**A THEORETICAL TOOLKIT FOR SURVIVING IN LEISURE STUDIES FROM THE 1960s TO THE 2020s**

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I have never described myself as a theorist and, up to now, have never felt a need to reveal my preferences when researching leisure. However, I was originally a Weberian by default, then enthusiastically. Karl Popper was more consciously influential. This theoretical equipment

enabled me to cope during the years when whether its growth would lead to some kind of leisure society, throughout the rise and continuing influence of the neo-liberalism that made unemployment a major issue for leisure (and many other) scholars in the 1980s, then the transformations in people’s everyday lives that followed the revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989. I was able to sidestep all the isms that have waxed and waned: symbolic interactionism, feminism, anti-racism, post-modernism. Theorists who enjoyed periods of fashion (Foucault, Beck, Bourdieu, Elias) have seemed to add little to what had already by written and said in English. Throughout my career I have been impressed by the work of John Goldthorpe who has become an addition to my theoretical toolkit: not his rational action theory which I regard as mistaken but his conceptualisation of sociology as a population science. This justifies cutting through the little leisures to focus on what has endured and what has changed, and why it has been a mistake for leisure studies to ‘bracket out’ the media whose influence has been consistently massive whether radio and film, television or all the ICT-enabled ways of passing time.

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**SOCIOLOGY**

**Max Weber**

I became a sociologist in the 1960s: as a student at the London School of Economics (LSE) from 1961-1966, then at Liverpool University starting as an assistant lecturer. At that time, if you took sociology seriously, you had to be a functionalist, a Marxist or a Weberian. I became a Weberian by default. Most us were ‘by default’ Weberians. It was not a self-description. We regarded ourselves simply as mainstream sociologists.

There had been a fierce debate in the 1950s among the small band of British sociologists, most of whom worked at, or had been students at LSE. The debate was between those who felt that the core of sociology should remain the comparative study of social institutions. They were heirs to evolutionary theory, represented at LSE first by Hobhouse then by Ginsberg. The latter was still lecturing when I was a student. This debate in the 1950s was won by ‘modernisers’ who wanted sociology to concentrate on its own and other contemporary modern societies using the powerful research tools which were then at its disposal – the representative sample survey, statistical techniques and computers. Modernisers also wanted to incorporate the ethnography that had been pioneered in social anthropology and drawn into American sociology by the ‘Chicago School’.

I think that all young sociologists at that time were either ‘mainstream’ or Marxists. We (the mainstream) identified as positivists. This was a label worn with pride. Our job was to discover causes as an essential first step in seeking reforms that would be transformative. The prevailing consensus was that post-war welfare capitalism had failed to deliver fundamental changes.

I became a ‘by default’ Weberian because I could not identify as a functionalist. I knew of no British sociologists who were functionalists. I could see that certain essential functions needed to be performed if any society was to endure over time. I found it interesting to divide practices into those that were functional, dysfunctional and functionally neutral. The theory’s fatal weakness (for myself and many others) was its difficulty in offering causal explanations except by making a series of tortuous assumptions. Functions are effects, not causes. The theory was more popular in America, and Talcott Parsons, regarded as ‘high priest’ of functionalism, was the world’s best known (and most criticised) sociologist. British and other European sociologists preferred conflict theories which had less difficulty in accommodating agency. We insisted that actors’ views of their situations, their cosmologies, had to be part of causal explanations. Parsons agreed with this but his rather feeble solution was the ‘pattern variables’. Conflict theories had more comprehensible and exciting things to say. Yet I still find it difficult to write a paper without including at least one functionalist sentence.

There was no chance that I might become a Marxist sociologist. I was against Marxism before I became a sociologist. During my political awakening in the mid-1950s, in the networks in which I moved, Marxists were sympathetic to Soviet socialism. For me the decisive event was the Soviet suppression of the counter-revolution in Hungary in 1956 (repeated in Czechoslovakia in 1968). I realised that in the 1960s the meaning of Marxism in sociology was different. Most Marxist sociologists regarded the Soviet system as state capitalism. I remained ‘against’ because I did not agree that capital-labour was the sole or even the main class division in Britain at that time, or that with radical leadership the post-war working class would become a revolutionary force. It seemed that most of sociology’s Marxists lacked direct experience of the British working class. Here I felt that I had an advantage over most lecturers.

**Karl Popper**

Karl Popper was the author with the greatest influence on my thinking while I was becoming a sociologist. I read his two volume *The Open Society and its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism* as a first year undergraduate. Later on I read *Conjectures and Refutations*. I found Popper utterly convincing. There can be no laws of history from which the future can be predicted. Historical trends, however long they last, are just trends. So much for the inevitable triumph of socialism. Open societies in which dissent is encouraged or at least permitted will prevail over those that suppress dissent. I still like to believe that this is true but I feel less confident in the 2020s than I did in the 1960s. We should beware closed systems of thought that can accommodate any evidence. Only propositions that can be falsified by contrary evidence should be admitted into scientific discourse. All theories begin life as pure conjectures. Today’s truths are really just propositions that so far have not been disproven. Marxism failed most of Popper’s tests, so by default I had to be a Weberian.

I seem to have carried much that I acquired from Popper throughout my career. I have always felt free to conjecture an interpretation of evidence and leave refutation to others. I have always been prepared to be surprised by unanticipated historical developments. I try to use ‘if-then’ propositions (all other things remaining equal) rather than proclaim universal truths. I see no harm in seeking causes, which always have to include a role for the minds of the actors, and I am ready to plead guilty if accused of positivism. I have often changed my own mind and do not regard this as a weakness when faced with contrary evidence. For instance, I am now much more sympathetic to the sociologists of the 1950s who wanted their discipline to remain the comparative study of social institutions. I now agree with Norbert Elias that it is a mistake to divorce sociology from history, and I deplore the extent to which British sociology in the 2020s is a narrow and shallow ‘here and now’ project.

**The sociological imagination**

Yes, I read Wright Mills’ book. We all did in the 1960s. We all found it inspiring. The book still inspires students today. There are not many books that achieve a shelf life of over 60 years, and even fewer whose ideas still feel fresh and as relevant as ever. For me admiration was despite Wright Mills being as close to a Marxist as was possible at that time while maintaining employment at an American academic institution. Wright Mills had produced a manifesto for sociologists on which functionalists, Marxists and Weberians could work. Students who were becoming sociologists in the 1960s, and maybe ever since, liked the idea of turning private troubles into public issues, leading citizens on marches and meetings in packed public spaces. We had to show how one household’s difficulties in making ends meet were shared by millions of other households whose circumstances were products of the distribution of income and wealth rather than an overall deficiency of resources. We liked the idea of showing how personal biographies interwove with historical trends. I am not sure that Wright Mills himself achieved any of this. His manifesto now seems to have set us up to fail.

In 1962 Thomas Kuhn had published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* His thesis was that most scientists did not lead exciting working lives, producing and debating new ideas, breaking through the current boundaries of knowledge. Most scientific labour was by worker bees who followed prescribed methods in projects set for them. However, points were reached when the knowledge accumulated in this way could not be reconciled with existing theories. At this point an Einstein could appear who set a science on a new course, a new period of labouring worker bees. Sociology’s problem in the 1960s was that it had more would-be Newtons and Darwins than foot soldiers. I would be among the latter and see what happened.

Later-on I heard about world systems theory. The argument is that long before globalisation became part of our everyday vocabularies, states and tribes throughout the world were linked by trade, warfare, flows of ideas and the migration of people. The world was one social system within which nation states and tribes were sub-systems. The task of sociology was to map how this configuration had developed since the beginning of human history. It was difficult to disagree but I knew that I could not rise to this challenge. I had Weber, Popper and also John H Goldthorpe as the main contributors to my toolkit.

**John H Goldthorpe**

Goldthorpe has my vote as the top UK sociologist since 1945. Look at what he has achieved. When I was an undergraduate, along with David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer and Jennifer Platt, he was conducting the famous *Affluent Worker* study in Luton. This settled debates that had been raging since the mid-1950s on what had happened to the working class. The answer was that the post-war working class differed from its predecessor, but it was still a working class. Embourgeoisement was not happening. This theory was killed, for ever.

Since then Goldthorpe has concentrated on research into class mobility. For this he constructed a new class scheme, known at that time as the Goldthorpe/Oxford/Nuffield class scheme. Versions of this scheme have subsequently been adopted as official classifications by the UK and then the European Union. The scheme has been used by Goldthorpe, in partnership with international colleagues, to compare class mobility rates in different countries, and to monitor changes over time. One important conclusion has been ‘constant flux’ in Britain throughout and since the 20th century. The class structure has not become more open and fluid, nor has it become more closed and rigid. We might have expected Goldthorpe to be piled with honours and a seat in the House of Lords, and to appear regularly in national media, like leading economists and medics.

I did not follow Goldthorpe into mobility research, but I seem to have been influenced throughout by his conceptions of the proper subject matter and forms of explanation in sociology, made explicit in his 2016 book. *Sociology as a Population Science*. The book told me what I had thought for decades. Is this possible?

A short digression is necessary. During my ‘becoming’ career stage all sociologists were interested in social class. Sociology was sometimes caricatured as the study of class. Critics said that we were class obsessed. Class, theories and methods were not specialisms, but all have subsequently become fields with their own experts. I did not become one, but have retained a constant interest in class. I have written four books with class in their titles. I have participated in never-ending debates on how to define and how to measure class. Goldthorpe has usually been a protagonist and I have invariably found myself on Goldthorpe’s side. In the 1960s I regarded the *Affluent Worke*r study as a major contribution to debates about what was happening to class in post–war Britain, and also a model for how to do sociology.

I have carried this into my own specialist fields which, I hope, makes it less surprising that I found Goldthorpe’s 2016 book expressing my ‘paradigm’ more clearly then I could have achieved myself. We often allow music to express our feelings and even to tell us what we feel. Goldthorpe’s book performed this service for me. His argument is that our proper subject matter is regular patterns of behaviour among populations or sub-populations, what Emile |Durkheim called social facts. However, rather than trying to explain one social fact with another social fact, Goldthorpe wished to make the minds of the actors pivotal in explanations. I think that in the 21st century it is more important than ever for sociology to follow this guidance if it is to take its proper leading role in leisure studies.

I have not always agreed with Goldthorpe. I regard his rational action theory, and his use of it in explaining social class differences in educational attainment, as plain wrong. Back to Weber. All human action is not rational. It can be affective or traditional. If Goldthorpe’s explanation of class differences in attainments was correct, one would expect inequalities to have narrowed in the second half of the 20th century then widened. In practice, as Goldthorpe himself has shown, the flux has been constant. I think that sociology inflicts unnecessary self-harm by over-claiming. We share fields of research with other disciplines and invite ridicule if we claim that class differences in education, gender and sexual orientations, are 100 percent socially constructed and have nothing to do with genetics.

Despite some disagreements with Goldthorpe, and with Weber, these along with Popper made the greatest contributions to the foundations of my becoming a sociologist. No established practising British sociologists contributed to my basic toolkit (Goldthorpe was not yet ‘established’, though I was impressed by David Glass, a demographer who had moved into sociology, and in 1949 had conducted the first study of social mobility in Britain. However, it was his demography that impressed me. Glass knew in the 1960s that in the 21st century our country would need to provide pensions and health care for the swollen baby boomer cohorts who would then be entering retirement. So why did we fail to prepare policies? Demographers seem to be the only social scientists who can make medium range predictions and feel confident that they will be right. Futurologists have been hopeless in comparison. Glass possibly nudged me into a career long interest in life stages and life courses.

**Toolkit adequate**

If I had started earlier or later I might have assembled a different toolkit. New concepts and theories have continued to flow in sociology. If I have not adopted any this does not necessarily indicate disagreement. I cheered the advance of symbolic interactionism in sociology during the 1960s. It gave the discipline an additional dimension. By 1970 it was producing new sociologies, most notably of deviance and education. I thought that Erving Goffman was remarkable, He was sociology’s Frank Sinatra in the 1960s. Would be emulators wanted to know how they did it. I doubt if either man knew. Goffman was a fountain of new ideas about the on- and off-stage presentation of ourselves, asylums and other total institutions, spoiled identities and stigma, and more. His claims all passed Popper’s falsifiability test but seemed challenge proof. I knew that I could not become a British Goffman. In any case, my existing toolkit was adequate for what I wanted to do.

Feminism and anti-racism were nurtured in sociology and spread into leisure studies in the 1970s. I felt that my Weberian tools enabled me to address gender and ethnic differences without either becoming the basis of my work. Marxism made a belated appearance in leisure studies in the 1980s. I was not tempted.

Postmodernism leaves me bemused. I accept (and I think this applies to all scientists who have thought the matter through) that mind-free knowledge is impossible. There are no escapes. Phenomenological reductions, triangulation, critical realism and ethnomethodology all fail. We can only say that this is how we see things, this is our evidence, and this is our interpretation. Others are free to challenge. I am amazed that anyone can believe that allowing our minds to re-imagine what is ‘out there’ is dependent on or has been heightened by socio-economic changes since the mid-20th century. What were Marx, Durkheim and Weber doing?

If I had entered sociology in the late-20th century I would likely to naming a selection from Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu as contributors to my basic toolkit. In the event, after 20-30 years in sociology, I felt that I could assimilate Beck, Giddens and Bauman without relaying foundations. I might well have become a follower of Michel Foucault or (slightly less likely) Pierre Bourdieu. Foucault’s choice of prisons, mental asylums and sexuality rather than factories and state bureaucracies as examples of modern institutions and practices, and his condemnation of our subjugation to scientific expertise was not the first, but added powerfully to criticisms of the orthodox treatment modernity as emancipating. Foucault’s interest in panopticons looks more relevant than during his lifetime which has been followed by the spread of CTV, and the vulnerability of all our electronically stored data to hacking with impunity by governments. If I had become a sociologist while Foucault was being translated into and discussed in English, I could have been part of a ‘turn to language’ in sociology, and I would certainly have paid more attention to discourses.

Bourdieu offers a new set of concepts, including habitus, field and capitals, which can be used to examine any social domain, but I have not found them an improvement on their predecessors. The Bourdieu inspired Great British Class Survey has produced a scheme which, in my view, is vastly inferior to Goldthorpe’s despite the latter needing an urgent update. Also, contrary to Bourdieu and his Anglo followers, I do not read the evidence as showing that the higher classes owe their ‘distinction’ to different and distinctive tastes, but rather to their omnivorousness and their ability to indulge expensive taste repertoires.

I find it worrying that I can identify no British sociologists who have emerged in the 21st century who I would urge those now starting to consider for their own toolkits.

**LEISURE**

**Entrance**

I transitioned from default to positively Weberian while adopting leisure as a special interest. This was towards the end of my becoming a sociologist. As was the case with several contemporaries, my interest in leisure arose from my first research, which was about work, specifically young males’ transitions from education to employment in London. I realised that their feelings about their jobs made sense only when set alongside how they experienced the rest of their lives. John Goldthorpe and his colleagues’ discovery of instrumentally oriented workers in their influential *Affluent Worker* study matched my own findings and thoughts. Then there was personal biography. I worked for four years between school and university. During these years I enjoyed a Friday night feeling and its counterpart on Mondays. Both were lost in 1961 except as receding but still vivid memories.

In examining how people spent their free time it became clear instantly that the main class divisions (arising from their roles in the economy) were among workers, not between all employees and capitalists, and that other divisions like age and sex were at least equally discriminating vis-à-vis people’s uses of non-working time. I liked Weber’s conceptions of class and status as related but neither reducible, entirely predictable, from the other.

Like Weber, I did not believe that all societies were travelling along the same evolutionary path. I regarded our (Western) leisure as a product of the organisation of work in industrial societies. During the late-20th and 21st centuries scholars from the Global South have been arguing that the Western leisure concept does not fit their own realities. In seeking alternative concepts of leisure I wish them well and expect them to succeed. My initial and lasting view is that all our leisures are products of particular kinds of societies. It therefore follows that sociology must be the lead discipline in its study. This has not happened, and in my view has made the leisure studies field continuously fragile. I agreed with nearly all leisure scholars in the 1960s that leisure was playing a larger and more central role in people’s lives than formerly. These trends seemed likely tó continue. Forecasts of the future leisure society had credibility but (Popperian caution), no future was inevitable.

All theories are conjectured in specific historical contexts. In the 1960s Western countries were experiencing an unprecedented (before or since) rise in consumer spending. Leisure was booming. New consumption opportunities were being created: mass overseas travel, television, and private motoring was carrying hordes of trippers to previously difficult to access coastal and inland sites. The common mistakes at that time were to imagine that this kind of growth would continue, and that it would be at the expense of the pivotal place of paid work in people’s lives. Sixty years on in the 2020s I am arguing that there has indeed been a growth of leisure since the 1960s but not with an outcome that anyone then envisaged

Sociologists, psychologists, economists and geographers who adopted leisure as their subject-matter in the 1960s expected to be the vanguard and that many would follow. This has happened, but rather than congregating under a single banner they have divided into specialists on sport, tourism, other ‘little leisures’, plus everyday life, popular cultures and consumption. ‘Leisure’ was always the most likely concept to draw all together. In practice fragmentation continues. In my view, this is related to sociology failing to become the lead discipline in the field.

There were no established sociologists of leisure or a history of leisure studies from which I could add to my toolkit. The tools acquired from general sociology had to suffice, and seemed adequate. I could bounce my own ideas off the work of contemporaries, most often Britain’s Stan Parker and France’s Joffre Dumazedier. America was slightly ahead of Britain in the formation of leisure studies. A similarity was that American sociologists who wrote about leisure had often moved from their research into work. The American who influenced me most was Harold Wilenski. He claimed that 20th century gains in free time had achieved no more than rolling back the increases in work time that occurred during industrialisation. Since then the balance between working time and the rest of life seemed to be settling on a longer-term historical plateau. Wilenski also claimed that the 20th century decline in working time had not been spread evenly but applied mainly to manual workers. Professionals’ work schedules had remained constant throughout industrialisation. In America and Europe our sources of evidence in building a sociology of leisure were studies of the work-leisure nexus, and also the community studies which had focused on family and neighbourhood relations, then looked beyond to the communities’ types of employment and uses of free time.

I have always been clear that sociology has something special to offer to leisure studies. Sociology is not synonymous with social studies from which students can pick and mix. Sociology is the social science of whole societies. At a minimum sociological work on leisure has to relate it to other life domains. A sociology of leisure also needs to seek causes which must include the actors’ motivations and also how the present has followed the past, the differences between then and now, and what led to the changes. The past in my sociology of leisure was originally Britain at the end of the Second World War, subsequently deepened to 19th century industrialisation and urbanisation. For Weber, Elias and Foucault the past ended close of the Middle Ages in Europe.

Sociology cannot monopolise any of the fields which it explores. It can aspire to be the lead discipline, but has never achieved this in leisure studies. The greater part of leisure research has been into leisure activities, experiences and the implications for individuals’ states of mind, nowadays their wellbeing, formerly access to ‘peak experience’ (Csikszentmihalyi’s flow) and before that to lifting people up Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs and achieving self-actualisation. Specialists in the cultural industries and tourism highlight the contributions of these leisure industries to the economy. This is functionalism. Sociologists can be interested in outcomes but must also seek causes.

I have always been super-impressed by the work of historians, including those who have documented 19th and early 20th century workers’ struggles for more free time, and the inventors of our modern holiday, modern sports, board games, radio and movies. Making a living as a historian requires true expertise in a time and place. The social sciences all feel lightweight in comparison.

**Three transformations**

Like histories, biographies are always made in the present. In the 1960s I could not have predicted that Weber, Popper and Goldthorpe would remain in my toolkit for 60 years. I need to dig deep to recall who I would have nominated sixty years ago as likely lasting influencers. One would certainly have been Bertrand Russell. I was a rationalist at the time but soon changed my position on enlightenment rationalism. I would also very likely have named Alvin Gouldner who was a very influential American sociologist back then, However, my career in studying leisure has spanned three major social, economic and political transformations, though none as momentous as the ‘great divide’ which in Britain was the 19th century that the country entered as a mainly rural society in which agriculture was the main occupation, and exited with a population that was mainly urban with manufacturing and extractive industries as the main employers. It is Weber, Popper and Goldthorpe whose relevance and applicability have stood the tests of the 20th and 21st century transformations.

The first transformation was in process while I was becoming a sociologist with a special interest in leisure. Along with other Western countries, Britain was achieving more-or-less continuous economic growth. Incomes and consumer sending were rising. So was government spending on public services. Inequalities were narrowing. Hours spent at work were declining as the five-day workweek became standard and holiday entitlements were extended. ‘Growth’ was the term than ran through the leisure literature of this period. We knew that post-war Britain was different. Elders were telling young people how lucky they were to be growing up in a country which offered opportunities of which seniors could only dream. Overseas package holidays began to replace the domestic seaside in the late-1940s. In the 1950s Britain entered the age of television. In the 1960s the proportion of households with motor vehicles passed 50 percent. Public money flowed into leisure. By the 1960s there were national state agencies supporting the arts, national parks and access to the countryside more widely, and also participant sport. Local authorities provided amenities – parks, playing fields, swimming pools, concert halls, civic community halls, and from the 1970s indoor sport and leisure centres were opening across the country. Public facilities were filled by voluntary associations which ran on members’ enthusiasm.

All this was possible because post-war Western governments discarded pre-war economic orthodoxies. They adopted the ideas of the economist John Maynard Keynes. The priorities were growth and full employment rather than balancing states’ budgets and reducing national debts. William Beveridge developed a blueprint for a post-war welfare state in Britain that would slay five giant evils that had stalked pre-war era: want (poverty) squalor (poor housing), disease, ignorance (an ill-educated population) and idleness (unemployment). All this was implemented by post-war governments. It seemed likely to lead to some kind of leisure society.

The post-war political economy set the context. The job of sociologists was to establish how leisure time and money were being used. This usually meant measuring rates of participation in different leisure activities, differences by age, sex and other socio-demographic predictors, and explaining the differences in terms of the different motivations, and opportunities and constraints associated with the social divisions. Social democracy, welfare capitalism and social market economies are alternative terms used to label this period.

The second transformation began in Eastern Europe in 1989 where communism began an unexpected and rapid collapse. This began in Soviet ‘satellite’ countries then spread into the USSR itself, and by the end of 1991 communism was history throughout Eurasia. This was the most dramatic change that was likely to happen in any modern society in my lifetime. Sociologists had to be interested and involved if possible.

I had developed two fields of specialisation in sociology while still becoming one. These were leisure, of course, and youth. My hunch was that if either field had ‘cold’ spells, the other might be ‘hot’, and it was usually youth research that enabled me to coordinate research projects in 13 ex-communist countries between 1992 and 2010. The first project was in Poland, enabled by research contacts made at leisure conferences. Data on leisure was gathered in most projects.

Most countries experienced severe economic decline when communist central planning was abandoned. Up to 50 percent was ripped from the populations’ household budgets. Salaries of state employees were sometimes unpaid for months. Many countries experienced bouts of hyper-inflation which destroyed people’s savings. Rates of participation in out-of-home leisure sank to extremely low levels. All organised leisure had been under the auspices of governments or communist parties. They operated all facilities. These soon became rundown, even derelict. State funded orchestrates, opera, film and ballet companies lost their main source of income (governments) which had made it possible to attend opera for less than a $USA (personal experience in Prague and Lviv). Classically trained musicians were busking on streets or, along with ballet dancers, performing in night clubs. For several years after as well as before 1989 travelling to Europe’s East was an adventure.