**WRITING ABOUT LEISURE**

**Ken Roberts**

**University of Liverpool**

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**Abstract**

This paper distinguishes five leisure narratives. The first is the story of big leisure, all of it defined by amounts of time, spending and activity, how these have changed over time, differences between regions and countries, and the significance for people’s lives and for their wider societies. The second narrative tells similar stories about the little leisures – sport, tourism, the arts, hobbies, food consumption and so on. It is argued that despite numerous attempts stretching over several decades, both of these narratives have failed to lead to satisfactory endings. The remaining narratives are more promising, Narrative three scans the entire leisure lives of types of people defined by occupation, gender, age and preferably a combination of these or any other locators. The fourth narrative is about different kinds of leisure providers, and how the relative prominence of the different types changes the leisure options that are available for different socio-demographic groups. The fifth and final narrative views leisure through the prism of social theories about the character of modern societies and their trajectories. It is argued that to reinvigorate leisure studies, to shake it from its currently stalled condition into a renewed progressive enterprise, its scholars of today (though not necessarily for ever) should adopt one of the three latter narratives.

**Keywords:** leisure, leisure business, leisure theory, social theory

**Introduction**

Writing is different than talking. In conversation, even in a monologue such as a lecture or conference presentation, a speaker can simply make points and be well received if the remarks are experienced as stimulating, provocative, making the listener think. Writing a book or article is different. The author needs a narrative. There has to be a start-point – a problem or question – then a body of evidence or argument, which leads to a conclusion. In other words, the writer needs a good story, and it now seems that throughout the history of leisure studies we have been searching for really good stories. There have been five main types of leisure narrative and I have tried four of them. There are ‘full frontal’ stories about ‘big leisure’ (all of it); then stories about the different ‘little leisures’ (sport, other games, tourism, crafts, hobbies and so on). This latter type of story is the one that I have never tried to master. The third type of story is about the leisure of a specific group – a gender, age or ethnic group or a social class, for example. The fourth story is about the different types of providers of leisure goods and services. Fifth and finally, there are stories about leisure as seen through the prisms of different social theories. We can debate, and there is no need to agree on, which kind of story is best. There is room in leisure studies for more than one good story. However, we may conclude, and the story in this paper is that we can conclude, that at present (which here means not necessarily forever) some stories are delivering far better endings than others.

# **Full frontal big leisure stories**

There is a ‘birth of leisure studies’ story, and also an earlier tale which is still told occasionally. The older tale is basically that ‘the devil makes work’. This phrase was used in the title of John Clarke and Chas Critcher’s 1985 book, but by then it was a throwback. There were plenty of leisure books in the pre-leisure studies era. There was a spate in Britain between the world wars (reviewed in Snape and Pussard, 2013). These books told a leisure story with 19th century origins when European countries and America began to become industrial and urban. Family and community social controls were weakened when households and individuals moved into urban areas. Industrial workers had a new kind of (limited) leisure time and money (again limited) to spend at their discretion, on luxuries. Young people were considered especially susceptible to temptations, but all age groups could be tempted by the evils of alcohol and gambling. Migrants from the countryside brought uncouth habits into the cities. This was the background to efforts by local authorities and (usually middle class led) voluntary associations to promote rational recreation (see Bailey, 1978). Urban parks, public galleries, museums, libraries, concert halls and meeting rooms were intended to foster ‘civilised’ ways of life (Meller, 1976). Recreation became one of the great social crusades of the era. It accompanied first wave feminism. Voluntary associations, public authorities and some trade unions and employers coordinated their efforts. ‘Good wholesome’ leisure was advocated as a safeguard against social breakdown which could take the form of crime, disorder on the streets and out of control mobs. However, from the 1920s onwards there was another fear. This was associated with the spread of (at that time) new media - radio, movies, recorded music and subsequently television. It was also associated with the construction of ‘soul-less’ suburban housing estates. The danger was ennui, boredom, passivity. After the Second World War television ownership spread rapidly. Television immediately became the default leisure time option, and accentuated these fears. Leisure time was said to be an unplanned and unwanted (in the sense that it had no uses) by-product of industrialism (Anderson, 1967). It would be a penalty unless people could be educated to use their leisure in constructive ways (Glasser, 1970). This story has been repeated whenever there have been fears of new technologies reducing demand for human labour (for example, Jenkins and Sherman, 1981). The basic narrative is still available for leisure scholars.

However, since the mid-20th century ‘threat’ has been replaced by ‘promise’ in the dominant big leisure narrative. This change coincided with the formation of leisure studies as an academic subject, first in North America, then in the UK, then Australasia and then more thinly throughout the rest of the world. Leisure scholars in the post-1945 era knew that leisure had been growing throughout the previous century. This applied however leisure was measured – time, money spent or participation rates in leisure activities. This growth was expected to continue. Why not? The rolling-back of paid work-time was expected to continue. The four-day work-week was forecast confidently (Poor, 1972). As real incomes continued to rise, there would be more money for discretionary spending. Leisure scholars drew on the work of psychologists, especially Abraham Maslow (1943, 1954) who claimed to have identified a hierarchy of human needs. Once basic needs for survival and security had been met, people were to pursue higher-level needs such as social status and eventually, Maslow claimed, they would seek self-actualisation or self-fulfilment, which (according to leisure scholars) leisure was to deliver. Paraphrasing John Kelly (1987), leisure offered ‘freedom to be’ or perhaps he should have said ‘freedom to become’ persons whose potential was developed and expressed fully. Paraphrasing Fred Best (1978), leisure was to give more and more people ‘the time of their lives’. Tony Blackshaw (2010) has recently revived this promise in our current ‘liquid’ modern era. However, by the 1980s Maslow had been joined or replaced by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi as leisure scholars’ favourite psychologist. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) claimed that optimal experience, which he called ‘flow’, arose when people encountered challenges that stretched their abilities to the utmost. So they would become totally absorbed, lost in the activity. Robert Stebbins (1992. 2001. 2005), the Canadian sociologist, has written a series of books and papers which, in effect, advocate ‘serious leisure’ as the route to the benefits that are available through leisure. Instead of self-actualisation, self-fulfillment or flow, in recent decades leisure scholars have adopted life satisfaction, wellness, happiness and enjoyment, which can be measured in quantitative surveys, as preferred indicators of the benefits of leisure. With the exception of watching television, every leisure activity that has been studied, in every socio-demographic group, has been found to enhance ‘well-being’, now the preferred all-embracing term ( Haworth and Hart, 2007; Haworth et al, 1997; Isao-Ahola and Mannell, 2004). Early in the history of leisure studies, it was envisaged that the continuing growth of leisure would lead to some kind of ‘society of leisure’ or ‘leisure society’, superseding the industrial societies in which people’s lives were work-centred. Joffre Dumazedier (1967), the French sociologist, will forever be associated with ‘the society of leisure’.

The problem with all full frontal big leisure stories is that neither the threat nor the promise have been fulfilled. Since the mid-20th century leisure time, spending and activity rates have risen in all the economically advanced societies, but the populations have not become more satisfied with their lives (Layard, 2003). Cross-sectionally, all active and social leisure is associated with enhanced well-being. Longitudinally, at a societal level, the association disappears. Leisure scholars need an explanation or a different full frontal story. Well-being has not risen but neither has the threat materialised, which would be indicated by a decline in well-being and/or social breakdown.

Most leisure scholars were always sceptical about a future leisure society (Veal, 2011. 2012). Some built careers criticising the narrative (for example, as in Rojek, 2010). Unfortunately, the sceptics and critics do not have a full frontal alternative. I have made successive attempts at full frontal treatments of leisure. The first was in 1970 and the last was in 2006 (Roberts, 1970, 2006). There were three attempts in between (Roberts, 1978, 1980, 1999). Leisure scholars need a fresh narrative. In practice most have withdrawn from full frontal engagement.

**Types of leisure**

Since the 1980s in Britain the numbers of leisure studies courses and students have declined. This may or may not have been the trend elsewhere, but in Britain a tendency has been for leisure studies to split into types of leisure, mainly sport or tourism, but more recently events. The courses often have ‘management’ affixed to their titles. The arts and media studies have always been outside, independent of leisure studies, and this largely applies to sport in North America. The big story of leisure never became strong enough to keep the field united, and it also appears, unsurprisingly, that students are more likely to be enthusiastic about a type of leisure, especially sport, than about leisure in general. Moreover, ‘practitioner’ careers tend to be within a particular type of leisure, not serving the entire field, except when there are public sector departments or agencies responsible for leisure or recreation services.

The narratives in the specialist leisure fields, which themselves have tended to splinter into types of tourism and sport (dark tourism, cultural tourism, eco-tourism, sport tourism, youth sport and so on) have been basically the same as in stories about leisure in general. All types of leisure are able to claim growth and, in a post-industrial era, they can stress their contributions to job generation and (in many cases) a country’s exports. Most leisure activities can claim to enhance well-being. The exceptions are investigated in media studies. New media is a relatively new field. In economic terms its growth rate has been spectacular, but as yet there have been no claims that well-being is enhanced.

The weakness in the narratives for specific kinds of leisure is that they mostly make exactly the same claims. They are all undistinguished in terms of outcomes for individual participants and their wider societies. Whether or not people play sport, or a particular sport, is important to the providers, and the activity will be important to its enthusiasts. However, in terms of outcomes, the leisure choices that individuals make are largely inconsequential. None has distinctive outcomes (Roberts, 2011). Being inconsequential is important but this does not make a good climax to the narratives. The leisure specialties yield little. They may make sense in terms of vocational training but not as social science. It is impossible add together the findings of research into the various specialties and reach conclusions that are more than the sum of the parts. Textbooks and courses that progress through the arts, crafts, sport, tourism, hobbies, media and so on are simultaneously repetitive and fragmented. There is no strong, credible unifying narrative. If leisure is split, it is best divided by types of people who participate or types of providers.

**Types of people**

Instead of dividing leisure into types of activities, the division can be into types of people – age groups, ethnic groups, social classes, men and women and so on. Up to now this has provided leisure scholars with their most successful narratives. The examples are far too numerous to list. Every leisure scholar could cite scores. I have used this story-line frequently, usually in studying the leisure of young people, or a specific group of young people such as the unemployed (Roberts, 1983; Roberts et al, 1991). Ideally, all the uses of leisure of the relevant group are scanned. The explanation of their leisure is in terms of the constraints and opportunities, the typical socialisation and resulting tastes, of the group in question. The outcome is a privileged port of entry into what it means to be a woman or a man, transitioning a life stage which may be youth or later-life, a migrant or a member of an ethnic minority in a particular place and at a particular time.

Leisure scholars who undertake this type of enquiry thereby become part of a multi-disciplinary field, or may enter leisure studies from the relevant multi-disciplinary field which may be women’s studies, youth studies or ethnic relations depending on the group. This approach to leisure has been so successful in supplying plausible narratives that leisure studies experiences a high rate of turnover of scholars who enter then leave the field for the conferences, networks and journals that focus on their chosen groups. Leisure scholars find it far easier to raise funds to study a specific social group, especially a group that is deemed to be a problem or to have problems, than to gather leisure data purely for the sake of better understanding leisure.

This research genre is never exhausted because societies change and so, therefore, do women’s lives, the youth life stage, the character of different social classes and so on. There are always groups whose leisure has been relatively neglected. Gender scholars usually focus on women’s leisure. Men’s leisure has been relatively neglected not in the sense of men being excluded from social surveys but by the treatment of their lives, including their leisure, as simply normal rather than peculiarly masculine. The attention that has been paid to young people’s leisure throughout the history of social research is now being rivalled by a focus on seniors. The leisure of mid-life child-rearing families is now relatively neglected. Social researchers habitually, by force of circumstances, have their hands-up, hoping for research funding from above, and eyes down on the groups who are deemed to be problems. Hence we know more about the leisure of the poor and other disadvantaged groups than about the leisure of voracious middle class omnivores not to mention the seriously rich. There are many more good leisure stories about types of people waiting to be researched and told.

**Types of providers**

Instead of, or as well, dividing leisure into types of activities and/or people, it can be divided by types of providers. Ideal-typically, providers decide what is offered and people decide what to purchase and/or use. In practice, of course, the relationship is interactive. Different sections of any population are subject to different constraints and have access to different leisure opportunities, and they also possess different tastes depending on their prior socialisation and experience. All this applies in all other ‘markets’. However, leisure is different from most markets in that, in many countries, and specifically Western countries, there has never been a dominant type of provider. Elsewhere the dominant leisure provider has been the local community, a church, the state, or whatever local authority or magnate to whom the power to provide has been delegated. In the West, leisure goods and services have been supplied by commercial businesses, voluntary associations and the public sector. Throughout the 20th century none of these providers was clearly dominant, but during the 21st century commerce has become the lead provider in the leisure ‘business’. Each of the providers has been driven by its own ‘engine’. Commercial businesses seek profit. Voluntary associations are driven by the enthusiasm and tastes of their members. The public sector will provide whatever politicians prescribe. Ideal-typically, in democracies, elected representatives reflect the wishes of the people and legislate to provide leisure opportunities accordingly. In practice, however, politicians’ own enthusiasms and tastes may take charge. Or it may be the public sector professionals, or the bureaucrats, who are the controllers. Inertia, simply continuing to support services that were introduced long ago, for reasons long forgotten, is likely to play a powerful role. The different providers have different capabilities. Profitability need not be decisive for voluntary associations or with public services. Each sector relates to users in a distinctive way. Commercial businesses cater for consumers. The voluntary sector serves members and clients. The public sector caters for citizens.

Leisure scholars may concentrate (for one project or longer-term) on a particular type of provider just as they may specialise on the leisure of children, the unemployed or seniors. Those who study a type of provider usually have one ‘foot’ in leisure studies and another in politics, the public sector or social policy, or the ‘third sector’, maybe more specifically its volunteers (see Jones, 2002; Treuren, 2014), or market economics. However, in practice leisure scholars have been more likely to study types of people or types of activities than types of providers, and there have been relatively few economists or political scientists who have ventured into the leisure field. The links between types of providers and what is provided have been under-researched despite the availability of good stories about the achievements, capabilities and limitations of each sector (see Roberts, 2004, 2016a).

However, the blockbuster narratives are about historical change. Western first-wave industrial societies have histories when most leisure provision was by the public and voluntary sectors. The explanation is simple. In the early decades of industrialism most people had precious little cash available for leisure spending. Over time the commercial sector has grown in absolute and relative importance and has now become the leading leisure provider whose commercial cultures have seeped into public and voluntary sector provisions They have all become leisure businesses (Roberts, 2016a). Simultaneously, leisure has become a major source of new jobs and is the main hub of economic regeneration in many local economies that have de-industrialised. Alongside widening economic inequalities within countries, this has implications for the leisure goods and services that are accessible by different kinds of people. Leisure provisions are stratified by price, but an even clearer division is created between voracious omnivores, a relatively well-off minority who are responsible for most spending on out-of-home leisure, and the majority whose leisure is mostly mediated, that is, provided by old and new media (Bennett et al, 2009; Roux et al, 2008).

Former communist countries have a different but equally enthralling historical leisure story. Under communism all formal leisure provision was under the auspices of state or party. The aim was to nurture a socialist way of life that would be superior to the ‘high’ and ‘popular’ cultures of Western capitalism (see Vitanyi, 1981). Since the end of communism there has been rapid commercialisation. Public funding for leisure services was slashed in the first wave of market reforms. The countries have no long-established genuinely voluntary associations. Change has been rapid and sweeping (see Butenko, 2005; Clark, 2002; Gvozdeva, 1994; Jung, 1994; Kloetze et al, 1998).

What used to be called third world, developing or under-developed countries have now become the world’s emerging market economies (the BRICS). They have a different historical story. For large sections of their populations leisure provision remains mostly informal, based in families and local neighbourhoods, but now served by the modern mass media (old and new), and branded products have stolen the markets for many locally produced goods and services. Meanwhile the countries have new urban middle classes with hyper-modern lifestyles (see Donner, 2011; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2008; Lukose, 2009; Rolandsen, 2011; Varma, 1998). Tourism has been a key business sector and economic dynamo in some of these countries where, for many people, up to now, leisure has been something enjoyed by rich visitors and locals, while for the rest of the locals it has been mainly a source of jobs.

Types of people and types of providers offer powerful leisure narratives but tend to fragment the study of leisure in the absence of convincing, full-frontal, really big leisure stories.

**Social theories**

Maybe leisure scholars who have sought their own subject-generated full frontal theories about leisure have been misguided. Does leisure studies really need to develop its own grand narratives? There are ready-made narratives in the general social theories that have been based mainly in sociology for a century and more. Sociology is the natural home for leisure studies since all leisure activities are social inventions. A common mistake when reaching for a general social theory that will suit leisure has been to imagine that just one of the available theories must be correct. The theories offer complementary narratives about leisure. I have decided belatedly to try many of these potential leisure stories (Roberts, 2016b).

All sociology’s big theories offer critical perspectives on leisure. This is not to say that other approaches to studying leisure cannot lead to critical conclusions about what is provided and how leisure is used. Sociology’s theories are necessarily critical in an additional sense in that they view leisure through theoretical lenses produced outside the field of leisure studies itself.

Most of sociology’s grand theories are about historical change. The classical theories, those of Karl Marx (1818-1883), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Max Weber (1864-1920), and also the theories of Nobert Elias (1897-1990) and more recently Michel Foucault (1926-1984), are about changes in European societies since the end of the Middle Ages. Karl Marx has waxed and waned in popularity, but his theory will never become out-of-date. He has not been proved wrong by either the failure of Soviet communism or the current retreat from social democracy in the West. Marx may prove more relevant than ever in the 21st century. He argued that capitalism was necessarily an expanding system, that it always needed to develop new markets, and in recent decades an outcome has been the globalisation of this economic regime. Another outcome has been the intrusion of capitalist businesses into what were once primarily voluntary and public leisure sectors such as (in Europe) sport and broadcasting. An example is public playing fields being sold to developers and physically active recreation moving into commercial gyms. As capitalism expanded, Marx believed that it would widen the gap between a class of wealthy owners and those whose livelihoods depended on the sale of their labour. This trend is currently accelerating (see Picketty. 2014). The outcome that Marx envisaged was revolution. Clearly, this has not happened as quickly, and will not happen in the way that Marx envisaged. Any 21st century revolution will not be led by the type of working class that was being formed in 19th century Britain where Marx, a German, spent most of his adult life. The revolution has not happened yet, but it cannot be ruled out for ever. This may not seem the most likely possibility, but it could be led by citizens defending their leisure, housing, education and other public services (Castells, 1977). It could happen as artists, sport players and spectators, entertainers and their fans, organise to reclaim ownership of their enthusiasms (Carrington and MacDonald, 2009).

Max Weber, another German, had different ideas about the main driver and direction of historical change in post-Reformation Europe. Weber’s driver was rationalisation, life governed by explicit rules, and calculative behaviour with actors selecting the best means to achieve a goal without respect for traditions. The outcomes, according to Weber, were the rise of capitalism, the creation of bureaucracies (the iron cages of modern life), the rule of written laws and the rise of science. In the late-20th century an American sociologist, George Ritzer (1993, 1999), claimed that rationalisation was spreading into consumer services and that the eventual outcome would be the ‘McDonaldization of society’ which would spread disenchantment and strip life of surprising, ‘magical’ experiences. So we now have ‘McDonaldized’ hotel chains, shopping malls, casinos, sports stadiums and musical festivals. Weber was pessimistic about the direction of change but, unlike Marx, could not see any escape. Ritzer hopes that by drawing attention to the trend people will be encouraged to resist McDonaldization.

Rather than the classical theories with their long historical scan, leisure scholars may prefer to use more recent theories which focus on changes since the late-20th century. One such theory is about changes in economically advanced Western countries which are experiencing the combined effects of globalisation (increased flows of goods, services, capital, information and people), deindustrialisation, multiplying uses of the latest information and communication technologies, and neo-liberal macro-economic management. Ulrich Beck (1985), another German sociologist, has claimed that these trends are creating ‘risk societies’. Family and community supports are said to have weakened, and national governments are no longer able to offer secure futures to their citizens who are therefore obliged to accept individual responsibility for constructing their own biographies in which all steps forward – education courses, training schemes, jobs and marriages – have become risky. How does leisure fit it?

Theories adopting a wider lens examine global changes. One such theory has been built from the World Values Surveys which were initiated by the American sociologist, Ronald Inglehart (1977, 1997). These surveys have detected two world-wide value shifts – from traditional to rational values (following Max Weber), and also from survival and security to self-expression values. People are said increasingly to demand ‘choice’, and an outcome is said to be world-wider support for market economies and democracy. Francis Fukuyama (1992), the American political scientist, has debated whether the world has now reached ‘the end of history’ with Western-type democracy and market capitalism triumphing and continuing uncontested all over the world. If so, leisure should be looking ‘much the same’ whatever the country. Here is a framework for comparative leisure research.

**Conclusions**

It is good to talk, but what makes good talk does not necessarily make good writing or good social science. This needs narratives that can link different types of events, groups of people, types of behaviour and life patterns. It is interesting to talk about specific kinds of leisure – our favourite sports, teams and players, the places that we have visited, the films and we have seen and the music that we enjoy and on which we have opinions. Leisure scholars are like everyone else in being able to enjoy talk on these topics. So are students and hence the ease with which they can be attracted to courses with their favourite leisure activities in the titles.

Leisure scholars can find common ground in theories which are really just speculations (which can be useful) about the meaning of leisure, and the possible and likely end products of leisure’s growth. The paradox is that when we write about leisure these narratives become cul-de-sacs because at present there are no conclusions to the narratives, and the narratives have not become progressively stronger with better-and-better explanations, and clearer visions of the historical outcomes.

Fortunately we can tell better stories. These begin with types of people and their leisure, types of providers and what they provide, and the trends and tendencies highlighted by macro-social theories. If leisure studies is to progress it needs to use narratives which have endings even though their conclusions are always interim. This is a strength, because the conclusions can always be challenged by better stories or built into stronger versions of their former selves. The stories that work best are the right base for developing leisure studies into a stronger, more firmly grounded body of knowledge, and this development will always remain unfinished business.

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**Author**

Ken Roberts is Professor of Sociology at the University of Liverpool. His major research areas throughout his career have been the sociology of leisure and the sociology of youth life stage transitions. He was a founder member of the Leisure Studies Association, has been Chair of the World Leisure Organization’s Research Commission and President of the International Sociological Association’s Research Committee on Leisure. After 1989 he coordinated a series of research projects in East-Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. His current research is into youth in North Africa and the East Mediterranean during and since the ‘Arab Spring’. Professor Roberts’ recent books are *Key Concepts in Sociology* (2009), *Youth in Transition: Eastern Europe and the West* (2009), *Class in Contemporary Britain* (2011), *Sociology: An Introduction* (2012), and *The Business of Leisure* (2016). His latest book, *Social Theory, Sport, Leisure* was published by Routledge in 2016.