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Where Has All Our Leisure Gone? The Case of the UK, 1950s-2020s

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Abstract

This paper compares leisure trends between the 1950s and 1970s with subsequent developments. It shows that in the earlier period the growth in leisure time and expenditure was either shared experiences or equalising. Subsequent gains in leisure time and spending have been focused and divisive. Gains in leisure time have been concentrated among the retired, and gains in income and spending among the higher socio-economic strata. These trends have been accompanied by commerce becoming the increasingly dominant leisure provider, huge increases in time spent watching a small screen and spending on hardware and content. It is argued that leisure studies need to focus on the outcomes of these 21st century trends for the everyday lives of the various socio-demographic groups.

Keywords

Income Distribution, Leisure, Neo-Liberalism, Social Democracy, Time Use

1. Introduction

This paper compares two periods in Britain's post-1945 history: the 1950s-70s and subsequently. The comparisons are in terms of trends, not profiles, in leisure time, money spent, the main providers of leisure goods and services, and the population's uses of its leisure time and money.

The paper starts with the sources of evidence used in what follows. It proceeds in the following section to examine the 1950s-70s: the trends in leisure that set the scene for the formation of leisure studies as a multi-disciplinary academic field. The context was the post-1945 continuation of longer-term growth in leisure time and consumer spending. These trends were expected to continue with leisure playing a forever larger and stronger role in people's lives. The anticipated out-

comes were to be beneficial for the population's quality of life and people's well-being. Government support for community leisure rose. The subsequent section describes how the upward trends in leisure time and spending have indeed continued since the 1970s but not quite in the ways that were expected. Leisure time has not risen among working age adults. Income for discretionary spending has been sucked up the class structure. Government support for its people's leisure has shrunk and become less reliable. The section concludes with how leisure studies have fared in this 21st century context. The penultimate discussion section contains proposals for leisure studies to regain its former relevance, excitement and audiences.

A central argument is that in the post-1945 decades the growth of leisure and its benefits were experienced and shared by all sections of the population. Subsequent growth in leisure time and discretionary spending has been concentrated within specific sections. Although leisure activities remain as efficacious as ever in enhancing wellbeing for individual actors, the 21st century trends have been divisive rather than binding.

Before progressing to the findings and main argument, the next section presents the sources and types of evidence on which the ensuing analysis is based.

2. Data

This paper does not contain any new data. It is not based on original analysis of any existing data sets. The statistics have been produced by primary analysts and left available for public scrutiny and use. Three types of data, when used, which is rarely, prove especially useful for leisure scholars.

2.1. Time Use Surveys

These surveys ask samples to keep diaries recording their activities in 10 minute slots over each of the 24 hours per day. Up to 2015 there had been just six such surveys in Britain using nationally representative samples. The first in 1961 and the second in 1975 were conducted by the BBC. The third in 1984-85 was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of its programme of research into Social Change and Economic Life (SCELI). Subsequent surveys in 2000, 2005 and 2014-15 were conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). After 2014-15 there was a succession of six monthly surveys during and between the COVID-19 lockdowns, then reduced to yearly and likely to revert to hitherto normal time spacing because except during upheavals such as the lockdowns uses of time by the population tend to change slowly over years and decades. However, the frequency of these surveys may increase because time and costs of data collection and analysis have been reduced by the availability of online methods and analysis using pre-prepared algorithms. In the early surveys participants were asked to complete paper diaries over two weeks. Nowadays it is typically one weekday and either a Saturday or Sunday. The value of the earliest time budget surveys (1961 and 1975) is diminished by their exclusion of everyone

aged over 65.

Time use surveys are most useful for measuring changes and differences between socio-demographic groups in large blocks of time which occur on most days for many people (paid work, housework and total leisure time). The data sets are useless for most specific leisure activities such as attending a cinema or theatre which account for tiny fractions of the average citizen's average day. The exception is watching a small screen, originally just television but nowadays television or a PC, laptop, tablet or smartphone.

Additional data on media use has been produced by Ofcom since 2002 in its annual reports. This data is collected by questionnaires. The original interest was in the proportion of the population that was online. Now it is how, where and for what they go online. In 2025 a headline finding was that among younger generations, after switching on a television set, the first platform visited was most likely to be YouTube (Ofcom, 2025).

2.2. Participation Surveys

These surveys ask respondents how frequently (and sometimes for how long and intensely) they engage in a list of activities. The lists can be long. Fortunately, given a sufficiently large total sample, it is unnecessary for any respondent to be asked to tackle the full list. These surveys have been leisure studies' main source of evidence about the entire population's uses of leisure.

A set of questions on engagement in the various forms of physically active recreation was included periodically (roughly every five years) in the General Household Survey (GHS) which ran from 1971-2007. This was a government survey which included questions proposed by various government departments. The leisure questions were promoted by the Sports Council. As the demise of the GHS approached, in 2005 Sport England launched an annual Active People survey and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) launched a Taking Part survey. Both were discontinued in 2016 but by then Taking Part included a small longitudinal panel which was revived during the lockdowns with questions on participation in active leisure that were compatible with social distancing, and the online audiences for arts performances (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2016, 2020). In 2021 a new Participation Survey replaced both Active People and Taking Part (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025).

2.3. Spending

Britain gathers more data on economic life than on any other topic. The data of most use to leisure scholars are from the Living Costs and Food Survey (LCFS) (for an example see Office for National Statistics, 2024a). This survey (under different titles) has been conducted annually since 1946. It is our longest statistical time series apart from the modern censuses that began in 1801.

LCFS is similar to time use surveys in that a sample is asked to keep diaries recording all their spending under various categories for a whole week. "Recrea-

tion and culture" is currently the main category for leisure spending, but it does not include tobacco, food, beverages or travel which are itemised separately. If calculating leisure spending as a percentage of all spending, leisure spending by local and central governments must be added.

The main use of the LCFS is to calculate the Retail Prices Index (RPI) and the Consumer Prices Index (CPI). The latter excludes housing costs. Changes from year-to-year in the cost of a typical household budget are used to calculate the rate of inflation which is a reference point in most pay negotiations and in adjusting welfare payments.

There are additional sources of data on economic life that are collected for different purposes. These include standard hours of work in different industries and occupations, hours actually worked, spending on alcohol and certain other products, and travel. These data sets are analysed thoroughly by all government departments, independent research organisations, think tanks and individual scholars. The following sections draw liberally on their work.

It will become apparent that even time-brief leisure activities can be money expensive. A conclusion that can be drawn at this stage is the paucity, indeed almost total absence before 1960, of nationally representative data sets covering the whole of leisure. Even the rest of the 20th century looks data poor compared with 21st century data riches.

3. 1950s-1970s

3.1. Time

England's transformation into the world's first industrial nation began from the 1750s. Work was arduous in the mines, shipyards, dockyards, foundries and mills. Men, women and children could be required to work for 12 hours, six days each week with no paid holidays. Then during the 19th century rolling back hours of work began. At first this was by reformers in Parliament and the initial restriction to 10 hours per day was confined to women and children. The first effective "combinations" of workers (trade unions) were formed from the 1850s and took over the battle for time. Ten hours, then eight per day, and a five-and-a-half-day workweek had become near universal by the 1920s (see Bienefeld, 1972). "Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep and eight hours for ourselves" was the mantra (Rosenweig, 1983).

After 1945 the struggle for a five-day workweek and a two-day weekend was gradually won (Gershuny & Sullivan, 2019). The right to two weeks plus public holidays which had been legislated in 1939 was implemented. Gradually three then four weeks annual holiday became normal. It was assumed that this trend would continue. In 1930 the economist John Maynard Keynes had claimed that by the end of the 20th century people could be required to work no more than 15 hours a week in order to meet all their needs (Keynes, 1930). There was no useful time use evidence available in the 1950s and 60s. More leisure was inferred from

reductions in paid work time.

3.2. Money

When Western economies switched from wartime to civilian production after 1945 they were embarking on a period of rising GDP and consumer spending that remain unequalled before or since. This period was described as *Les Trente Glorieuses* by the French demographer, Jean Fourastie (see Gordon, 2016). The 1950s-1970s were the highpoint for European social democracies. Full employment was the priority in economic policy. Inequalities narrowed. Working class affluence was featured in print and broadcast media and in sociological research (for example, Zweig, 1961). Pay differentials between young people and adults also narrowed (Abrams, 1961). Spending on out-of-home dining began to rise. So did alcohol consumption, reversing a decline that had begun towards the end of the 19th century and continued into the 1930s (see Roberts, 2011). Drug use by young people began to rise from the 1960s (Parker et al., 2002).

All age groups benefitted from post-war affluence. Carpets replaced linoleum. Soft furnishings replaced hard chairs in living rooms. Sales of household gadgets boomed: vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, freezers, washing machines, and televisions. During the 1950s, 60s and 70s car ownership spread to over 70 percent of households (see Roberts, 2011). This sent waves of leisure to places of natural beauty and heritage sites. Overseas package holidays drew holiday makers from domestic resorts (see Roberts, 2006). In retrospect, the 1950s and 60s were the decades of cheap food and energy. Increases in real incomes could be spent on items that were "beyond necessity".

Time and money were the basic ingredients for the formation of consumer culture (Cross, 1993; Baudrillard, 1998). People could be "placed" by their levels and patterns of spending as well as the occupations in which they earned their money. Lifestyle differences began to complicate social stratification. However, there was never a consensus on the main lifestyle groups that were being formed, or even how to identify them (Veal, 1989, 1993). Hence the survival of occupational classes as the favoured indicator of socio-economic status. Nevertheless, consumer aspirations were complicating socio-political divisions (Castells, 1983). People could be mobilised and vote on consumer as well as producer issues.

3.3. Providers

Before 1939 voluntary associations were major providers of uses for leisure time. Clubs of enthusiasts in England invented most of our modern sports, forms of outdoor recreation, board games and hobbies. Local and national societies were responsible for most cultural production and consumption. Civic amenities—parks, public gardens, libraries, galleries and museums, town and village halls—were typically joint ventures between local councils, major philanthropists, churches, and volunteers who gave their time and enthusiasm (see Roberts, 2004).

Commerce was restricted by the population's limited spending power, but it

did supply equipment and clothing for sports and other free time activities. Commercial businesses also developed uses for the internal combustion engine and pioneered radio broadcasting, film production and distribution, and recorded music. Rail companies, hospitality and entertainment businesses created the modern holiday. Local authorities were supporting actors. Voluntary associations insisted that they, certainly not governments, should be leaders in promoting desirable uses of free time (Snape, 2018; Snape & Pussard, 2013). During the 1930s Nazi Germany advertised the alternative (Timpe, 2017).

After 1945, as the Western world entered its era of social democracy, governments stepped up their efforts as leisure providers. In the UK central government created agencies to support the arts, countryside recreation and community sport. Local authorities combined former baths, libraries, parks and other appropriate departments into departments of leisure and recreation services (see Roberts, 2004). Belatedly in 1992 the Westminster government created what was in effect a department for leisure, initially called the Department of National Heritage, and most recently Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Leisure was regarded officially as a significant contributor to the quality of people's lives, and also a major businesses sector. Expanded and better integrated public sectors became a source of jobs and careers for college graduates in leisure studies.

3.4. Uses

So how did people in Britain use their leisure time, discretionary spending, and the provisions that were offered during the "30 glorious years"? What were the most notable arrivals and growths? First, leisure became more mobile. International tourist travel expanded rapidly. So did car-borne trips to older and newly created attractions—the Disneylands and their imitators, and theme parks that offered thrilling aquatic and roller coaster experiences. Second, and apparently in contradiction, there was more immobility, "staying in". This was due to the installation of television sets in over 90 percent of homes during the 1950s. By the time of the first national time use survey in 1961 television was accounting for around 40 percent of all leisure time (Gershuny & Thomas, 1980).

3.5. Leisure Studies

Leisure studies became an academic field in the 1960s and 70s. The growth of leisure was being discussed in parliaments, in print and broadcast media. Historians, economists, geographers, psychologists and sociologists joined in with books and papers in scholarly journals. In Britain recognition of their common interest led to the formation of the Leisure Studies Association (LSA) in 1975 which began its ongoing series of annual conferences. Then in 1982 the journal *Leisure Studies* was launched. Higher education courses, sometimes departments and degrees, had "leisure" or "recreation" in their titles.

This was a time of optimism. Leisure had grown and this would surely continue (Veal, 1987). In 1972 Poor was already advocating a standard four-day workweek

(Poor, 1972). Poor was actually proposing four 10-hour workdays. One step forward and another step back! Its pioneers believed that the study of leisure was at the forefront of history. Leisure scholars debated the ways in which leisure would become more important (see Best, 1978; Dumazedier, 1967). Would industrial societies be replaced by leisure societies in which their uses of leisure became principal sources of group affiliations and personal identities? Such claims continued, very occasionally, through the 1980s (Kelly, 1987; Neulinger, 1990), and then beyond (Blackshaw, 2010, 2016). The ability of active leisure to improve people's lives was an artticle of faith. Scholars attached leisure to the hierarchy of human needs that had been proposed by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943, 1954). Once basic needs were met people would prioritise security, then status and finally self-actualisation in which leisure would play a major part. Later its scholars associated leisure with the optimal experience that had been analysed by another American psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990).

There was considerable support for the fledgling LSA from local and national public leisure providers. They attended and presented at LSA conferences, and funded research projects. They commissioned "market research" (who were they reaching?) and were also seeking theories about leisure's importance which would raise their status in Whitehall, county, town and city halls.

There was never a consensus. Rather than celebrating, some writers feared the growth of leisure time leaving people stranded in a wilderness of boredom (Glasser, 1970). The solution according to Jenkins and Sherman (1981) was to orient education towards leisure and ensure that everyone had interesting things to do. Linder (1970) noted that spending money was increasing more rapidly than the time available for spending. The outcome, he argued, would be a harried leisure class. Godbey (1978), and later-on Rojek (2009) argued that during its growth leisure was becoming more work-like. Wilenski, an American sociologist, argued that leisure time won since the 19th century had achieved no more than regaining time that was lost in long work schedules during the take-off into an industrial age (Wilenski, 1963). He envisaged leisure time settling on a plateau reached during the 30 glorious years. Sixty years on it appears that Wilenski was the scholar who got ít right.

Debates about the character of a coming leisure society (sometimes called theories but "grand narratives" in what follows) swirled around leisure studies in the 1970s. Then, after 1980, references to a future leisure society almost disappeared from the literature (Veal, 2011, 2012, 2018), and leisure studies lost its grand narratives.

4. 1970s-2020s

4.1. Time

For the entire UK population since the 1970s leisure time has continued its long-term historical growth. However, the working age population (currently defined as 16 - 64 by most international agencies) has seen none of this increase. Standard

hours of work per day, per week and holiday entitlement (excluding public holidays) have been static. (Roberts, 2006, 2023a). There has been no further downward step since the end of the "30 glorious years". In fact, total working time per household with working age adults has risen due to increasing labour market participation by women. People still earn their leisure time, but rather than more time in evenings, longer weekends and holidays, the free time earned is "saved" then "spent" after retirement.

Individuals in the retired age group (65 and over) have not increased their leisure time per day or week. They are experiencing more leisure time by living longer. through their 70, 80s and beyond. Currently, the total leisure time enjoyed by the retired is inflated by the large baby boomer cohorts (born between 1945 and 1965) entering retirement. Eventually these cohorts will die and the retired age group will shrink, but not as rapidly as the decline in new entrants to the workforce due to sub-replacement birth rates in most years since 1976.

The Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 disrupted nearly everyone's routines including their time schedules. There was a debate at the time about whether the outcome would be a new normal. There were experiments with four-day schedules with no loss of earnings, and the experiments were declared successful. In most participating firms output was maintained despite the reduced worktime. Firms reported improved retention rates and less difficulty in recruiting staff. Employees appreciated the longer weekends (Autonomy, 2023, 2024). There were calls to make four days the new standard workweek (Coote et al., 2021; Veal, 2020, 2023) but this has not happened.

During the lockdowns there was a major shift towards remote (usually from home) working. Some of this shift has been retained, mainly by professional employees who work to tasks rather than by time (Roberts, 2023b, 2024). However, by the mid-2020s employers were demanding that first their managers, then their staffs, return to the office. Hybrid, working one or two days remotely, appears to have become accepted as normal for professional, and less frequently for other grades of employees. In 2025 28 percent of UK workers were on hybrid schedules (Office for National Statistics, 2025). Commuter travel and allied services were experiencing a sustained loss of passengers and customers.

At the time of peak remote working in 2020 and 2021 time saved from travelling allowed remote employees to increase their paid working time (proving that they were not slacking) and also to gain more leisure time. By 2024 this was no longer the case. Hybrid schedules, mainly for graduate professional staff, enabled those concerned to spread work across a three- or even a four-day weekend and increase their total work time but the gains in leisure time had disappeared.

Relatively long hours of work vis-à-vis the present-day normal do not depress participation in out-of-home leisure activities. These participation rates are more sensitive to income than time. Hotspots and time coordination difficulties are common in households with two or more working adults whatever their total paid workloads (Southerton, 2000). People choose to clutter their time by responding

to voicemail, email and texts the moment they arrive (Wajcman, 2015). Busyness, being in demand, appears to have become a status earner (Gershuny, 2005; Veal, 2016).

4.2. Money

Western economies have been unable to maintain the rates of economic growth achieved during the "30 glorious years". Growth in GDP has generally been beneath rather than at least two percent per year. The UK economy virtually stagnated from the banking crisis of 2008 until the mid-2020s (Bell, 2024; Resolution Foundation, 2022). Growth per capita looks even more depressing.

Most people's living standards have been more affected by the redistribution of income and wealth than headline GDP statistics. In the 1980s managers and professionals spurted ahead of the rest and their gains have not been lost (Bell, 2024). The Gini co-efficient (where zero is total equality and 1.0 is where one actor has everything) rose by eight points during the 1980s: an unusually large and rapid rise. Subsequently the rise has continued but more slowly: up by another three points between 1990 and 2015 (Bell, 2024). Income growth has continued to outpace the rest at the very top where professional elites and top corporate managers expect to be made seriously wealthy (Pittaway, 2024).

Economic inequalities intersect with age and life stage differences. The retired include most of the wealthiest people in the country. The most widely held wealth is in houses followed by pension funds. However, at the very top of the wealth ladder people own large estates of land, and also have personal savings in trusts (onshore or offshore) in mixtures of stocks and shares, houses that are rented, and cash. Some of the wealthiest own businesses with employees (Johnson, 2023). However, as well as the wealthiest the elderly include some of the country's poorest: virtually zero wealth and incomes topped up by pension credit to a level that enables them to live but little else.

The big winners from the redistribution of leisure time and money have been well-off older people. They have become the prime market for leisure that is expensive in its demands on both time and money. Ocean cruising is one example. However, the winners are not all multi-millionaires. They include young single adults who are progressing in management and professional careers or running successful start-ups. There are couples in their 50s earning peak salaries whose children have left home. In 2025 the fans attending Oasis concerts in the UK spent an average of £766 on tickets, travel, accommodation, food, clothing and accessories. In 2025 the band had attracted younger fans, but many at the concerts were reliving experiences of the 1990s (Barclays, 2024). Football fans pay even more to follow their clubs and country to international fixtures and tournaments.

The big losers from redistribution have been child rearing working families on median and lower incomes, and young people who cannot afford to step onto the home ownership "ladder" (Acharya & Broome, 2024). Minimum legal pay per hour in Britain has risen from its introduction in 1999 at 49 percent of median

earnings, to 65 percent in the mid-2020s. This has enlarged the bunch on median or lower salaries who often describe themselves as "just about managing". Pay rises are trimmed by reduced eligibility for welfare benefits and outpaced by prices of essentials (food, rent, energy, broadband and water). An outcome is around 30 percent of children in Britain being reared in poverty (officially defined as beneath 70 percent of median income moderated for housing costs, household size and composition). At the bottom of the labour market, as minimum pay per hour has risen, jobs have been degraded by reductions in hours, especially guaranteed hours, and indefinite have been replaced by temporary contracts (Cominetti & Murphy, 2024; Navani & Florisson, 2024). Young adults are failing to match their parents' achievements in pay, career progress and housing when at the same age (Roberts, 2025). Meanwhile, state welfare spending has shifted from children and working age adults to pensioners. The former have lost between £1500 and £2600 per year (Brewer & Clegg, 2024).

More money for discretionary spending is no longer a shared experience. It divides the population into those with plenty and those with little. The end of the cheap food and energy era was signalled by quadrupling world oil prices in the early-1970s. "Commodities" have grown scarcer and scarcer relative to demand. Lower income bands are penalised most heavily because they spend the highest proportions of their incomes on these "basics". As in the 1970s, in the 2020s poorer households have struggled to cope with spikes in food and energy prices. Less leisure time within the range of variation in present-day Britain does not suppress participation in leisure activities. Money is far more efficacious (Roberts, 2023a).

4.3. Providers

Britain's era of social democracy was already waning when it ended abruptly with the election of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister in 1979. Social democratic political economies spread prosperity as widely as possible. Their replacement, called neo-liberal, is an equally powerful engine for syphoning wealth and income upwards and from public into private ownership. State spending on public leisure has been among the casualties.

State funding for the London based major arts companies (music, dance and drama) has been cut. These are still national prestige institutions. They may perform live mainly for the well-to-do, but they also train the pools of musicians and actors from which stars of popular culture emerge. These are major export industries for the UK. So is heritage which draws most of the leisure visitors to Britain. Yet funding for Historic England, and also for Natural England (responsible for sites of natural beauty and other significance) has been cut. The budget of the BBC which has a global reputation for its impartial news reporting and the quality of its drama, has been slashed. Domestic and international news have reduced budgets for camera and microphone facing and support staff. Even after modest increases from 2025 the budget of the DCMS (which funds the national arts, sports,

countryside and heritage agencies) and the BBC which is funded by a licence fee, was to end the decade a full 40 percent in real terms beneath its 2009-10 level (Aref-Adib et al., 2025).

Private enterprise has been invited to move into the vacated space. So Britain now has opinionated new channels on television. Commerce is now responsible for most viewer and listener hours. This has been a global trend. In the 1970s over 80 percent of Europe's broadcasting was public service. In the 2020s well over 80 percent is commercial, funded by a mixture of viewer subscriptions and advertising (Hesmondalgh, 2019).

Local authorities' incomes and spending have been reduced. Core funding from various national and local taxes was set in 2025 to end the decade 18 percent down in real terms on its 2009-10 level (Aref-Adib et al., 2025). Community leisure facilities have been casualties. Sports centres and swimming pools have closed or reduced their opening hours. Museums have sold artefacts in order to meet day-to-day running costs. Items disposed of may have been donated for the enjoyment of the public in perpetuity. The same applies to parks and open spaces that have been sold for housing or retail use (see Roberts, 2016).

Fortunately, the voluntary sector has been resilient. Enthusiasts have kept local music, drama and sports clubs afloat. Some have taken over the management of civic assets—swimming pools, town and village halls. Prime minister Cameron (2010-2016) hoped that a Big Society would fill gaps left by the state's withdrawal of support. Actually, the big society already existed. It had pioneered uses of leisure time from the 19th century onwards and had received increased state support during the era of social democracy. It was surviving difficulties posed by Cameron's own as well as previous neo-liberal governments. However, voluntary associations have not been able to prevent an invasion by commercial culture. All types of leisure providers have become more business-like, acting as if they were profit-seeking (see Roberts, 2004).

The difficulties faced in recent times by public sector leisure providers are not due solely to hostility to state supported leisure. Governments in Western democracies now face electorates who resist raising taxes while making increasing demands for education, housing, health care and more. Under neo-liberalism state spending has switched from other public services to health, education, and more recently towards defence. Leisure scholars have sound research evidence that participation in active leisure (anything out-of-home to attend an event, be part of an audience, or just meet friends) is the best way to improve life satisfaction (for an early source see Hall & Perry, 1974). Yet as in Hall and Perry's research, the public continue to rank their health, family relationships and jobs in which they feel valued ahead of leisure activities for their quality of life. Leisure scholars may have convinced each other but so far they have not succeeded with the wider public. Meanwhile, public sector providers have disappeared from leisure studies conferences and as significant funders of leisure research.

4.4. Uses

Since the 1970s there have been no new arrivals with similar impacts on leisure as television, the motor car and international tourist travel between the 1940s and 70s. Music festivals have become more numerous and better attended since the 1980s, but the first Glastonbury (admittedly a modest affair) was in 1970 and Woodstock (in New York State) was in 1969. Raves and late-night disco clubbing began after the 1970s. Cell phones have been marketed since the early-1990s by when "online" had begun. In the mid-2020s small screen hardware and content were the fastest growing items in consumer spending (Barclays, 2924). Mobile phones have accumulated uses but the changes to daily life do not equal in scale the changes between the 1950s and 70s, which in turn look modest when compared with the invention of uses for free time in the second half of the 19th century, then the advent of radio, moving pictures and music records between the World Wars.

Television became the elephant in the leisure room between the 1940s and 60s. Cinema and the radio lost most of their audiences then partly recovered by targeting niches where television was weak: cinemas for young people with no homes of their own, and talk and music by radio (Roberts, 2006, 2011). Since the 1990s it is "traditional" television that has taken a battering from streamed and internet services. Audiences for linear television (watched at the time of broadcast) have shrunk.

Time spent watching a small screen (television set, PC, laptop, tablet or smartphone) accounted for 70 percent of all leisure time in the mid-2020s. It was 80 percent during the Covid lockdowns (Roberts, 2023b). The elephant has grown even larger but without depressing forms of active leisure. Like the radio then television, the small screen fills otherwise vacant time. It illustrates the ability of commerce to find ways of making money from purposeless uses of free time (Zizek, 2019).

The Covid lockdowns appear to have been the catalyst for wider economic inequalities and increased paid working time per household with adults of working age to make an impact on leisure. Demand has risen for expensive uses of leisure such as ocean cruises and top-priced restaurants which book-up weeks ahead. The market has grown rather than shrunk for slow leisure (Hohlbaum, 2009; Honore, 2004) which has high costs in time and money. Meanwhile, demand for budget, mass market overseas holidays, the services of the hospitality sector (pubs, restaurants, cafes, hotels), gym memberships, visits to museums, galleries and historical sites had not regained pre-Covid levels in the mid-2020s (Office for National Statistics, 2024a, 2024b). Young people were consuming less tobacco, alcohol and the various recreational drugs. Disco-clubbing had not regained the pre-Covid crowds. More students were eating vegetarian or vegan (NatCen Social Research and Institute for Employment Studies, 2023). These are trends that one would expect from wider money inequality alongside a general commercialisation of leisure provisions.

4.5. Leisure Studies

Leisure studies need a 21st century mission. "Keeping people happy in grim times" will not suffice. At the time of leisure studies' formation it was about growth, about people whose needs were met and who could ascend a ladder of wellbeing. The growth, post-scarcity and post-necessity grand narratives about leisure are now history. Leisure activities may be good for wellbeing whether people are time and money rich or poor, but failure to engage with 21st century trends will be an existential crisis for leisure studies. The subject needs to restore historical relevance.

Leisure and other scholars have other 21st century concerns, but these are relatively petty, not existential. Scholars are inevitably sensitive to developments in their wider higher education fields. As in most other countries, higher education in the UK has expanded hugely since the 1970s. A bachelor degree has lost value in the labour market. The class of the degree, the subject studied, and the awarding university all make a difference. Universities in the UK face financial difficulties. Some are pruning weaker units. Leisure scholars are not alone in worrying about how they fare in the metrics used by their employers. A response by leisure studies and allied units has been to shelter within stronger academic fields, usually health sciences, or management or business schools. Thus, the study of leisure has been loosening its links with other social sciences, and the "L" word has been disappearing from department and course titles (Fletcher et al., 2017). The field has splintered into different types of leisure (sport, tourism) then micro-specialisms (lifestyle sports, eco-tourism) or into the leisure of specific socio-demographic groups—sexual minorities, or an ethnic or immigrant group—forever foraging cervices in which scholars can instantly claim to be world experts. The greater the density of the forest of leisure specialisms, the greater the difficulty of scanning the whole (Pitas, 2023). There have been similar developments in Australia and New Zealand (Towers et al., 2018). Yet the leisure studies field is not disappearing. Conferences are adequately attended. The journals receive sufficient inflows of papers (Adie et al., 2025; Carr, 2022). Leisure studies are surviving. It could and should be thriving.

5. Discussion

Members of the public have no reason to be sensitive to or aware of how the leisure trends of the 1950s-70s have subsequently halted (growth in leisure time for working households) or reversed (widening replacing narrowing economic inequalities). Households whose total paid working time has risen will have been able to adjust by speeding up housework or reducing small screen time (both are great shock absorbers). Those who have benefitted from the growth in top incomes will have been able to decide whether to spend more or to save. They are most likely to attribute their good fortune to career progress and merit (Reeves & Friedman, 2024). These trends cannot have shaken households from normal routines on a scale comparable to the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021.

It has been different for leisure providers and their employees. Public sector

organisations and clients who depend on state financial support have shrunk. Staff have lost jobs and career opportunities. Commercial enterprises have filled the space but without creating long-term secure careers for their staff.

Leisure studies resemble providers in that it is necessarily affected by changes in the leisure field. Failure to respond will leave a zombie. For enlivenment leisure studies needs to rebuild its links with cognate social sciences. The first generation of leisure scholars were necessarily from cognate disciplines. Economists brought debates about time versus money preferences (Gratton & Taylor, 1985; Vickerman, 1979). Geographers made the case for more land for leisure in urban and rural areas (Patmore, 1972). Sociologists brought theories about the work-leisure relationship (Parker, 1971), the need to set leisure in its political economy context (Clarke & Critcher, 1985), postmodernism (Rojek, 1995), and the social construction of gender (Green et al., 1990). These were the years when LSA conferences hosted real debates.

In the 21st century sociologists have been identifying new or newly significant socio-cultural divisions: higher education graduates versus the rest (Bennett et al., 2009; Le Roux et al., 2008), jazz joining classical as a highbrow taste (Savage, 2015); the significance of wealth, especially inherited wealth (Piketty, 2015; Reeves & Friedman, 2024), and omnivore and univore replacing highbrow and lowbrow (van Eijck, 1999; Peterson, 1992; Peterson & Jern, 1996).

Leisure scholars might track these divisions or explore divisions highlighted in their own field. The types of people to focus on given 21st century trends are those who are well-off in leisure time and ability to spend, and the time-rich but money poor, both mainly retired pensioners. Then there are those who are money rich but time poor (in high income working households), and the big losers, the working poor. The leisure profiles and wellbeing of all these groups are under-investigated. The findings are difficult to predict which is why research is needed. How to proceed? There are lessons from leisure studies' own past. We have learnt that leisure works best as a dependent rather than an independent variable, and that investigators obtain clearer results if they start with types of people rather than types of leisure. This is because leisure is complex: it has many uses that cannot be condensed into a linear interval scale or a small number of categories.

Whether money rich or poor, we cannot be sure that the behaviour of today's retired will be different from that described by Long and Wimbush (1985) 40 years ago. Most were continuing as before retirement in so far as they were able to do so. They were sticking to routines organised around family and work, including times for bed and rising. Routines keep us in contact with others who are following their routines so that friends and family members meet predictably without prior arrangement (Emler & McNamara, 1996). Leisure activities become "musts" when built into people's routines. Forced to make savings when food and energy prices, and interest rates, spiked in the early-2020s, the UK population did not cutback on leisure spending. People saved on food (take-aways and value brands instead of dining out) and energy (central heating lowered or even switched off

during cold months) (Office for National Statistics, 2024a). Holidays abroad are now priorities for many UK families (ABTA, 2025; Office for National Statistics, 2024b). Yet when broken as during the lockdowns, these leisure practices may be slow to regain their routine status and priority.

Children who are growing up in the two working age groups need to be part of the investigations. Sociologists (and leisure scholars if they wish) now have access to a series of birth cohort studies. The oldest began with a sample born in 1946 and remains ongoing. It has become possible to search for ages and life stages when interests, tastes, habits and skills (languages, sport and cultural) are acquired easily but with difficulty later on. The further back we search the more we find ourselves reaching deep into childhood for the foundations of adult leisure (Birchwood et al., 2008; Feinstein et al., 2006; Glevarec et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2015). Before entering adulthood people can be set on lifelong leisure careers. Those who are joining clubs in later life turn out to be those who were acting similarly when they were young (Scott & Willits, 1989). It may take a generation for the full leisure implications of economic and political changes to become evident. We should therefore bear in mind that currently retired cohorts were baby boomers who grew up during the 30 glorious years.

New grand narratives will arise from these investigations. Economists and sociologists can be left to identify the drivers of change. Leisure scholars should be the experts on the implications for the everyday lives of different sections of the population, and especially sensitive to the likelihood of a generation lag. Leisure interests and practices can be the reliable threads in life courses where little else can be relied on to last.

6. Conclusion

So where has it gone? Gains in leisure time since the 1970s have gone entirely to the retired. Modest increases in GDP (and more) have been sucked up the class structure. Commerce has become the increasingly dominant leisure provider. The main growth in uses of leisure time and money has been providing and delivering content to small screens. This has been the least inventive leisure half century since Britain became a mainly industrial and urban society.

Twenty-first century leisure studies need big stories. New grand narratives will start in the 21st century macro-economic, political and social contexts. They will focus on groups who have gained and lost during the unequal and divisive growths in leisure time and spending, and the switch towards commercial provision. The grand narratives of the 1960s and 70s have outlived their usefulness except in histories of leisure and leisure studies. They need to be, and they can be replaced if leisure scholars keep the boundaries of their field open to two-way traffic with cognate social sciences plus leisure providers and the wider publics who, perhaps surprisingly, are easily interested in what leisure scholars are saying. Of course, this depends on leisure studies having big stories about what is happening in their field. Leisure is no longer a site of shared uplifting experiences. It has become a

site of differences and divisions that have now been widening for over half a century.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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