

Chris Rojek, *Decentring Leisure: Rethinking Leisure Theory*. Sage Publications, London, 1995. pp. 215.

The field of leisure studies is a site of much analytical contention for those concerned with the sociology of leisure and for those in closely-related disciplines such as sports sociology and socio-history. In *Decentring Leisure* Chris Rojek effectively captures this polemical condition as he provides a comprehensive critical overview of theoretical approaches to leisure studies, while arguing for a reworking of the way we view leisure within contemporary society. By 'decentring' leisure—viewing leisure not as an isolated cultural sphere or practice, but as an activity contingently subsumed in other cultural forms, structures and symbols — Rojek convincingly contends that we can arrive at a more complete understanding of leisure as a social phenomenon.

This principal focus on decentring leisure provides insight into the attention paid to structuralist, poststructuralist and postmodern thought in Rojek's analyses (the book's cover illustration¹ has also been used on the cover of French structuralist theorist Roland Barthes's work *Mythologies*). Further to this, the analytical power of many other theoretical approaches is critically considered. Schools of thought consulted include feminism, Marxism, neo-Marxist cultural studies, phenomenology, political economy, figurational sociology, functionalism, Fordism along with the works of Nietzsche, Foucault, Bourdieu, Weber and Durkheim. A major strength of the work is its concentration on unities and strengths of competing theories' not the disunities and weaknesses. This complements the author's ability to take complex sociological jargon and conceptualisations and distil these into meaningful and accessible ideas.

Rojek's capacity to clarify complicated theory is ideally crowned by his keen awareness of the analytical power of history. Historical

examples are frequently implemented in analysis

including Greek mythology, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and Enlightenment, Nazi Germany, early and late capitalism, and innumerable post-1960 popular culture events. The use of history is an instructive example of the successful interweaving of historical narrative to bolster, and demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of, particular theoretical approaches. It is an approach favouring the *how* and *why*, rather than the *when* in history; and is also a convincing case for viewing history in terms of interrelated, culturally-generated continuities and discontinuities. This is directed at capturing the transformative nature of values, forms and experiences, rather than trying to retrace the past through narrative driven chronological sequences.

This examination of leisure utilises, as explanatory frameworks, the three main social formations experienced in the context of Western capitalist society. The three identified are: Modernity 1—where order and control attempt to dominate social conditions; Modernity 2—in which disorder and fragmentation encroach and come to wear down the driving forces of Modernity 1; and finally, postmodernism, which is gradually emerging out of modernity's decline. Simply, postmodern society is represented as experiencing an inexorable dedifferentiation of social segmentation, which has seen social relations come to be increasingly defined by the disjointed, flexible, arbitrary, fragmentary and transitory qualities that often rise to the fore in the living experience in the 1990s. Modernity 1, Modernity 2 and postmodernity can be viewed as connoting some form of temporal sequence, but due to the problematic nature of periodisation it is a sequence that frequently overlaps and is closely interrelated.

The central argument of *Decentring Leisure*, an argument launched and sustained potently, is that modernist assumptions of leisure sustained under capitalism erroneously present leisure as a way of liberating the individual from work life. Leisure promises freedom, choice and life satisfaction outside work under this paradigm. This is a deceiving proposition according to Rojek for two main reasons (although these are far from the only reasons presented). Firstly, although it presents itself as such, social life under modernity is not genuinely ordered or rigid. Leisure activity is not as experientially displaced from work activity as many dichotomous modernist assumptions presume, and it is indeed necessary to view work and leisure as functionally interrelated. Once

one goes outside work into socially-sanctioned leisure activity, a supposed realm of freedom and choice is *not* waiting for the individual. Ultimately, leisure under modernity is not the realisable utopia it presents itself as. Secondly, the ordering of social activity and leisure under modernity sees room only for 'normal' leisure forms—it is an exclusive grouping. Examples of deviant leisure forms such as sexual sadism or masochism, and illicit drug use are simply ignored within the leisure equation. Another problem posed to challenge this exclusivity is that groups such as the unemployed are not properly accounted for under modernity—they cannot have leisure time' since they do not work in the first place. Such issues result in Rojek calling for a more inclusive theoretical perspective to consider leisure in contemporary society. The dialectics of modernity, with their predisposition towards essential values, simply can no longer contain or explain the contingent and fragmented character of current leisure experience. And it is postmodernity, with its emphasis on relative value systems, that is offered as a possibility to fill this breach.

It is the strength of Rojek's postmodern examination that is particularly enjoyable. He draws out and castigates many extreme, apocalyptic and fatalistic examples of postmodern theory. In stark contrast to such writing, postmodernism is shown to be a theoretical paradigm that offers many empowering, liberating elements and, more importantly, *possibilities* for social development. Rojek does not assert that we have reached postmodernity, nor is it claimed that it is the direction we should be heading. Refreshingly, he simply calls for its deserved consideration as a conceptual modality that offers a method of clearing 'the space to question social interaction at a truly elementary level' (p. 173). This call for a break from modernist values, and associated hierarchical social systems, is consistently supported by an impressively wide and entertaining array of examples including cyberspace, hyperreality, neo-tribalism, globalisation, retro-culture, necro-fever, conspiracy theories, contemporary art, plastic surgery, and movies.

There are minor improvements that could have been made to this work. Functionally, a glossary may have assisted readers wholly unfamiliar with, and apprehensive about, theoretical concerns. Topically, an examination of any divergence in leisure patterns and experiences between city and rural areas may have proved useful. Also, for all the discussion of feelings such as freedom, choice, opportunity-loss,

uncertainty, risk and anti-climax, there remains only a passing examination of the sociology of the emotions. Finally, in discussing the poetics of leisure, what constitutes a 'poetic' quality is ill-defined—is it appealing to the sublime within leisure experience? Nevertheless, these grievances amount to little when set alongside this book's many accomplishments.

The major achievement of Rojek's comprehensive critical introduction to leisure theory is that it emphasises the connections and interrelationships that various theoretical bodies have with lived experience. It does not become pedagogic and arcane in its investigations of theory. The successful connection with the 'everyday' loads many ideas and experiences described and analysed with particular resonance. It is this capturing of the practical and experiential substance—the 'realism'—within social theory for which Rojek is to be congratulated. For a book modestly aspiring 'to do no more than provide a critical introduction to theorising leisure' (p. 28), it does far more than this. *Decentring Leisure* is important reading for anyone interested in the study of leisure, sport and social theory generally.

NOTE:

- 1 The image is Richard Hamilton's collage, *Just what is it that makes today's home so different, so appealing?* (1956).

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