

RE-THINKING THE HISTORY OF LEISURE: QUESTIONING THE META-NARRATIVE

Karen M. Fox, University of Alberta

The traditional, historical meta-narratives around leisure focused on one Greek concept of leisure, *scholē* (σχολή) from the ancient world, and drew a direct line from this particular Greek concept to the preferred, privileged current leisure practices in North America (for example and among many, Chubb & Chubb, 1981 or Dare, 1998). Such a meta-narrative, created in early textbooks, made sense for an emerging academic discipline needing a justification connected to academia and situated within a cultural milieu focused on positive, productive, and nationalistic concepts of leisure. Although much has been debated about Greek concepts of leisure (see Sylvester, 1999), little historical research with primary sources has been conducted to deepen our knowledge of leisure history in general and the ancient period in particular. Given the changes in controversies, methodologies, and arguments in historical, cultural, anthropological, classics, and archaeological research, among many (Balsdon, 2004; Davidson, 1997; Marius & Page, 2002; Perrottet, 2002; Taplin, 2000; Toner, 1995; Tosh, 2000), it is time to re-think the historical meta-narrative around leisure.

By focusing on a particular ideal of leisure, the leisure scholars and practitioners denied themselves the understanding that the nature of leisure was always, already contested, contained both negative and positive aspects, and inhered within various conceptual frameworks related to culture, economics, military strategies, power, resistance, and freedom beginning with the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean world. In addition, the understanding of *scholē*, grounded in a narrow and limited understanding of its original meanings (Anastasiadis, 2004), has hidden the value of other leisure practices, made it difficult to find connections with cultural practices of leisure contrary to the one meta-narrative of leisure, and obscured leisure connected to the non-elite, resistant and “negative” or shadow elements of the ideal.

This scholarship explores the weaknesses and limitations of the traditional, historical meta-narrative of leisure and its resultant values within current leisure scholarship and practices and initiates a re-description of the complex and dynamic ancient Mediterranean world embracing the cultures and values of Greece, Rome, Egypt, Persia as well as the influences of the Hebrews and Christians. The analysis illuminates the dynamic and multi-faceted nature of leisure in the ancient world, helps demonstrate the partiality of our understanding of leisure and its history, and moves us to a more complex view of the depth and paradoxical nature of leisure. This paper seeks to build a foundation for future research and discussions around leisure history.

Limitations of the Normative Historical Narrative of Leisure

The limitations of the normative historical narrative of leisure included: (1) a teleological, traditional, and nationalistic historical framework for interpretation and (2) a reliance on secondary or tertiary resources. The normative historical narrative of leisure was patterned after a traditional historical framework that focused on specific events, emerged from the victors or elites of societies, posited a linear notion of progress and history, and assumed a positive and progressive endpoint of civilization (i.e., modern, Euro-North American societies). The normative historical narrative of leisure began with substantive discussions of one Greek leisure concept, *scholē*, moved quickly to the latter

part of Roman history, followed European history until the Industrial Revolution, and then finally ended with the leisure in the United States. The implications encompassed a teleological development of leisure, causal relationships between diverse and sometimes antagonistic cultures or nations, and a valuing of only one particular type of leisure.

Second, the leisure history in textbooks was usually grounded in secondary or tertiary sources of general or specific histories. For example, Shivers and deLisle (1997) only referenced mainstream, traditional historical books of Greece and Rome. Kelly (1996), while providing a more nuanced view of the Christian struggle for leisure and identity, also relied on traditional, historical books and other leisure historical interpretations such as Goodale and Godbey (1988). Such a strategy was helpful in illuminating how leisure may be present and/or unlabeled in mainstream histories and provided an initial understanding of the “potential” of ancient thought and culture about leisure. Original sources in Greek or Latin were not accessed nor interpreted for their richness and application to the full range of leisure in the ancient Mediterranean world. In addition, the historians of the mainstream histories were not, necessarily, focused on leisure nor attentive to the types of information or interpretations relevant to leisure per se from these original sources.

Why Return to the History of Leisure in Ancient Civilizations?

In a day and age where the focus is on current events with little attention to historical insights, it seems strange to argue for a return to the ancient Mediterranean civilizations and their conceptions and struggles over leisure. However, the meta-narrative of leisure history established the values and perspectives that shape our understanding and judgements about current leisure events and pursuits, restricts our choices of resource material, and leaves us unable to engage in meaningful dialogue with multiple perspectives or interpretations of leisure (Armstrong 1993, 2000). Any time leisure scholarship or practice privileges leisure connected to citizenship, only positive aspects, education and freedom, it is haunted by the untold history of leisure related to slavery, resistant populations, authoritarianism, colonialism, imperialism, class struggles, and resistant or “deviant” forms of leisure. In addition, the current struggles over defining and critiquing leisure are seen as “modern” phenomena rather than connected with ancient discussions and differences around leisure (Crossan, 1998; Perrotet, 2003; Taplin, 2000). Hence, there was and is a loss of insight and understanding about the values, meaning, and struggle for leisure.

The Ancient World and Competing Visions of Leisure

The ancient world around the Mediterranean was vibrant, diverse, and fluid. Not only did each culture develop unique characteristics, but the flow of ideas through commerce, travel, government control, and resistant movements led to reciprocal influences. To understand the development of leisure in this world, both the unique characteristics and the influence of other cultures is essential. Within this limited space, it is difficult to do justice to all of the dominant and non-dominant traditions and religious-political entities that were engaged in the contested arena of leisure. For simplicity, this analysis will explore the relationships between Greece, Rome, Hebrew and Judeo-Christian entities.

The description of entities as religious-political entities is deliberate. Within the ancient world, religion and politics was intimately intertwined. For most Greeks, the pantheon of gods and goddesses, including oracles, were the narratives of meaning for their religious and political decisions (Garland, 1998). The Roman Empire often challenged the religious practices of occupied people and/or established rulers as gods (Toner, 1995). Scholars within, and outside of, the historical Jesus tradition, view the Christ movement as both religious and political (Armstrong, 1993; Borg, 1998; Crossan, 1991; Horsley, 1997;).

Revisiting the Greek legacy extends the range of words, ethics, and behaviours related to leisure beyond *scholē*. Entering into their world of gods and goddesses resurrects the ethical frameworks and influences of the Cult of Dionysius, the struggle to define “good” related to a specific type of leisure, the nature of symposium and its relationship to values of goodness, hospitality and elite excess, voluntary associations, and the always, already contested nature of leisure (Harland, 2003; Kloppenborg & Wilson, 1996; Smith, 2003; Smith, J., 1978, 1990). Looking more closely at the simultaneous development of notions of democracy, republic, and power in the Roman Empire places the struggle over leisure in a more complex, contested context. For instance, the law respecting corn brought forth by Caius Gracchus was resisted by the elite because “it would lead the common people away from industry to idleness” according to Cicero (http://www.exovedate.com/ancient_timeline_three.html). Leisure practices were the basis for denying food to common people based upon class interests. Furthermore, this indicates controversies over leisure surrounding the adaptation of “spectator” leisure for the interests of the Roman Empire.

The struggles of both the Hebrew and Judeo-Christian groups were intimately connected with practices of leisure (Armstrong, 1993; Borg, 1998; Crossan, 1991, 1998; Crossan & Reed, 2002; Horsley, 1997). First, the Judeo-Christian beliefs around YHWH or God would value, not individualism or democratic freedom as defined by the Greeks, but distributive forms of justice, sharing in food, honouring a supreme being, and connections to the land (Heschel, 1988). As people living within occupied lands, the processes for defining and maintaining their identities were often connected to leisure, forced changes within the political context of the rulers, and required changes in their practices to survive. Understanding how these forces and conflicts helped shape beliefs, religious structures, political involvement, and daily practices is essential to understanding the contested nature of leisure.

Conclusion

Re-thinking leisure history and working through the implications of changes in historiography and social theory allows leisure scholars and practitioners to understand the dynamic, contested, paradoxical, and multi-faceted nature of leisure over time. Unlike current claims to new and emerging “modern” trends, the processes, debates, and behaviour connected with leisure become grounded in different societies and time periods. Furthermore, a critical look at the meta-narrative of leisure indicates specific historical, class, religious, and nationalistic biases. A more complex and contested history of leisure moves discussions into an exploration of the definitions, meanings, and interpretations of leisure from conflicting dominant, alternative, resistant conceptions of leisure across cultures, groups of people, nations, and time periods. Furthermore, such

an approach to leisure history allows an exploration of who is developing and promoting what leisure concepts or definitions, for whom, and for what purposes.

References

- Anastasiadis, V.I. (2004). Idealized σχολή and disdain for work: aspects of philosophy and politics in ancient democracy. *Classical Quarterly*, 54(1), 58-79.
- Armstrong, K. (1993). *A history of God: The 4,000-year quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Arnold, J.H. (2000). *History: A very short introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Balsdon, J.P.V.D. (2004). *Life and leisure in ancient Rome*. London, UK: Phoenix.
- Borg, M.J. (1984). *Conflict, holiness and politics in the teachings of Jesus*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.
- Chubb, M. and Chubb, H. (1981). *One third our time? An introduction to recreation behaviour and resources*. New York: Wiley.
- Crossan, J.D. (1991). *The historical Jesus: The life of a Mediterranean Jewish peasant*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Crossan, J.D. (1998). *The birth of Christianity: Discovering what happened in the years immediately after the execution of Jesus*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Crossan, J.D. & Reed, J.L. (2002). *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the stones, behind the texts*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Dare, B. (1998). *Concepts of leisure in western thought: A critical and historical analysis*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing.
- Davidson, J.N. (1997). *Courtesans and fishcakes: The consuming passions of classical Athens*. London, UK: HarperCollinsPublishers.
- Garland, R. (1998). *Daily life of the ancient Greeks*. Westport, CONN: Greenwood Press.
- Goodale, T. and Godbey, G. (1988). *The evolution of leisure: historical and philosophical perspectives*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing.
- Harland, P.A. (2003). *Associations, synagogues, and congregations: Claiming a space in ancient Mediterranean society*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Hemingway, J. (1999). Leisure, social capital, and democratic citizenship. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 31(2), 150-166.
- Hemingway, J. (1996). Emancipating leisure: The recovery of freedom. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 28(1), 27-34.
- Heschel, A.J. (1988). *The Sabbath: Its meaning for modern man*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Horsley, R.A. (Ed.). (1997). *Paul and empire: Religion and power in Roman Imperial society*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.
- Kelly, J.R. (1996). *Leisure*. 3rd Edition. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Kloppenborg, J.S. & Wilson, S.G. (1996). *Voluntary associations in the Graeco-Roman world*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Marius, R. & Page, M.E. (2002). *A short guide to writing about history*. New York: Longman Publishing.

- Neelan, D. http://www.exovedate.com/ancient_timeline_three.html. Accessed October 31, 2004.
- Parenti, M. (1999). *History as mystery*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books.
- Perrottet, T. (2003). *Pagan holiday: On the trail of ancient Roman tourists*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks.
- Shivers, J.S., and deLisle, L.J. (1997). *The story of leisure: Context, concepts, and current controversy*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Smith, D.E. (2003). *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Smith, J. Z. (1978). *Map is not territory: Studies in the history of religion*. Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill.
- Smith, J.Z. (1990). *Drudgery divine: On the comparison of early Christianities and the religions of Late Antiquity*. Chicago, ILL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sylvester, C. (1999). The classical idea of leisure: Cultural ideal or class prejudice? *Leisure Sciences*, 21:3-16.
- Taplin, O. (2000). *Literature in the Greek and Roman worlds: A new perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Toner, J.P. (1995). *Leisure and ancient Rome*. Oxford, UK: Polity Press.
- Tosh, J. (2000). *The pursuit of history*. 3rd Edition. Essex, England: Pearson Education.
- Waskow, A. (2003). Can American learn from Shabbatt? In J. de Graaf (Ed.). *Take back your time* (pp. 123-133). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

ABSTRACTS
of Papers Presented at the
Eleventh Canadian Congress on Leisure Research
May 17 – 20, 2005
Hosted by
Department of Recreation and Tourism Management
Malaspina University-College
Nanaimo, B.C.
Abstracts compiled and edited by
Tom Delamere, Carleigh Randall, David Robinson
CCLR-11 Programme Committee
Tom Delamere
Dan McDonald
Carleigh Randall
Rick Rollins
and
David Robinson



Copyright © 2005 Canadian Association for Leisure Studies
ISBN 1-896886-01-9



Appropriate Use of Documents: Documents may be downloaded or printed (single copy only). Please note that this document is copyrighted and CREDIT MUST BE PROVIDED to the originator of the document when you quote from it. You must not sell the document or make a profit from reproducing it. You must not copy, extract, summarize or distribute downloaded documents outside of your own organization in a manner which competes with or substitutes for the distribution of the database by the Lifestyle Information Network (LIN). <http://www.lin.ca>