

Downshifting: Regaining the Essence of Leisure

Susana Juniu
Montclair State University

KEYWORDS: *Leisure behavior, leisure meaning, commodification, consumerism*

"The parameters for success are changing in the United States and Europe by the followers of the downshifting movement, a movement that attempts to give back the pleasure to life with the philosophy that money is the means but not an end." (Díaz, 1999)

The focus of this essay is to give the reader a brief review of the historical evolution of leisure and its changes through time. I will examine how contemporary notions of leisure have been shaped through the post-industrial revolution resulting in its commodification and consumerism. The intent of this paper is to raise issues of reflection and to propose the downshifting philosophy as a possibility to regain the essence of leisure lost in this post-modern consumer culture.

Attitudes toward Work and Leisure

Leisure is not a phenomenon of recent modern times (Munné, 1992). By saying this implies that leisure is a function of work and work in its modern sense is comparatively recent. It is necessary to analyze the meaning and the relationship of work and leisure throughout history to understand their present form.

Leisure in the ancient Greek society was defined as the contemplation of the supreme values of the world: truth, goodness, beauty and knowledge. This contemplation demanded a life of leisure defined as "*skholé*" (Munné, 1992). *Skholé* was not simply doing nothing, but rather a state of peace and creative contemplation in which the spirit is immersed. Leisure required having time for oneself, therefore, not being subjected to work. Leisure was associated with the upper class and interpreted as absolving individuals from daily labor, and freeing them to engage in intellectual, aesthetic, and civic endeavors. This was possible through the stratification of the society. Only the elite had the time to achieve this higher level of spirituality while the rest of the people had to work.

The Romans moved away from the Greek perception of leisure and found in *otium* (Munné, 1992) the time required to rest, recreate, and recuperate in order to go back to work. In contrast to Greek times, leisure in Roman times did not signify a social status or a way of life, but a time after productive activities. The Greek ideal was inverted and leisure became a device to support work, work was the end in itself. Forms of mass leisure

Dr. Susana Juniu is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Health Professions, Physical Education, Recreation, and Leisure Studies, Montclair State University. Upper Montclair, NJ 07043. e-mail: junius@mail.montclair.edu.

arose during this time through sports and games provided by the ruling class as a means for entertainment. This view of leisure as a complement of work is a concept related to modern times.

Leisure in the Middle Ages was not only time to rest and recreate but it became a social exhibition among the higher social strata. In contrast to the Greek philosophy leisure was the abstinence from work and the freedom to choose the activity in which to participate. In the late Middle Ages, leisure began to transform into ostentation, luxury, pleasures, and squander. The use of leisure time became a sign of nobility as opposed to the servile work time. This view coincides with Veblen's (1912) notion of conspicuous consumption. This perception of leisure comes to our modern society as an artificial source of wealth, prestige and power.

During the 1700s the Puritan's work ethic was built on Luther's basic beliefs that work and family responsibility was service to God. The Puritans considered leisure as idleness and wasting time. This doctrine gave a religious value to work where idleness was view as a sin This interpretation of leisure became part of the industrial society and remains true at present.

The advent of the industrial revolution brought about increases in work time. The main goal was to increase production. The increasing exploitation of the worker led to a worker movement which demanded fewer work hours and more pay. Little by little, a time existed that was extracted from the decreased work time. This is what is call the *spare time* or *disposable time*. Historically, leisure had a clear meaning. In Greece, Rome, the ostentatious Medieval times, and the Puritans times, this meaning conditioned the use of leisure time. The essential in each case was the social life. Modern leisure comes from this subtraction of work time not because leisure time is valued but because work has lost its value. As a consequence, the important issue is to not-work, which is a different notion form earlier views of leisure. Leisure is then "blank time," meaningless time, time for everything and anything. This time is subjected by the work conditions and it constitutes a potential source of consumption. Modern leisure is subordinated to work and should not interfere with work. Hemingway (1996) quoted Habermas as saying "Leisure has been deformed to increasing commodification and consumerization." The historical sense of freedom in leisure has been lost to consumerization; leisure is no longer a time for personal growth and contemplation, nor a time for social utilization.

The new structure of work demanded a restructuring of the element of social interaction that previously consisted of more communication and equal sharing. Work relationships were transformed into exchange relationships between the employee and the employer. The purpose was to shape social interaction to increase productivity and maintain stability. Social rewards were substituted by economic rewards. This economic reward gave the worker the power of purchasing leisure and consequently the purchase of pleasure (Kelly, 1996). But this new leisure time that arose from decreased work time did not restore the sense of social solidarity damaged by industrialization. Leisure became associated with a materialistic style of life and a

means of social control. The consumption of leisure mirrored work, leisure became more individualistic, and involved exchange relationships (Hemingway, 1996).

Changes in Leisure

The increasing instrumentalism of leisure as a reflection of modernization (Hemingway, 1996) produced “culture consuming” instead of “culture creating.” Culture is now the commodity and leisure the act of consuming it. Hemingway noted that Habermas differentiated between free time and leisure. Leisure, conceived as “culture creating,” has an element of communication and interaction among individuals, while free time, “culture consuming” leisure, is a means to an end, making use of subjects and objects. Today, consumerism has consumed us in the sense that we are trapped by money, and those elements of creativity and sociability found in leisure are disappearing. According to the New Road Map Foundation, the unlimited consumerism, once considered the American Dream not just for the American community, is now a nightmare. “We are materialistically rich but poor in happiness” (Díaz, 1999).

Simplifying our Lives

So, what is happening to us? The pressure of today’s life, reinforced by the workplace, economic, social, and political climate, has reduced our quality of life. Many Americans feel driven and unhappy despite their success (Schor, 1998). We live to work and don’t work to live. “. . . For everything you have missed, you have gained something else; and for everything you gain, you lose something” (Emerson, quoted by Haertsch, 1999) and leisure is part of that loss. By stepping out of this current paradigm we could aim for healthier choices of life. An alternative to this unhappiness is taking a step to simplicity that could lead us to the search of more satisfying way of life. Simplifying our lives could help us regain that quality lost through this modern trend of consumerism.

Buckingham noted that “downshifting” is the will to give up the compulsive purchase of material things that end up owning their owners and reject the idea to sacrifice non-working activities such as reading a book at night to a child in order to get a job promotion. This movement of simplification, according to Celente (1998), is not just a passing fashion. “We live in an era that exceeds in capacity, production, and population, therefore, the economy demands that some people change their high power position salaries.” Voluntary simplicity could help us regain the essence of leisure. The focus would no longer be on the quantity of life (i.e. how much we have? how much we own? how much we earn?) but on the quality of life (i.e. how much we enjoy? how much we explore in life?) Downshifting does not just mean stop working or stop spending. It means work less, spend less, and doing things differently in a leisurely manner. Drawing on Spry, Russell

(1996), states that conserving in our leisure is a matter of being and doing rather than having. However, if we choose to consume less, could we still have a good time?

The recovery of leisure must begin by asking what are our priorities and raising our consciousness as to what constitutes leisure for us. These questions of reflection have no simple answers or guidelines for change. No policy solutions could be suggested at this time, only a change of philosophy and a serious analysis of how we experience leisure today. We must look for new forms of leisure that allow us to do things that satisfy us. We must approach them in a leisurely manner. But how do we replace the consumption tendency developed in modern society? How do we get away from being control by the clock? What is the reward that will replace this compulsive need to buy leisure? Searching for and promoting activities geared toward social interactions could be part of the solutions. For example, we could exercise outdoors and use public parks with friends instead of spending money in the best fitness club. Or we can cook with friends instead of dining out. These are moments in which social interaction could give us a different and more meaningful happiness that we have lost by becoming socially isolated. We must learn to slow down, not rush during leisure as we do at work. We must take a leisurely approach to do things. This requires certain attitudes and behaviors such taking one's own time and pace.

But once again how do we achieve these changes? Perhaps by moving from (a) individualism to social solidarity, (b) live-to-work to work-to-live philosophy, (c) materialism to spiritualism, and (d) perfection to creativity and fun. The answer then falls in education and in the need to strive for balance between life and work. Education could help us promote interpersonal relations and select activities that enhance our personal growth. Leisure is not just time away from work; it is a valuable and special time we spend, among other things, understanding our inner-self. "What insight are we losing by not taking a different perspective?" (Samdhal 1997, p. 471).

References

- Buckingham, S. *Shift down to gear up*. <http://www.unorg.com/a46.htm>.
- Celente, G. (1998). *Trends 2000 : How to Prepare for and Profit from the Changes of the 21st Century*. New York: Warner Books.
- Díaz, D. V. (1999, August). Por unos ólares menos. Retrieved August 8, 1999 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.nacion.co.cr/dominical/>.
- Haertsch, G. (1999, September). In their quest to "have it all," women have lost not only Saturdays, but part of themselves. Retrieved September 4, 1999 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.phillynews.com/99/Sep/04/opinion/haertsch04.htm>.
- Hemingway, J. L. (1996). Emancipating leisure: The recovery the freedom in leisure. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 28(1), 27-43.
- Kelly, J. R. (1996) *Leisure*. Needham Hights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Munné, F. (1992). *Psicosociología del tiempo libre: Un enfoque crítico*. México: Editorial Trillas.
- Russell, R. V. (1996). *Pastimes: The context of contemporary leisure*. Dubuque, IA: Brown & Benchmark Publishers.

-
- Schor, J. (1998). *Overspent American : Why we want what we don't need*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Samdahl, D. M, & Jekubovich N. J. (1997). A rejoinder to Henderson's and Jackson's commentaries on "A critique of leisure constraints." *Journal of Leisure Research*, 29(4), 469-471.
- Veblen, T. (1912). *The theory of leisure class*. New York: Macmillan.