

“LEISURE AND CONSUMPTION”: A COMPREHENSIVE AND ELABORATE WORK DESPITE SOME MISSING POINTS **

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After Veblen’s work, *Theory of Leisure Class* (1899), “leisure” has become critically important to observe as a sociological phenomenon. However, increasing importance of consumption patterns in our global world has inevitably gathered concepts of “leisure” and “consumption” together. For this reason, *Leisure and Consumption* written by Robert Stebbins is a remarkable work while it argues problematic of unconsciously thinking about “leisure” and “consumption” as essentially similar processes. The author also questions the degree of sufficiency of literature about leisure discussions.

The title of the book appears as an early thesis of the author which is also stated similarly in the preface and following chapters. On the other hand, although the preface of the book is only about three pages, I believe that indolent readers who prefer to ignore this introduction part will miss more than a few pages. The reason of this is that the introduction part written by the author explicitly draws the general framework of the book. Thus, the first noteworthy part of the book is the preface:

In this present book, however, I argue, following Ken Roberts and Jackie Kiewa, that in no way, can all of leisure be equated with mass consumption, indeed with mass consumption of any kind... My goal is here to explore and clarify where consumption and taking

*Stebbins, R. A. (2009) *Leisure and Consumption: Common Ground/Separate Worlds*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, ss.192.

The preliminary version of this review was submitted as one of the assignments as part of the MSc. in Sociology Department in METU (Middle East Technical University). One might argue that this book review is outdated since the aforementioned book was published in 2009. However, as far as I know this significant work hasn’t been thoroughly reviewed in Turkey yet.

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leisure are separate processes, where they are similar if not the same, and in such overlap, what that looks like. (Stebbins, 2009: ix)

Contrary to indirect goals and wasteful comments about the following chapters in most of the prefaces, the author in this book directly refers to his assertions. The author is successfully introducing his book, simultaneously, drawing attention to his potential readers.

The author is always inclined to make strong claims in his book. Although this wording of the author makes his book more influential, in every page, there is a high risk for careful readers to be disappointed, because of high expectations to read a perfectly structured book. Even at the very beginning of the book, Stebbins comes up with a claim. "Consumption studies are not as interdisciplinary as it might be, and in this book I will argue, as it should be." (Stebbins, 2009: 1). However, when carefully reading between the lines, although he mentions to submit an interdisciplinary work, he also warns the reader by telling "do not expect the fit to be perfect in all respects, for it will not" (Stebbins, 2009: 29). This proves that the author will also gain readers' esteem by not being in an immodest attitude.

Before mentioning nature of leisure and consumption and whether they are interconnected or separate, the author defines "leisure" first, and then, cleverly makes a distinction between "activity" and "role". According to Stebbins, "Scientifically speaking, leisure is uncoerced activity undertaken during free time" (Stebbins, 2009: 10). On the other hand, "roles are static whereas activities are dynamic" (Stebbins, 2009: 11). Then, he makes a typology about leisure styles. When framing this typology, his previous books, experiences and knowledge enable him to draw a coherent and detailed framework. A careful reader, observing the frequency of references in every chapter from earlier works of the author, can easily understand that in the first chapter, where definitions, diagrams and tables are used extensively, the author quotes from himself the most. Thus, we can say that the first chapter is the most influential and intense part of the book for it builds on earlier works of the author.

Although "serious leisure" and "casual leisure" are expressed in previous works of the author, this book adds a new type called as "project – based leisure". This typology is illustrated in a comprehensive, well – defined and well – structured diagram in the book. (See Figure 1). Then, he makes a table about these leisure types, according to six qualities. (See Table 1).

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Starting from the first chapter, the author successfully makes his analysis from macro level to micro level. At the end of the first chapter, Stebbins clearly states the difference between "consumption" and "leisure" in a general theoretical expression: "The two main sections of this chapter – the nature of consumption and the nature of leisure – contrast with one another in that, generally speaking, the first is macro-sociological whereas the second is micro-sociological" (Stebbins, 2009: 28).

On the other hand, "deviant leisure" defined by Stebbins in the first chapter is an arguable concept. According to him, deviant sexual activities are observable in casual leisure. Stebbins also claims that "beyond the broad domains of tolerable and intolerable deviant casual leisure lies that of deviant serious leisure composed primarily of aberrant religion, politics, and science" (Stebbins, 2009: 27). However, this concept could be clarified in a better way by considering how Durkheim and Simmel have approached "deviance" and "anomie". Then, the author could easily make his own assertions about this interconnected conceptualization called as "deviant leisure". In this way, methodology of the author would be more effective.

If we ignore the second chapter, the author might be criticized by focusing solely on modern Western countries, cultures and their consumption and leisure activities. However, in the second chapter, as the historical analysis necessitates mentioning primitive conspicuous consumption, "potlach" and "kula" are explained in a few pages. Then, related to these, inevitably, the nature of gift giving is analyzed.

Starting from the second chapter, the effects of Veblen on Stebbins becomes visible. For instance, in Veblen's analysis, "apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observes at first glance" (2007). In Stebbins' analysis, the apparel is both evaluated with respect to its pecuniary standing and formation of an identity.

Another successful aspect of the book is up-to-date examples. For instance, when talking about identity formation in conspicuous consumption, Toyota's advertising of its new model in 2008 is quoted. When considering that the book was published in 2009, this up-to-date example becomes fresher.

On the other hand, there are some serious problems about references. For instance, on page 43, when talking about "elite tourism", Stebbins quotes from wikipedia which is an invalid academic reference.

To continue, the third chapter of the book evaluates and analyzes prominent theorists or sociologists and questions their theoretical frameworks

by considering their relation to “leisure” and “consumption” studies. However, the book loses its fluency in this chapter. The enthusiastic reader might be disappointed at this chapter. Instead of linking his previous theories about leisure and consumption, the author only attempts to illustrate possible relations of notable figures to “consumption” and “leisure” issues. In the conclusion part of this chapter, Stebbins (2009: 80) states the following:

Consumption for some of this group of thinkers was treated of largely, if not wholly, without direct reference to leisure (e.g., Marx, Simmel, Baudrillard, de Certeau, Bauman, Douglas and Isherwood). For others leisure does fall within their purview, albeit only very generally (e.g., Lefevbre, Bourdieu, Ritzer, Bryman).

As he does in all chapters, he again makes a conclusion. However, this conclusion is pointless, because his assertions about mentioned group of thinkers are explicitly explained in the previous pages of the same chapter.

To continue, after reviewing theories of great figures such as Marx, Simmel, Baudrillard, de Certeau, Bauman, Douglas, Isherwood, Lefevbre and Bourdieu, whether it is a necessity to mention Ritzer and Bryman is arguable. This is another problematic in the third chapter. According to Ritzer, McDonaldization may be observed in many parts of the modern leisure industry. However, Ritzer’s book called as *McDonaldization* is a popular book, so – called sociological. The book lacks a valid methodology and systematic academic writing style. Affected by Ritzer’s conceptualization of McDonaldization and analyzing Disney World, Bryman has also come up with a similar idea about leisure industry called as “Disneyization”. However, since Ritzer’s work is arguable in academic field, Bryman’s work is also questionable to be an authoritative reference to academic writings.

In the fourth chapter, where the nature of shopping is discussed with relevance to gender, knowledge, leisure, distance, context and community, the author underlines two concepts as primarily linked to consumption and leisure. These are “need” and “want”. However, these concepts serve as the same purpose for “role” and “activity” discussed in early pages. If we recall Stebbins’ claim, “roles are static whereas activities are dynamic” (Stebbins, 2009: 11). In other words, one might claim that “needs are static, whereas wants are dynamic. Thus, it would be more influential to discuss “need” and “want” by considering “role” and “activity” and “consumption” and “leisure”, all together.

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The first and second chapters might be considered as the most effective parts of the book. Especially in the fourth and fifth chapters, over repetition from the early chapters and within those chapters sometimes bore the readers. After reading the fifth chapter, readers will probably remember only the conclusion rather than the whole chapter, because, three generalizations (Stebbins, 2009: 132) summarize the chapter. However, appropriate evaluations and some influential quotations, to some extent; strengthen the fourth and fifth chapters. For instance, when mentioning about leisure as orientation towards shopping, the author quotes from Arthur Miller: "Years ago a person, he was unhappy, didn't know what to do with himself – he'd go to church, start a revolution – *something*. Today you're unhappy? Can't figure it out? What is the salvation? Go shopping." (Quoted from *The Price*, Act 1, 1968; Stebbins, 2009: 82).

The last chapter of the book, as the author emphasizes, is focusing on the systematic discussion of the organizational basis of leisure and consumption which is missing in the previous chapters. Thus, it accomplishes the integrity and harmony of the book. Although the book has evaluated leisure and consumption patterns both positively and negatively, the ending is more optimistic to view leisure as a happy activity.

Although the book might be criticized to some extent negatively because of some missing points, inadequate assumptions, needless conclusions at each chapter and arguable choice of references, it is a comprehensive, coherent and elaborate work. The book will satisfy the readers who seek interdisciplinary consumption and leisure studies.

References

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Appendices

Figure 1

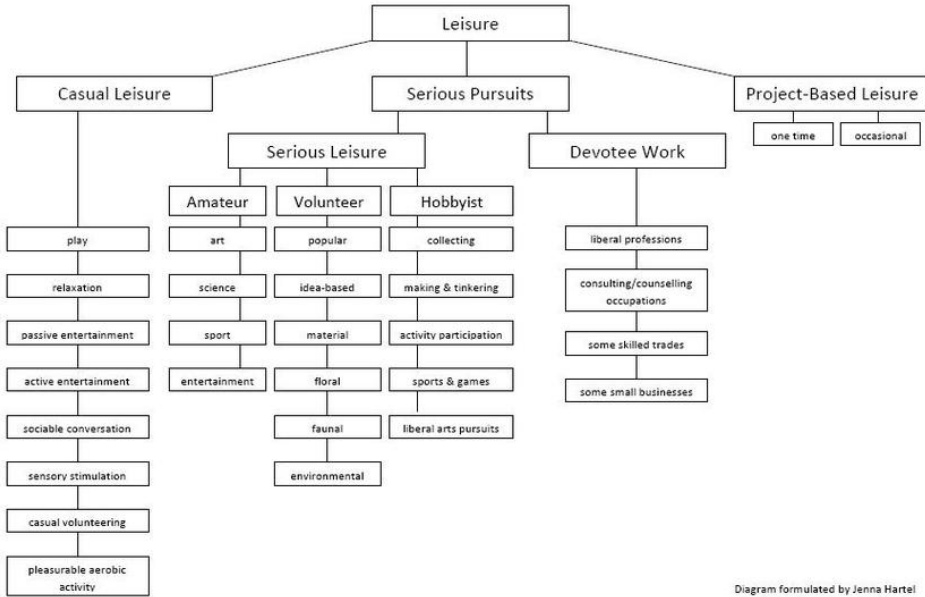


Diagram formulated by Jenna Hartel

Source: Stebbins (2009)

Table 1

| Leisure Interest | Type of Volunteer | | |
|------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Serious Leisure (SL) | Casual Leisure (CL) | Project-Based Leisure (PBL) |
| Popular | SL Popular | CL Popular | PBL Popular |
| Idea-Based | SL Idea-Based | CL Idea-Based | PBL Idea-Based |
| Material | SL Material | CL Material | PBL Material |
| Floral | SL Floral | CL Floral | PBL Floral |
| Faunal | SL Faunal | CL Faunal | PBL Faunal |
| Environmental | SL Environmental | CL Environmental | PBL Environmental |

Source: Stebbins (2009)