

Sociological theories of leisure: marx and weber



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Leisure is an area of sociological study that has, according to many sociologists including Chris Rojek ^[1] been neglected. The literature, certainly in the countries of Britain and Australia, has been dominated by views and theories that fit into a Marxist framework. 'Leisure' is juxtaposed against what is deemed its opposite, 'work.' In this essay I shall attempt to elucidate some of that Marxist framework and then criticise what can be viewed as its limitations thus, hopefully, highlighted and understanding some of the implications necessary for a further and deeper understanding of the sociology of leisure.

Marx's most basic premise, that man in capitalist society is alienated from his own labour, is also, unsurprisingly, the theoretical underpinning for Marxist notions of leisure. The change from older forms of economic markets to capitalist industrialisation forced a schism in the work/leisure relationship. *"The identification of leisure as the sphere in which needs are satisfied and pleasure found simultaneously makes work less susceptible to criticism as unsatisfactory and more salient as that which has to be tolerated to 'earn' the freedom of leisure. Instrumentalism about work is built into this enforced separation: 'leisure' is the prize to be won."* ^[2] This demarcation is seen as the principle victory, in a stream of relatively uncontested battles, of capitalism in regards to leisure. The alienation of labour is made more tolerable by leisure activities and pursuits. The idea that one worked to live at the weekend, or outside of work, became prevalent. Work became a means to an end.

The sphere of leisure, once created, offered the ruling classes the opportunity to restrict and control workers lives further, in insidious ways, <https://assignbuster.com/sociological-theories-of-leisure-marx-and-weber/>

permeating what was supposed to be 'free' time. "*If the working class wants alcohol and music, it shall have them - but only to be consumed under certain conditions.*"^[3] Under the guise of caring for workers rights and needs, and by setting up institutions of leisure, the dominant ruling classes could ensure that time away from work was spent in activities deemed appropriate. The point of this control was, of course, to ensure the productivity of workers and thus perpetuate the capitalist market. A hung over worker was of little use.

"The establishment of leisure as consumption ... has also been of considerable significance."^[4] This was capitalism's second great victory in regards to leisure. The capitalist process, at its most fundamental, is all about consumption. By turning leisure into a commodity, to be bought and sold as well as used, revenue could be exploited. The irony and hypocrisy of the sphere of leisure, supposedly free of capitalist ideology, feeding that ideology with new avenues of revenue, production and reproduction, is shown by Clarke and Critcher.

The freedom of leisure is a fallacy. "*The much vaunted democracy of the market-place rests on the rather less democratic foundations of the profoundly unequal distribution of wealth and income.*"^[5] Instead of resistance to the fact that choice is limited, nay controlled, by the market, we, the consumer, value what choices we do have all the more. Choice in leisure is curtailed by social division and unequal distribution. "*Those with relatively more control over work tend to have more control over their leisure; class does not end at the factory gate ... gender even less so.*"^[6]

Clarke and Critcher indicate a direct link between the alienation of work, to an alienation of leisure, precisely because they conceptualise leisure as being a by product of what we term as work. Leisure is defined by work, caused by work and needed because of work in a capitalist industrial society.

Resistance to leisure models are, according to Clarke and Critcher, ultimately futile. The market can not completely control how leisure products are used, the young especially tend to use them in ways never envisioned. This would be seen as a site of resistance except, *" Such strategies may modify but cannot challenge the market/consumer model. Before we can modify the meaning and use of any commodity, we must first enter the market as consumers to acquire it. "* [7]

" In a manner sometimes reminiscent of the early Marx, Simmel argues that modern production is not the site of creativity, of individuality, of pleasure. "

[8] Marx stated that workers were alienated from their species being, their creativity, individuality and ultimately their pleasure. Simmel here echoes those sentiments. He also concurs that leisure is an escape from such alienation. *" In this context then, the history of forms of leisure is the history of labour ... The exhaustion of our mental and physical energies in work lead us to require only one thing of our leisure; ' we must be made comfortable ' ; ' we only wish to be amused. '"* [9] These notions are very similar to those of Marxist and neo-Marxist theorists such as Clarke and Critcher. Leisure is a reward for time spent working and the real purpose of leisure is to repair and relax the worker ready to once more be a useful member of the industrial complex.

" The sphere of non-work, ostensibly that of leisure, can also be filled out by consumption and by circulation in search of what is new. Where a mass of consumers has been created, commodities can be sold for their price rather than their quality. "^[10] It is to be noted that in sociology of the Marxist

tradition, and here in Simmel's own words, what constitutes leisure in a capitalist society for the workers is judged morally bankrupt and alienating.

Quantity over quality, mere amusement over the satisfaction of any deeper needs. Many theorists question this view. Wrestling would certainly be

treated as such mere amusement in a Marxist or Simmel tradition, yet for

Barthes ^[11], such ' low' culture reproduces the ' species being' that they see as lacking from capitalist leisure. The Marxist tradition makes those

judgements with very little empirical evidence. As Rojek states, " *So far*

leisure and other studies have provided little sense of what people actually do or feel in pubs, gardens, kitchens, on pitches or package tours. "^[12] The

assumption of what people experience during leisure is dangerous.^[13]

In Freudian psychology, " *An irresistible verbal transition ... effortlessly*

replaces the ... term ' leisure, ' with a substitute, ' pleasure. '"^[14] In essence

our existence, at the polymorphous perversity stage, begins as fun. The

processes of society, the rules of the ego, attempt to cage that fun. " *The*

world of fun is repressed. "^[15] Freud noted the classic bourgeois ego,

perhaps best represented by Veblen's " *Leisure class. "*^[16] For Freud, it was,

" Just this ' objectivity ' which justified the utilitarian tradition in psychology, and, viewing the individual as a consumer rather than a producer, regarded

pleasure as the consequence of possessing valued objects. "^[17] Freud

depicted the Bourgeois ego as deriving its pleasure from owning commodities. This pleasure was leisure and inexorably, in both implicit and explicit ways, the subordinate classes were compelled to adopt this view because, as Rojek points out, "*the ideas of the bourgeois class are the ruling ideas in society.*" [18]

Interestingly, Freudian psychology breaks with Marxist tradition. The pleasure of fun is not to be found in commodities. Commodities are the only form of leisure since, under capitalist ideology all leisure is a commodity. So, reacting to the psychological need to escape from the alienation of work, people seek excitement from their commodities instead. "*Consumption has become exciting ... Possession, of course, remains its prerequisite, but necessity is held in abeyance.*" [19] The act of shopping in itself has become the excitement, the commodity itself holds less importance. Evidence of this comes from, "*The comparative longevity of modern goods (Which are) overwhelmed by the wish for continual newness.*" [20] Freud, rather pessimistically, saw no real way out of this ideological trap, hence his claim, "*For psychoanalysis the modest therapeutic aim of 'transforming neurotic misery into common unhappiness.'*" [21]

"*Kelly argues that, 'If something has to be done then it isn't leisure' and that 'leisure is generally understood as chosen activity that is not work.'*"

[22] Sociology is replete with such ethereal and vague definitions of just what exactly leisure is. Clarke and Critcher state that their work, "*Does not attempt to lay to rest all those complex definitional questions about what is or is not leisure. We do not believe that these questions can be solved by*

ever more elaborate analytical juggling. " [23] H F Moorhouse [24] takes issue with this. He raises the very salient point that one could consider it blithely ignorant to conduct a whole study without first defining what it is one is researching. Clarke and Critcher rely on a 'self evident' truth of what leisure is. 'Self evident' truths are, quite often, less than self evident. They rely on common sense notions, but sense in this case is not necessarily common. "*It operates with the simplistic and stereotyped view of what most 'work' is like, seeing it as impoverished, routinised, deskilled etc What is a very complicated issue is oversimplified.* " [25] For Moorhouse, their treatment of work is crude and their definition of leisure spurious. They refuse "*To allow that paid labour can be, for most, a source of satisfaction, purpose, creativity, qualitative experience, and so on.* " [26]

This can only be seen as a weakness.

Classical assumptions of the nature of work and leisure may no longer be sufficient. Clarke and Critcher state that they are writing during a time (1985) of transition to 'post-industrial' society. If one take this claim seriously then it has important implications. "*The introduction of flexi-time and the development of human relations techniques in management have made the workplace less oppressive and monotonous for many workers ... Moreover, technical progress enables paid employment to be conducted from the home.* " [27] Technology, in particular that most wide of world webs, has magnified the possibilities of working from home and blurred the lines of what constitutes work and leisure still further. The dualistic and simplistic account, as found in Clarke and Critcher and other works in the Marxist

tradition, may no longer be completely adequate to explain the sociology of leisure. Their account seems isolated in a very specific moment, a moment of change. Older accounts, Veblen's, Marx's, Simmel's, may have been entirely accurate at the time they were published, but that time has long since past. Other considerations may need to be taken into account.

" My submission is that the distinctions between work and leisure, public and private life, duty and excitement, have blurred. " [28] If one takes the work of Rojek seriously, what implications for the tired and simplistic definitions of what constitutes work and leisure? Freud defines leisure as pleasure as fun. If the boundaries of what constitutes leisure and work are indeed eroding could it mean that leisure, pleasure and fun can be found in work? Or work in fun? A cogent example would be of a party that one feels obliged to attend. You do not like the food, you hate the music, you're surrounded by people you despise and you would give anything to be anywhere else. Yet this is your leisure time? The sociology of leisure needs to address these concerns.

" Relationships and structures of leisure help mitigate human problems, foster cohesion in communities, alleviate personal suffering, maintain economic stability, and encourage political activity. " [29] Some sociologists see leisure as being a site for developing essential social networks, places that maintain and improve cohesion and interaction. If one considers Simmel's conception that sociability is the, *" Pure form of interacting independence of individuals, "* [30] then one might conclude that the development of leisure networks are a ' morally' good occurrence that let actors enjoy true or ' pure' leisure, pleasure and fun. Perhaps for the good of

the sociology of leisure, *“ There is a need to shift attention away from the characteristics of individuals or groups as the unit of analysis, and focus on the characteristics of social relationships between people. ”* [31]

“ Social structure may also be manipulated by the intentional activities of actors. ” [32] The Marxist based argument is one sided. The bourgeois are the active oppressors, the working class the submissive victims and there is no room for any real dialogue between worker’s desire and capitalist ideology.

[33] Also it assumes that capitalist ideology is uniform and coherent. The ideological structure is rarely that simple.

Feminist theorists such as Wearing [34] raise the issues of the problem of women’s experiences of leisure. Though raised in Clarke and Crichton’s work, their account does not, perhaps, delve deeply enough into the feminist sociological perspective. The structural and pervasive economic ideology of Marxism is, in many ways, present in feminist accounts, however particular attention should be paid to the fact that this ideology is exclusively the preserve of men, and is not exclusively economic. Theorists such as Butler [35] indicate the problem of explaining women’s position in society while being forced to use the only language available, the language of masculinity. Still further Collins critiques feminism as the preserve of white women only.

[36]

“ If one ‘ is’ a woman then that is surely not all that one is...gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional discursively constituted identities. ” [37]

In conclusion and as stated above in the introduction to this essay, leisure is very often regarded as having been neglected in the arena of sociological study. Perhaps one of the reasons for this indifference has been the genuine problem of even defining exactly what leisure is. The Marxist tradition has held dominance in the field much since the time of Marx himself. Even those who I have used to criticise some of the Marxist perspectives themselves share many similar views ^[38]. This is because it is incredibly difficult to understand leisure without its 'opposite.' This study is really as much of a study of work as it is of leisure and this author actually can not find fault in that approach. What I do find fault with is the quite often simplistic dualism that is depicted between the two. As Rojek concludes, the edges between work and leisure are blurred and this is something that is important to the future study of leisure.

Marxist ideas are frequently accused of being economically deterministic. Whilst I personally find that accusation a tad harsh, many of the theories outlined above could be accused of considering the economic, the capitalist, a little too much in their theorisations. "*Leisure ...' Is action in structure ... produced by action in the real world of roles and responsibilities as well as the division of race, class, age and gender.*" ^[39] All of these particular characteristics must be considered in any study of leisure.

Moorhouse suggests a methodology. "*Weber used the concepts of status group and lifestyle to refer to specific patterns of consumption and culturally based attachments.*" ^[40] What is certain is that by using such concepts, and still further, the sociology of leisure can only broaden its knowledge.

Bibliography

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Roland Barthes *Image, music, text* pub by Fontana Press 1977

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American library 1959

Footnotes

[1] *Leisure for leisure* edited by Chris Rojek. Published by Macmillan press
1989

Ways of Escape by Chris Rojek. Published by Macmillan Press 1993

[2] *The devil makes work: Leisure in capitalist Britain* by J Clarke and C Critcher. Published by Macmillan 1985 p94-95

[3] Ibid p95

[4] Ibid p95

[5] Ibid p96

[6] Ibid

[7] Ibid p201

[8] *Leisure for leisure* edited by Chris Rojek. Published by Macmillan press 1989 p78

[9] Ibid p83

[10] Ibid p78

[11] Roland Barthes *Mythologies* pub by J. Cape 1972

Roland Barthes *Image, music, text* pub by Fontana Press 1977

[12] *Leisure for leisure* edited by Chris Rojek. Published by Macmillan press 1989 p31

[13] Though Rojek himself reaches many of the same himself conclusions regarding the banality of modern leisure, in particular package tours, travel and tourism.

Ways of Escape by Chris Rojek. Published by Macmillan Press 1993

[14] *Leisure for leisure* edited by Chris Rojek. Published by Macmillan press
1989 p53

[15] Ibid p64

[16] *The theory of the leisure class* by Thorstein Veblen. Published by The new
American library 1959 - The ruling Bourgeois idea of leisure, for Veblen, was
conspicuous consumption, the ostentatious display of wealth through the
purchase of commodities.

[17] *Leisure for leisure* edited by Chris Rojek. Published by Macmillan press
1989 p69

[18] Ibid p101

[19] Ibid p70

[20] Ibid p70

[21] Ibid p57

[22] Ibid p17

[23] *The devil makes work: Leisure in capitalist Britain* by J Clarke and C
Cricher. Published by Macmillan 1985 pxiii

[24] *Leisure for leisure* edited by Chris Rojek. Published by Macmillan press
1989

[25] Ibid p22

[26] Ibid p25

[27] Ibid p108

[28] Ibid p108

[29] *Leisure in society, A network structural perspective* by Patricia A Stokoswki. Published by Mansell 1994 p112

[30] *Leisure for leisure* edited by Chris Rojek. Published by Macmillan press 1989 p87

[31] *Leisure in society, A network structural perspective* by Patricia A Stokoswki. Published by Mansell 1994 p38

[32] Ibid p112

[33] At least not in any meaningful way as we have seen in the above example, from Clarke and Critcher, that the very entry into the market process taints any action with is ideological stigma.

[34] *Leisure and Feminist Theory* by B Wearing. Published by Sage 1998

[35] *Gender trouble* by Judith Butler. Published by Routledge 1999

[36] *Black feminist thought* by P H Collins. Published by Routledge 1990

[37] *Gender trouble* by Judith Butler. Published by Routledge 1999 p6

[38] *Ways of Escape* by Chris Rojek. Published by Macmillan Press 1993

[39] *Leisure in society, A network structural perspective* by Patricia A Stokoswki. Published by Mansell 1994 p37

[40] *Leisure for leisure* edited by Chris Rojek. Published by Macmillan press 1989 p31