

Robert A. Stebbins**Serious Leisure: A Perspective for our Time.**

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Robert Stebbins has spent his career publishing numerous books and articles on sports, leisure, work, and the generic sociological connections that tie them together. This research agenda can be seen in the numerous books he has published over the years (e.g., Stebbins, 1979, 1992, 2004), as well as his new and exhaustive website, which contains a database of emerging research in the area (see <http://www.soci.ucalgary.ca/seriousleisure>). In his latest book, titled *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time*, Stebbins illustrates how leisure takes on different forms, levels of intensity, and duration across various social contexts. Stebbins shows that leisure can range from casual, fleeting engagements, to intensive short term projects, to more serious lifetime commitments that require a great deal of time, money, and energy. Indeed, Stebbins shows that leisure is anything but “trivial” to the more serious and devoted participants of, for example, kayaking, fishing, mountain climbing, and amateur astronomy. If recreational and hobby activities are in many cases the central life pursuits of so many, and are representative of a great deal of time and attention for others, it is time that sociology renews its investment into understanding these important elements of social life. Indeed, Stebbins boldly asks in the preface, “Does anyone remember Veblen, Lundberg, Hollingshead, and Riesman?” (viii). This statement captures both the strengths and weaknesses of Stebbins’ latest work.

Like his earlier contributions, *Serious Leisure* represents an up to date and exhaustive “stock taking” of contemporary leisure studies, oriented largely toward ethnographic studies that have provided insider accounts of the meanings, careers, social worlds, organizations, and networks that comprise various recreational and leisure pursuits. In this regard, the book is an excellent contribution. Stebbins divides leisure into the categories of serious, casual, and project based leisure activities, and based on the findings of the numerous accounts he draws on attempts to unpack the generic elements and stages of involvement within each. This approach may strike the reader as overly taxonomic, in that the delineations Stebbins makes between types of leisure careers are often descriptive, lacking theoretical richness and depth. These somewhat mundane categories (e.g., a leisure career is characterized by five stages: beginning, development, establishment, maintenance, and decline) are preferred over abstract theoretical characterizations because they are seen to make sense to the participants in their own terms. Stebbins writes that “most people in society do not go about their routine leisure thinking of it as mass, elite, alienated, anomic, sedentary, or even playful.” (p 121). Thus he rejects the somewhat elitist attributions placed on participants by theorists of the mass society, the Frankfurt school, or neo-Durkheimian scholars.

Following his preferred method of participant observation and interviews, Stebbins follows the interactionist spirit of treating insiders to activities as almost entirely self-aware. However, this commitment leads him to ignore many of the more latent aspects of leisure that make it such an interesting and important topic for study. How do different types of leisure help to focus the community, improve social solidarity, and positively affect collective political participation? From the other direction, how does leisure serve to distract people from politics and civic issues, encourage consumerism, delay maturity and moral development, and prevent upward mobility? To what extent do particular leisure pursuits bolster values and beliefs that are associated with larger macro-cultural scripts? How do leisure activities serve as various types of cultural capital, helping to further distinguish class, gender, and ethnic divisions? While Stebbins does mention issues like

gender, class, consumption, social capital, and community briefly, the larger questions that would link local members' local practices and meanings to these broader issues are not given much serious consideration.

Further, Stebbins' earlier call for a renewed interest in the exemplars of the sociology of leisure seems to have been left behind in the preface. Indeed, when Stebbins outlines the history of the serious leisure perspective, he begins from its official inception in the 1970s. This documentation of how the perspective emerged ignores the more classic works that would have set the backdrop for his more distinctive research agenda to develop. Very little background on the major sociological themes of leisure is provided. Nels Anderson, Thorstein Veblen, and David Reisman are not to be found in the references, nor are the others he warned us we are in danger of forgetting. To understand Stebbins' unique approach to studying leisure, surely it would help to establish how this differs from the major approaches that preceded it.

Despite these issues, what the book does accomplish is very useful, and is replete with exciting ideas for future research. For example, Stebbins mentions the unfortunate lack of literature on "makers," who tinker with technology and inventions as leisure, or simply rewire things to suit their own particular needs. Indeed, more research on the culture of such everyday innovators would prove interesting. Connected to this, Stebbins argues for the need to study the increasingly prevalent culture of "edutainment," enabled by our postmodern times as well as the information explosion of the internet. Another imaginative idea is that "contemplation" is an as yet under-studied, but highly central sociological process. A phenomenological study into the process of contemplation in life and work, and as a more disciplined pursuit in practices such as Zen Buddhism, could be theoretically rich.

Stebbins' account of the sociology of leisure tends to privilege the method of sociological ethnography, to gain the meanings carried by members in an effort to understand how they make sense of their activities. In large part, this is for good reason, as this is the only method that will understand these cultures of activity in their own terms, dispelling myths and connecting findings to other relevant micro-sociological studies. This approach has allowed Stebbins to understand the essence of serious, casual, and project based leisure across a number of areas, and has generated much insight into the motivations, experiences, and forms of organization central to these commitments. Still, this intellectual preference has its shortcomings as well, as the analysis offered does not seem to extend very far beyond this level of insider understanding. The effort to draw stronger connections from these local activities, meanings, and forms of organization to larger cultural scripts, political ideologies, class positions, and collective identities may help make an even stronger case that leisure is no trivial topic.

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