How Innocent is our Scientific Vocabulary?
Rethinking Recent Sociological Conceptualizations of Complex Leisure

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**Abstract**
More than ever, social scientists have reason to question the assumption that work is the human activity of value and leisure is little more than a respite from work; a way to consume its fruits and prepare for more work. This article compares four conceptualizations of the demanding activities people choose for themselves in their spare time. Each one is based on relatively recent empirical studies and presented to social science with a distinct term: 'serious leisure', 'specialized play', 'edgework', and 'consumption within a fantasy enclave'. Any conceptual representation allows certain interpretations of social phenomena and blocks others. In this case, vastly different pictures emerge, depending on the conception chosen. Thus, the major finding of the article is that sociology urgently needs to assess its vocabulary in order to understand how the modern predicament affects men and women in their freest moments.

**Key Words**
conceptual representations / consumption / edgework / serious leisure / specialized play

Id quod est praestantissimum maximeque optabile omnibus sanis et bonis et beatis, cum dignitate otium. (Cicero)
Certain ideas in modern societies correspond exceptionally well with Cicero’s classical insight: what is most outstanding and chiefly to be desired by all healthy, good and well-off persons is leisure with honour. Today, broad segments of the population find it eminently worthwhile to spend time in artistic creation, performance, and games. Harrison White (1993) believes people are attracted to such activities because they allow emotional energies and reflexive images to be set in motion with little interference from everyday expectations and power structures. Charles Taylor (1989), on the other hand, believes expressive conduct is sought because people are uncertain about what makes a modern life worth living and what confers meaning onto their existence, although they are prepared to grant purpose and respect to individual originality and accomplishment. Whatever the reasons, increasing numbers are finding their way to various kinds of activities that are not economically necessary.

How is today’s ‘honourable leisure’ reflected in contemporary sociology? How does the discipline understand the astonishing commitment many men and women have to their activities outside work? The questions are not trivial, because scientific languages influence the social world; not only the other way around. Any vocabulary opens doors to understanding and experience and restricts and narrows at the same time (Vygotsky, 1979; Wertsch, 1998). Concepts influence data construction and social analysis and, in due course, how things are generally perceived inside social science and outside.

There is no conceptual agreement and much phenomenological uncertainty associated with understanding the adventures of climbers, roamers of the seven seas, collectors, role-players, backpackers, birdwatchers, participants in extreme sports and many others. Several depictions exist; all share the notion that individuals somehow shape their identity by carving out opportunities outside work, but this is where the consensus ends.

Leisure comes in distinct forms, with variable complexity. This article addresses a type in which one must ‘work’. The four conceptions I examine cover similar activities to the extent that: (1) participants make an effort to fill their freedom with systematic experiences that are ends-in-themselves; (2) they are willing to invest considerable effort and assets as well as emotional and intellectual engagement; (3) they do not mix work and leisure aspects of life but order them into different ‘worlds’; and, finally, (4) reaching a degree of accomplishment in any of these activities requires particular skills and knowledge.

Four Conceptions of Complex Leisure

By lumping together activities that are normally considered different, even vastly different, each author or group of authors has delimited a new category of investigation and thereby tried to make an emerging and quite enigmatic
phenomenon available for sociological description and analysis. In addition to this rather similar heuristic strategy, their ultimate goals seem to overlap: to understand aspects of modernity by finding out what energetic people do when they are actually free to decide for themselves. Let me begin by briefly introducing each of the four categories:

Drawing on his extensive empirical research, Robert A. Stebbins (1982, 1992, 1997) defines serious leisure as the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial that they launch themselves on a career centred on expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience. The term itself, as well as the areas included in the definition, suggests a vast category, containing almost everything that is not a casual or laid-back endeavour. Stebbins (1997: 119) lists six distinctive traits or qualities of serious leisure:

1. the occasional need to persevere;
2. the development of the activity as in a career;
3. the requirement of effort based on specially acquired knowledge, training, or skill, and at times on all three;
4. the provision of durable rewards, including feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, a sense of belonging, and social interaction;
5. strong identification with the activity, which follows from the above; and, finally,
6. a unique ethos which tends to develop among the like-minded, anchored in the special social world that emerges when enthusiasts in a particular field pursue common interests over many years.

Similar qualities are also reflected in specialized play. This category is smaller, though still large and heterogeneous, because certain characteristics of the activities’ internal structures are included in the definition. Climbing, base jumping, graffiti-painting, collecting, backpacking, and numerous other endeavours are seen as variations of the distinct social form Georg Simmel (1971[1911]) called adventure. An adventure requires both knowledgeable undertakings and self-abandonment to chance; it is a socially organized activity which allows elements from normal life to be abstracted and dealt with from a distance. The notion of specialized play attaches particular significance to the way participants ‘cut out’ and ‘transfer’ mental content from their normal life into their leisure (Kjølsrød, 2003, 2004).

Edgework is as much in the pit of the stomach as in the head, according to Stephen Lyng (1990, 2005). He wants the term to capture risk, which is actively embraced by some actors, as opposed to the dangers imposed by the unanticipated consequences of social, technological, and environmental development. There is edgework not only within leisure but also in crime, business, science, and elsewhere. Although lovers of extreme sports and street criminals have little in common with patrons of the high arts and academic scholars, the fact that they all take calculated risks indicates that the capacity for risk-taking
is somehow an integral part of the very fabric of modern society, argues Lyng (2005: 4). Moreover, a commonality among diverse groups engaged in very different kinds of risk-taking ‘suggests psychic influences traceable to social and cultural forces deeply embedded in the modern way of life’. Risk-taking seems to be what the social institutions of work and leisure increasingly expect from people; edgework and centre work begin to blur into each other. People can seek a risk-taking experience of personal determination in their leisure, while they can employ the human capital created by this experience to navigate the challenges of risk society in their occupational life.

In consumption theory, leisure activities are believed to be shaped by the same cultural and social processes that affect other types of consumption. Russel Belk and Janeen Arnold Costa (1998) analyse ‘buckskinning’ or ‘rendezvousing’ as a case of consumption within a fantasy enclave. Every summer men, women and children meet for a relatively brief period in a specific geographic area to enact the living conditions, possessions, clothing, and character types of people who used to trap beavers and trade with fur in the Rocky Mountains of the American West between 1825 and 1840. Not unlike live role-players, these people create their own collective fantasy of a mythical past. They engage in trading and bartering of period-specific effects, embody images of the somewhat ‘uncivilized’ original mountain men with a ‘devil-may-care attitude’, and stage ‘authentic’ enactments. Aspects of consumer society and consumption are more explicitly described in Belk’s earlier, historically oriented study of collecting. As consumer society developed, a normative shift occurred: envy avoidance gave way to conspicuous display of possessions aimed at envy provocation. And ‘... collecting is consumption writ large. It is a perpetual pursuit of inessential luxury goods. It is a continuing quest for self completion in the marketplace. And it is a sustained faith that happiness lies only an acquisition away’ (Belk, 1995: 1).

Even if the four categories fit the initial criteria, they are not identical. A given activity of leisure may fit more than one of these definitions. Parachuting, for instance, as a highly skilled, physically demanding activity with costly equipment, can easily fit all four. Whereas collecting can be classified as serious leisure, specialized play or consumption, but it would appear odd to think of what collectors do as edgework, though there is some kind of risk involved.

**Analogies – More or Less Explicit**

Authors borrow and get ideas from elsewhere. Analogy is probably the most central search heuristic in the social sciences (Abbott, 2004: 113). So, the next step in our investigation is to look for implicit analogies. Any choice of analogy is likely to influence an author’s understanding of how the various elements of a subject matter are interlinked, what motivates actors, and what other generative processes are involved.
Serious leisure borrows much from work. Like work, it is a substantial
activity; nothing is laidback about it. Like work, it is systematically pursued,
even to the point of developing lasting careers. Careers in leisure, as in work,
owe their existence to personal efforts based on specially acquired knowledge,
training and skills. Moreover, actors in both areas tend to identify strongly with
what they do. This springs from their efforts as well as from the rewards they
reap. The work-like character of serious leisure is emphasized by drawing atten-
tion to its civic potential; for example, to the undoubted accomplishments of a
group of people who manage the labour and knowledge-intensive task of, say,
restoring an historic railway, aircraft or building. Implying that leisure ‘really’
is work is not far fetched in such cases.

Specialized play, on the other hand, borrows most from art (Kjølsrød,
2003, 2004). Anyone who is willing to withstand an element of chance, endure
substantial learning processes, and take on the many practicalities involved can
in due course develop images in play of whatever experiential or ideological
concern he or she has. The player acquires an art, or a ‘mediational tool’ in
Wertsch’s sense (1998), in which elements from real life can be abstracted and
dealt with in a different ‘language’.2 A graffiti painter’s ability to outsmart every
guardian of the urban scene is visibly anti-establishment; a climber’s successful
ascent up a tough northern wall is indisputably brave. Such clarity aids percep-
tion and helps players and audiences alike in their understanding of what is
mediated. Because metaphors developed in play can be used like words in ordi-
nary languages, with polysemy, an almost infinite range of socially significant
messages can be carved out.

Whatever the actual context and social forces at work, negotiating the edge is
believed to touch on deep-seated layers of the personality. This type of risk-taking
is associated with a constitution in the individual – an inborn tendency, enhanced
by social and cultural forces embedded in modern ways of life. At the root of the
conception, then, is a genetic model; a biological characteristic interacting with
psychological and social feedbacks. Lyng (2005: 47) considers several possibilities
when it comes to what such feedbacks or structural imperatives of contemporary
society actually consist of. Exposing oneself to danger may be a somewhat anarch-
tistic or playful escape from the Weberian rationality principle – an attempt to
re-enchant the world by shaking the bars of the iron cage of regulation. Making
an offer of oneself in an extreme situation may also be a more carefully designed
Foucauldian project of self-creation; a deliberate attempt to transcend existing
power–knowledge arrangements by means of a new corporeal ‘ethic of the self’.
In either case, the edge represents an alternative to what participants may feel is
an over-determined social life.

Originally, the idea of consumption within a fantasy enclave stems from
studies of commercial settings, among them Las Vegas, Disneyland, and luxury
hotels. Fantasy invites feelings of pleasure, relaxation, and escape. Fantastic
scenes also offer a richer quality of experience and stimulate consumer desires
by removing consumers from their normal lives with more constrained norms
of spending. It makes little difference in this respect whether a shared mythology
is a business product or self-made. Belk and Costa (1998) describe how participants change and improve their outfits and equipment from one season to the next; they pay much attention to how the modern mountain men trade and barter and also to the monetary cost of the artefacts. Their analysis leaves an ambivalent impression, as does Thorstein Veblen’s (2001[1899]) famous tale of ‘the leisure class’. Veblen approached his material as if he were a visiting anthropologist puzzled by local customs (see Wolfe, 2001: xv). The acquisitiveness and garish extravagance of the early industrialists did not strike a chord of affinity in him; quite the contrary. Yet he is aware that ‘wealth and power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence (Veblen, 2001[1899]: 29). So he interprets the immense dwellings and plethora of costly objects not as mere self-indulgence but as deliberate demonstrations of accomplishment, distinctive of an early stage of capitalism and a class that had recently emerged from the commonplace body of the population. Likewise, the esoteric and not so ‘authentic’ conduct of the modern mountain men is the other side of their admirable collective mythmaking.

Despite marked similarities in the type of leisure under consideration, each author relies on a separate analogy. Why? At least two have an agenda, ‘a bigger box’, which may have influenced their choice. Stebbins (1997: 126) is clear about his aspiration to ‘dignify’ the entire field of leisure studies: ‘For the millions of people in this world who do not pursue serious leisure, its existence can stand as evidence that leisure can be more than pure hedonism.’ In contrast, Belk (1995: 3) sees conspicuous consumption patterns as inevitable when certain values emerge from the confrontation of available consumer goods with the social construction of acceptable and desirable consumption patterns. People’s minds and ultimately most aspects of life are sadly influenced by this.

**Form – More or Less Defined**

That complex leisure takes place in a bounded space, secluded from the normal rounds of life, is a common and non-trivial point of departure for our authors. The boundary and ‘the rules of the game’ serve to interrupt and ward off normal expectations. Other than that, each conception has its own idea of form. Form, as we know, has a bearing on the actors’ motivation, experience, and expression; it affects the simpler ‘kicks’ as well as the richer emotional, cognitive, and social processes that operate in relation to any social situation (cf. Collins, 2004; Goffman, 1967).

There are no implications in serious leisure about commonalities in the internal structure of the relevant activities. As already mentioned, the category is indeed large; it includes involvement in any amateur group, hobbyist activity and also voluntary work. Stebbins (1992, 1997) illustrates how amateur groups involved with classical music, theatre, archaeology, baseball, astronomy, and stand-up comedy are linked in a variety of ways with professional counterparts; most often through a shared audience. He divides hobbyists into five categories:
collectors; makers and tinkerers; activity participants in non-competitive, rule-based pursuits; players of sports and games; and enthusiasts in one of the liberal arts such as fishing, bird-watching, or barbershop singing. Volunteers, the third basic type, develop careers in helping action that are not directly motivated by material gain. These actors also have one foot in normal life when they cooperate with professionals. The immense heterogeneity of serious leisure is hardly compatible with an idea about certain unifying elements of form.

In contrast, specialized players pursue game-like activities with a specific internal form. ‘Action’ and ‘series’ are key elements in this structure (Kjølsrød, 2003). An enthusiastic collector of books entering a ‘hunt’ for a specific copy will perceive this to be a chance-taking event, or an action in Erving Goffman’s (1967) sense. However, this hunt is not a singular action but part of a larger and lasting enterprise with numerous related events. When the player at some point decides on a line of specialization, a long series of virtual spaces emerges; some already filled as a result of previous successful hunts, others still empty. A defined or redefined series orders what is already secured and calls for new action. Past and future efforts gain direction. Form is thereby intimately related to motivation: ‘There is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order’, says Walter Benjamin, talking about his own passion for books:

> When the books are not yet on the shelves, they are not yet touched by the mild boredom of order … I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth. To renew the old world, that is the collector’s deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things, and that is why a collector of older books is closer to the wellsprings of collecting than the acquirer of luxury editions. (1978[1955]: 59)

As the spaces are gradually filled, the assembled artefacts are ‘reborn’ into a new system. The player is also ‘reborn’, because creating this system, the collection, documents and amplifies the person’s values, preferences and capabilities.

Edgework occurs as direct confrontation with consequential physical, economic, or social danger. The internal form is more or less synonymous with what it takes to reach the peak experience. According to Ferrell (2005: 78), the term itself can be grasped as ‘a conceptual commemoration of those moments when it is possible to find existential definition right at the end of chaos’.

> Once I hit the air I felt like I was home again. You never get enough … To just be snatched from the jaws of death … But it isn’t a death wish like everybody thinks it is. You know you’re alive when you do this; every sense is working. … You want to live so that you can do it again. (Member of a highly respected group of women base jumpers, the Gravity Girls, quoted from Ferrell, 2005: 79)

Those who are attracted become ‘junkies for the seductive, intoxicating tension between artistry and abandon, for the dialectic of chaos and control; for that ‘strange music’ that plays when you stretch your luck, but stretch it just right’ (Ferrell, 2005: 78).
Fantasy enhances escape and seduction. Recreational consumption based on a script, story or motif draws a firm borderline towards everyday life, evoking playful activities and attitudes, and creating a climate of escape, pleasure, and relaxation: ‘Very little is needed to trigger off this type of fantasy, and once the images get going, they can be of a totally absorbing kind’ (Belk and Costa, 1998: 92–3). According to Belk (1995), consumption in general characteristically generates mixed or rather sequential feelings of pleasure and discomfort. As experiences and objects seldom live up to the initial expectations, they offer only relatively short-lived moments of gratification and happiness. So, the enchantment of realizing a fantasized item of desire normally gives way to painful yearning at a later stage. Such restiveness is precisely the faith of collectors who wilfully throw themselves into ever new hunts for treasures.

All our authors see men and women who invest a great deal of passion in impersonal situations governed by some kind of ‘rules’, and by perfecting and remaking these rules derive greater pleasure and promote greater sociability with others. In other words, those who are involved in complex leisure possess expressive means and act in correspondence with Richard Sennett’s eminent insight that artifice is superior to reality when it comes to articulating emotion, because ‘without some work on the emotions to be conveyed, without the exercise of judgement or calculation in showing them, an expression cannot be performed more than once’ (1992[1974]: 111). Like Sennett, they see people who are doing specific ‘work’ in a specific medium, but each author perceives the characteristics of this medium differently.

We investigate these differences further, but let us first take a closer look at what it takes to participate, then at the rewards.

Training for Leisure

The need to train for work is widely recognized and firmly institutionalized; less so with leisure. Our participants, however, take part in dynamic interactive systems with transactions, cooperation, and competition between well-informed peers. Successful involvement invites not only learning-by-doing but also extensive reading and qualified interaction. Competence and ‘style’ are assets as well as status elements in the social worlds that emerge around each activity. Though it is possible to sail around the world, climb Mount Kilimanjaro, or explore the polar ice on a packaged tour, those who do will not be recognized as peers. Someone who simply inherits or buys a ready-made collection will not be fully respected and included.

Self-actualization becomes a major outcome of serious leisure, largely because committed participants can hardly avoid developing particular talents, skills, and knowledge in their fields of interest. According to Stebbins (1997: 118), the liberal arts hobbyists are enamoured of the systematic acquisition of knowledge for its own sake, and this is typically accomplished by reading
voraciously in a field, be it art, sport, cuisine, language, culture, history, science, philosophy, politics or literature.

New challenges appear as specialized players develop the skill component in their games of mixed skill and chance. When a Texas Hold' em poker player becomes more proficient and also determines what kind of interaction is most appealing – on the internet or live, tournaments or single tables – he or she can take further steps up the ladder to more demanding tables and higher stakes (Klethagen, 2007). Learning, then, is not only for the sake of mere satisfaction, but enables the players to reach higher levels in the game and higher levels of mental functioning. Up to a point, a more knowledgeable participant is likely to become more involved.

Edgework is almost unfeasible without advanced physical and/or psychological mastery. Clubs of base-jumpers and hang-gliders usually make an effort to inform potential recruits about the dangers and offer necessary guidance to newcomers. A good balance between challenge and skill brings enjoyment. A way to reach yet another level of excitement is to engage in even more demanding approaches; as when skydivers join hands to form momentary formations during freefall and motor-bikers do the same during high-speed back road runs:

… with the throttle screwed on there is only the barest margin, and no room at all for mistakes. It has to be done right … and that's when the strange music starts, when you stretch your luck so far that fear becomes your exhilaration and vibrates along your arms … until the next dark stretch and another few seconds on the edge.

(Thompson, 1967: 37, quoted from Ferrell, 2005)

Consumers within lasting fantasy enclaves also develop skills and knowledge. During the winter, enthusiastic mountain men and women set up for the next rendezvous season by preparing clothing and other gear or trade goods, and during the summer they may attend courses in order to learn more about brain-tanning, handling guns, making moccasins or powder horns, beading, quilting, etc. A lot of actual learning is obviously involved but Belk and Costa (1998: 219) interpret this merely as contributions to the fantasy frame: 'By adopting a particular style of costume, hair, food, vernacular, and even gait, modern mountain men construct a liminoid time and place in which carnevalesque adult play and rites can freely take place'. Knowledge and skill are not accorded value in themselves, nor are they considered an expansion of the actors' mental or physical capacities. The idea of consumption within a fantasy enclave differs from the other three representations in this respect.

In other words, depending on the conceptualization, the social sciences will see people either on the road to gratifying expertise or drawn into essentially self-illusory quests. The same kind of leisure can be understood as 'academies of autodidact learning' or as 'self-constructed realms of escape'; vocabulary more than empirical evidence shapes our impression of what men and women are actually doing with their spare time.
Significant Efforts and Significant Rewards

This is a type of leisure in which one must ‘work’; what is more, those who are engrossed are usually willing to endure a great deal in order to find what they seek. On a general basis, psychiatrist George Ainslie (1992: 9) argues convincingly that most of the choices individuals make are related to how much of an unpleasant emotion they are willing to risk enduring in the hope of experiencing pleasant emotions; the unpleasant emotions being apprehension, resentment, anxiety, doubt, confusion, embarrassment, tedium, and so forth, and the pleasant emotions being fellowship, comfort, amusement, pride, relief, inspiration, and ‘other vaguely defined feelings that are nevertheless well known in the day’s particular context’.

It is hardly surprising that the authors tend to emphasize the kinds of output which go hand-in-glove with their basic analogy. The rewards from serious leisure include feelings of accomplishment, social interaction and fellowship, and also physical products (e.g. paintings, scholarly papers, pieces of furniture). Enhanced self-esteem results from the favourable social identity associated with participation in a wide sense, not to forget that ‘the unusual, memorable experiences found in an activity contribute to feelings of self-enrichment by endowing the person with moral, cultural or intellectual resources’ (Stebbins, 1997: 123). In addition, there is some measure of plain hedonistic gratification, which refers to the pure enjoyment people experience from their pursuits. The costs may include considerable amounts of time spent and much ‘work’, as well as emotional charges. Disappointments, dislikes, and tensions between people can be extremely poignant (1997: 123). Costs can be linked to parts of the activity, such as auditions for amateur actors. Expected rewards may also fail to materialize. Moreover, committed amateurs in pursuit of leisure goals may find themselves in ambiguous and/or marginal social positions when they cooperate with professionals (1997: 125).

Again, much the same can be said for specialized play. An additional set of rewards or costs is linked to the communicative aspects. By delimiting units of action, players find suspense as well as chances to prove themselves. Those who go on can use their series of coded outcomes as a memory-system to chronicle and communicate their own values, ideology, and mastery. Gratification comes from this increased literacy; from being able to express, feel, and reflect on even the most difficult questions in a language of imagery. There are certainly communicative hazards in this; activities or artefacts can be morally difficult, socially dubious, or simply reveal too much to an unwanted audience (see Kjølsrød, 2003 for more details). Play and art are often thought of as autonomous social forms, autonomous because society grants people a licence to be different from their normal selves when they play but still accepts that there is a connection to ‘real life’ concerns. According to Simmel (1971[1911]: 192), an adventure is basically a social form that allows people to synthesize
what life is about: ‘It stands outside the proper meaning and steady course of existence to which it is yet tied by a fate and a secret symbolism.’

The illicit pleasures of graffiti painting, the sensual immediacy of a base jump, the fascination of financial gambling, or even the arousing challenges of rescue work – such risks are not pursued as a means to an end, rather as an end in itself associated with a certain type of adrenaline-induced ‘kick’. Phenomenologically oriented studies depict those who venture close to the edge as attracted by embodied pleasures of such high intensity that they feel ‘addicted’ to some extent. There can also be a feeling of implosion of time and space. In line with such observations, Lyng (2005: 5) argues that the main challenge for social science is not to explain why people would deliberately risk their lives without material reward. There is a simple answer to this question: they do it because the experience itself is intensely seductive, ‘because it is fun!’ What needs to be sociologically explained is why voluntary risk-taking has acquired such broad appeal. As already mentioned, this could well be an indicator of social conditions that somehow deaden or deform the human spirit. Or, it could be an especially pure expression of the central institutional and cultural imperatives of an emerging social order, as edgework competencies are in increasing real-world demand.

More than allowing access to an ostentatious amount of things, imagination and fantasy appear to be keys to pleasure in modernity. New venues of consumer desire appear when commercial actors invite customers into arenas of prefabricated fantasy, or when people create their own collective stories, for example by camping together in order to elaborate an historic myth, or when they establish a social world around any other popular activity. An intoxicating mixture of recurring needs and temptations, which eventually gives way to a moment of pleasure when the fantasized object is realized, is exactly what Zygmunt Bauman (2002: 185–7) sees as the distinctive mark of modern consumerism: in consumer society the ‘pleasure principle’ has been enlisted in the service of the ‘reality principle’. The ‘reality principle’ used to be the limit set on the ‘pleasure principle’ – the boundary pleasure-seekers could only cross at their own peril. However, the search for pleasure has become an instrument. The two enemies have cut a deal, says Bauman, and the conflict between them has been transmogrified. Fluidity thus becomes solidity.

Summing up so far. If we take into account that analogies throw light only on some aspects of a phenomenon and leave other aspects in the shadows, we may assume that each of these conceptions is inadequate and none in itself is sufficient to understand and explain complex leisure ‘properly’. The four taken together may render a better description than any of the ‘purer’ representations. Alternatively, if we accept the authors’ intentions and analyses, surprisingly different pictures emerge. The last step in our analysis is an attempt to map these differences further by considering the four representations in relation to three distinguishing dimensions: degree of commercialization, possible source of resilience, and communicative potential.
Distinguishing Dimensions

Market-dependent Leisure versus Non-market Leisure

The commercial sector is a major provider of adult leisure. Social science has not always treated market-based leisure as an entirely welcome aspect of modernity. The Frankfurt school of critical theory, for example, analysed the emerging apparatuses that supply consumers with means of dreaming in a largely pessimistic vein. Consumption of films, shows, magazines, and various types of games was seen as mass entertainment, with the likely consequence of seducing individuals and homogenizing culture.

In contrast, the authors presented in this article emphasize what individuals and groups do for themselves; how they invest in demanding end-in-itself activities and derive pleasure through their own efforts. In this respect, the encampments of the mountain men are rather like protracted theatrical performances in which actors impersonate characters and explore identities as part of a shared American heritage. Self-organization is a common highlighting.

Still, there is a difference 'in principle' between the consumer category and the other three. Sky-divers, sailors, climbers, hang-gliders and many others buy the equipment they use; professional dealers supply collectors with artefacts; and commercial journals and web sites bring information. Despite substantial market interaction, only the consumer approach considers the activities as somehow driven by market developments; as intimately linked to a capitalist context.

Finding a Self in One’s Own Creations versus Seduction by Strong Social Forces

Contemporary narratives in the social sciences and philosophy tend to evolve around damaged civil society, frail social ties, shaken faiths, and loss of meaning. Tentative, hesitant, insecure, and fluid are adjectives frequently attached to modern commitments.

This is not so with participants in serious leisure, specialized play, and edgework, who seem to exhibit resilience and inventiveness in the face of such adversity. The philosopher Charles Taylor (1989, 1991) may help to explain why their adventures seem to offer opportunities to (re)shape credible selves. He sees the widely shared ideal of self-fulfilment not in the sense of plain subjectivism but as a powerful incentive to ‘being true to oneself’, as an intrinsic part of our area, and a fairly new phenomenon in history. Seeking authenticity involves ideas of originality, and being original requires some kind of front against convention; either a simple contrast, something that is one’s own choice may suffice, or it may take a more profound revolt, such as offensive action against the ‘bourgeois’ ethic of orderliness or safety. This helps to explain why demands to be true to oneself are occasionally pitched against those of morality, and why expressive enterprises can develop in many directions, independent of a person’s habitus (Taylor, 1991: 74). Protected by the walls of an acknowledged
game-like activity with rules, our participants can find the freedom they need for their particular projects. Some individuals exhibit a narcissistic, self-indulgent manner in their leisure, others emphasize altruistic values and ideals. Some are admirably skilled and original; others are merely bizarre and eccentric; yet others are intentionally provocative, but all are essentially free to articulate a chosen self and possess an adequate ‘tool’ for this purpose.

The notion of consumption evokes rather different connotations. Recurring consumer desires, inside or outside a fantasy enclave, fits well into a social science tradition where ‘consumption’ is seen as more closely related to impulses of the moment than to lasting goals. Consumption exists in this tradition in contrast to ‘production’ and ‘investment’. Whatever it takes to enact or re-enact a historic past or achieve a collection of some magnitude, the consuming actor is still believed to be somehow under the influence of market-induced impulses. And, this duplicity remains even when aspects of play are explicitly recognized, both play as mimicking reality and play in the sense of being in a world apart.

The Life–Leisure Relationship

The relationship between work and leisure is a long-standing theme of study in sociology. Wilensky’s (1960) well-known hypothesis is that work attitudes and practices tend to ‘spill over’ or generalize into leisure, or that an individual may ‘compensate’ for work practices in leisure. Later research has not shown a consensus (see Haworth, 1997). So, whether there is a relationship between the two spheres or not remains an open question and, if so, it is not clear how it operates.

Two of the conceptions in this article, specialized play and edgework, postulate a relationship between life and leisure on the level of the actor. The first assumes that modern men and women may address a vast repertoire of real life concerns in their play, the second detects a pattern of gratifying revolt where people willingly take consequential risk, led on by developments in macro society. In either case, both the specific games and the specific actors should be taken into account in actual studies. By reducing the analysis to either one, sociologists run the risk of destroying the understanding of what is going on.

Each of the four conceptions approaches committed human beings from a micro perspective, and each claims to give an account of the phenomenon ‘as it is’. Yet these people hardly seem to share the same social conditions. Those who are involved in serious leisure do their own thing, saved from the chains of economic dependence and the official sorting by an educational system. Specialized players and workers of the edge are communicators; what they do can be understood as mediated action, as a way of translating individual or collective projects into an alternative language. Consumers, unfortunately, appear to have lost much of their freedom, even when they are active co-producers of a shared fantasy. Again, the understanding of what modern men and women do in their freest moments depends entirely upon our conceptions.
Conclusion

The four versions of complex leisure offer an opportunity to examine apparently neutral or innocent terms in our scientific vocabulary. As ordering devices, analogies are not true or false but either useful or not; they are simply aids for assembling particular attributes and connections from a complex reality in an attempt to find out how things operate. Thus, we should not be surprised that each of the terms examined in this article carries strong ‘affordances’ and ‘constraints’, that each singles out and highlights some elements and simply blocks the view to others. *Nomen est numen*, to name is to know, is a well-known saying and warning in philosophy of science. If we interpret these representations as empirical descriptions of ‘the world as it is’, our discipline will be taking at least some of its terms far too literally.

Could it be that the notion of consumption, with all its connotations, has been granted too much space in sociology? That it has turned into a ‘terministic screen’, blinding us to the actual character of the projects people choose for themselves? Has the persuasive lens of consumer society made social scientists less sensitive to the deeper concerns of men and women, and therefore misled us as to the character of the human condition in modernity? This author believes it has. The idea of consumerism fits hand-in-glove with other forceful ideas about modernity. One such idea is the alleged dominance of the narcissistic personality. Being successful in the outside world, the narcissistic personality is nevertheless assumed to suffer a degree of inner emptiness or anxiety that needs to be repaired with the help of ‘transitional’ objects or activities. Another rapidly spreading notion is that people are now fleeing from political engagement into secluded spheres of esoteric diversion (Critchley, 2007). By adopting this cluster of ideas, social science risks portraying people as less active, inventive, and resourceful in their individual and collective lives than is actually the case, though some may certainly desire a fully fledged escape into a fictional world apart.

I have tried in this article to demonstrate that there are other interpretations with no less credibility. Varieties of complex leisure can, as we have seen, for instance, be thought of as an art form, far more democratic than what is normally called art. Harrison White (1993: 195) reminds us that art was crucial to social life long before there were artists, as identities, ties, and allegiances have always been announced and celebrated with the help of artwork. All of the boundary lines between one art and another and between art and other forms are constructed and hence negotiable; fuzziness characterizes such separations, just as aesthetic discriminations of quality are fuzzy. Today, he notes, new categories enter the identity sweepstakes of art worlds in different ways, and ‘a prototype in our time and place is the collector’.

In societies like ours where the puritan work ethic is still highly valued, leisure tends to fall into the shadows of social science (Iso-Ahola, 1997), though there are exceptions. Two highly visible scholars from roughly opposite political positions have long since emphasized the leisure side of the work/leisure
dichotomy. Daniel Bell (1976) portrayed contemporary capitalists as torn between declining markets and increasing sensation-seeking. In the 20th century, he wrote, a new character introduces to the world an unprecedented way of living: the modern artist who searches out new sensations and identities. Following the lead of the artist, individuals, understandably, seek to realize their full potential. But unmoored from the puritan tradition and role requirements – delayed gratification, enterprise, self-denial – the individual can only be a cultural wanderer without a home to return to, hence the cultural contradictions of capitalism. A decade later Claus Offe (1985) also deemed labour a declining power in society and called for a replacement of all work-focused social theories, including those of Marx. He found the driving forces of this decline in the historical evolution of capital accumulation and argued his case at two levels: that of the reduced centrality of work in the structuring of life and that of the perception of work by those whose lives are being structured.

I am not implying that labour might be displaced by leisure as the major organizing force in society; my argument is more modest and less controversial. I believe sociology has good reasons to rethink leisure simply because it is now widely accessible and its various forms are not well understood. Today, it seems, work becomes ‘play’ and play becomes strenuous ‘work’. Rising levels of education, longevity, money to spend, expanding internet, and heavy commercial engagement in these areas are all associated with an increasing involvement in varieties of complex leisure and the corresponding growth in quite amazing social worlds.

Notes

1 Classical scholars seem to agree that the guiding principle throughout Cicero’s political career was to advocate some sort of individual freedom as the necessary condition of a worthy existence, as opposed to the slave’s ideal of a good master. In the Pro Sesto, cum dignitate otium addresses the responsibility of the state. In other instances it is about the situation of the individual. For a happy political situation, the government ought to provide the strength and prestige necessary for a tranquil social order, whereas the governed ought to enjoy an unburdened private life where they can practise art, seek knowledge, and savour what else life has to offer.

2 This method of bounding phenomenological units allowed Simmel and later Goffman to discuss the relationship between inside and outside, and to include in sociological analysis aspects of the human condition that had so far been left out (Davies, 1997).

References


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