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Objectivist Problematics: Planning for Leisure from an Experiential Perspective?

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ABSTRACT Despite the fact that the experiential perspective has had a profound impact on the way we view leisure behaviour, experiential matters have been renounced for being overtly subjective. As a corollary, experiential matters have been castigated for their inability to offer concrete criteria for leisure policy and the provisions of services. This paper argues that this dismissal of experiential matters is based on an overinflated dichotomy – the fact/value dichotomy – and that, by valorising objectivist approaches to managing leisure resources, experiential matters have become nothing more than a policy-making faux pas. The paper argues that while experiential matters bring many challenges with respect to policy-making and the provision of leisure services, this type of experiential oversight is on of convenience rather than necessity

Keywords: experiential perspective, false dichotomies, logical positivism, fact/value dichotomy, policy-making.

Introduction

While the leisure studies tradition has invariably tended towards the softer side of the social inquiry impasse, one cannot help but acknowledge the increasing occurrence of the term experience to refer to the types and varieties of actions that we call leisure. While it might be crude to differentiate it as a unified or unifying narrative, the experiential perspective certainly demarcates some distinct ground from which the relationship between consumers, products and services, and symbolic meanings can be addressed (along with a variety of hedonic and aesthetic criteria that come with it). Most importantly, the experiential perspective tells us that if we are committed to studying leisure experiences then we regard them as being symbolically rich, inherently meaningful, and capable of communicating meaning. In fact, where other disciplines have discussed experiential consumption they have focused almost exclusively on leisure activities (cf. Arnould and Price, 1993 Celsi, Rose and Leigh, 1993 Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982 Holbrook, 1995 Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982 Holbrook, Chestnut, Oliva and Greenleaf, 1984).

If the experiential perspective offers all of this to our understanding of leisure action, then what does it offer to leisure practice? Well, one could be led to believe that it does not offer a great deal. Despite the fact that this perspective has had a profound impact on the way we view leisure behaviour, experiential matters have been renounced for being overtly subjective and for their inability to offer concrete criteria for leisure policy and the provisions of services. While it is acknowledged that the experiential view brings with it many challenges, the purpose of this paper is to argue that the dismissal of experiential matters is based on an overinflated dichotomy – a dichotomy that seems to be one of the lasting remnants of positivistic science. The paper argues that, although leisure is indeed (and continues to be) in transition, the silent hand of positivistic science permeates the leisure discipline at the political level. By separating fact and value, and by valorising objectivist approaches to managing leisure resources, experiential

matters have become nothing more than a policy-making faux pas. This, it must be added, has turned out to be an increasingly problematic position.

The silent hand of positivistic policy-making

> Except in those cases where academics have attempted to situate the analysis of the concept of leisure itself in philosophical terms, the research has emerged relatively unscathed by philosophical analysis…Leisure research cannot be hermetically sealed off from philosophy but can, and sometimes does, proceed ignorant of it (McNamee and Brackenridge, 2006).

Although what is meant by the silent hand of positivism defies simple classification, the quote outlined above certainly captures the spirit of it as it pertains to leisure. For example, Parry and Johnson (2007) noted that despite the increasing occurrence of qualitative approaches in the leisure sciences literature, much of this work has remained within the traditional scientific orientation. Phenomenological accounts, according to Goulding (2005: p. 294), seem to be "free from any guiding philosophy and [have even been] described in terms of content analysis and…statistics". Similarly, Zealand (2007) noted that while there has been a general tendency in the leisure sciences literature to uncover the lived nature of leisure experiences, the preferred approach remains atavistically charged by the positivistic prototype of a priori categories and dimensions. That is, despite the fact that most leisure (or consumption) related publications point towards a repose that is increasingly post-positivistic, the transition (to some "post-ism" as Henderson put it) has been far from unified, not to mention nothing like complete.

Although the methodological consequences of leisure in transition are significant enough, it is perhaps in Burton (1996) and Henderson (2000; 2006) that the silent hand of positivism has been most expressly articulated. That is, in their discussions of the ubiquity of false dichotomies. Following Wilson (1980), Burton (1996) argued that "Western thought is characterized by the use of dichotomies…[and] such dichotomies are central to rational positivistic science" (p. 19). He argued further that, although there is an increasing plurality of methodological representations of leisure behaviour, the "increased questioning of positivistic, quantitative science…has not led to a serious re-examination of the appropriate place of logic and reason in the social domain" (Burton 1996: p. 18). Rather, it has led (according to Burton) merely "to a series of squabbles about the appropriate relevance of non-quantitative, but thoroughly structured and ordered techniques of scientific investigation into social phenomena" (p. 18). The diffusion of positivistic influence has, of course, extended beyond the methodological domain.

Henderson (2000) makes a similar argument. Whilst also contemplating leisure in transition, and the increasing intellectual diversity that comes with it, Henderson argued "I am not sure that we appreciate the value and the challenges that these multiple options hold" (p. 49). Henderson continued by saying "I believe…it is useful to place some of the false dichotomies on the table so that we can articulate the changes that are occurring in leisure research" (p. 49). Extending on these points a little, I am not sure that we appreciate how much the positivistic tradition has been imbricated in Western narratives – even outside of the methodological domain. Based on this premise, I would like to argue that it is as important (if not more so) to critically examine these false dichotomies so that we can identify where changes are not occurring so that we can effect change in leisure research and practice. If, as Burton (1996: p. 28) suggested, "[l]eisure studies has suffered…from the inappropriate use of dichotomies" then logical positivism's separation of fact and value is by all accounts the most dangerous – and its danger is not lessened by the fact that it has been so widespread.

A case of thy blood or mine?

> EVERYTHING MUST GO – SCIENTIFIC VERIFIABILITY OR YOUR MONEY BACK…Be sure to leave all metaphysical matters at the door.

If the logical positivists were experts at anything outside of reason and logic it is clear that, given the vehement expression of their theses throughout the scientific enterprise, it was huckster marketing.[1] Logical positivism, according to Putnam (1995: p. 155), "was fundamentally a denial of entanglement, an insistence on sharp dichotomies: science-ethics, science-metaphysics, analytic-synthetic". As McNamee (1994) described, because verification or falsification do not operate in the arena of evaluative judgments (of ethics or aesthetics say), value judgments were deemed to be logically weak. Moreover, not only were they deemed to express mere assertions and not logical arguments, the fact/value dichotomy was further premised on the notion that value terms could not (and did not) describe states of affairs in the world. So, for scientists at least, value judgments were cognitively meaningless.

An important notion put forward in Burton (1996) must be specified here, lest we underwrite the force of the positivistic movement outside of science. Burton writes, "[d]ifficulties occur not because dichotomies are developed as analytic tools for problem identification and investigation, but because researchers and policymakers so often treat them not as intellectual constructs but as naturally occurring phenomena" (p. 19). Putnam (2002) makes a similar point in his recent treatise on the collapse of the fact value dichotomy when he distinguishes between a mere distinction and a metaphysical dichotomy. Using John Dewey as his example, Putnam explains that, although Dewey's philosophical project entailed the foundering of a great many dualisms, it is a great misunderstanding to infer that he was, at the same time, attacking all philosophical distinctions – according to Putnam, "[n]othing could be further from the truth" (p. 9). There is "fuzziness", Putnam suggests, between what should be considered an ordinary distinction and a metaphysical dichotomy and, for the logical positivists at least, the nature of facts and values very much fell under the latter remit. The distinctions that can be found in Hume's empiricism (matters of fact/relations of ideas and is/ought) became foundational metaphysical dichotomies for its twentieth century daughter logical positivism (analytic/synthetic and fact/value respectively) – with rather tremendous consequences it must be added.

Now, while matters of fact and value might seem like ivory-tower issues, both Putnam (1995; 2002) and Sen (1987) have brought to our attention that this dichotomy came to be regarded as undoubtedly correct by economists in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, the connection between the logical positivist claim that why people respond favourably to certain facts and unfavourably to others is a matter of sociological concern (à la Ayer) and the claim by leading economist (of his time) Lionel Robbins that "interpersonal comparisons of utility are meaningless" is not one of mere coincidence. And, as a matter of fact, positivistic economics is most expressly articulated in the latter. Robbins is most (in)famously renowned for emphasizing the arbitrary character of ethical discussion (they cannot emit a logical argument) and, as a corollary, the jettisoning of welfare economics (at the depths of the depression Putnam reminds us). The position, in Robbin's terms can be stated as follows:

> If we disagree about ends it is a case of thy blood or mine – or live and let live according to the importance of the difference, or the relative strength of our opponents. But if we disagree about means, then scientific analysis can often help us resolve our differences. If we disagree about the

> morality of the taking of interest (and we understand what we are talking about), then there is no room for argument (Robbins, 1952 [1935]: p. 150).

The net effect of this position is that one could only talk about ethics and economics in juxtaposition because economics deals with ascertainable facts and ethics with obligation and evaluation. As Putnam (2002: p. 54) described, "[w]ith one stroke, the idea that the economist could and should be concerned with the welfare of society in an evaluative sense was rejected". By taking their dualistic wares to the scientific marketplace, logical positivism contributed to the disenchantment of metaphysics and, as a corollary, the impoverishment of welfare economics. Through a policy-science whose recommendations impact the lives of billions of people through governmental and non-governmental organizations, it seems as though there is no aspect of human life that has gone unaffected by this dichotomy. Moreover, despite the fact that the sterile dichotomies of positivistic science have been looked upon as conflated and naïve by philosophers for many years, values remain very much a vexed question outside of philosophy. As the positivist qua marketer might have said, "Now if that's not market penetration, I don't know what is!"

The snares of objectivism

This kind of objectivism, derivative of logical positivism, has manifested itself in many forms within the leisure literature. However implicit this might be, it's impact seems to have been (and might vey well continue to be) radically influential??

If, as Kuhn (1962) noted, the dominant paradigm explained why mature sciences progressed and others did not, then one immediately recognizes why the products of positivistic science became for many, so ineluctable. The objectivist position provided the crude, omnipotent position from which claims to scientific rigour could be built and this "view from nowhere" came to be regarded as the only sure basis for scientific legitimacy. Although it is certainly crude to equate logical positivism with objectivism ipso facto, the latter provides a useful label for covering all of those disparate areas that have (explicitly or implicitly) been affected by it. Moreover, since the notion of value judgements being subjective is so deeply imbricated in Western narratives, the use of this label seems quite logical for heuristic purposes.

While matters of fact and value seem remote from concerns of leisure provision, the spirit of the logical positivist position is aptly described in McNamee's (1994) paper Valuing Leisure Practices. While his position is not be interpreted as objectivist,[2] McNamee argued that "the subjectivist thesis is to be shunned by academics and other professionals concerned with leisure" (p. 291). The central reason for this, according to McNamee, is that "it offers no criteria (and hence no logical basis over mere preference) against which to evaluate such practices or make subsequent policy decisions" (p. 291-292). If we are concerned with what leisure practices are worth providing, "[t]he subjectivist thesis offers us no clues or direction" (p. 292). The objectivist position, however, appears equally fraught with difficulties.

The snares of objectivism are to be found (if only implicitly) in Coalter's (1998) critique of the normative citizenship paradigm. As Coalter recounted, "it was accepted that public provision must provide equal opportunities for all…democratise areas of public leisure…reduc[e] constraints and encourag[e] participation" (p. 27). By the late 1980s, however, Coalter observed that leisure services came under attack for their failure to cater for those groups most in need. Because the provision of services were determined almost exclusively by "experts" (professionals, bureaucrats, the social elite, or "men of affairs" to borrow from Veblen, 2007

[1918]: p. 22), the objectivist orientation led to "crisis in the relationship between citizens and inflexible, bureaucratic and non-responsive public services" (Coalter, 1998: p. 28). In fact, while Coalter's discussion is directed towards the areas of public leisure provision that deal with the management of public sports and recreation facilities, the management of tourist sites also provides examples germane to the problems with an objectivist position (heritage attractions in particular).

Rojek's (1988; 1995) discussion of citizenship rights relating to the management of access at Stonehenge provides a particularly revealing example. Since the state undertakes the management of these resources "for all", Rojek highlighted how this can raise problems with social groupings who seek to occupy these public spaces in a manner conflicting with those specified by the state. By defining a minimal set of uses for the site (an objectivist orientation) the state stigmatized and obstructed groups who defined the use-value of the site on different terms.[3] More recently, Garrod and Fyall (2000) have suggested that the key performance indicators utilised in the management of heritage attractions are anathema to the sustainability imperative. Site managers, according to Garrod and Fyall (2000: p. 698), "expect heritage attractions to adopt a largely reactive strategy towards the sustainability issue…[and] accept that more costly impacts are inevitable rather than…tak[ing] strategic measures to moderate them". The more explicit claim in this instance is that recreational welfarism (and notions of "access for all" and "equal opportunities") is at odds with the curatorial approach to site management.[4] As this preservationist position celebrates the inherent or intrinsic value of artefacts and monuments, management see themselves more as guardians of the past rather than providers or facilitators of community leisure. So, although Poria and Ashworth (2009) have argued that heritage tourism can act as a mechanism for social stability, identity realization/creation, and solidarity etc. the curatorial approach to site management represents a significant barrier to this normative imperative. In fact, it is not unreasonable to think that this might be an ongoing tension without significant scope for resolve.

While the heritage example represents only one area among many that could be considered contested leisure, it obviously raises some general questions as to the ownership of leisure spaces, the representation of minority groups' needs, the low trust evaluation afforded to certain population sub-groupings, conflict, and social inclusion/exclusion. Despite the fact that the subjectivist thesis has been castigated for its inability to offer evaluative criteria for leisure policy, the key performance indicators typical of objectivist positions have also come under critical scrutiny – for their inability to develop welfare-related performance targets in particular (cf. Coalter, 1995; 1998). Taken together with the broader leisure sector, the snares of objectivism highlight various inherent tensions between ideological positions and the actual provision and delivery of products and services at the ground level (authenticity and sustainability in particular).

Planning for leisure from an experiential perspective?

It is quite paradoxical that, on the one hand, we have a view of leisure consumption that reflects a fundamental shift towards a more experientially oriented society yet, on the other, we have an attitude towards policy-making and the provision of services that occludes such criteria. And for reasons that should be clear at this point, planning for leisure from an experiential perspective is a rather contested issue – perhaps even an oxymoron. It is contested because, despite the increasing occurrence of the term experience to refer to the types and varieties of actions we call leisure, there still remains a rather noticeable tension between the provision of leisure services

and the consumption of leisure experiences. There have been various different reasons offered to explain this.

The relative absence of a concern with experiential matters, according to Coalter (1998: p.23), "is in part explained by a failure to develop a strong body of research in the psychology of leisure". While this might have been significant enough in itself, Burton (1996) argues that it is due to an inappropriate fit between the outmoded and archaic ideological approach to leisure provision and the more fluid, protean, and fragmented needs of the market. Highly rational (objectivist) approaches to policy making, according to Burton, "do not meet the needs of [the] diverse and complex mix of people who make up the real world and for whom leisure services are provided". He continued by saying that "[b]y oversimplifying and denying the complicated and often paradoxical characteristics and needs of difference social groups, these models perpetuate policies and delivery systems that are out of step with the complexities of social reality" (p. 26). According to Holbrook (1985; 1995), this tension results not merely because delivery systems are out of step, but rather, because of an indefatigable conflict of interest between both parties to the exchange – a position he seems to have inherited from Veblen. According to Veblen (2007 [1918]: p. 22), who was commenting on the academic ethic in America at the time, "the technologist and the professional man are, like other men of affairs, necessarily and habitually impatient of any scientific or scholarly work that does not obviously lend itself to some practical use". The technologist, he continued, "appreciates what is mechanically serviceable; the professional man…appreciates what promises pecuniary gain; and the two unite with the business-man at large in repudiating whatever does not look directly to such a utilitarian outcome" (p. 22).

Therefore, while the experiential consumer has to face the full consequences of their thoughts and feelings as they seek to grant space to emotions, the objectivist position seems to float several feet above the ground. And this impasse is perpetuated by the fact that objectivist approaches to policy-making and the provision of services continue to take what is essentially emotional and inherently meaningful and continue to approach it from a neo-classical angle. And just like the examples provided from the heritage sector, it is not unreasonable to think that this might be an ongoing tension without any significant scope for resolve.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that experiential or subjectively informed analyses of culture have driven shifting views on the philosophy of science (by calling into question traditional categories of meaning), the leisure studies tradition has tended to overlook the fact that the sharp dichotomies of positivistic science still pervade our discipline at various levels (in addition to the methodological). The silent hand of positivism, as it has been articulated in this paper, is a direct result of this and, while this point has not been explicitly articulated in recent leisure research, it seems as though it has been at the core of various critical commentaries – if only implicitly (cf. Burton, 1996 McNamee, 1994 McNamee and Brackenridge, 1996 Watkins, 2000).

While it would be remiss to suggest that we have not moved beyond the brand of Robbinsonian (positivistic) economics that was so influential in the 1930s, it is clear that the current economic climate is fertile ground for this type of objectivism. That is, while the net effect of Robbins' position was incommensurability between ethics and economics, it seems as though the objectivist position to leisure provision allows us only talk about experiential matters and planning in juxtaposition. The objectivist position is problematic because it allows leisure

professionals and policy-makers of all kinds to relativise matters of experiential concern and, as a corollary, dismiss hard ethical questions with respect to the use, misuse, and abuse of leisure services. While it is acknowledged that experiential matters bring many challenges with respect to policy-making and the provision of leisure services, this type of experiential oversight (even in the current economic climate) is to be considered one of convenience rather than necessity.

Notes

1. In a dialogue with A.J. Ayer broadcast on the BBC, Magee (cf. Magee, 2001) likened the logical positivists to a political party. Speaking of Ayer's most famous treatise, Language, Truth and Logic, he described how "[t]he aggressiveness of the book was typical of the movement as a whole…[t]hey self-consciously organized themselves like a political party, with regular meetings, publications and international congresses, propagating their doctrines with missionary zeal" (p. 95). Looking back, it would not be absurd to say that the diffusion of logical positivism throughout the philosophic enterprise (and beyond) was as much a product of "how it was being sold" as it was of "what was being sold".
2. McNamee (1994) offered R.S. Peters as an example of someone who has articulated an objectivist position and described how his own position "will resist such an asocial, ahistorical and timeless vantage point" (p. 290).
3. Rojek makes two more important points about the dispute over access to the site at Stonehenge. Since the site became focus of civil disobedience, access to the site is limited by barriers. The application of secular, bureaucratic distinctions on site management, the state has contributed to the disenchantment of the monument. For minority groupings, the state provision has "violat[ed] the mystical integrity of the site…turning Stonehenge into just another tourist attraction" (Rojek, 1995: p. 73). Not apart from this is the state rebuttal that in order to manager the sustainability of such sites, these public spaces are maintained to serve the needs of "normal" visitors. As Rojek noted, this raises questions about the appropriate definition of "normality" and the place of discriminatory approaches to site management. The case at Stonehenge is a prime example of how leisure can be (and often is) a site for the reproduction of wider socio-cultural inequalities and not merely a vehicle of social or moral progress.
4. According to Garrod and Fyall (2001) the curatorial approach designates those facets of property management that involve the preservation, maintenance, and (at times) the restoration of valued historic monuments and artefacts. According to Page and Mason (2004), it involves the celebration, care for, and interpretation of valued individual monuments. Professionalization of historic preservation and management, they described, naturally went hand-in-hand with the curatorial approach because "it presupposes a group of experts who know how to identity valued artefacts or monuments and how to care for them" (p. 141). Abutted to this is the notion that issues of financial solvency and public access, from this perspective, enter into the decision-making process only in a secondary manner.

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