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From Playful Pleasure to Dystopian Control

Marx, Gramsci, Habermas and the Limits of Leisure

Professor Karl Spracklen

is a Professor of Leisure Studies at Leeds Beckett University, UK. He has published three key monographs on leisure theory: The Meaning and Purpose of Leisure (2009); Constructing Leisure (2011); and Whiteness and Leisure (2013). He is interested in identities, spaces and hegemony - his research on tourism, music and sport is underpinned by a concern with the problem of leisure.

Abstract

In this new century of (post)modernity and technological progress, it is easy to think that leisure lives have become more meaningful and important. Leisure is claimed to be the space or activity in which we become human, find our Self, and find belonging. There is an enormous range of literature that makes the case for contemporary leisure as a form that allows for meaningful human agency and human development, whether through the discipline of physical activity or the virtual communities of the internet. In this paper, I will make the opposite case. I will concede that leisure has had an important role to play in human development (as a Habermasian communicative discourse and playful pleasure) - but using Marx, Gramsci and especially Habermas, I will argue that the lifeworld of contemporary leisure has been swamped by the systems of global capitalism and captured by the power of hegemonic elites.

Keywords: agency, Habermas, hegemony, leisure, modernity

Although I am not a follower of Hegel, one might think that the spirit of the early twenty-first century is defined by the concept of

the free, discerning leisure life. The free leisure life is a *zeitgeist* recognized through the importance attached to it by its practitioners. There has been a vocal and strident advocacy for active leisure and sports in policy circles ever since the dawn of modernity, but the cheerleaders of active leisure have taken become dominant in the public sphere as the new century dawned with its scare stories of obesity and indolence (Coalter 2013; Gard and Wright 2005). Increasingly, people are told by journalists and academics that the century in which we live is different, post-modern and post-industrial (Bauman 2000; Urry 2003, 2007). In this brave new world in which we live, we are told that work has become fractured and unstable, and societal structures have become liquid, as a result of a paradigmatic shift to post-modernity, globalization and technological progress (Bauman 2000). With no workplace and no community in family or locality or society, we are told that the leisure life is increasingly meaningful and important. For the advocates of active leisure, leisure is claimed to be the space or activity in which we become human, find our Self, and find belonging (Blackshaw 2010, 2014; Kelly 1983, 2012; Rojek 2010). Everybody in the global North is told their lives would be much more meaningful if they only went for a run, or a long walk (Kelly 2012). People with hobbies are lauded as true heroes of human endeavour (Stebbins 2009). Volunteering and charity work makes our students more rounded as individuals when they compete in the job market. For scholars in leisure studies and cultural sociology, leisure becomes a last refuge for community, subcultural identity and agency, something that must be morally good because so many people find meaning and purpose in it (Blackshaw 2014; Spracklen 2009, 2011, 2013). There is an enormous range of literature that makes the case for contemporary leisure as a form that allows for meaningful human agency and human development, whether through the discipline of physical activity or the virtual communities of the internet.

In this paper, I will make the opposite case. In the first half of the paper, I will explore in more detail the claims made about the importance of leisure today. I will concede that leisure has had an important role to play in human development as a Habermasian communicative discourse and playful pleasure (Habermas 1984, 1987, 1989). I will use my on-going research project on leisure to show that there are some leisure spaces that retain communicatively ra-

tional actions in defence of the Habermasian lifeworld (Spracklen 2009, 2011, 2013). I will admit that leisure is something that offers humans the potential to be truly human. But in the second half of the paper I will use Marx, Gramsci and especially Habermas to argue that the lifeworld of contemporary leisure has been swamped by the systems of global capitalism and captured by the power of hegemonic elites.

The Meaning and Purpose of Leisure as Playful Pleasure

I have argued elsewhere that leisure is universal human need, and something we probably share with higher-order animals such as whales and apes (Spracklen, 2011). There is evidence of human leisure activities stretching back thousands of years into prehistory, from carved shells to musical instruments and stone board games (ibid.). That is, humans use time when they are not pursuing more basic needs for play, socialisation and learning of cultural norms. There is no doubt that this non-essential activity played some part in the development of human language, human culture and human belief systems, all of which mark us out as modern humans. Play and pleasure are important purposes for everyday leisure, but leisure is also communicative. Following the work of Habermas, we can say that communicative leisure might be one of the ways in which the lifeworld and the public sphere might potentially be constructed (Habermas 1989). That is, leisure has the capacity as an activity and a space to bring people together equally for a common good. Leisure, then, is something that has always been a part of human culture, and human belonging, and is part of what makes us human (Kelly 2012).

The argument by some leisure scholars that leisure is a product of modernity or the industrial global North is not true (Blackshaw 2010; Borsay 2005), though it is true to say that the rise of modernity in the global North shaped leisure in new and significant way, as I will discuss below. Leisure has been the subject of moral and legal discussions in every human society and culture. Politicians and policy-makers have a long history of thinking about leisure. In the Ancient world of Greece and Rome, philosophers and rulers wondered what it was to live a good life, and to rule widely (Spracklen, 2011a; Toner 1999). Away from the formal philosophies of active and moderate elite leisure enshrined in the work of Aristotle then the Stoics,

the leisure lives of the urban masses and slaves were more formally circumscribed by laws and moral norms. For the rulers of the Roman Empire, the development of a nascent public sphere associated with cities and other urban spaces forced them to develop spectacles such as gladiatorial games and chariot-racing to keep citizens happy (Toner 1999).

While leisure has had a communicative potential ever since two humans told stories to each other over a fire, a formally Habermasian communicative rationality only became part of the dominant discourse in society with the construction of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas 1989). This public sphere appeared in Western Europe as a free space for exchange, dialogue and debate, a space won through successive generations of struggle against systems of belief and systems of feudal oppression. Leisure was a key activity for the creators of liberal, secular modernity. It was in coffee shops that people engaged in political and scientific debate. It was through leisure lives that the new bourgeoisie learned manners and civility, as well as liberty, fraternity and equality (Spracklen 2009, 2011a). But while leisure in early modernity was a site for the creation of the public sphere, and the construction of the communicative life-world, it was the victim of its own creation. By the end of the nineteenth-century, the communicative idealism of the Enlightenment had transformed into industrialization, urbanization and the rise of the nation-states and imperial hegemonies. Capitalist and imperialist powers fought back against the more radical conclusions of the Enlightenment, and saw profits and empires as being the sole instrumental goal of politics (Habermas 1984, 1987). In this modern world, humans became alienated, dis-enfranchised, individuated (Weber 1992). Leisure and work became formally separated spatially and temporally, and the large numbers of working-class men and women became the subjects or (more usually) victims of leisure policies. This was the age of active leisure, rational recreation and organized sports, leisure activities given to the working-classes in the hope that they would become better people (or better consumers, or better workers, or better soldiers). This was the age also of the leisure industry, that capitalist complex that had led step-by-step to the trans-national entertainment corporations we know today, via the growth of what might be described as a top-down popular culture (Roberts 2004).

Towards the end of the last century the philosophical movement of postmodernism combined with sociological critiques of the decline of modernity to produce a sociology of postmodernity (Žižek 2010). The postmodern philosophers called for an end to grand meta-narratives such as Marxism, and argued that we lived in an unstable, uncertain world where individuals were the only agents (Lyotard 1984). This was the crisis of existentialism, which led theorists such as Sartre to argue that the only thing worth doing was self-actualization (Sartre 2003). There was evidence that society in the global North was in a state of change, and a state of flux: class boundaries were more fluid, industrial culture was becoming post-industrial culture, and people were moving around the world in pursuit of jobs and security. Leisure scholars such as Chris Rojek and Tony Blackshaw have in the past made convincing arguments that leisure in postmodernity itself was becoming postmodern (Blackshaw 2010; Rojek 1995, 2000, 2010). In a world where work-place community and identity, class solidarity and other secure structures of belonging were in danger of disappearing, leisure seemed to offer itself as a panacea to the problem of where people belonged. Leisure studies since the 1990s has been dominated by research that assumes that people doing leisure now are reasonably unconstrained by the traditional social structures of inequality and power, and are able to use their agency to participate in leisure activities in either mainstream or subcultural spaces (Blackshaw 2014; Kelly 2012; Roberts 2004). Even where gender is used in feminist critiques of leisure, the research projects are often driven by post-structural or post-modern accounts of gender drawing on Butler or Foucault to show that individuals are in control of shaping their gender identities through leisure (see Pavilidis 2012).

Claims about the positive value of leisure continue to echo through popular and scholarly debates. We are told that we should do more exercise to improve our health, that we should take part in various leisure activities that improve our psychological wellbeing. Kelly and others like him make the case that leisure is essential for our spiritual wellbeing, if only we learn the right kind of active, self-actualizing leisure (Kelly 1983, 2012): we should be do things that help our mindfulness, such as yoga and physical activity, and not take part in leisure activities that are associated with commerce, commodification or passivity. A large proportion of the studies in

North American leisure sciences are reduced to this idea that being active is better than being passive, and leisure is active recreation and positive psychological development (Bramham 2006). This is the logic at the heart of most leisure management, sports pedagogy, sports psychology, physical activity and physical education research – a sleight of hand that sets out to prove what the researchers all believe anyway (Spracklen 2014). The world of the Ancient Greeks is before us again when researchers tell us that physical activity is proper leisure and good for us. There is, then, a moral hierarchy in all this talk of spirituality and self-actualization: my leisure becomes better than your leisure because I am a better person, and I choose to go through the pain of abstinence from drinking, television, fast-food and drugs.

Leisure as Dystopian Control

As I have argued elsewhere, I think leisure today is still a potentially communicative space, and a site for the construction of communicative rationality (Spracklen 2009, 2011, 2013). People get pleasure from the things they do away from the monotony of work, and get satisfaction and meaning and purpose through some of the things they do in their leisure time (Kelly 2012; Rojek 2010). But the freedom and agency associated with our contemporary, (post) modern leisure lives is chimerical in nature. Our choices are limited by the histories that shape us, the hegemonic powers at work that try to control and constrain us, and by the instrumental rationality of global capitalism. My analysis in the rest of this paper is essentially a return to Marxist theory. I am not the first person in leisure studies to bring Marxist theory critiquing leisure. In the 1970s through to the 1990s, British leisure studies as a subject field was dominated by theorists informed by Marx and his interlocutors Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams (see discussion in Bramham 2006; Rojek 2010). Those theorists have continued to write Marxist critiques of leisure even as leisure studies made its post-modern turn. Recently, even Chris Rojek has suggested there is a need to return to Marx, though such a step is suggested in a typically hesitant and careful fashion (Rojek 2013).

Marx helps us understand the first constraint on our agency in leisure: the histories that shape us. To paraphrase Marx, our leisure lives are ours to make sense of, but each of us has been given

specific chances, opportunities and constraints associated with our parents, our class, our gender, our nationality, our sexuality, our 'race' and our nationality (Marx 1963). The historical facts of modernity are what they are. We have seen the rise of the global North, the British Empire then the American Empire. The rise to power of these imperial hegemonies has come with the normalization of capitalist ideologies, and the spread of false notions of political freedom masked in neo-liberal economic freedoms (Habermas 1987). In some countries older elites have managed to retain their grip on power, in other countries the new capitalist classes have completely subverted the traditional elites and taken more democratic control. In this political struggle for power and freedoms, some people have managed to transcend the boundaries and limitations of class and culture to become newly-minted capitalist success stories. But for every person who lives this American dream, there are millions who struggle through their lives facing inequality and constraints imposed on them because of where they were born, and what they were born into. Leisure activities are not offered to us all equally, and the resources that allow us to have meaningful leisure lives are not distributed equally (Bramham 2006). In our historical circumstances, then, it is easier to do leisure and choose leisure if one has been born a white man in the global North into one of the ruling classes. The intersectionality of inequalities that operates on the majority of people in the world make leisure choice constrained. How can individuals exercise their communicative leisure agency when they need to work long and uncertain hours just to pay their bills? How can people find their Self when they have no money to search for it? The historical circumstances of the victory of capitalism, and the continuing intersectional oppression of the majority of the people in the world just because they are born 'unlucky', makes a mockery of the claim that everyone has the freedom to choose active leisure and find themselves.

Even worse for the claim that everybody can have these meaningful and freely chosen leisure lives is the fact that the intersectional oppression that operates today is hegemonic in nature. The articulation of hegemonic power by Gramsci remains as true today as it was when he first wrote about it when imprisoned in Fascist Italy (Gramsci 1971). All rulers and states have tried to impose their power and authority on the people they rule. Hegemonic power

occurs when the rulers are able to have complete control over the public sphere and popular culture to such an extent that they limit the ability of their oppressed people to realise they suffer that state of oppression. Hegemonic power might be used to keep people in their marginalized social classes, but it can also operate to maintain white privileges or heteronormative masculinity (Connell, 1987; Spracklen 2013). Such a state of affairs can happen in pre-modern societies such as Ancient Rome, and under the conditions of theocracy, but hegemonic power operates more readily in the condition of modernity. In our time, technological developments have given rise to mass or popular culture, all of which is an industry constructed to keep people pliant, ignorant, happy and off the streets (Adorno 1947, 1967, 1991). Foucault's concept of power extends the hegemonic sleigh-of-hand to our bodies and our minds, where we accept and embody the governmentality that surrounds us (Foucault 1991). Leisure is a site where this hegemonic power operates. Leisure constructs and normalizes hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic whiteness and stupefies the masses through popular music and television (Spracklen 2013). It is not just the entertainment industries that are places of hegemonic power, hegemonic normalization and hegemonic trickery. Adorno argues that modern sports belong to the realm of unfreedom, and this is only becoming more obvious as sport becomes part of the entertainment industries (Adorno 1991). But sports and active leisure normalize notions of power, discipline and respect that make people good citizens and consumers (Rojek 2010). The myth of the search for the Self and the freedom to choose to be active may well be a hegemonic trick, making us conform to the neo-liberal ideal of the happy, law-abiding, healthy citizen. This might sound outrageous, but of course the capitalist hegemony relies on individuals being productive workers and active consumers, as everything is reduced to growing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over time.

The reduction of the measure of ourselves to component parts of a country's GDP is an example of the third and final reason why people cannot find meaning and purpose through communicative leisure: the expansion of the logic instrumental rationality into our late modern lives (Habermas 1984, 1987). Weber was the first social theorist to show that modern society was become disenchanted and instrumental, a product of the rise of industry and technology, and

the need to turn communities into individual workers and consumers (Weber 1992). Habermas has shown how the rise of high modernity ushered in the demise of the communicative public sphere (Habermas 1984, 1987, 1989). For him, high modernity has seen the retreat of the lifeworld against the rising dominance of instrumental rationality. That is, two things have happened that changed modern society and continued to dominate us: nation-states developed bureaucracies that organized the life of their citizens; and capitalist economics became the dominant way in which things were measured. It is the second form of instrumental rationality that concerns us here. The communicative lifeworld, colonized by this system, is in danger of being completely lost in our contemporary age. Corporations have inordinate power, and communities of like-minded people have been fractured into individuals competing with one another. Work is completely instrumental, but so is most of our leisure. The things we like to do are being taken over or re-shaped by the power of this instrumental rationality, and it is difficult to find any form of leisure, or leisure space, that has not been colonized by instrumentality (Spracklen 2009, 2011, 2013). Instrumental leisure reduces all leisure to its relationship to capitalism, to GDP and other short-term measures.

Leisure in this moment in the twenty-first century, then, is not essentially about being playful, or communicative, or for finding belonging. Leisure today is instrumental, hegemonic and a product of historical circumstances. Leisure is a form of life that is controlled, constrained and used by hegemonies and capitalists to impose their particular will, whether that is the preservation of their elite power or merely the pursuit of un-checked profit. This is a pessimistic but realistic conclusion. There is a communicative potential for leisure, and leisure is the thing that makes us human, but we live in a modern world where the power and the instrumentality that has disenchanting the workplace is at work trying to disenchant everyday leisure. Our only hope is to make people aware of the instrumental and hegemonic forces at work, and to help fight for social justice and equality, inside and out of leisure. We need to understand the extent of the colonization of the lifeworld, the reach of instrumental leisure and the forms of communicative leisure that have so far survived. We need to ask: what are the conditions for communicative leisure? Despite everything I have said about leisure being chimeric-

cal and a form of dystopian control, despite my dismissal of the claims made about the physical-activists, the positivists and the psychologists, leisure is an important part of life today precisely because it is the source of these unfounded claims. Leisure is important when it is communicative, and the study of leisure has to unpick the false claims made about leisure that hide the reality of most forms of leisure in our brave new world.

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