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Producing the Crisis: The State of Leisure Studies

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Abstract

This article examines the common perception that Leisure Studies is in crisis. It reviews some recent millennial evaluations of the state of Leisure Studies and prescriptions for its development. The author sceptically assesses the prevailing crisis diagnoses and its prescribed causes and cures, especially those that seek to fix the object of Leisure Studies. It is argued that Leisure Studies practitioners have often not taken sufficient account of the wider historical and social conditions that produced the field in the first place, and of the institutional forces that, in changing, have re-fashioned Leisure Studies and problematised the work-leisure dialectic out of which the field of study was formed. The article concludes with a call for those who identify with Leisure Studies to be more self-reflexive about the conditions of their practice, and to be less restrictive in their conception of what constitutes leisure and Leisure Studies.

Introduction: Crisis Talk¹

The idea that Leisure Studies is in crisis is quite commonly held (for example, Williams, 1997; Aitchison, 2000; Veal, 2002). This phenomenon is not unusual in contemporary disciplines or fields of study, where the pronouncement of crisis is the academic equivalent of the 'shock horror' headline on newspaper billboards. The concept of crisis in social and other sciences, after Kuhn (1970), has become virtually normative – a predictable part of the eternal life and death cycle of paradigms, more recursive pattern than interruption to linear progress. It is easy to engage in crisis talk, but harder to establish precisely what constitutes the condition of crisis. In the early twenty-first century, the Greek conception of *krisis*, the key point at which a pivotal decision must be made, has become almost a routine phenomenon. But what differentiates a crisis in Leisure Studies (or anything else) from another condition – say, teething problems or productive uncertainty – is much in dispute.

¹ This article is a much-extended version of a presentation to an Australian and New Zealand Association for Leisure Studies Seminar on Leisure Theory, University of Technology Sydney, Kuring-gai Campus, 30 November, 2000. I would like to thank two anonymous referees for their constructive criticisms and suggestions. In response to the latter, I should point out that his article refers predominantly to Anglo-American Leisure Studies unless otherwise noted (for example, in addressing the continental European contribution of Mommaas or the Francophone Canadian work of D'Amours). Australasian Leisure Studies is treated here as predominantly within the Anglo-American tradition to date.

The diagnosis of crisis may, therefore, be condition or perception or some combination of both, and may be productive as well as destructive. It can be symbolised by the 1970s rock group Supertramp's (whose 1979 single 'The Logical Song' reached the top of the charts in 2002 in a cover by Scooter) parody of a British politician's response to a journalist's question about the 'crisis' of the economy and industrial relations. The cover of their 1975 album "Crisis? What Crisis?" depicted a cocktail sipping sunbather oblivious to the heavy industrial environmental wasteland all around. From such a perspective, not to discern a crisis of Leisure Studies may be to be guilty of complacency bordering on dereliction of duty. Alternatively, in the work invoked in the title of this article, *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al, 1978), a crisis is something that can be manufactured by particular interest groups to achieve specific ends. In *Policing the Crisis* it is argued that the police, politicians, judges and newspaper editors combined in Britain during the 1970s to create the impression of a crime wave with racist overtones. For the state the motive was extended power and for the press increased circulation and advertising revenue. The contemporary crisis of Leisure Studies could, then, be no more than a power struggle between different power blocs within the field, motivated perhaps by intra- or inter-institutional rivalries, or a desire to seize the intellectual agenda. Ken Roberts (1999), for example, sees Leisure Studies as anything but moribund.

Yet even if there were a consensus that a crisis of Leisure Studies exists, there may be little agreement concerning its ascribed causes or prescribed cures. Furthermore, such deliberations can only take place if there is a widespread acceptance of what is and is not the Leisure Studies that is putatively crisis-ridden. The newer, inter/multi/trans/anti-disciplinary fields of study (such as Cultural Studies – see Barker, 2000; Storey, 1997) are prone to endless definitional debate concerning their boundaries – or lack thereof. Such deliberations usually revolve around questions of the field's canon and its principal theories, methods and objects of analysis (Rowe and Lawrence, 1997), and also questions of disciplinarity (see, for example, Evans's (2000) discussion – and rejection - of the claims that tourism constitutes an identifiable discipline). This article will not seek to resolve such debates given that, as is intimated above, they are regarded as inevitably produced under prevailing academic conditions and are inherently irresolvable. Instead, I want to re-appraise one pre-millennial exercise in Leisure Studies's 'crisis production/management' and some other recent interventions in the field in order to explore the ways in which a crisis can be said to exist and the extent to which it may be a product of institutional forces and competing conceptions of what ought to count as Leisure Studies in the early 21st century. I am seeking, then, to understand the aetiology and trajectory of a field of inquiry's crisis – whether 'real' or 'imagined' – and to suggest appropriate coping strategies.

The State of Leisure Studies: Leisure Studies in a State

In 1997 the international journal *Leisure Sciences* published a state of the field, international special issue consisting of "two articles from European authors who seek to characterise and/or compare European scholarship relative to North American scholarship" (Williams, 1997: 239-40). This debate has continued to unfold over the ensuing years (see Veal, 2002). The current geo-intellectual order in Leisure Studies was traced in six commentaries on the *Leisure Sciences* articles, three from Canada, two from

the United States and one from Australia. This attempt to promote ‘international scholarly dialogue’ (p.239) was marked by a rather rancorous trans-Atlantic exchange over empiricism and positivism, with the contribution from Australia adopting the more detached role of non-combatant diplomatic neutrality.

The debate in *Leisure Sciences* took on something of the character of an international sports contest. In order to provide something of the flavour of the discourse a brief (and no doubt unsatisfactory) summary of the enunciated positions is provided below. Hans Mommaas (1997: 241-2) argued that European Leisure Studies, dominated from the beginning by Sociology, lacking the status of “a basic discipline”, and with a strong public policy emphasis, is in crisis because “Leisure no longer seems to have that self-evident public authority and importance once associated with it”. From the shared geographical and intellectual space of the European Union, Fred Coalter (1997: 265) found that what he calls “United Kingdom leisure studies and North American leisure sciences” (p.255) are both in trouble because they “by different routes, have arrived at a crossroads. Neither has addressed satisfactorily the situated nature of leisure meanings and their relationship to wider sources of meaning and identity” (p.265).

From the other side of the Atlantic, but importantly from one side of another boundary (the border between Canada and the United States), Donald MacLean (1997: 275) sees the problem of leisure studies/sciences as predominantly one of establishing the “meaningfulness” of leisure and of “general agreement about the boundaries of acceptable leisure”. Susan Shaw (1997: 278) sees the issues in Kuhnian terms, and a potential answer to the paradigm crisis posed by “postmodernism”, “poststructuralism” and “the growing influence of market-oriented approaches” identified by the European authors lies in “acceptance of the inevitability of diversity” and “greater communication and interaction” (p.279). Robert Stebbins (1997: 282), similarly, sees “fragmentation” as “really more friend than foe”, so that if Leisure Studies is indeed in crisis it is, paradoxically, a benign one. From a United States vantage point, Garry Chick (1997: 286) questions whether a crisis exists at all, but observes, with Mommaas, that the very concept of leisure is now something of a liability, and that, at least from the point of view of desirable language:

it may very well be that the discourses of consumption, culture, tourism, and sport, to name a few, have created a reality much more alluring than the ever-messy and suspect discourse of leisure. So, in fact, it may be time to move on (Chick, 1997: 286).

Chick views any crisis and distinctiveness of American leisure sciences as deriving not from questions of epistemology but, rather, from institutional conditions producing attempts to “squirm from under the restrictive concepts of leisure and recreation that are implicit in NRPA [National Recreation and Park Association] culture, to raise its status in the academic field, and to adapt to the realities of the American university [tenure and promotion] system” (p.288). Howard Tinsley (1997: 292, 3), from a position within US social psychology, feels some “optimism and enthusiasm” in taking the opportunity of the crisis to return to the object of investigation from within “a basic scientific discipline”. The trans-Atlantic component of the debate, then, sometimes testily and a

little predictably, pivoted on Coalter's provocative critique of US Leisure Sciences and pessimistic reading of the UK Leisure Studies. The very existence of crisis and, if acknowledged, its causes and (un)desirability, and the differences between the US and UK leisure 'scenes' were contested. This discourse was predominantly binary in nature. Among the many lessons to be drawn from the debate, we might note in passing, is the persistence of national/regional intellectual cultural formations despite the much-trumpeted arrival of the age of globalisation (Waters, 1995).

The view of the crisis from the 'neutral corner' or hemisphere (a core/periphery model could also perhaps be deployed) by Rob Lynch (1997: 269) is rather different. For Lynch, if a crisis exists it is "not a crisis of leisure studies/sciences *per se* but, rather, a 'crisis' of leisure studies *as a social science*". He judges that periodic crises in the social sciences can be countered by three principal strategies: "adapting and evolving methodologies ... transforming or changing the paradigm that has given rise to the crisis ... or changing the object of study to find new pathways forward" (p. 270). He sees the first two strategies as acceptable and desirable for Leisure Studies/Sciences, but the last is not because "the object of study of the field is fixed. Leisure studies is a contingent project inextricably dependent on the phenomenon of leisure, in all of its manifestations and changes, for its life blood" (p.270). In other words, without an agreed position on what constitutes leisure, there can be no Leisure Studies/Sciences, which is left as an applied field unsure of its own object of application and seduced into "moving too far into the exciting world of theorizing aspects of the social and political world other than leisure" (p.270). It is precisely this issue of theoretical, analytical and empirical boundary policing in Leisure Studies (the preferred descriptor in this article) that is at heart of most diagnoses of crisis. A small but symptomatic example of this dilemma in Lynch's own experience can be found in his co-published, wide-ranging report (funded by the Office of Recreation Development) *An Australian Leisure Research Agenda*. In his foreword to the report, the relevant ministerial representative referred only to the needs of the "recreation industry" (Snowdon in Lynch and Brown, 1995: i), thereby replacing the concept of leisure with the more edifying notion of recreation, while contradictorily tethering it exclusively to "employment growth over the next few years [that] is worth billions of dollars to the national economy".

The millennial impulse stimulating the special issues of *Leisure Sciences* was similarly registered in the same year in the twentieth anniversary issue of *Loisir et Société/Society and Leisure* devoted to 'Leisure Studies in the XXIst Century: Toward a New Legitimacy'. In his editor's introduction, Max D'Amours (1997: 340) observes that its debate over the condition of Leisure Studies might signal "a certain degree of maturity", yet notes standpoints that are both "optimistic" and characterized by "pervasive doubts'. Among the contributions Kenneth Roberts (1997: 378) views the sociology of leisure as successful and urges commitment to "sticking to and re-using the discipline's standard questions", while Chris Rojek (1997: 388) criticises the '*gladiatorial paradigm*' in Leisure Studies that seeks to obliterate rival approaches in the hope that "more inclusive and relevant general theories of leisure can be constructed". Here, again, the same questions are raised about whether Leisure Studies is in crisis, and how scholars, teachers and researchers in the field should proceed. Indeed, as this article was in preparation, Veal (2002) published a sceptical appraisal of millennial propositions of a deep-rooted

crisis in Leisure Studies. In a critical condition or otherwise, the field is undoubtedly undergoing an intense phase of critical self-reflection.

In reflecting on the *Leisure Sciences* special issue debate, Cara Aitchison (2000: 127) addresses a “current academic impasse” and “crisis within the theoretical base of the subject field” attributed by various writers to continuing theoretical naivety and/or the challenge of postmodernism. Her specific diagnosis echoes the first two strategies discussed by Lynch in that it concerns “leisure studies’ reluctance to embrace recent theoretical developments accommodated within ‘parent’ disciplines of the subject field, together with a concomitant reticence to engage with poststructuralist discourse”. The concept of “Othering” and its application by means of poststructural feminist theory is proposed as a potential way out of the crisis/impasse of Leisure Studies by requiring a reflexive critique of conventional categories of dominant and subordinate groups, identities and practices. Such an approach, Aitchison argues, can meet the challenge of providing “a broad analysis of cultural difference in leisure relations while simultaneously attending to [the] broader structural relations of power” (p.135) in a manner that gives due weight to the ‘social-cultural nexus of leisure relations’. Yet Aitchison’s approach, like Lynch’s, retains a normative conception of leisure. In addressing Chris Rojek’s (2000) notorious provocation that serial killing can be regarded as a form of leisure, she argues that a “poststructuralist feminist analysis would refute Rojek’s interpretation of [such] violent deviant behaviour” as leisure (Aitchison, 2000: 141). Aitchison provides an expanded taxonomy of “everyday forms of ‘deviant’ leisure behaviour, consumption and identity formation such as clubbing, fashion, music, drug taking, smoking, drinking, and other forms of productive consumption” (p.141) that should be encompassed by Leisure Studies, but it is unclear, except in ideological terms, why ‘unproductive’ violent (indeed, homicidal) behaviour is excluded as an object of analysis for Leisure Studies, or what constitutes ‘productiveness’ in such an approach.

Veal and Lynch (2001: 335), like Aitchison, have been critical of the prevailing moralism of Leisure Studies and have called for attention to be given to the neglected area within the field of “leisure on the margins of conventional morality”. In their taxonomy, violence is included under “creating disorder at sporting fixtures”, alongside legal and illegal drug use and gambling, sexual activities of various kinds, and just ‘hanging out’ in public space. But, also like Aitchison, their definition of leisure is restrictive in that, while it advances a context-sensitive ‘typology’ of leisure (eco, classical, pre-modern, modern, and post-modern), they acknowledge that the “succinct” description of Roberts (1978: 3) that leisure is “relatively freely undertaken non-work activity” is one that “encompasses most of the aspects of leisure dealt with in this book” (Veal and Lynch, 2001: 23). Once again, the problem of preventing the over-extension of the concept of leisure returns it to the status of the ‘Other’ of work. Additional typologies, such as Parker and Paddick’s (1990), similarly privilege the leisure-work relational matrix. However, a new emphasis on selected forms of ‘marginal’ leisure could as easily entail only the importation of a conventional sociology of deviance perspective, detaching it from a primary concern with “relatively freely undertaken non-work activity” and ‘re-badging’ it within Leisure Studies. The dilemma for an applied field like Leisure Studies, then, remains – to transform or exchange its object of study in response to a real or imagined crisis or to affirm that “the object of study of the field is fixed”. Fixing the

object of study becomes highly problematic, however, when object, perspective and context are all subject to continual transmutation.

The Reconstitution of Society and Leisure

It is apparent from the discussion above that such attempts to shore up the concept of leisure and the domain of Leisure Studies are unlikely to ward off the widely accepted perception of crisis. It might, therefore, be necessary to adopt the third strategy eschewed by Lynch and to redefine and reposition the object of analysis of Leisure Studies. Such a task would clearly involve the uncoupling of Leisure Studies from the concept against which it has been constructed – formal, paid work – in a manner that goes beyond, for example, a feminist critique of privileging male employment in debates about leisure (Deem, 1986). This task would require a more intimate nexus between the concept of leisure and that of pleasure and its various spaces – an argument that has been made for some considerable time (for example, by Rojek 1985; Hawkins 1990; Wearing, 1998) but which is routinely resisted for the precise reason that it tends to dethrone the concept of leisure by detaching it from its traditional, relational ‘other’ of work. Most importantly, Leisure Studies practitioners would have to overcome their anxiety about addressing certain phenomena that seem a long way from even the currently mapped leisure margins (see, for example, Markwell (1998) on gay men’s leisure and Rojek (1988) on the clash of state leisure management and ‘New Age Travellers’). At the same time, they would need to be less concerned about the ‘infiltration’ of their field by what are often felt to be alien theoretical discourses (Roberts (1997: 374), it should be noted, compares “leisure researchers” to an “indigenous population” confronted by “trespassers and raiders”). There is no doubt that loss would be involved in such a process in terms of direct policy utility and research ‘fundability’, but it would also open up the horizon of Leisure Studies rather than require it continually to resist the pressure of splintering into sundry related “topics related to leisure (consumption, culture, pleasure, desire, tourism, sports, time-space)” (Mommaas, 1997: 252). It would also not be so heavily preoccupied with the task of, in Lynch’s (1997: 271) adaptation of Simmel, establishing the “reality of life (leisure) out of which it makes its own fabric”. Instead, Leisure Studies could learn from Cultural Studies (Tomlinson, 1999) in offering a deeper, more reflexive and less technocratically oriented interrogation of everyday life. Such strategies will inevitably problematise the very existence of Leisure Studies – but, as was argued above, such challenges can be expected to characterise the condition of the newer interdisciplinary fields in any case – and many of the more established conditions besides (see, for example, Nicos Mouzelis (1995) on “what went wrong” with sociological theory).

Current defences of the field of Leisure Studies tend to be institutionally rather than intellectually founded. That is, for perfectly understandable reasons they want to protect Leisure Studies not as delimited social scientific inquiry so much as intellectual institution (or, in Foucault’s terms (1972), as discursive formation). It does not or cannot, therefore, recognise the possibility that Leisure Studies may not be what it used to be because either the conditions under which it is practised have changed or, more radically, that the object of analysis has, indeed, changed. To adopt a socio-historical and institutional explanation, it could be proposed that Leisure Studies within universities developed in the late post-war era under conditions of an expanding public sector and in

recognition of definable boundaries between leisure and work (Mommaas, 1997). These conditions produced a concomitant need to understand, manage and plan leisure (with a clear *étatist* bias towards approved forms of ‘serious leisure’) within a social democratic framework of public provision balancing marketisation. Clearly these conditions have varied in spatial terms (for example, we have already noted some differences between Europe and the USA), but the ‘progressive’ public/private animation of leisure gave detectable ideological impetus to Leisure Studies in all the sites in which it flourished.

The rise of Leisure Studies - seen in this way as a product of the ‘Fordist’ moment (Hall, 1989) of corporatist alliance between capital, labour and the state – was characterised by notions of citizenry entitlement (participation, access and provision), control (institutionalisation, surveillance, and discipline) and industry (market development, employment, and the exploitation of disposable income). There is considerable disagreement about the extent, duration and persistence of Fordism, but it can be safely assumed to have reached its apogee in the three decades after the Second World War and to have begun to decline thereafter. If it is accepted that the Fordist moment has at least partially passed into some new epoch – variously described as post-Fordist, New Times, Postmodernity, and so on (Crook, Pakulski and Waters, 1992; Harvey, 1989) – then both the previous conditions of practice of Leisure Studies and its object of analysis can also be expected to be in flux. Paradoxically, given the long lead-in time of institutionalised educational innovation, perhaps Leisure Studies was established at a point where it was already being undermined by the fracturing of Fordist ‘consensus’ on which it was built and the concomitant rise of neo classical economics (Miller, 1993).

Most diagnoses of crisis in Leisure Studies do not attend sufficiently to this wider socio-historical context. It may be legitimately argued that Leisure Studies has been hampered in some places and times by theoretical blind spots or social conservatism, but its greatest single problem is that the conditions that gave rise to the installation of Leisure Studies in universities have significantly changed. What once gave Leisure Studies its institutional authority – a field of inquiry in tune with the *zeitgeist* – seems to have turned against it because the spirit of 1970s social democratic reformism that produced it is no longer dominant. In seeking to preserve and defend what currently stands for Leisure Studies, more thoroughgoing changes to the field are usually occluded in crisis pronouncements. Two examples can be given here, the first of which is very institutionally focused and refers to the undergraduate demand for Leisure Studies in universities, while the second concerns the conceptual status of leisure in an increasingly fluid socio-cultural environment. In Australia (the vantage point for this analysis) the Field of Education classification finds it difficult to accommodate the range of teaching and learning under the rubric of Leisure Studies, but according to the latest statistics there has been a 19.1% decline between 1995 and 1999 in students studying ‘Sport, Recreation’ (Macfarlane, 2000). These figures may disguise growth or stability in areas of tourism, management, business, humanities and social sciences that can be legitimately regarded as in some way Leisure Studies, but in the UK and Australia at least there is a sense (and some empirical evidence in relation to student demand) that Leisure Studies is currently in decline as a field of undergraduate study.

It is likely that the rather diffuse nature of the concept of leisure has, in instrumental times, led it to be regarded by potential students as less easily converted to employable qualifications than other applied areas of study with more 'concrete' identities (like sport or tourism). This is not to say, however, that such 'sub-fields' as they have emerged have not also had to confront similar questions about their state and status. Nigel Evans (2000: 115), for example, in examining a related area of study that is currently experiencing growth - university tourism education in the UK - has noted that the gravitational pull of the "business studies field" and questions of disciplinarity and "other approaches to the field" are continually raised. Instead, however, of seeing these as signs of crisis, he interprets them as a necessary expression of intellectual health:

Debates about the curriculum, the appropriate way in which the subjects are taught and the interrelations with other bodies of knowledge are generic to the subject areas that have vitality. Should the place of tourism studies cease to become such a fertile area for debate, then it would be a clear sign that its decline was imminent (2000: 115).

Leisure Studies has been similarly produced by and subject to an even wider complex of forces - the "business studies field", certainly, but also the field of government and the sphere of critical social science. Indeed, two or three decades ago, Leisure Studies was regarded (and at some loss to academic credibility) as unquestionably applied and technocratically 'hard-nosed'. Since its inception, however, broader societal changes seem to have eroded the integrity of the concept of leisure. This trend partially, no doubt, is derived from heightened specialisation and rationalisation in the broad leisure sector (as in other domains of industry). More significantly, though, given that the concept of leisure evolved dualistically in relation to the concept of work, sweeping changes to work, social and cultural life have had a profound impact on the leisure-work distinction. For example, the steady erosion of full-time continuing employment in favour of part-time, casualised work; under- and unemployment; the increase in task-oriented white-collar occupations without clear limits on what constitutes paid 'work time', and the proliferation of computer-based work/entertainment communications technologies in both home and work sites, have seriously compromised the relatively determinate boundaries between work and leisure that previously pertained (Rowe, 1998). This development has been accentuated by the critical cultural dimensions that overlay and underpin the realignment of contemporary work and leisure. This relationship of culture to "the social" is important because it signals a departure from the common view that culture reflects social relations (including those that surround leisure) in favour of a position that views culture as "a set of relations and practices" that acts upon the social (Bennett, 1999: 11).

Culturalisation

The insinuation of culture in its contemporary forms - rapidly produced, circulated and adapted - into key social institutions has disturbed many of their more predictable features. The primacy of design, symbolism and imagery in the 'hard' world of labour has made the 'soft' world of culture integral to contemporary economics (Lash and Urry, 1994), yet the resultant "new technologies of communication and entertainment [have]

vastly increased the appeal of non-work activity” (Rojek, 2000: 197). More radically, we could suggest that these developments have not so much made work less comparatively attractive but more difficult to affirm precisely where work begins and leisure ends. This culturalisation process resonates across all the fields of human activity, and its ramifications for understanding the work-leisure dialectic have been far-reaching given the foundational construction of leisure *against* work. Chris Rojek (2000: 197/8) argues, following André Gorz (1982), that:

The expansion of the cultural sphere has reduced the importance of work as the central life interest in contemporary society. As a result, the notion of post-work society no longer carries with it the spectre of mass idleness that horrified the rational recreation movement at the turn of the [twentieth] century. Post-work frees up the individual for more leisure.

This conception of ‘post-work society’ may be something of an exaggeration generated from the vantage point of authors insulated from environments where some of the starker work/leisure divisions persist (abattoirs, say, or assembly lines and coal mines). However, even if work has only been partially dethroned ideologically (as moral duty) or experientially (as time-based activity), the “relative freedom” concept of leisure underpinning much of Leisure Studies looks more precarious. This is even more the case where, conversely, the expansion of the leisure and retail economies (Ritzer, 1995) renders most acts, especially of consumption, as extensions of work (for example, the use of ‘reward cards’ to discipline and track retail consumption, the behavioural psychology-inspired design of shopping malls, and the use of closed circuit television and miniature cameras in public and private space). Under these circumstances, the ‘clean’ study of leisure as an object becomes harder, irrespective of the analytical framework deployed.

Taking this logic further into “leisure on the margins of conventional morality” or “everyday forms of ‘deviant’ behaviour, consumption and identity formation”, what is the status in Leisure Studies of, for example, a drug dealer (‘worker’) who is also a recreational user (‘engaged in leisure’), a pornographer who is also a fetishist, a club ‘bouncer’ who takes pleasure in provoking violence and also plays rugby football, and so on? This pattern, reminiscent of the concept of ‘drift’ in the sociology of deviancy and criminology (see Matza, 1964), makes a secure concept of leisure as practice even more improbable. Such social phenomena tend to lead the more conventional Leisure Studies analyst away from familiar terrain where work is not only separable from leisure, but also “conceptually different from culture” (Bennett, Emmison and Frow, 1999: 87). If “work has its own cultures (and ways of doing things and relating to others, its forms of pride and honour); and it meshes with every other aspect of cultural life” (87), and the work-leisure dialectic loses its constitutive clarity, it is harder to fix a bead on the object of study, and to persuade those who resource teaching and research about it of the importance and integrity of Leisure Studies.

Crises of Leisure Studies, then, even where obvious in nature, are the products of wide and profound societal changes, the consequences of which are felt institutionally and not principally, as crisis debates tend to represent them, as dilemmas of theoretical, conceptual or methodological preference. The future of Leisure Studies is bound up in

changes that far exceed the powers of its practitioners to control. What they can do is to recognise these circumstances and seek to mould them, contextually, to their advantage. This I argue must involve a series of strategies that retain the relevance of the study of leisure without fruitlessly attempting to prescribe a customised theoretical orientation or to seal it off from other disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields of study that appropriate leisure as their object of study. In order to ward off a permanent sense of intellectual crisis and siege, those who identify with Leisure Studies need to open up its portals and renounce any exclusive claim to its elusive object of study.

Conclusion: Recovering Leisure Studies

As we have seen, if a crisis of Leisure Studies is perceived, the last line of defence is the object of study itself. If the “phenomenon of leisure” (Lynch: 1997, 270) cannot be ascertained and its founding, central premises “decentred” (Rojek, 1995), then the prospect of a relativist abyss beckons, with everything potentially becoming leisure and leisure everything – and with Leisure Studies following the same fate. My argument is that, in order to overcome a continual crisis mentality and to sustain this field of social inquiry, Leisure Studies practitioners need to have a more acute sense of intellectual history and a wider appreciation of how intellectual institutions are shaped. This will require, first, a reflexive understanding of the formation of Leisure Studies in its post-World War II intellectual context and, second, of the shifts in the social relations that produce what we call leisure at any given historical moment. What persists, then, is not the fixed object of study itself, but the self-reflexive research of the social conditions that activate the concept of leisure as a description of a phenomenon. This is an important and enlightening task, but its object of study is essentially chimerical. It is a project that can gather data, propose concepts and garner theoretical insights, but it can ‘fix’ the object of study only in receding retrospect. It cannot prescribe norms for what counts as leisure as an object of study, although Leisure Studies scholars have the right – if not a duty – to offer critical opinion (and, where appropriate, prescriptions for action) concerning the relations of power producing nominated leisure structures, practices and relations.

Leisure Studies has both specific and general properties as social science. It must operate in a context where material and intellectual resources supplied by public and private institutions are contested, and where the uses of its practice and outcomes are equally contested and contestable. In an era of hyper-differentiation (Crook, Pakulski and Waters, 1992), Leisure Studies has suffered a diminution in its utility among its principal ‘stakeholders’ – students seeking careers, governments developing policies, pressure groups requesting support, business enterprises searching out profitable opportunities, citizens demanding their rights, and academics looking for intellectual leverage. At this historical conjuncture, however, what we tend to call leisure is very deeply imbricated with those forces that have placed the even more abstract concept of culture at the centre of experience and discourse. Leisure Studies as an institutional interest group can benefit from aligning itself with this growing cultural sphere (if leisure is anything it is surely cultural), but only if it is more open to a broader range of socio-cultural phenomena that may not resemble leisure as traditionally conceived (Rojek, 2000). These will be both “productive” and “unproductive”, uplifting and repugnant, discrete and partial, continuous and intermittent. They must be approached by both ‘classical’ intellectual

means and through those that are hybridic and evolving. Leisure Studies practitioners, it can be assumed, are likely to feel less crisis-prone if they are attempting to ask questions of a confusing present rather than trying to recover a perplexingly compromised object of study from its formative past. In addressing anxieties caused by such anti-essentialist thought, Tania Modleski (1991) has raised the danger of “Feminism without Women”, while Stuart Hall (1996) has written of the need for a “Marxism without guarantees”. The latter intervention has been recently invoked in relation to sport by David Andrews (2001: 116) in calling for a “sport without guarantees” to replace the orthodoxy that treats sport as a self-evident object of analysis. It may seem that what I have proposed here is not just a leisure without guarantees, but, by not ascribing to it a firm remit and object, a Leisure Studies without leisure. But leisure surely can remain a key locus of analysis as long as Leisure Studies does not mechanically reproduce a self-defeating crisis out of its own inflexibilities, insecurities and illusions.

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