, sculpture, pantomime, theatrical script, texted messages, etc.). Now, some of those others are offering opinions and beliefs that reflect the outlook of formal society, its government, corporate groups, established organizations, traditional institutions, and the like. That is, we have the right to ignore other peoples' attitudes and thoughts, as long as they are not anchored in the laws and regulations of the formal democratic country in which we live.

This, too, is a kind of leisure activity. Sometimes it is a liberal arts hobby often one revolving around various political issues of the day, whereas at other times it is a casual refusal to believe or even attend to someone else's freely given expressions. Many participants in today's democratic societies hold political opinions and beliefs that appear to be acquired unquestioningly per the public expressions of respected friends, relatives, and members of their social circle. Interactions in which such personal development occurs is typically rooted in casual leisure (e.g., dinner parties, drinking sessions, *kaffeeklatches*, social media exchanges).

Political expression becomes a hobby when done as serious leisure, which requires an enduring attention to and analysis of everyday political happenings at the local, national, or international levels, if not all three. Here sources of information are known for their credibility or lack thereof, a critical orientation in an age of widespread misinformation (incorrect or misleading) and disinformation (deliberately deceptive). The enthusiast spends considerable time gathering and evaluating information from these sources acquiring thereby an expertise with which to back up his or her political expressions and to reject or at least question the dubious expressions of others. This is that person's right, just as it is a right of the person to state or produce challengeable ideas.

Now, if people expressing their feelings about some issue do so in such a way that substantially constrains or spoils certain leisure activities of others, they threaten another right set out in the UN Declaration:

#### Article 24

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Carrying signs, handing out leaflets, yelling slogans, and the like exemplify peaceful expression of beliefs and opinions and do not normally undermine the rest and leisure of bystanders. When a demonstration gets noisy and movement is restricted (e.g., excessive yelling, horn honking), impedes leisure (e.g., streets are blocked, building exits are barricaded), or turns violent, Article 29, clause 2 is violated.

Consider this example from sport:

Marvin Richardson, the father of the Duke volleyball player, said in an interview late Saturday that a slur was repeatedly yelled from the stands as his daughter was serving, making her fear "the raucous crowd" could grow violent. . . . His daughter, who is 19, told him that she was scared of the crowd and that the safest course would be to keep her head down and continue playing. She didn't only "feel the ping of the slurs but also fear of the crowd," he said. "Because as the crowd got more hyped and the epithets kept coming, she wanted to respond back but she told me she was afraid that, if she did, the raucous crowd could very well turn into a mob mentality." (Patel 2022)

While the epithets made Ms. Richardson fear for her safety, they could well have also weakened her concentration and hence her performance during the game, though the article does not mention this possible result of the incident. All in all, her serious leisure experience of playing volleyball that night was substantially diluted by someone's expression of a racist slur.

Analyzing the public expression of opinions and beliefs from a leisure perspective forces us to consider the limits of the leisure perspective for all concerned. The modern tendency to see this activity exclusively from the side of the person giving off expressions misses thereby the

freedom the target of them has to avoid them. This point is not, however, lost on those who framed Article 29(2), even if the latter needs some further clarification vis-à-vis the ideas presented above.

## **References**

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Forthcoming:

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On “Citizen Science as Serious Leisure: Self-Image, Self-Worth in Everyday Life”