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Book review

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*The Future of Work and Leisure*

Stanley Parker (1971, London: MacGibbon and Kee)

Book review by Karl Spracklen

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It is a testament to the longevity of leisure studies that one of the most important monographs to emerge from the British scene is so old. The early seventies may seem like a foreign land to anyone involved in leisure studies who was born in that decade, or in the eighties or nineties. But, as I will show in this review, *The Future of Work and Leisure* remains relevant to the new critical leisure studies of this new century, and Parker's analysis and policy recommendations retain their saliency in a world of zero-hour contracts, Uber, and digital leisure.

Anyone who knows leisure studies knows the importance of Stanley Parker and his work in leisure studies. He was one of the founders of the Leisure Studies Association and one of the handful of people to be awarded life membership of it. He was a constant presence at conferences in leisure studies, and in sociology. His work was read and cited by everyone trying to grapple with the sociology of leisure. When the book was written the problem of work and the problem of leisure were fashionable topics in sociology, and in the mass media. Everybody seemed to have an opinion about the impact of automation on employment, and the rise of the leisure society. Some people predicted the end of mass employment would lead to civil unrest unless measures were taken to educate people in how to make good use of their leisure time. Others predicted more fruitful and meaningful lives would open up for humans once the robots took over all the work; others again feared a world controlled by media corporations and security states selling leisure experiences. As Parker shows in this book, the debate among sociologists was being contributed to by such important names as Arendt, Marcuse, Fromm and the younger Giddens, among many others. Leisure studies and the sociology of leisure was the coming thing, and *The Future of Work and Leisure* captures the moment perfectly.

Parker was a civil servant working for a central government agency when he wrote this book. He was interested professionally in the relationship between work and leisure, the future of that relationship, and how policy-makers and sociologists could influence that future. The book is based on his PhD thesis, and although fairly short by modern standards, it

covers an enormous amount of historical, philosophical, psychological, and sociological ground. It was at the time an enormous influence on the fledgling subject field of leisure studies, and ensured in the United Kingdom at least that leisure studies was multi-disciplinary, policy-oriented and underpinned by the sociological imagination.

*The Future of Work and Leisure* is definitely of its time, and some of the language and examples now seem quaint, if not offensive. Parker writes about a world of work and leisure where men still do hard, manual labour, and where women are absent from many workplaces. He writes about men playing cards, or having a smoke, or going fishing because they are too tired from mining to do anything else with their leisure. He describes the separation of sexes as it is in his time without critical comment, and uses gendered language when making his general points. But it is foolish to dismiss the book and its arguments because the frame is gendered: Parker's arguments are applicable to women as well as men, and he does recognise that women in his day were entering the world of work in large numbers.

Likewise, Parker is writing in a world that is firmly Keynesian in its economics. Parker is dismissive of laissez faire approaches to industry, to work and to leisure. But he tells us that no serious policy-maker or academic believes in the power of the invisible hand to solve the problem of the re-distribution of wealth. Like every other rational person of his time and place, Parker believes in the importance of policy-making by active states, and the necessity of planning. This is a world-view shared by everyone across the political spectrum, a world-view supported by the evidence of the success of the planned economies of the West in the Second World War. No sensible person in the sixties and seventies would think the best way to solve the problems of work and leisure is through the free market, yet this is exactly the orthodoxy of our times. When re-reading *The Future of Work and Leisure* one feels a sense of confidence and optimism in the ability of rational people to plan and act to make the world a better place for all of us. Parker's utopianism may be partly influenced by his personal radical left-wing politics, but it is also influenced by the founding principles of the post-war welfare state in the United Kingdom. In these principles, the state is provided with the power to intervene and build, to direct and order, to tax and spend, so that the poor are made better off and the rich pay for that amelioration.

The book begins in Chapter Two with the problems of defining work and leisure among sociologists interested in understanding both in the modern world. Leisure is seen as a moral good by most of these theorists of leisure, though he recognises that some critical theories of leisure identify it with constraint and control. Parker then develops his own

synthesis of these differing theories of work and leisure. He suggests that the time associated with work and leisure is better understood as consisting of work time, and non-work time. Work time involves work and work obligations; non-work time includes time for physiological needs, time for non-work obligations, and only after they have taken place is there time for leisure. The dimension of time is then juxtaposed with a dimension that maps the freedom or constraint associated with a given activity – so work is constrained, and happens during work time, but it is possible to be doing ‘leisure in work’; but leisure is both free activity, and non-work time.

Chapter Three of the book extends the discussion of the meaning of work and leisure historically and anthropologically. In this chapter, one might have imagined Parker to have produced a post-structuralist or post-colonial account of work and leisure that showed how contingent they are in any given culture, or how fluid the boundaries are between them. Some of the anthropological evidence provided points towards that analysis. Despite that, Parker is comfortable using his own definitions of work and leisure, and applying them to make meaning out of the practises he encounters in his source texts. This is a weakness, of course, but Parker’s account does provide us with an undeniable truth: that all societies and cultures in pre-modernity are as concerned about work as they are leisure, and work and leisure in these spaces are sites of command and control, as well as sites of free expression. In this chapter, Parker also starts to build the important argument that meaningful, freely chosen leisure is a moral and social good; and work that provides meaning and freedom is equally important and desirable.

Chapters Four to Seven of the book are related to one another, and are where Parker’s book really starts to be important. These four chapters attempt to make sense of work and leisure in the time and place Parker was writing: the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Again, some of the examples are dated, and some of the gender politics is left unquestioned, but these four chapters start to map out the problem of work and leisure in modern society in a way that is still relevant today. The chapters draw on Parker’s own fieldwork, as well as other survey work. They show that while work and leisure varied to some extent across class and other social groups, for most people in the UK at the time, work was hard and unrewarding, and leisure time was spent on entertainment and escape. There were also other problems in the meaning and purpose of leisure and work for some individuals and groups: some people were not employed, and therefore had to find meaning and purpose away from the workplace. It was the unemployed who offered the greatest threat for the future: if robots and other technologies took away people’s jobs, how would they use their leisure? Would they find

solace in meaningful leisure activities, would they spend their money on alcohol and drugs, or would they rise up and revolt against the machines? As we today live in a world where the same questions are being asked, the importance of Parker's book becomes clear.

The final three chapters of the book start to map out a new theory of the work-leisure relationship, the potentialities for work and leisure as sites of self-realisation, and the implications for policy-makers. Here again we see an echo of our concerns about the blurring of leisure and work, and the rise of the gig economy. Parker identifies three kinds of relationship between work and leisure. Firstly there is 'extension', where work and leisure are similar, and are both spaces in which individual meaning is made: this for Parker is clearly the optimal configuration of work and leisure. The second relationship is 'opposition', where leisure activities are chosen that are deliberately different to work: this is exemplified by miners choosing to fish. Finally, there is 'neutrality', where leisure is usually different to work, but where that difference is not an active choice: this is the leisure offered by the leisure and entertainment industries. Using this tri-fold relationship, Parker re-iterates the problem of work and the problem of leisure: how do we create a society in which humans are able to find fulfilment in work, and fulfilment in leisure? Of course, one might think that the current society allots work and leisure according to natural abilities and affinities. But Parker rejects that like a good sociologist – the present distribution of jobs, of capital and of status, and of education, is a social construction. It is inherently unequal and immoral, as it favours the freedom of the elite few against the frustrated lives and desires of the many. Parker suggests alternative answers to the problem of the potentiality of work and leisure, drawing on the debate happening among sociologists and philosophers at the time he was writing. One solution suggested is to seek to clearly demarcate work and leisure as distinct domains, in which policy-makers can work to make leisure more meaningful as work becomes more controlled and constrained. While this approach has its merit, Parker rejects it for the second alternative: work and leisure need to be more integrated, not differentiated, so that people have the opportunity to realise themselves in work and in leisure.

Parker is strongly critical of the inequality of modernity, and his call for more integration of work and leisure runs alongside his call for a fairer distribution of resources, and a fairer and better education system and industrial system that allows more people to find passion and meaning in the workplace. This still has implications for us as we grapple to make sense of leisure and work today. The gig economy has failed because it reduces autonomy to a chimera of choice: no one on the minimum wage can afford not to work whatever hours they are asked to do. Our own blurring of work and leisure fails because it

make leisure more like work, not work more like leisure. And if we are to be replaced by robots, we need to invest resources into planning how we find meaning and purpose when we no longer have our work.