

1986

The Future of Recreation: A Classical Perspective

Barton Kunstler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions>

Recommended Citation

Kunstler, Barton (1986) "The Future of Recreation: A Classical Perspective," *Visions in Leisure and Business*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions/vol5/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Human Movement, Sport and Leisure Studies at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Visions in Leisure and Business by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

THE FUTURE OF RECREATION: A CLASSICAL PERSPECTIVE

BY

DR. BARTON KUNSTLER, CONSULTANT

3 UPLAND ROAD
BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS 02146

ABSTRACT

Modern society sees work and leisure as distinct realms, thus disrupting the dynamic interchange between these two categories of activity. The ancient world offers an alternative model in which play, or recreation, is actually the activity that creates thought, vision, beauty and order, i.e., culture itself. When the work ethic dominates, as it does today, play loses its creative vitality, its ability to renew.

The power to renew is, however, inherent in recreation, as ancient examples show. By addressing the values, ethics, myths, rituals and ceremonies of our many recreational sub-cultures, the recreation professional can shape leisure activity into the powerful tool of renewal and self-discovery that is its heritage.

THE FUTURE OF RECREATION: A CLASSICAL PERSPECTIVE

THE POLARIZATION OF WORK AND PLAY

The definition of recreation has always been important to the leisure services profession. The reason, perhaps, lies in the very nature of recreation itself. "You're a recreation professional? You mean play ? But what do you do ?" is a familiar response of those outside the field to one who works at recreation. There is always this sense that anyone working at "playing" must justify the seriousness and productivity of her or his labor.

Our culture's separation of work and play underlies essential ways in which we polarize our lives. Time itself is divided into two categories: on the one hand, time devoted to making a living, and on the other, time devoted to ourselves, leisure time. Such a split in our thinking widens the gulf between public and private persona, between who we are and what we care about when we work as opposed to when we play.

Advertising, which reflects our society's collective values as much

as any present-day medium, constantly plays upon this tension. Beer advertisements tell us that leisure time means relaxing during "Miller time" or celebrating with "good friends" our on-the-job success. We are groomed to be consumers of all the magical items that will transform our work-a-day selves into alluring and dynamic night riders. Translated into terms of everyday life, the hidden message of such ads is, "Life is tense, perhaps boring, a struggle to get through (i.e., work time). The best way to cope is to put it all behind you and relax with our particular brand of forgetting (i.e., play time)."

Since leisure time is supposed to help us forget life's anxieties, we tend to fiercely protect its supposed frivolous character. Jane Fonda the actress or aerobics instructor is more palatable to many people than Jane Fonda the political activist, while television viewers reacting to Ed Asner the progressive drove Lou Grant the editor right off the air. The black American athletes who gave the black power salute as they stood on the podium receiving their gold and silver medals during Mexico City's 1968 Olympics outraged many Americans. The specific political views involved were only partly responsible for the virulence of public response. That actors and athletes should dare challenge the status quo shocked many people who felt that a "play-person" simply had no right to infringe on a society's belief system. (Of course, we are far more indulgent of "play-people" who publicly proclaim socially acceptable truisms.)

Often, however, those who inject politics into play are saying that play may not be so innocent after all. Play only appears to be an escape, but really it has been overwhelmed by the tensions and values of the world of work. In general, the social role and character of leisure activities reveal a great deal about all the values and aims of a society, and thus about critical aspects of the work we do, how it is valued, and whom it is really benefitting.

A brief look back into the world of Classical antiquity, ancient Greece and Rome, might enable us to develop a more holistic view of the relationship between work and play. The Classical tradition is an ongoing one, and stands as the source of many of our own institutions and perspectives. Games and other leisure pursuits were central to the lives of the ancient Greeks and Romans. From the former we adopted the Olympic Games, and from the latter we inherited immense stadiums and the crowds that fill them. Despite these connections, antiquity's view of leisure was quite different from our own. In Classical times, the division between the character of work and leisure was less rigid, and the valuation of each less skewed towards the side of work, than in our own.

PLAY AS RE-CREATION

Agriculture was the basis of the ancient economy, and numerous festivals, marking the astronomical and seasonal milestones of the year, punctuated the annual cycle of a farmer's labor. These festivals were not simply opportunities to "party", as are the modern New Year's Eve or Mardi Gras carnival. The songs, dances, and rituals dedicated to the

gods were imbued with profound religious meaning.

At the same time, the gatherings possessed important social and economic functions. Inhabitants of neighboring villages exchanged goods and even intermarried at such festivals. Often group marriages were performed, members of one age-group marrying their counterparts of the opposite sex. Ancient myths imply that footraces were used to sort out the various mates, winners of the boys' and girls' races marrying one another, the runner-ups pairing off, and so on (1, p. 229 ff.). The winners were also fertility figures, their marriage sanctifying and nourishing the earth for the coming year.

The Olympic Games themselves had their origins in just such a celebration. In earliest times the footrace was the main, perhaps the only, event. Its distance was approximately 200 meters, or a "stade", the equivalent of a furlong, the length of furrow a mule or ox could plough in one effort. The stade or furlong was the basis for marking off the areas of fields in ancient agriculture (6, p. 306-307, 317-318). Integral to the structure and conduct of all Greek games and festivals, including the Olympics, was the Greeks' awareness of the close ties between their daily tasks, such as farming and trade, and the meaning their leisure activities gave to their lives. The secret of these close ties was a healthy respect for the importance and integrity of leisure activity as distinct from work. In a sense, creative exchange could only occur between two equally valued realms.

As villages developed into cities during the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., the games came to include tests of military skills such as javelin throwing, chariot racing, and footraces in full armor. In this later era trade no longer depended on the gatherings of separate villages, but the games were still the scenes of thriving bazaars. Winning athletes were richly rewarded by their hometowns, and for the duration of the games the business of warfare was suspended between the often-hostile communities.

Our modern Olympics display certain parallels to the ancient games. Ideally, they are supposed to be above politics and should foster understanding between nations. The sight of a striving competitor achieving the acme of physical perfection is as moving today as it was 2500 years ago. And for the athlete, today as in ancient Greece, triumph brings with it great financial rewards. Now, as then, we fear the Games are becoming too commercial, the arena of athletes whose entire lives are absorbed by their quest for victory in a particular sport or event. Ideally, the Games in both ancient and modern times were intended to display a more balanced, innate grace and strength.

Despite these similarities, I would suggest that the Games of ancient Greece possessed a spirit or meaning absent from our own, and from our leisure activities in general today. The roots of this difference draw upon our most deeply held beliefs about work and play.

Max Weber, in his work The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, analyzed modern industrial Western society in terms of one of its great myths: that work is of over-riding importance in people's

lives. "Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life," Weber wrote (7, p. 53). This pursuit is "combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life" (7, p. 53). Work and play have been severed from one another, and the satisfactions work has to offer far outweigh those of play, for society places by far the greater value on work. Play then becomes "relaxation", a way to recharge oneself for the more important workaday world. Or, if the workaday world proves too frustrating, play becomes the realm in which unfulfilled desires are transformed into larger-than-life dreams. This can be a very creative process; however, if play is at the same time denied any social value, these dreams become frivolous dead-ends, leading to social problems of crime, alcohol and drug abuse, and domestic violence.

Thus, when the dominant ethic of a society is the work ethic as Weber described it, play tends to lose either its importance or its integrity. In the view of Johan Huizinga, the great theorist of play, such a development is opposed to the very spirit of civilization itself. According to Huizinga, we do not play merely to work off tensions from the productive part of the day so that, in turn, we can work more efficiently tomorrow. Nor is play simply escapism. Play is entered into voluntarily, with a spirit somehow outside "the course of the natural process" (5, p. 7), a spirit of pure freedom and fun.

Huizinga's theme is that culture itself is the product of play activity, a point on which he is quite definite. "We do not mean that among the various activities of civilized life an important place is reserved for play, nor do we mean that . . . something which was originally play passed into something which was no longer play and could henceforth be called culture. The view we take . . . is that culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning. Even those activities which aim at the immediate satisfaction of vital needs--hunting, for instance--tend, in archaic society, to take on the play-form . . . in its earliest phases culture has the play-character, or it proceeds in the shape and the mood of play. In the twin union of play and culture, play is primary" (5, p. 46).

How far this is from our own society's view of play as essentially frivolous! In both the capitalist countries, so absorbed by the work ethic and the exaltation of the commodity, and in the state socialism exemplified by the Soviet Union, the primary social values reside in the productivity of the System, and the degree to which the individual fits into the productive machinery. Absent from the modern world view is the sense that the most significant experiences in life reside in the sphere of leisure activity. This attitude was an integral part of the Greeks' approach to life, and underlay the foundation of the Olympic Games.

Work has meaning because it provides the material basis for life. But civilization, ideas, art--the things that differentiate humans from all other creatures that struggle to survive--grow out of leisure activity. Similarly, the Olympic Games grew out of the festivals of village farmers. Greek drama had its origins in raucous local celebrations to the wine god Dionysus, while Greek philosophy was developed by Socrates, Plato, and their followers as they mused, at their

leisure, on what it meant to be a free person, a just person, a citizen of a city-state.

Greek culture, which stands as the fountainhead of our own civilization, was created "at leisure". This simple fact restores to the term "recreation" the full power inherent in the idea "to re-create."

DEVALUING LEISURE ACTIVITY

However much we enjoy watching a Carl Louis or Mary Lou Retton triumph, and however much sports mean to us today, we have somehow become separated from the sense that we and Mary Lou are in any way engaged in renewing society.

An interesting parallel to our modern stadium celebrations (whether of the Olympics, football, baseball or soccer) are those of the Romans, staged in the great Colosseums of the Empire. Rome's were far more savage, of course. Captive slaves--gladiators--slaughtered one another as 50,000 cheered. Northern Africa, Western Asia and Europe were stripped of wildlife as bears, lions, elephants and more perished in the arena's bloodbaths. Christians met their martyrs' deaths there, while Roman emperors, governors and young ambitious princes curried favor with the crowds by producing ever more extravagant shows.

What can we make of this odd perversion of play and "re-creation" that marked the later Roman Empire? Rome in this period was plagued by drastically uneven distribution of wealth, and its population was totally cut off from the sources of power and policy-making concentrated in the Emperor's court, the army, the bureaucracy, and the great estate owners.

To quell potential protest, the empire's leaders provided the people of the cities with adequate food and plenty of entertainment: Bread and Circuses. Much of the frustrated energy of people alienated from the hub of community life was channeled into recreational behavior that distracted rather than fulfilled, that displayed the power of life draining itself into the sand of the arena rather than restoring itself in the power of play.

Today, soccer elsewhere, and football in the United States, serve ends similar to those of the ancient Roman bloodbaths. The militaristic framework of football--the game's territoriality, blitzes, bombs, aerial attacks, the trench warfare of the linemen, the injury reports, marching bands, the officials who can only monitor violence, not prevent it, and the staff of somber coaches delivering terse reports of the battlefield situation to their commander--all remind us that recreation is never frivolous or trivial, but both a reflector and molder of critical social attitudes. Such activity is not simply a pressure-valve release from tensions that would otherwise turn into violence. Evidence is mounting that, in an increasingly violent world, such aggression acted out upon the playing field in fact increases the aggressive behavior and attitudes of fans (4, p. C1, C3).

A disturbing aspect of the 1984 Olympics, for many people, was the over-emphasis on the winning American athletes at the cost of talented competitors from so many smaller nations. It seemed that in our moment of triumph there should have been more generosity to those who did not win. Perhaps winning and losing should have been secondary to embracing the fellowship of all athletes and all competing nations, and to appreciating the diverse and often difficult worlds from which these athletes came. Medals and pride in self are only two of the prizes offered by competition. Other rewards are a sense of identity with the people with whom one is matched, an appreciation of effort and grace for their own sakes, and a perspective about the meaning of victory and defeat. Without these ideas to inform athletics, we are left with recreation as commodity, existing solely for what we can take from the activity. Without them, we lose the ethical and social contexts leisure activities require in order to provide us with the meaning and vision inherent in them.

Once this loss occurs, recreation and play have in fact been taken over by the same fears and sense of alienation that mark the more "serious" concerns of modern society. The energy of play merely compensates for the frustrations of work, of trying to survive. It has lost its power to renew.

Recreation always contains the potential for freedom and renewal. In this regard, the Roman concept and practice of otium ("leisure") is instructive. As the Roman Empire lost its bearings in the third to fifth centuries A.D., many upper class Romans retreated from their powerlessness and alienation into private leisure pursuits. Otium meant writing commentaries on Plato and Aristotle, pursuing exotic cults and rituals, and becoming aficionados of music and mime. Groups of aristocrats gathered to live together in country houses, passing the time in such study.

Upper class adherents of Christianity often did the same. Christian Roman women pursued their ecclesiastical studies and practice in quiet, reclusive settings, and thus gave impetus to the monastic movement in Western Europe. Others, seeking escape from the ennui and purposelessness of the cities, risked their lives by travelling through the exotic deserts of Palestine and Egypt, visiting holy saints, arguing points of church doctrine with Eastern deacons and bishops, and endowing monastic orders where people might pursue the new religion, thus filling the vacuum left by the breakdown of older frameworks of spiritual and community life. While one order slowly crumbled, the seeds of a new one germinated, and the leisure pursuits of early Christians played a major role in this rebirth.

THE FUTURE

Leisure and play were at the heart of the highest expressions of ancient culture, demonstrating that recreation has an immense potential for renewing society. Future recreation policies should be designed with such possibilities in mind. Recreation is not fulfilling its promise if

its main aim is to enable one to work more efficiently, or if its main function is to sublimate the alienation and tension of daily life.

As children climb the organizational ladder of little leagues and school sports, for instance, activities often become more regimented. Twelve year olds do not need hockey practice six times a week. Sports in America too often reinforce allegiance to a team whose efforts add to the glory of school, coach, and parents, while ignoring the needs of the young athlete. The regimentation of school sports is endemic to both the true spirit of recreation and a healthy community. Competitive games are wonderful, but the ethic of "winning is everything" and the imitation of the commodity-based system of professional sports at all levels of pee-wee, little league and school sports, jeopardize the deeper lessons to be learned from competition.

Can we somehow impart through play the message that each of us are free individuals who participate in society in the same free spirit of giving and toleration that originally underlay the spirit of play itself? That victory is great but also an occasion for magnanimity and contemplation of the meaning of striving, of loss, of competition? That the human community is an interwoven network of people with varying talents and ideas and orientations, and that play enables these people to utilize these resources with a maximum of utility, joy, and fairness, not only on the playing field, but in all aspects of life? In short, is it possible to restore to play a sense of meaning and integrity? Can we convince people that the freedom and exhilaration of play, the inventiveness of it, is as important to life as work is generally thought to be?

Recreation professionals, simply by addressing these possibilities, will be more likely to develop programs that reinforce them. Workshops or courses that address the history of games and the role of sports in society can give both school-age competitors and recreation program planners a respect for their own activities and a more thoughtful approach to competition. School administrators, coaches and parents can be encouraged to relax their attitudes toward winning. The movement by some schools to drop college football due to ethics violations and its overshadowing the business of education shows that many people are disturbed by the current tenor of school sports. As it is, a powerful ideology of sports is already imparted to children and adolescents via media images and the input of coaches, family, spectators, and fellow-players.

A creative way of dealing with such issues is by working with the culture of the recreational community. Today, many corporations are realizing that their organizations possess cultures, a system of values and beliefs, rituals, myths, ceremonies and heroes, which in fact do more to determine business strategy than economic factors themselves (2-3). The same is true for the world of sports and recreation, especially because, as we have seen, play itself is at the heart of culture. Recreation planners might address a broad range of cultural issues within the recreational communities (team, company, community, etc.) they serve. A sampling of such issues follows:

* What sort of person is held up as hero within the recreational community: the cutthroat competitor, the sacrificial lamb, the fierce independent?

* What values do heroes embody in the community: strength, cunning, fairness, fierceness, intelligence, mindless force?

* What sort of myths are told within the community? What values are transmitted along with the narrative? Do the myths focus on heroes; on the dynamics of the group; on the subject of victory or the quality of play? Do the values emphasize individualism, cooperation, overcoming the "other", or self-fulfillment?

* What are the daily rituals of the recreational community? What are the important ceremonies? What are the welcoming rituals for new members? Is hazing common? Who is publicly rewarded, and for what?

* What values are taught by the leaders of the community? How do these enter into the recreational environment? Is leadership authoritarian, humanitarian, motivational, slack?

* What are participants' ideas about why they are engaged in this recreational activity? For fun, training, eventual profit, learning, or perhaps they have no idea at all?

* What is the physical environment in which the recreation takes place? What are the hidden messages of this environment? Does the recreational landscape encourage creativity? Does it allow people to impose their own ideas upon it? Or is it hostile, imposing, drab, or simply unimaginative?

Once understood on the essential levels of ritual, myth, values, and "landscape", a culture can be changed by bringing these often hidden attitudes and behaviors into the light of discussion. New rituals and myths can be created if the old are found wanting, or old values renewed by the creation of rituals, heroes, and ceremonies meaningful to the people discussing and re-creating them.

For instance, youth workers might encourage children and teenagers to create their own festivals and ceremonies. Such events provide the opportunity for participants to discuss the important occasions in their lives, and the meaning these hold for them, precisely their function in ancient times. One need only recall the impact of the 1969 music festival, Woodstock, to recognize the power inherent in such events. Young people are hungry to find meaning in their lives, and given the freedom to uncover it through art, play, their own ceremonies and myths, and their own explorations of values and ethics, they can draw on a source of strength that will serve them throughout their years.

A recent movie, "Over the Edge" (8), dramatized the anger of teenagers in a "model" suburban community in the Southwest. Their dilemma was symbolized by the sterile Quonset hut recreation center built with no sense of the teenagers' needs. It functioned more as a prison than a "center" of anything, and the movie ends with it going up in a

fiery explosion symbolizing liberation, but also futility and desperation. Public space--which is very often recreational space--must be reclaimed in America with a view to beauty and the sustenance of a social life that fosters engagement, purpose and creativity.

Corporate recreation might lean more towards theories and practice that de-emphasize the idea that programs should refresh workers so they can produce more efficiently. Recreation programs should be run by the employees via unions or other workers' groups: they should not become the domain of company-hired social engineers. Recreation should stimulate and empower people in self-chosen directions, and I suspect that any organization, including corporations, will benefit in the long run by encouraging a more independent, self-motivated employee.

Therapeutic recreation might emphasize that patients can create a leisure lifestyle or "free zone" outside their problems and concerns with illness, disability or age, precisely the process that will most increase an individual's confidence and self-reliance. The patients who create their own vital culture will be more capable of adapting to the "outside" world because they know the power of their own resources, and are adept at manipulating the various aspects of culture itself.

The recreational environment can be fine-tuned to be an expression of people's deep-seated needs for community, meaningful experience, and freedom of expression. It can also be created in counterpoint to the values and rituals of the work world by generating rituals and values totally outside those belonging to work, setting up, in effect, a creative tension between leisure and workaday realities.

Play, recreation and leisure activities tap into the deep creative wells residing in virtually all of us because they allow us to step outside the often overbearing patterns of our daily lives. By cultivating the impulses and ideas released in creative recreation, we create anew our outlook on the world, and spark ideas about ourselves and the way we live that have the most profound impact upon us.

Recreation professionals should be trained and equipped to reconceive the nature of recreation activities. Re-creation is the primary social and cultural act, as our examples from classical antiquity indicate. Recreation possesses the power to restore, renew and re-create, and our own society is fertile ground for actualizing this ancient potential inherent in leisure activities.

REFERENCES

1. F. M. Cornford, *The Origin of the Olympic Games*, in Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis*, University Press, New Hyde Park, NY, 1962.
2. S. M. Davis, *Managing Corporate Culture*, Ballinger Publishing Co., Cambridge, MA, 1984.
3. T. E. Deal and Allen A. Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and*

Rituals of Corporate Life, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1982.

4. D. Goleman, Brutal Sports and Brutal Fans, New York Times, 13 August, 1985, sec. 3, p. C1.

5. J. Huizinga, Homo Ludens, The Beacon Press, Boston, 1955.

6. G. Thomson, Studies in Ancient Greek Society: The Prehistoric Aegean, The Citadel Press, New York, 1965.

7. M. Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Talcott Parsons (trans.), Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1958.

8. Over the Edge, directed by Jonathan Kaplan, screenplay by Charlie Haas and Tim Hunter, Orion Pictures release, 1979 (released 1981).