

LEISURE

Peter N Stearns, Ph.D.

Overview Leisure has always been an important part of the human experience, though historians have not always paid it serious attention. Hunting and gathering groups tell stories, and also of course generate various forms of art for their communities. Agricultural society developed two characteristic leisure forms, which had great flexibility across regions and over time. Industrial society on the whole replaces these, with some resulting questions about losses and gains.

Festivals and Daily Routines During the Agricultural Age, daily work patterns, though often extending as long as light permitted, were not always very intensive. People did not work by clock time and took frequent, if informal, breaks except for peak periods like harvest time. Thus workers often chatted and napped. Group singing was another outlet. In some cases – probably particularly among urban artisans – some drinking accompanied work; French artisans might stop for a drop in the morning, a pattern known as “killing the worm.” Whole days off might occur, even aside from the weekend. Overall, agricultural days were not divided between work and leisure, but intermixed the activities. More important still, and far more memorable, was the range of festivals. As many as 80 to 90 days a year might serve as festivals large or small. The occasions involved community feasting (more important than family occasions). They might include dancing, sports competitions like wrestling or tugs-of-war, and other group activities. Festivals often gave young people a special role, to compensate for normal subordination. Festival specifics obviously varied by region, with all sorts of separate traditions – like the rural circuses that originated this activity in China. And they could change over time. Both Islam and Christianity brought new festivals, though sometimes, as with Christmas, they built on earlier pagan precedents. There was no question, though, that remembering or anticipating festivals was a vital feature of agricultural life, in between the occasions themselves. Further, many religions encouraged pilgrimages to holy sites, and while this was a solemn occasion it also could serve as something of a vacation equivalent for traveling groups, and it was often available for women as well as men. Finally, as a special case, journeymen craftsmen often enjoyed a travel period after apprenticeship, where they traveled and enjoyed some change of scene: this was a key aspect of artisanal life in Japan, and also in Western Europe.

Festival Samples Not surprisingly, festivals often involved a religious addition to basic agricultural rituals. Easter began as a spring celebration in Northern Europe, designed to encourage fertility, and with a rabbit as symbol. By the late postclassical period the event could be solemnly religious, or it could have other dimensions as in Germany where a bunny would decide whether children were good or bad. Colored eggs were also involved. Hinduism became associated with a major spring celebration in India and later other parts of southeast Asia: Holi Moli became a festivals of colors and dances, with dyes available to add flavor. Many Chinese festivals were organized around ancestors, and Buddhism, with an All Souls day, was incorporated in this pattern. Harvest festivals were common, from Judaism to the Incas. Islam generated a number of feasting festivals, including the celebration ending Ramadan. The festival tradition was not always welcome to authorities. Religious leaders often complained about frivolity, governments worried about keeping order and the loss of productivity. In Europe Protestantism, no longer crediting saints and saints’ days, already cut the number of annual festivals in half during the early modern centuries.

Sports Festivals, but also the urban environment, also involved sports. Classical Greece developed the annual, highly competitive Olympic games, focused on running, throwing and wrestling. Local ball games were common in postclassical Europe, for peasants and artisans alike. A popular kind of football involved trying to get an inflated pig’s bladder across a goal line, with much violence involved on both sides. Central Americans, who had access to rubber, developed a game in which small teams, playing within an enclosure, attempted to keep a ball in play, on pain of disgrace and possible punishment. Games involved both players and spectators, of course, with players sometimes given special opportunities, as in classical Greece, to develop their skills. Both China and the Roman Empire offered various kinds of popular entertainment, including sports and parades.

Cities Cities developed a wider array of entertainments, in addition to the main events. Casual street entertainment might include various kinds of animal acts. Ordinary people attended plays in classical Greece and Shakespeare’s England. The English monarchy opened its zoo, in the Tower of London, to the public in 1600,

featuring leopards and other great cats. Chinese circuses highlighted acrobatics, magic and animal taming. Later, in the 17th century, a circus tradition emerged in Europe as well. A vital innovation in the leisure category, beginning in the Middle East but spreading to Europe by the 17th century, was the coffee house, where urban men could gather, chat and read. Here was yet another form of popular leisure that provoked concern among authorities, primarily because of potential political agitation; both the Ottoman and several European governments tried to close coffee houses down, but they failed. Overall, popular leisure in the Agricultural Age showed both vigor and variety, constituting an important aspect of life and an often complex expression of popular values.

Impact of Industrialization Gradually, and incompletely, the industrial revolution shut down many of the classic leisure forms of agricultural society. The daily routine went first. Factories directly attacked workers' habits of singing, wandering around, chatting – all were targets of early factory rules, for they distracted from productivity and the rhythms of the new machines. This doesn't mean that everything changed, but there was a gradual shift; and it would affect artisanal and white collar work as well. Festivals faded as well. Urbanization took groups away from their community framework, and it was not easy to rebuild the tradition in the larger and mixed city populations. Industrialists disliked festivals because they wasted time, with workers groggy for a few days even after the event was over. Many governments grew even more worried about festivals as sources of political disorder, and a great deal of police time in the 19th century was devoted to regulating festival activities. Of course the genre did not disappear entirely. Some festivals survived, but more as family than as community celebrations, as with Christmas or, in North America, Thanksgiving. Modern governments also introduced some new political celebrations, around independence days or revolutionary days, that had some festival overtones. In general, however, the festival no longer served as the leisure anchor that it had been during the Agricultural Age. Often, for several decades during early industrialization, leisure opportunities simply diminished, one reason that drinking often went up in compensation.

Later Industrial Patterns In the long run – and signs of this emerged clearly in the West by the later 19th century – industrialization generated two major options for popular leisure, often closely related. First, for most people, the day was increasingly divided between a fairly intense work period, and a period for relaxation – aside from the hours for sleep. This followed from a reduction in the hours of work, after the first decades of industrialization. The leisure or non-work period might be constrained by fatigue; commuting (by foot or otherwise); poverty; household tasks, but it was increasingly identified. This might be supplemented by an increase in non-work days, including a fuller weekend (two days instead of just one) and possibly some other vacation options. Second, industrial society began to encourage a growing group of professional entertainers and organizations designed to sell their services to a wider public. Participatory sports continued, of course, but they were increasingly supplemented by rule-making bodies, designed to regularize the sports and bring them up to date, and professional athletic competitions like baseball or soccer football. Traditions of popular theater expanded into music hall and, by 1900, into the early films. Increasingly lots of people began to define leisure in part through expanded opportunities for spectatorship, often in mass venues like stadiums that were far removed from the traditional idea of community.

Adjustment, Change and Variety It would take time for new leisure patterns to be assimilated. Working-class groups, for example, might dutifully go to the beach, to take advantage of the new weekend, but it would be some time before they learned to swim; in the meantime, they sat in beach chairs, in surprisingly stiff clothing. Early movie houses were often fairly rowdy, in the popular theater tradition; but ultimately a tradition of silence developed, though this arguably increased the passive aspect of spectatorship. During the 20th century, many of the leisure forms began to generate international appeal, around common sports like soccer or around popular films which, by 1918, emanated disproportionately from Hollywood. Leisure patterns were further cemented by new technologies, first the radio, then television, which generated unprecedented opportunities for spectatorship in the home. These same developments produced widespread concerns about children's leisure, where spontaneous play was often displaced by more passive listening or viewing. Regional variations continued of course. Separate movie industries arose in places like Egypt or India, expressing cultural values somewhat different from those of Hollywood though often integrating some of the same techniques. Europeans, after World War II, began to enjoy exceptionally long vacation periods, apparently enjoying this aspect of modern leisure more than maximum consumerism; in contrast, formal leisure time expanded very little in the United States. Authoritarian regimes – the fascists for a time, then the communists – organized a somewhat different leisure pattern, including state-sponsored vacation communities, though ultimately more consumerist forms of leisure penetrated here as well. Quite generally, the link between leisure and consumerism assured a steady effort to innovate, to encourage new fads and

styles. The international popularity of computer games, by the early 21st century, was a case in point, another sign of the linkage between leisure and some of the key themes of the contemporary economy.

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Discussion

1. What were the main forms and functions of festivals during the Agricultural Age?
2. What role did the Olympic Games play in ancient Greek society? How were women incorporated?
3. How did rural and urban leisure compare in agricultural societies?
4. What is meant by the “invention” of leisure? What are the debates over this historical development?
5. What was the Grand Tour and why did aristocrats participate in this leisure activity? What role did it have in defining identity?
6. How did the West influence Japanese leisure in the contemporary period? What social groups participated in this new leisure culture?
7. Why did sports become so important in modern recreation?
8. Do global leisure forms predominate over regional traditions in contemporary world history?

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Festivals and Daily Routines During the Agricultural Age, daily work patterns, though often extending as long as light permitted, were not always very intensive. People did not work by clock time and took frequent, if informal, breaks except for peak periods like harvest time. Thus workers often chatted and napped. Group singing was another outlet. In some cases – probably particularly among urban artisans – some drinking accompanied work; French artisans might stop for a drop in the morning, a pattern known as “killing the worm.” Whole days off might occur, even aside from the weekend. Overall, agricultural days were not divided between work and leisure, but intermixed the activities. More important still, and far more memorable, was the range of festivals. As many as 80 to 90 days a year might serve as festivals large or small. The occasions involved community feasting (more important than family occasions). They might include dancing, sports competitions like wrestling or tugs-of-war, and other group activities. Festivals often gave young people a special role, to compensate for normal subordination. Festival specifics obviously varied by region, with all sorts of separate traditions – like the rural circuses that originated this activity in China. And they could change over time. Both Islam and Christianity brought new festivals, though sometimes, as with Christmas, they built on earlier pagan precedents. There was no question, though, that remembering or anticipating festivals was a vital feature of agricultural life, in between the occasions themselves. Further, many religions encouraged pilgrimages to holy sites, and while this was a solemn occasion it also could serve as something of a vacation equivalent for traveling groups, and it was often available for women as well as men. Finally, as a special case, journeymen craftsmen often enjoyed a travel period after apprenticeship, where they traveled and enjoyed some change of scene: this was a key aspect of artisanal life in Japan, and also in Western Europe.

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featuring leopards and other great cats. Chinese circuses highlighted acrobatics, magic and animal taming. Later, in the 17th century, a circus tradition emerged in Europe as well. A vital innovation in the leisure category, beginning in the Middle East but spreading to Europe by the 17th century, was the coffee house, where urban men could gather, chat and read. Here was yet another form of popular leisure that provoked concern among authorities, primarily because of potential political agitation; both the Ottoman and several European governments tried to close coffee houses down, but they failed. Overall, popular leisure in the Agricultural Age showed both vigor and variety, constituting an important aspect of life and an often complex expression of popular values.

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