

Decentring leisure : rethinking leisure theory (Book review)

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Decentring Leisure: Rethinking Leisure Theory, by Chris Rojek, SAGE Publications Ltd, London, 1995, 215 pp., ISBN 0-8039-8113-3 (paperback).

Leisure studies is like an old clock that stops ticking from time to time and needs to be shaken to get it working once again, and if that doesn't do the trick, opened up and disassembled, its gears, springs, sprockets and levers cleaned, oiled, and its 'movement' – the clock's condition embodied in its 'tick-tock' sound – made to run in an even balanced beat. Unlike clock-menders, scholars overhaul subject fields by leaving parts behind that after decades of use have become unnecessary to their workings, replacing these with new ones. They can't afford to be sentimental when it comes to replacing old parts; if getting the clock back 'in beat' is the objective, then it is best to replace what no longer works. This gives us the impression that things in our subject field change while ostensibly remaining the same – even if this isn't really the case.

Just over two decades ago, Chris Rojek published *Decentring Leisure*, the fruit of his attempt to overhaul leisure studies. This book changed our understanding of leisure forever. Like clock-mending, it is a study that draws parallels with deconstructionism. This term is derived from the work of Jacques Derrida, a philosopher with a uniquely sharpened ability for remedying subject fields that have lost their beat. If the job of the clock-mender is to disassemble the 'movement' in a clock, work on it, and then put it all back together again, the job of deconstructionism is disassemble and reassemble subject fields; that is, take them apart, to not only demonstrate how they are necessarily contingent to time and place, but also to reveal the gaps and absences they render unintelligible. Deconstructionism works with the assumption that all subject fields contain hidden and unexpected meanings, which often signify points of resistance. In this regard its central aim is to show how subject fields do not come up to scratch under their own terms of reference. A successful deconstruction not only changes a subject field, but it also conceives new ways seeing. Rojek's study is a deconstruction of leisure studies in the sense that not only does it call for a critique of taken for granted assumptions made about leisure, but it also prompts changes in our perceptions about the potential and the limits of leisure studies. Leisure studies after *Decentring Leisure* was supposed to be business as usual and a return to normality but in reality it was just the opposite.

It is the norm in leisure studies to adapt Tolstoy's famous sentence about families and say that good books tend to be good in the same ways. Certainly, if you encounter something that is radically different you are liable to suspect, and perhaps to go on suspecting, that it is different because it is not good. Tolstoy also wrote that the greatest threat to life is habit. Habit, he argued, destroys everything around us. By familiarizing us to the point that we no longer really see anymore, habit destroys our critical faculties. In his important book *Thinking Sociologically* (1990) the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argued that the cure for habit is defamiliarization. In opening up leisure studies to new and previously unanticipated possibilities *Decentring Leisure* restores leisure studies for us, by remedying the blindness, so that we come to see what it is that important about leisure in the contemporary world. In so doing it brings the furniture of the critical imagination back into focus.

The idea of 'decentring' leisure not only assumes that leisure studies is a discursive formation that exists independently of individual leisure scholars, but also that it should go about its

day-to-day business by undermining the significance of its own unifying centre (the topic of leisure). In this sense Rojek is suggesting in this book that although leisure studies cannot help but be perspectival, it must always strive to remain open to various other culturally determined ways of seeing of the world. In other words, the modernist object of leisure ‘as a bounded category of practice and experience’ (p. 146) needs to be subsumed into the subject of culture.

What strikes this reader as the greatest virtue of this book is the way that Rojek goes about bringing often opposing elements into the discussion of what we mean by leisure at the same moment. In this regard Rojek is a kind of conservative revolutionary. He is as concerned to insist on, and celebrate, the social, political, economic and cultural upheavals of the second half of the twentieth century that gave birth to postmodernity and what these imply for our leisure (and leisure studies) as he is determined to save, in his work, the kind of ‘educated’ Enlightenment critique that postmodernism wants to leave out.

In deploying this critical perspective there are three main impulses behind *Decentering Leisure*. First, to escape the trappings of conventional leisure studies which tacitly assumes that leisure is coextensive with ‘freedom’, ‘choice’ and ‘self-determination’. Second, to describe in as much detail as possible the cultural conditions that have radically transformed what we mean by leisure. Leisure is a concept which we all instinctively recognize but which buckles under the pressure of postmodern change. What Rojek recognises first and foremost is that by the end of the twentieth century capitalism has now incorporated its own critique. What the system used to regard with suspicion at the beginning of the century – leisure – has now been co-opted pure and simply for the purpose of maximising profits. And third, to demonstrate that there are certain scholarly conventions that remain constant whatever the era or culture.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, entitled ‘Capitalism and Leisure’, deals with capitalist production and reproduction. Rojek suggests that there are absolutely two points to be made about capitalism: whereas for Marx it must be understood in terms of class relationships where the work process itself becomes wholly rationalized, for Weber the engine of capitalism is the rationalization process itself. Under capitalism, which commodifies everything and leads to the rationalization of institutions and ‘the disenchantment of the world’, Rojek argues, leisure is characterized by a deficit of meaning and a loss of its former intrinsic value. Capitalism is a market world of commodification and homogenization of experience from which there is little chance of escape.

The second section, entitled ‘Modernity and Leisure’, focuses on two contrasting versions of modernity, which are summed up nicely for us by Peter Bramham:

If modernity 1 was all about order, rationality and recreation, modernity 2 was about change, irrationality and pleasure. Rojek captures these disintegrating, destructuring processes of modernity 2 by summarizing Nietzsche’s four propositions about modernity. First, the rational order of modernity is an illusion; secondly, change is inevitable; thirdly, change must be positively embraced and affirmed; finally, modernity 2 demands a celebration of unavoidable divisions and fragmentations. Leisure under modernity 1 was purposive and rational, for example, character-building

outdoor pursuits offered hygienic and healthy countryside recreation. In modernity 2, leisure becomes postmodern shopping, promenading flâneurie – browsing, wandering, watching, wishing, and opening oneself up to the sensations and rhythms of the city (2002, 230).

The ‘official’ message of Modernity 1 was, in Zygmunt Bauman’s terminology, ‘solidly’ modern: progress, order and self-improvement; the ‘unofficial’ message of Modernity 2 is just the opposite. In developing his arguments Rojek compares these key aspects of Modernity 2 to what he sees as characteristic aspects of postmodernity, which include the following: ambivalence, individualization, the idea of the self and privatized narcissism, rationality, secularism, capitalism, consumption, globalization, irony, parody, bricolage, curiosity and intellectualism. Wherever there are intimations of postmodernity, Rojek identifies a precursor in modernity.

Some of Rojek’s tacit assumptions about this link become explicit in his concluding discussion of modernity and leisure, when he argues that three things are without doubt: First, ‘Modernity 1’s attempt to arrange rational differentiation of society generated irresistible de-differentiating tendencies’ (p. 101). For example, the gap between what we understand as ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ is often contradictory: they appear not to talk with each other, yet are in constant communication; they seem to have little in common, yet often have much in common. Second, analysing leisure only in ‘evolutionary terms’, as historians typically do, is insufficient, since just as leisure is likely ‘centred’ in modern experience and distinctive in form, it is just as likely to be ‘decentred’ and formless. Third, the precarization tendencies emanating from differentiation and de-differentiation challenge leisure scholars to place people’s experience of leisure (rather than leisure as a thing in itself) at the centre of their analyses.

After providing a brief discussion of the phenomenology of leisure, which identifies the embodied character of our being-in-the-modern-world that significantly determines the ways in which we perceive and act in our leisure, the third part of the book, entitled ‘Postmodernism and Leisure’, widens the frame to explore postmodernity and postmodernism and postmodern leisure. Rojek is excellent on the latter which as he points out is an oxymoron since if postmodernism implies ‘boundlessness and protean flexibility’, leisure is a concept that refers to ‘a bounded category of practice and experience’ (p. 146). When discussing topics like ‘disembedding and cyberspace’, ‘hyperreality’, ‘neo-tribalism’, ‘risk’, ‘contingency’, ‘speed’ and ‘necro-fever’, the book hums like a tuning fork, gathering vibrations from postmodern culture at large in order to inform our critical understanding of contemporary leisure practices.

Those with a little postmodern learning often opine that what we write in our books can never be objective; this is because we are always telling a ‘story’. That may be true enough in a very basic sense, but scholarly writing remains an intelligent and accomplished art form. Bad leisure studies is transparently ideological; it has a bad habit of using a familiar narrative to make obvious arguments. Good leisure studies, on the other hand, is based on deep learning. As a compelling ‘story’ told by a fabulous writer, *Decentering Leisure*, written (astonishingly) over twenty years ago, remains an enduring monument to this insight. In this book Rojek, gives us a larger view of contemporary leisure practices and experiences, teeming with life, as a staging of human unfreedom and – despite his own reservations – freedom.

References

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