
BOOK REVIEW
Fiftieth Anniversary¹
Of Time, Work, and Leisure

Sebastian de Grazia

The Twentieth Century Fund, 1962

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This year is the 50th anniversary of Sebastian de Grazia's *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* (1962), arguably one of the most important books on the subject of leisure in the 20th century. Besides Thorstein Veblen's (1899/1994) *Theory of the Leisure Class* and Josef Pieper's (1952) *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, I can think of nothing else that compares. I have no idea how familiar the most recent generation of students, educators, and professionals is with *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* and Sebastian de Grazia, a humanist scholar and political philosopher who received a Pulitzer Prize for *Machiavelli in Hell* (1989). I doubt if many students are, especially undergraduates. Indeed, I suspect that even in its prime *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* received greater exposure through the film of the same title featuring de Grazia in bowtie and with pipe. Nonetheless, *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* once had an audience in leisure studies. I was introduced to it as an undergraduate nearly 40 years ago, starting my journey as a student of history and philosophy. Without *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* to open my eyes, I would have been unable to challenge students, colleagues, and myself to imagine something besides free time, the "experience industry," or "benefits-based recreation" as the sum and substance of leisure.

While I will initially provide a thumbnail summary, I do not intend to conduct a standard book review. Frankly, besides recommending *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* to anyone interested in the study and practice of leisure, there is little I could write that would affect its deserved reputation as a classic in the literature of leisure studies. de Grazia explores the enduring themes of work and leisure with wit and erudition. His treatment of technology and consumerism foresees the future, though de Grazia's angst over the "tyranny of the clock" and shopping malls reads quaintly compared to cell phones and Black Friday rumbles at Walmart. Yet even if *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* were to regain an audience, my concern is that de Grazia's message and challenge would resonate very little in leisure studies, and the inattention would just continue. Therefore, while taking another look at *Of*

¹Editor note: From time to time, the *Journal of Leisure Research* will print reviews of books published in years past. Established scholars and new leisure studies students alike may find inspiration in these "classics." These works are too important to be forgotten.

Time, Work, and Leisure, I will posit one reason why leisure studies has been largely indifferent to de Grazia and classical leisure.

A keen and sweeping study, *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* is about the rise and decline of the classical conception of leisure, including what it has meant for modern society. de Grazia argues that classical and modern conceptions of leisure “live in two different worlds” (p. 8). The world of modern leisure is free time, amounting to time left over after employment (work) and other necessities, such as rest, self-maintenance, and domestic chores. The temporal space of modern leisure mainly gets filled with hobbies, amusements, and health-sustaining recreation. de Grazia also notably includes consumer activity that people would deem free, but is manipulated by advertising. On the other hand, defined as “freedom from the necessity of being occupied” (p. 14), classical leisure only appears to resemble the modern view. de Grazia cautions, however, that free time or freedom from the necessity of labor is just the gateway to leisure. Beyond that gate is one of the great contributions of classical Greece to Western civilization—not just the idea of leisure, but the idea that leisure is an *ideal* and thus an organizing principle of life, just as personal freedom and equality are modern ideals. de Grazia elaborates that “leisure is a state of being in which activity is performed for its own sake, as its own end” (p. 15), a way of living amounting to the good life, indeed the best possible life. Because human beings must live, economic activity (work) is necessary. Yet to live doing what is *best* in human nature—that life being most free, just, noble, beautiful, and pleasurable—requires leisure and the capacity to use it rightly. Thus, unlike today, leisure was a serious concern of politics and education in ancient Athens. Drawing from Plato and Aristotle, de Grazia adeptly encapsulates the classical understanding of the good and proper life in relation to leisure, government, and education, an explanation that would be impossible to do justice to in the scope of this commentary. This is reason enough to scrutinize *Of Time, Work, and Leisure*, for de Grazia provides as a good an introduction to classical leisure as can be found (also see Hemingway, 1988; Hunnicutt, 1990).

Although the story of classical leisure is complex, its purpose is direct—a life of excellence. While the classical idea of excellence (*aretē*) was unitary, it could be expressed in different ways. For example, music, friendship, and gymnastics were among actions done for their own sake that involved the best capacities of human beings. Of all the finest, most pleasant activities intended for leisure, de Grazia places contemplation of truth at the peak of excellence. Accordingly, anything that limited the freedom of the mind to contemplate the meaning of the universe and the place of human beings in it ultimately impeded excellence and the achievement of the greatest good (*eudaimonia*). Hence, leisure, the freedom from the necessity of being occupied with mundane activities, was necessary in the classical view for living a higher, more divine life that human beings were intended by nature to live.

Having described the origin and apotheosis of classical leisure, de Grazia follows its decline and the ascent of its successor, the ideal of work. Spawned in the Christian monasteries, idealized during the Renaissance, converted to a godly virtue by Protestantism, and legitimized by economic philosophers as the basis of

value, productive work became not just the means of life, but life itself.² Aided and abetted by capitalism, consumerism, advertising, technology, and government, work is now gospel in a secular world.

While tracking classical leisure's demise, de Grazia detects traces where it persisted despite the expanding authority of work. One of the most intriguing sections of *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* is de Grazia's discussion of America's Founding Fathers, who were unique in that they inhabited ancient and modern worldviews. de Grazia recounts Benjamin Franklin's proposal for a college in Philadelphia. Franklin recognized that establishing the colonies out of the harsh and hazardous wilds demanded most of the settlers' time and energy. Once sustained, however, Franklin anticipated "times of more wealth and leisure" for "the culture of minds by the finer arts and sciences" (p. 237). In considering a design for liberal education fitted for budding America, Franklin arrived at one both classical and modern, believing that education should prepare individuals for material welfare, social progress, and cultural enrichment in work and leisure (Sylvester, 2011). de Grazia also refers to Thomas Jefferson as a revolutionary figure who interpreted life through a mixture of classical and Enlightenment ideas. Against the elitism of ancient Athens, Jefferson sought a more egalitarian reformulation of classical leisure befitting American democracy. Criticizing the 16-hour days typical of European manufacturing, leaving workers "no time to think," Jefferson praised American farmers who "can read Homer" in their leisure (quoted in Sylvester, 2008).

Franklin and Jefferson were not atypical for their time. Without discounting the influence of Puritanism, the early American mind was receptive to leisure as a source of virtue and happiness according to de Grazia:

The Founding Fathers had their ideal of the good life. . . . To be free of necessity and therefore free to do whatever one wants to for itself alone—this to them was the pursuit of happiness. In this they could have not been more classical. (p. 279)

The Founders' reformulation that attempted to conjoin classical and modern ideas did not prevail, however, as "such an ideal no longer exists" (de Grazia, 1962, p. 294). Instead, work and its residual, free-time, have replaced the ersatz ideal of leisure, resulting in a good life that "consists in the people's enjoyment of whatever industry produces, advertisers sell, and government orders" (p. 294). Still, de Grazia does not utterly despair. While there is no romantic return to Jefferson's rural past of literate farmers reading Homer or entrepreneurs occupying their leisure in natural philosophy like Franklin, de Grazia believes that elements of history can be retrieved. "In the Founding Fathers," he observes, "we have an example of men who went far back for their inspiration and came forth with the most original thinking the country has ever seen" (p. 279). Thus, de Grazia certainly thinks that past ideals can be refitted for present times *if* there are receptive minds to receive and transmit them. Therefore, despite America's turn toward work, de Grazia was able to sound a hopeful note:

²Compare Aristotle's "the first principle of all action is leisure." (Pol., Bk. VII, 3) with the Protestant minister Zinzendorf's (1869-1874) "Man works not only to live, but man lives that he may work" (p. 428).

If only the cheery things of existence are American, then this book is un-American. If only a happy ending is American, then . . . well, I don't know. Perhaps it is American. It ends discussing holidays. Do you know what a holiday is? A day to dance in. (p. 7)

I borrow the metaphor of dance to suggest that perhaps de Grazia was extending an invitation to embrace the challenge of the Founders' unfinished vision of happiness, choreographing it into an ideal of the good life befitting modern times. Granted, the project would be extraordinarily difficult, but I care to think that leisure studies would see it as worthwhile.

If so, who in leisure studies might lead the way, producing and inspiring research related to the Founders' ideals of leisure and the pursuit of happiness? Where are the mature intellectual leadership and the cadre of young scholars capable of sustaining and building upon the project?

The answer is troubling. With just a single exception, no one to my knowledge has seriously engaged de Grazia's thesis since it was first published a half-century ago! Not until the 25th anniversary of *Of Time, Work, and Leisure*, when "*Of Time, Work, and Leisure Revisited*" by Douglas Sessoms (1986) appeared, was de Grazia's study directly addressed in the pages of leisure studies' scholarly journals. Yet even this solitary case is specious, because Sessoms did not substantially speak to de Grazia's argument. Rather than a rigorous revisit, Sessoms conveniently used de Grazia as a straw man in order to launch a cursory stroll through some of the intellectual moments in the development of the loosely arranged field of recreation and leisure. While leaving *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* virtually untouched, he dismissively thanked de Grazia for the "intellectual game" that Sessoms himself never joined in.

Out of Sessoms' polemic arose the only scholarly endeavor that has directly examined de Grazia's challenge of the relationship and relevance of classical leisure to modern society in the 50 years since *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* was first published. Spurred by Sessoms' dismissal of de Grazia and, by implication, classical leisure, and dissatisfied with how leisure studies has treated its intellectual heritage, Hemingway (1988) responded with a trenchant analysis of leisure and democracy. Among other contributions, he demonstrated that ideas and ideals thousands of years old can be relevantly applied to contemporary times, just as the Founders and de Grazia did in their times. Yet, besides Hemingway, why such a dearth of interest?

I believe one reason relates to something Franklin, Jefferson, de Grazia, and Hemingway hold in common—the humanities. Steeped especially in history and philosophy, they were able to see and interpret the ebb and flow of ideas and practices across the stream of time. For instance, de Grazia appears skeptical about the compatibility of leisure and democracy. Yet it is not democracy, *per se*, that concerns him, but rather how it has been estranged from leisure in becoming the ally of work and economic development. Similarly, Hemingway does not see the ideal of democracy as the problem, but instead the conflation of liberal democracy and the marketplace, leading to the exclusion of non-economic goods in the good life. Accordingly, like Franklin, Jefferson, and de Grazia, Hemingway looked back to discover a way forward, locating a possible path out of the thicket in leisure and

civility. As moderns, they could dance with the classics because they heard the music and knew what steps to take. Conversely, the discipline of leisure studies has never had much of an ear or rhythm for the humanities.

Kindled by a handful of studies, the humanities actually stirred in leisure studies during the late '80s and early '90s (e.g. Fain, 1991; Hemingway, 1988; Hunnicutt, 1990; Goodale & Godbey, 1988; Dare, Welton, & Coe, 1987). They started to languish slowly, however, around the time that the Leisure Research Symposium switched from organizing sessions by disciplines to thematic tracks, gradually slipping into obscurity. Interestingly, while the humanities are nearly invisible in leisure studies, they have been used advantageously by other fields. Widely regarded as the father of positive psychology, Martin Seligman has reached back to the humanities of the East and West in exploring the contributions of virtue and character to growth, development, and well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Ironically, Tom Goodale (1985) recommended virtue to leisure studies more than 25 years ago. Yet, like de Grazia, he has also been ignored.

In closing, de Grazia's main interest was not recreation or free-time; it was a special conception of leisure that he ruefully believed few people recognize, fewer understand, and even fewer can achieve today. Although I am often persuaded by de Grazia, I do not entirely concur. For instance, I am dubious that classical leisure is only open to intellectuals and cultural elites, a bias countered by Matthew Crawford (2009) in *Shop Class as Soulcraft*. Agree or disagree, engagement with *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* requires some capacity to use the humanities, and they are certainly necessary to comprehend, challenge, and contribute to de Grazia's discourse. Although I hope I am wrong, I suspect fewer students today are able to grasp de Grazia compared to previous generations due to vocationalism in the curriculum, there being no room, or apparent reason, for the humanities. Therefore, unless the humanities are revived in leisure studies, there may not be a next anniversary. Without receptive minds, we will have simply forgotten *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* altogether. Sadly, without the humanities, leisure studies, consisting as it does of human beings, will be unable to hear its collective soul talking to itself, or assist other individuals to listen their own. It would be ironic, as well, because that was one of the purposes of classical leisure.

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