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Rojek, the sociological imagination and leisure

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This article traces the historical development of Chris Rojek’s writing and documents his distinctive contribution to contemporary debates about postmodern culture. Rojek has consistently sought to develop a coherent sociology of leisure and has sought to apply his sociological imagination to develop leisure studies as a field of study. However, there seems to be an ambivalence or reluctance to engage with Rojek’s work on leisure theory. From the outset, his work is both critical and subversive as he challenges ‘conventional wisdom’, which associates leisure with free time and freedom. He argues that both concepts need to be contextualized and any quest for a universal theory of leisure is both illusory and idealistic – one cannot dislocate free time or quality of experience from the social and historical context in which it occurs. Rojek also takes to task critical paradigms of feminism and cultural studies, whilst favouring the contribution that postmodern perspectives can make to understanding leisure practices. The article traces the development of his ideas theorising about leisure by reviewing his seminal texts, *Capitalism and Social Theory* (1985), *Ways of Escape* (1993), *Decentring Leisure* (1995) and most recently, *Leisure and Culture* (2000).

Introduction

This article traces the historical development of Chris Rojek’s arguments through his key textbooks. It assesses his growing contribution to understanding leisure and his mapping of contemporary debates in the sociology of leisure. It may seem premature elevation after less than 20 years of writing to even suggest that Rojek is the founding father of postmodern perspectives on leisure, whatever that nomenclature may signify, but it is certainly a mantle he can easily bear. His myriad conference presentations need not concern us here, nor his role as commissioning editor for publishers Routledge and Sage, nor his impact on scholarship and research with Mike Featherstone at the Theory, Culture and Society Centre, Nottingham Trent University. These are perhaps important avenues to explore in some future analysis towards a sociology of knowledge and the development of ideas in academic networks that make up leisure studies. Mapping such processes of academic inclusion and exclusion often becomes starkly judgemental and is clearly a dangerous business, especially unwise for those lacking professorial status. However, this review is more modest in scope as it traces the evolution of Rojek’s demand for an adequate social theory of leisure.
The main argument offered here is that Rojek has consistently sought to develop a coherent sociology of leisure and has been an important player in developing debates about leisure studies as a field of study. However, there seems to be ambivalence or reluctance to engage with Rojek’s work. This presents itself as something of a conundrum as Rojek speaks authoritatively to the field of leisure scholars yet it seems few are listening and even fewer make sense of, or value, his contributions.

One main aim of this review is to summarize his key texts so as to render them more easily accessible to leisure scholars and students. It is tantamount to rojeking Rojek, if one dare coin a phrase. Such an approach is similar to Rojek’s own narrative work in journal articles when he writes about Baudrillard, Benjamin, Veblen and many others, so as to review and map their key ideas, whilst suggesting their relevance for leisure studies. Such journal articles sometimes then provide the backbone for chapters in later textbooks.

**Rojek’s Theoretical Challenge**

This review focuses exclusively on Rojek’s key textbooks since they represent at different times iconoclastic interventions into leisure studies. Readers may look for a coherent exposition of a simple linear perspective on leisure theory but they will do so in vain. Perhaps as befits postmodern writing, Rojek offers readers *routes* through the changing landscapes of leisure studies rather than providing deep *roots* of one single solid theoretical perspective. Philosophers have been caricatured as either hedgehogs or foxes – hedgehogs know one big thing about the world whereas foxes know many little things. As we shall see Rojek frequently casts the field of leisure studies as populated by hedgehogs, whereas he is clearly a fox and a very clever one too. Such postmodern perspectives are foxy in character but clearly they do not please everyone.

Rojek has certainly been prolific in the field of leisure studies, for good reason:

My job at the Queens College was a fixed term opportunity. I thought it expeditious to build up my publications record in order to prepare for the awful day when I would be forced to reapply for my job. In just under four years, I completed one book, began work on another two, signed a contract for a fourth and published over twenty articles in a variety of academic journals. (Rojek, 1993, p. x)

But a key questions is to decide what sort of sociology of leisure we are left with, in order to relate Rojek’s work to C. Wright Mills’ demand for sociology to exhibit ‘sociological imagination’. There is also room to speculate on the reasons for the magnitude of Rojek’s impact and the ambivalence encountered in reactions to his work.

In his first major excursion in the field of leisure studies, he immediately displays what will the hallmark of all later contributions. In ‘Emancipation and Demoralization: contradicting approaches in the sociology of leisure’, *Leisure Studies*, Rojek (1983) maps out two contrasting approaches to leisure: one of positivist empiricism and the other the Frankurt School of
Cultural Materialism. Both are seen as flawed and he proposes as one solution deployment of the developmental theory of Elias to examine the emotional content of leisure and also to introduce a power perspective of leisure as a process of accommodation and opposition by different groups.

From the outset his work is both critical and subversive as he challenges ‘conventional wisdom’ which associates leisure with free time and freedom. Both need to be contextualized and any quest for a universal theory of leisure is both illusory and idealistic . . . one cannot dislocate free time or quality of experience from the social and historical context in which it occurs. Consequently, Rojek rides roughshod over philosophers and social theorists who search for a universal theory of leisure. They all fall foul of Wittgenstein’s criticisms of the fallacy of essentialism – as free-floating intelligentsia seeking to demarcate the essential features or characteristics of leisure. Leisure is shaped by history and there can be no ‘timeless’ theories of leisure. Leisure is a distinctive form of human experience and not a derivative of work. Nor is leisure a site for accumulation of pleasure or human freedom, as founding fathers seem to imply. Leisure is now recast in broader terms as an effect of systems of legitimation.

Writing in the mid-1980s, Rojek berates leisure researchers, in Capitalism and Leisure Theory, who work within the dominant tradition of social formalism. This approach myopically searches for data of leisure forms and encourages measurement of variables within patterns of leisure participation. It emulates the natural sciences and treats leisure as something ‘out there’, as an unproblematic social fact that can be objectively measured within a scientific positivist perspective. It has one obsession and that is quantification. It is empiricism per se with no sociological imagination.

Social formalism offers us theories of ‘leisure without society’. It is a study of ‘society without sociology’. He makes no bones about this:

I shall argue that the main defects in social formalism, the dominant research tradition in the sociology of leisure, arise from the failure to situate leisure relations in the context of the history and the general power structure of capitalist society. (Rojek, 1985, p. 3)

The key concepts of power and capitalism in the above sentence imply that Rojek will settle comfortably within the parameters of Marxist sociology. Indeed, his characterization of major structural tendencies or organizational forms of modern leisure only confirms this position. He maps out privatization, individualization, commercialization and pacification as defining characteristics of modern leisure accounts. But Rojek is not committed to Marxism as a mode of analysis and even less so as revolutionary emancipatory praxis. Marxist and neo-Marxists may be framing the right sorts of questions but they usually come up with the wrong answers.

For his own part, Rojek is at ease with mainstream sociological debates, particularly in the broader field of cultural analysis, and he brings them to bear on the emergent and consolidating field of leisure studies. The drive of this book is primarily theoretical ground clearing and simultaneous reclamation of the ‘submerged tradition’ of old masters; no less than the classical sociological triumvirate of Marx, Durkheim and Weber and also the
psychoanalyst Freud. Yet Marx and Durkheim are treated together in a chapter on leisure and social intervention, whereas Weber and Freud offer _laissez-faire_ views on leisure and pessimistic views on the possibility of human freedoms, when confronted by enveloping processes of civilization and rationalization.

In the second half of the book, Rojek returns to the multi-paradigmatic rivalry within the leisure studies establishment. This theme persists for Rojek, both in the focus of his theoretical work but also in professional and academic networks within which his career develops. Rojek’s strategy for re-aligning the sociology of leisure is one of innovation. Rather than ploughing the well-worn furrows of social formalism, by eschewing its commitment to positivism, to pragmatic data collection and policy-driven research agendas, Rojek instead introduces contemporary arguments, raging in mainstream sociology, directly into leisure studies. Here we meet daunting figures – neo-Marxists, French post-structuralists such as Barthes and Foucault, as well as figural sociologists.

For Rojek, Neo-Marxism has to explain a historical conundrum, a non-event i.e. the absence of socialist revolutionary change in the heartland of capitalism. There are several versions promulgated to explain the consolidation of industrial capitalism. Writers develop theories on the changing role of the welfare state, the growing fragmentation of the working class, and the hegemonic dominance of media industries. All see leisure and specific leisure forms as important mechanisms of control, which mystify, locate and constrain radical opposition within the carapace of national culture. Mechanisms of repression, sublimation and routinization serve to channel consciousness into mass consumer culture.

The next chapter introduces key ideas behind Saussurian linguistics, theories of signification and decentering the subject. In the world of semiotics, one must distinguish between the signifier and the signified. There is no one single authoritative reading of any ‘text’ and so leisure goods and services must be treated as sign systems. Moving swiftly, Rojek maps out Foucault's concept of power and the government of the body in monopoly capitalism. New techniques of surveillance from a panopticon state serve to administer ‘a disciplinary society’ where individuals, their sexual identities and not least their physical bodies are rendered docile by medicalized discourses.

In the penultimate chapter of his first book, he assesses the contribution of figural sociology to understanding leisure. Indeed, there are clear theoretical resonances in this early work with figural sociology and hence his vantage-point for making sense of sociological theory and its development. At an earlier stage of his career, he decided not to embark on PhD research under supervision by Eric Dunning but completed his MPhil at Leicester University. His intellectual debt to developmental or figural sociology found expression in the early 1990s as he shared editorship of a book entitled _Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process_. Figural sociology was later criticized and reassessed by him as one sociological approach amongst many.

The framing of new rules for leisure research mirrors the influential work of Giddens in _New Rules of Sociological Method_ (1976) and ironically,
Giddens studied at Leicester university and his theory of structuration explores similar themes to Elias’ own work. Ironically too, Giddens first published article was to explore the concept of play. Rojek helpfully concludes with four main rules for leisure:

(1) Leisure activity is an adult phenomenon which is defined in opposition to the play world of children.
(2) Leisure practice is an accomplishment of skilled and knowledgeable actors.
(3) The structure and development of leisure relations is an effect of the legitimating rules of pleasure and displeasure.
(4) Leisure relations must be sociologically examined as dynamic, relatively open-ended processes. (Rojek 1985, pp. 180–181)

Routes for escape

Rojek’s next major sortie into the scientific community of leisure scholars came with his collection of papers Leisure for Leisure (1989). Rojek (1989, p. 9) defines: ‘Leisure is the “reward” of the many who toil in domestic labour and paid employment for the profit of the few. The pleasure which derives from “free” time activity is rule bound and conforms to an historically specific economy of political and cultural regulation’. It was not so much the content of the book that proved controversial as the fall out from its review in academic journals. The tone of the book was set by Moorhouse’s first paper on ‘Models of Work, Models of Leisure’. In it he challenges functionalist, feminist and Marxist orthodoxy which he describes as self-referring and uncritical. It is suggested that such approaches rely on commonsense categories, and fail to define work-leisure relations. Consequently, they are not well placed to theorize leisure adequately, as they ignore productive work, and not least fun and pleasure in free-time activities. The contribution from Harvie Ferguson assesses the contribution Freud makes to theorising leisure as pleasure; our pursuit of pleasure is the pursuit of ourselves. Although developing what seems to offer a straightforward Marxist analysis of class and ideology, Rojek argues that by the turn of the century the bourgeois project was in ruins. Modernity, not least the consumption of mass media, was about ambiguity and uncertainty. In the final chapter, Rojek develops some of these arguments in relation to the regimentation of leisure time and space. He opens up new sites which mainstream leisure research had ignored, through case studies of Sunday trading and of the Stonehenge hippy convoy, examining historical processes of regulation, reaction and resistance.

As mentioned previously, the abiding memory of this book is its somewhat hostile review by Alan Tomlinson, working within the cultural studies tradition. He characterised the contributors as constituting a Glasgow–Leicester axis, implying they sought hegemonic control over leisure studies. The reaction from some of the book’s contributors to Tomlinson’s critical review, if rumours are to be believed, was to demand that he should not be allowed to review any more for academic journals, because of his lack of
objectivity and his breaching taken-for-granted professional rules of academic community. It is clear that this hostile review was for Rojek a chastening experience and provided personal and damaging evidence of the multi-paradigmatic rivalry in leisure studies. Indeed, even in his latest book, published in 2000, *Leisure and Culture*, it is not forgotten nor forgiven.

Accounting for paradigmatic rivalry in leisure studies underpins much of his theoretical work as he writes frequently to provide authoritative overviews of the state of leisure theory in UK leisure studies, often published in edited compilations for North American markets in leisure studies or leisure sciences. But there is a lack of clarity about Rojek’s own vantage point: how can or does one write an overview of the sociology of leisure? Can foxes write about hedgehogs and do either species pay any attention to each other? Such themes have been explored in Mommass *et al.* (1996) compilation *Leisure Research in Europe*. For example, how does one theorize one’s involvement and detachment from competing paradigms in leisure studies. This is especially pressing when postmodern developments in social theory demand the deconstruction of dominant discourse.

Rojek’s precise categorization of paradigmatic traditions varies, yet all the usual suspects are there – social formalism, the politicization of leisure within cultural studies and feminism, alongside more recent growth in postmodernist discourses. The driving force of Rojek’s position betrays both his figurational roots and his commitment to developing the sociological imagination as he seeks to void naïve dualisms of agency and structure, of the individual and society, ‘the twin blights of essentialism and reification’ (1989, p. 9) of work and leisure. He restates ‘Leisure relations must be studied as relations of power. However they must also be studied as relations which are both constraining and enabling’ (1989, p. 8). This dualism of constraint and choice is at the heart of his own work but such framing and conceptualisation are seen as fundamental weaknesses and failures in the work of others. For example as his criticisms of Clarke and Critcher (1985) in *The Devil Makes Work* reveal.

The publication by Macmillan of *Ways of Escape* in 1993 proved an important milestone or turning point in Rojek’s intellectual journey. It signifies his distance from any neo-Marxist research agenda around class and capitalism or figurational approaches to civilized society, or feminist positions on patriarchal society. Indeed, the final chapter directly challenges Marxist cultural studies on several counts: its positing of a universal ontology, of the necessity to labour as a shared common experience, the scope of resistance and struggle inside consumer capitalism; equally, its failure to grasp the changes taking place in class structures, work organisation and media consumption. Yet, as he asserts in the final chapter,

> However, we confront these attractions as members of a particular class, race, nation and civilization. And were we able truly to abandon these identity values we could no longer function. Our escape attempts are therefore themselves artificial. They are encoded activities with structural parameters. There is no escape. Rojek (1993, p. 12)

Whilst teaching sociology at Queens College, Glasgow to diverse student
groups loosely linked to social work qualifications, Rojek’s own research PhD now focused much more on modernity, influenced by work on the ‘modern’, by writers such as Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin. It also established him at the cutting edge of postmodern leisure theory at the very time, in the beginning of the 1990s, when he had secured a tenured career outside the academy in publishing. Indeed, he starts his preface,

The critic who complains that this book sometimes reads as if it doesn’t have both feet on the ground has a point. For much of it was conceived, considered and executed in mid-air as I flew city to city in Europe and the USA pursuing my responsibilities as Senior Editor in Sociology at Routledge.

The subtitle of Ways of Escape reads ‘Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel’ and one review actually claimed that Rojek should be prosecuted because ‘Of these [5] chapters, three might be cited under the trades descriptions legislation as not being particularly about leisure or travel at all’ (Allison, 1993). This is unfair as the book develops new material within the context of the four rules originally mapped out in 1985. In the introduction Rojek suggests that the boundary between work and leisure has been transformed by historical processes of dedifferentiation.

... most people maintained that in the final analysis clear distinctions between each side obtained and could be demarcated. That is, past and present, work and leisure were ultimately seen as separate states.

For most postmodernists these common sense distinctions have evaporated. (Rojek, 1993, p. 4)

Change in modernity could mean that class, elite, statist or corporatist types of moral regulation would not apply and were no longer viable. The book therefore engages with central debates of late-1980s postmodernism. Rojek argues that two key ideas of modernity are circulation and consumption. To quote Benjamin (1983) Rojek asserts ‘we live in “the ruins of the bourgeois world” ’ (1993, p. 45). It is within this context of these continuities and discontinuities that Rojek focuses on two aspects of leisure – travel and tourism.

The first chapter examines the development of the modern nation state and its involvement in licensing, policing and stereotyping. During the later part of the nineteenth century, the state functioned to develop rational recreation. Useful pleasures were encouraged and supported, whereas working class squalor and idleness were subject to bourgeois surveillance and control or, as Foucault stressed, subject to the panopticon ‘eye of power’ in the bourgeois century. No new arguments here, but Rojek’s second chapter is more subversive. He challenges feminist arguments which universalise women’s experience, preferring Turner’s concept of patrim to feminist views on patriarchy. He argues that patrim more accurately describes diverse constraints on women in late capitalism, whereas patriarchy renders invisible women’s experience of class, race, nationality, and subculture. Changes in birth control, labour markets and the media radicalized and created new gender alliances. Bourgeois women exercised control over households and
leisured women could challenge patriarchy. Women became more involved in public policy on ‘women’s issues’, for example, housing, social work and education. Gender relations had become more informal and women exercised more power through consumption, not least leisure shopping in department stores.

Still demanding a historical perspective, Rojek argues that leisure has been transformed from a bourgeois project of self-development into something more diffuse and disorganized. The ‘grand tour’ of the aristocracy gave free-time opportunities for education, rationality and self-enlightenment. Its aim was adventure and sociability, travelling with friends, to visit familiar places in the Orient, but not with the purpose of getting to know Eastern culture but rather to know one’s self. One had to gain some ‘real’ experiences before returning to the rigours of privilege inside the nation state.

However, driving forces of change within modernity such as dedifferentiation gradually undermine bourgeois divisions or polarities of work/leisure, reason/nature, body and mind and so on. ‘De-differentiation is nothing but the pursuit of the contradiction of modernity. Postmodernism, it might be said, is the acceptance of these contradictions – not as necessities or impediments, but as conditions to work with’ (Rojek, 1993, p. 188).

The sureties of the bourgeois world dissolved. Modernity stressed unfinished aspects of experience; life had an accidental character ... one of ambiguity, illusion, diversity and opposition. Indeed, Rojek criticized structuralist accounts for failing to challenge contradictions in experience and not developing a phenomenology of leisure. The hedgehogs were still locked into homogeneity, continuities of collective existence, whereas foxes knew that things were different and different foxes knew and experienced different things.

Rational consciousness, the intellectual quest of the scientist, sought to impose order on the natural world yet people experienced other contradictory forms. Rojek delineates four major forms – the ‘polymorphous perversity’ of children with feelings of mobility, disorder and pleasure; the temporary consciousness induced through illness or drugs; madness and hallucination, as well as interpersonal collective forms celebrating political ideologies, nationalist doctrines or religious worldviews.

Rojek illustrates disintegration of the bourgeois world through a brief discussion of the ordering of nature as an escape area, the subsequent organization of tourism and the dissolution of home interiors as a means of escape. He also maps out Lash and Urry’s arguments about disorganized capitalism and postmodern challenges to an authoritative universal rationalist discourse and Baudrillard’s suggestion that reality has been replaced by representation. There are implications for leisure and tourism – they are consumption activities – post-tourism is no quest for the self; they are part of de-differentiation as work spaces become leisure spaces and leisure activities become more work-like; they challenge the right of nation states to rule and regulate; they acknowledge inauthenticity. Such themes are developed in the next two chapters of Ways of Escape – ‘Fatal Attractions’ and ‘Wonderful World’. The former examines leisure as spectacle and sensation by exploring
four types, black spots, fatal attractions, heritage sites and literary landscapes. The ‘Wonderful World’ chapter develops some of Urry’s arguments about the post-tourist’s quest for playfulness, the search for inauthenticity and intertextuality – the growing interest in different facets and interpretations of tourist sites and sights. Rojek also provides brief commentary of four ‘escape areas’ – the beach, the hotel, historical monuments and wilderness.

**Centring on Rojek**

Any overall assessment of Rojek’s contribution to developing a postmodern theory of leisure could start in 1995 with the Sage publication of *Decentring Leisure. Rethinking Leisure Theory*. It is worth noting that this book has never been reviewed within *Leisure Studies*. If previous writing was concerned to tease out neglected and hidden theoretical traditions in understanding modern leisure, this book represents a decisive engagement with the postmodern turn in social theory. The title signifies a critical engagement with postmodern theories and its very subtitle suggests a possible repositioning of Rojek’s theoretical vantage-point to gain full purchase on leisure studies. As ever, Rojek demands that leisure must be contextualized and must be related to determinate social formations. He argues that there is no such thing or space as essentially leisure, with its own unique laws, management practices, propositions and rhythms; so nothing could be *centred* on leisure. Leisure studies operate at a discursive level. It offers a cultural problematic. Under modernity, leisure meant freedom, release and escape whereas under postmodernity those meanings are challenged and deconstructed.

The first two chapters revisit earlier themes by mapping out Marxist arguments about production and feminist arguments about reproduction under capitalism. Rojek criticizes Marxists on their own ground for failing to theorize adequately class and culture, for their partisan commitment and political correctness, for their indiscriminate reliance on the concept of hegemony and the invisibility of race and ethnicity as major divisions of capitalism. Feminist theory too is challenged for its over-reliance on the concept of patriarchy which proffers a determinist structuralist account that minimises difference and agency inside the gender order.

The second part of the book is entitled ‘Modernity and Leisure’. Rojek introduces the heuristic device of separating modernity 1 from modernity 2 to facilitate analysis, although acknowledges the two social formations as interdependent. This device was identical to Giddens’ own distinction between modernity and late modernity. Both writers thereby avoided fierce and sterile debates about periodization i.e. whether modernity had shifted into a new formation and established postmodernity. In modernity 1, Rojek defines leisure as an essential element of social order; it was integrative, regulated and moral. He then summarizes five separate theories of leisure: conservative, (Marxist) moral regulation, the protestant ethic, conspicuous consumption, and the civilizing process. In chapter four, ‘Mechanisms of Regulation’, he draws on Foucault to provide an account of the ‘carceral networks of power’ which are also forms of recognizing individuals.
Medicalized and sexualized discourses are languages of power written into people’s lives to ‘normalize’ behaviour. Foucault (1982) recognized three forms of power – institutional (involving ethnic, national, religious rules), economic (involving class) and subjective (involving personal struggles against subjectivity and submission).

The micropolitics of leisure in modernity is one of regulation, order and control. Following Foucault and others, power is embodied and grounded within the healthy, normal body, controlled by the gaze of others. To use concepts derived from Giddens, during the later part nineteenth century modernity was about sequestration of deviant experience, its institutionalization and medicalization. People were organized into the lifecycle, into appropriate gender roles within families, with a clear sexual division of labour and normalized sexual identities, valuing heterosexuality. Leisure became a symbol of personal merit and health. Leisure was an important site for emulation and consumption, following Bourdieu’s concepts, cultural capital and competence became important arenas for social evaluation, for exercise of social taste, for distinction. In modernity, bureaucracies, particularly within the nation state, were important mechanisms for organizing leisure time, managing access to leisure spaces and national heritage. Modernity 1 offered citizens controlled nature. Leisure spaces, such as countryside, national parks and urban recreation grounds were nonludic, controlled and managed.

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 flanerie – browsing, wandering, watching, wishing, and opening oneself up to the sensations and rhythms of the city.

Chapter six reasserts Rojek’s demand for a phenomenology of leisure . . . to place experiences of the naive or native subject at the centre of analysis. Such phenomenology has as its focus both the individual and everyday life, what is left over from mainstream institutions. It is the untidy world of subjectivity, of love, friendships and humour. In modernity 2 there are growing processes of individualism and privatism, as there are growing feelings of risk and insecurity, a collapse of public trust and collective fraternity. Modernity 2 focuses on the psychology of the consumer, on wanting rather than having, on incompleteness, arbitrariness, fragmentation and indifference. The modern citizen, self-confident, self-developed, embedded in stable networks of neighbourhood supports has gone, vital communities are nowhere and no longer to be seen.

Part Three of Decentring Leisure is entitled Postmodernism and Leisure.
For Rojek writing in 1995 postmodernity includes the dedifferentiation of high and popular culture, the collapse of a ‘progress’ view of history, the debunking of science, the superimposition of the local/national by the global and the politics of impression rather than problem-solving. Following Bauman (1992), Rojek argues that postmodernism refers to a change in social consciousness. It is an expression of disquiet about the ideas of modernity, a self-reflexivity, a stepping away from modernity. Modernity has crumbled because of the feminist movement, international tourism, restructured markets, politicisation of gays, collapse of USSR, increased environmental awareness and new communications technology.

The postmodern term, decentring, was taken from Derrida’s phenomenology in his argument that meaning was located not in reality or in things but in language. The presence of concepts such as leisure was also marked by its absence. We understand freedom because we understand constraint, and so with other dualisms of agency and structure, individual and society, work and leisure, male and female. What then follows is an authoritative pen picture of key postmodern changes: changes in knowledge and grand narrative, changes in authority, in culture, in communication and in the economy.

So the term postmodern leisure is now cast as an oxymoron. The postmodern is about flexibility, irrationality and play, whereas leisure was a modernist, bounded and rational experience. Postmodern culture is characterised by hyperreality and hypermobility, by restlessness and disengagement. Individuals carry polysemic identities; fixed commitments are resisted in postmodern life. As Bauman tellingly argued, the icon of late nineteenth century modernity was the camera, the family portrait, shared kinship, fixed in particular locality. In the late twentieth century, the definitive icon of postmodernity is the erasable videotape recorder or the camcorder.

Rojek concludes Decentring Leisure with the question, what is the legacy of postmodernism? For him postmodern analysis corrected the modernist notion that leisure was segmented from the rest of life, as a charmed realm of self-fulfilment. It also reverses the tendency to oppose authentic experience with inauthenticity. It challenges any notion of an integrated self. Postmodern analysis acknowledges identity politics, the difference and divisions of ethnicity, gender, and class. It highlights failures of government, of public policies; consequently, it destabilises elitist authority structures and those cultural missionaries keen to bind citizens into the ‘imaginary community’ of the nation state.

The final chapter raises the question of whether leisure constitutes an individual or societal need. Doyal and Gough (1984) argued that societal needs were production, reproduction, communication and political authority. So should there be a politics of liberation to reconcile individual and societal needs? Habermas had argued that all human life centred on work and communication, on purposive rational action and communicative competence, which equipped people with personality structures and to be part of democratic mutual consensus. Habermas stressed the ideal speech situation which required technical understanding, procedural understanding and
participatory competence but he still offered a Marxist productivist approach, as work and technical ideologies invaded personal life worlds. Interactions were mediated by distorted communicative competence, leaving individuals and classes trapped inside distorted communication and capitalist ideology. The productivist view challenges the optimistic leisure society view. In modernity I the productivist account celebrated Homo Faber, and ignored the human need to play. Play then was defined characteristically as freedom, imagination, disinterestedness and tension. In modernity I Homo ludens was represented as an object of pity (the unemployed) or attraction (the leisure class). Western culture represents leisure as a realizable utopia yet we are dissatisfied on arrival. Rojek concludes the book with the exhortation that we should recover the illusions modernity I had concealed.

In his most recently published book, Leisure and Culture (2000), Rojek seeks to explore those domain assumptions grounded in the philosophical view of human nature captured by the phrase, Homo Ludens. He accuses all three major traditions in leisure studies – functionalism, critical Marxism and feminism of lacking any anthropological view of culture. Rojek restates his previous challenge to any Homo Faber view of humanity – which he sees as historically specific to modernity. With post-Fordism – de-industrialization, flexibilization and feminization of labour and, not least, the attractive media technoculture embedded in non-work, work is no longer central to individuals, communities or classes. So it should be no surprise that identity politics creates fissures in the homogenous blocks of common culture, constructed around class or the nation state. Following Huizinga’s Homo Ludens, Rojek argues that language, communication and play are at the centre of human culture. Industrial societies stress over-regimentation, calculability and rationality, whilst leisure remains a site for transgression and change, for challenging everyday culture and compulsion. So logically the culture of leisure is essential for a clear understanding of rule-breaking deviance.

In the penultimate chapter, Rojek categorises types of ‘dark’ leisure – liminal leisure, moral transcendence and edgework, and finally, surplus energy. In Durkheimian vein, liminal leisure and surplus energy in traditional societies are seen as functional for social order. In differentiated pluralistic societies, they do not serve that collective function. Indeed, and this is one of Rojek’s many insights, leisure is all about liminality, testing diversity and difference, clear expressions of self-reflexivity. If people are culturally and materially constrained, they seek escape.

Some forms of fantasy and escape threaten both self and others, as in abnormal leisure forms. Free time not only provides the context within which deviant activities take place but leisure researchers should be well placed to challenge determinist medical models of compulsion and addiction. So Rojek does not shy away from discussing pornography, and iconoclastically, serial killing. He maps out three types of abnormal forms which he classifies as an invasive, mephitic and wild leisure ... drawing eclectically on parties, raves, motorcycle riots, inner city disorders and soccer hooliganism.

Leisure and Culture casts a much wider historical net than any of his
previous works which, as we have seen, focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century capitalism, on modernity and postmodernity. This is no doubt because of his commitment to develop an anthropological perspective on leisure. In the very first chapter ‘From Ritual to Performative Culture’ he argues that all societies must organize time and space for economic and social survival but there is and has always been a surplus of energy and unused resources. The problem of leisure is how to use this surplus. Rojek draws on Lewis Mumford and George Bataille to argue that human history is not so much about scarcity, poverty and inequality but rather about abundance, conspicuous consumption and transgression.

In traditional societies, culture is grounded in a cyclical collective time frame. Play is a means to religious ritual and conformity. People, as human bodies, are always ‘occupied’, performing activities or rituals for the collective clan. In industrial society, ‘vacant’ bodies mean that individuals seek to kill free time, avoid commitments, create lifestyles and restlessly fill space. Modernity then offers a diverse pluralistic culture yet it is replete with pressures to perform in standard ways to organised and carefully scripted roles. Modern industrial life is characterized by relentless techniques of Goffmanesque impression management, especially in work, performing against criteria of relevance which demarcate what constitutes a legitimate performance. Although leisure is uniformly defined and presented as the antithesis to performative work, it is not. This paradox informs the direction of the rest of the book – how best to understand leisure?

Rojek argues that leisure is a status-positioning activity that places us culturally in relation to others. He revisits the contribution Veblen’s concept of a leisure class may make to our understanding of class, leisure and culture. Commodities shift from use value to exchange value to denotational value. Having explored some of Veblen’s weaknesses in understanding cultural processes of emulation and consumption, Rojek reviews Bourdieu’s contribution of the relativism of taste and cultural competence and considers the new service class and the growing importance of cultural intermediaries in consumer culture.

In the final chapter, Rojek reviews the post-work argument, which has three major aspects – cybernation of work processes, growing media and cultural consumption and increased self-reflexivity, with mass higher education. He rejects Andre Gorz’ solutions and his politics of work and time. He demands that leisure policies acknowledge the transgressive elements in leisure. This is qualified by an acknowledgement of the frailty of the human body and of the natural environment, so leisure policies must be based on values of care and respect for others. Rojek powerfully concludes that personal engagement is necessary, especially in a performative culture.

Concluding comments

This article has sought to provide a brief review of Rojek’s key ideas and arguments. It cannot do full justice to the complexity and diversity of his work nor to its sheer weight, embedded in various international journals.
Over the past two decades Chris Rojek has developed theoretical debates around interpreting and understanding postmodern cultures and their possible relevance for leisure. In his writing he does not suffer fools gladly and clearly articulates his criticisms of other perspectives and traditions. Indeed, the vocationalist managerialist tradition amongst others in leisure studies may doubt the relevance of Rojek’s work. However, for this reviewer, Rojek occupies a decisive place in the development of leisure studies since he has consistently sought to establish a sociological theory of leisure. This significance is no historical accident as this is precisely what he set out to do. ‘All in all, I decided, leisure looked like a fair bet for making an impact. If this sounds unduly Machiavellian, it had less to do with my nature than with a sober assessment of the academic career option open for a young sociologist in Thatcherite Britain’ (Rojek, 1993, p. xi).

Scholars of leisure studies are still undecided and divided as to the precise contribution that Rojek has made and indeed whether there is any progressive development or legacy in Rojek’s work. This overview of his four major texts suggests that Rojek has consistently demanded a sociological imagination to understand leisure. His preferred sociology draws heavily on postmodern writers who emphasize the importance of cultural formations in modernity rather than political, economic or social processes. So perhaps it should come as no surprise that his chosen academic title is Professor of Sociology and Culture (and not Professor of Leisure). But perhaps that in turn tells us more about the deconstruction of leisure studies itself?

References