

## **Our Reform Heritage: Recovering the Vision of Community Leisure Service**

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Given the rare opportunity to write unencumbered by the usual scholarly constraints, I take this as an occasion for reflection, asking questions that are probably good for all of us to ask from time to time; How did I get here in the first place? and What keeps me going?

Thinking back to my days as a graduate student at the University of North Carolina in the mid 1970s, I recall a seminar with the historian George Mowry and my selecting, more or less at random, "leisure in the 1920s" from a list of research topics he gave our class. Exploring the topic, looking around the university, I noticed H. Douglas Sessoms and his bunch across campus were running a Recreation Curriculum. I went to see Doug and my life has, quite literally, not been the same since.

Under Doug's tutelage I first saw what recreation and leisure were once, and might be again. I saw then visions of social reform and transformation, of human progress and betterment that were so striking, so inspiring, that I committed myself to study and teach these topics. This reform model and vision sustain me still, confirming my commitment when I despair for my fields.

Writing my master's thesis, "Playground Reform: The Recreation Movement in America 1880-1920," I discovered a group of activists in the mainstream of America's Progressive Movement presenting powerful critiques of industrialization, urban society, and the excesses of capitalism. At the inception of our fields, founders of the "playground movement" around the turn of the century such as Joseph Lee and Jane Addams, established a blueprint for reform that speaks powerfully today. Looking around them at the crowded and crime ridden streets of Boston, New York, etc., they saw children denied a basic human freedom—play. They spoke out against this condition, drawing the public's attention to the problem. Marshaling public support, they took action, providing free, open spaces (sandgardens) where children could be themselves and simply play, and beginning a social movement that flourished for over thirty years. Here is the reform model in elegant simplicity. Modern life (technology, urbanization, mass culture, capitalism) crowds out humans. We are alienated; separated from our true selves, our very essence; exiled to stunted and restless artificiality. It is the reformer's role to expose this alienation, gather public support for change, and do

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something practical, acting in the “real” world to make some room for our humanity.

The men and women who came afterwards, leading the recreation and parks movement, followed this reform pattern. People such as Jay Nash criticized the onslaught of commercial recreation, pointing out that Americans were becoming passive in their free time, consuming rather than creating their amusements. “Spectatoritis” was sweeping the land, alienating more and more people as fat, lazy, and quarrelsome bench-warmers. What to do? Provide programs for the schools, playgrounds, and recreation centers that stressed active involvement and produced healthy, engaged sportsmen and women. Others criticized the increasing speed and deadly stress of modern life, offering recreation centers and parks as places for recuperation and of relative peace and quiet. Nature? The city was crowding out all things green. Humans were separated from natural surrounding (our evolutionary home) and suffered because of it. Solution? Bring a little nature to the city (parks) or take nature-starved humans out of town for some “fresh air.”

These pioneers took notice of what others were saying and writing (scholars and journalists) and addressed larger public concerns—the devitalizing and de-skilling of work, for example. Technology was making work less and less satisfying. The best hope for men and women alienated at work was increasing leisure.

Arguably, their major complaint was the loss of community. Not only were people becoming spectators at sports events, they were becoming passive in the building and maintenance of their own local culture. Clarence Rainwater, writing about the “community service” (after 1918) stage of the play movement, documented how this concern enlivened our fields; how recreation and parks leaders mounted a nationwide effort to resist the encroachment of consumerism and mass culture; providing new opportunities for people to put together and perform their own “pageants,” music, celebrations and rituals, festivals and fairs.

Finally, leaders of our fields were animated by an inspiring vision of the coming of mass, abundant leisure. Shorter work hours became a national issue in the 1920s, and people such as Howard Braucher, looking back on the “century of shorter hours” during which working hours had been cut in half, acted with confidence that leisure would soon become the greatest challenge of the modern world.

Leisure was opening up astonishing new democratic vistas. With increasing leisure humans would be able to progress beyond work and the marketplace (necessity was becoming “obsolete”!), spending more of their lives “outside” in those regions of human existence that were “free” and worthwhile in and for themselves. Beginning with the family and moving outward toward community and the state, humans would gain increasing access to cultural expression and creation. Moving even further beyond the confines of utility, the average individual might approach the free realms of mind and spirit previously reserved mainly for the elite, directly experiencing nature, history, art, the body, literature, the life of the mind and the soul’s pursuit—

enjoying those “given” parts of humanity that were in their essence, free. This was not some distant dream but an emerging reality, one that required the best leadership and guidance from fields such as our own.

Steadily increasing leisure was once seen as the healthy alternative to perpetual economic growth that would eventually destroy the environment, and to excessive expansion of the marketplace and work that exploited and commercialized the finest, free experiences of life. Expanding work would exploit and re-enslave humans as surely as expanding leisure would liberate them. The choice was clear.

Howard Braucher, for example envisioned a “Golden Age” of leisure just around the corner. Joseph Lee spoke of play and leisure as among the most potent “antidotes to civilization;” proofs against what Joseph Pieper later called the “rise of the world of total work.”

I maintain that over the years we lost that reform spirit and forgot that old vision. I am convinced that our fields have given in to the opposition, meekly trailing along at the tail-end of the stampede for more of everything, work and consumption; tamely defending leisure because it expands the economy (creates new spending), gives us “careers” and makes new jobs, or somehow makes perpetually expanding work better (diversion/recuperation).

I submit that we have forgotten leisure and play as “antidotes to civilization;” shying from what has become a “radical” vision—that old vision of steadily increasing leisure that will replace work/consumption/marketplace as life’s focus. We have forgotten that expanding leisure can be an alternative to the ruinous developments of modern technology and capitalism.

I am guilty of my share of hero worship and nostalgia, but I don’t suggest that we return to those golden years. I simply think we might find there an alternative to what we are doing these days—a perspective from which to view, critically, our own lack of purpose and direction.

Most of the issues that the scholars and leaders of our fields once addressed are still around. The destruction of the environment, the speed and strain of life, widespread passivity during free-time, “devalitized” work- now compounded by fantastic claims about work as the center of culture and the organizing principle of the human personality. New issues and alienation have emerged; overwork, the loss of family time, TV, the worsening maldistribution of the world’s wealth.

What we lack, in my view, is a reform purpose and agenda. What we want is the willingness to think and speak out critically and the courage to propose solutions that reject the conventional wisdom, taking a stand against work-as-the-center-of-life, the “need” for eternal work-creation, the “blessings” of perpetual economic expansion, and leisure’s role in abetting that expansion.

I see the most exciting challenge in our fields’ traditional concern with revitalizing communities. Some of the most important academic and theoretical developments in my lifetime, critical and feminist theory, propose that the fundamental alienation of modern life is the loss of autonomous, local

culture creation, and the expropriation of this basic aspect of humanity by a host of modern exploiters.

Writers such as Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Andre Gorz, and Jacques Ellul have formulated a reform agenda based on the recovery of functioning local cultures—Habermas uses “emancipated leisure,” Foucault “genealogy” for this agenda. As I read these theorists I am reminded of Rainwater’s history of the play movement—the one thing lacking is a practical program of community leisure service; something pioneers of our fields certainly had.

We have a fine interpretation of some of this critical theory in the writings of John Hemingway. We want only the will and courage to adopt these newer theories and begin to take action. Encouraged by the example of our ancestors, we must aspire to reestablish a reform movement based on the potential of leisure, play, and recreation to liberate humans from the excesses of modern life. We must directly address social issues, such as those listed above, prescribing the antidotes of play, recreation, and public spaces.

We need to return to the simple, elegant idea of community leisure service; building facilities and programs deliberately designed to reform our culture; aspiring to return active culture doing and making to localities; striving to rebuild a democratic culture; recalling those “democratic vistas” that once inspired us.

The alternative is continued decline. Following the herd, trying to justify leisure and recreation using conventional economic and organizational-based logic (what Habermas calls “instrumental rationality”) is a losing game. We are always going to be at the bottom of the world-of-total-work, total-utility scramble. Why not turn from this no-win situation and opposing the whole business of piling more on top of more—more work, more consumption, more bureaucracy—and abandoning the worship of “instrumental rationality,” recover the “radical” vision of leisure and play as the remedy, the viable “de-centering” alternatives to what most of us have all bought into?