

FOCUS ON SOCIOLOGY OF LEISURE: FROM THEORY TO DAILY LIFE

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Abstract: *This study aims to underline the importance of continuing sociological research into leisure practices, in order to better understand social life. I start by explaining the concept of leisure, after which I go over the main approaches and established sociological theories dealing with the topic of leisure. The text aims to highlight the importance of maintaining leisure sociology as a field of study. In order to have a complete and complex image of societies, sociological studies cannot neglect leisure, which is an integral part of the daily life of every individual. Leisure should not be seen merely as a time free from obligations and worries, but instead must be understood in the context of the meanings that individuals in contemporary societies attribute to it. Recent analyses of leisure practices underscore the necessity of involving individuals in activities to which they ascribe meanings and purposes, beyond being purely hedonistic. In order to illustrate the change we are currently experiencing in terms of the perspective we have of leisure, the last part of the text presents the results of a qualitative sociological research, undertaken a few months prior. As long as sociological analyses continue to neglect leisure practices, our understanding of power dynamics will be an incomplete one.*

Keywords: *sociology of leisure; serious leisure; casual leisure; corporate work.*

Introduction

Although underutilized, marginal or at least with a low visibility in the Romanian space, the analysis of leisure can uncover a host of relevant social aspects, such as: changes and differences in terms of economic, cultural, social, religious, and political capital (Mărginean, 1996; Rojek et al, 2006; Stebbins, 2006), inequalities in allocation of leisure time, both quantitatively – the amount of free time an individual has in a given day (quantified by the actual time), as well as in terms of the options and opportunities available to individuals. Thus, a global analysis might underscore the fact that both the quantity and the quality of leisure are distributed non-uniformly between the individuals of the same society. Also, a close look at the patterns of leisure may offer crucial details regarding the profiles of individuals and helps better define their habitus; it can be a very accurate indicator of welfare, of social position, of stratification, power relations, and may highlight a social map of individuals making up a society at a given time.

At the international level, we can only truly speak of a sociology of leisure in the true sense of the word starting with the 1950s, after World War II, being developed in a specific context, during which there was intense

pressure for leisure time to be viewed as a serious, important social activity. In this context, sociology of leisure was created a field of sociology in the 1960s and officially recognized with the formation of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee 13 (RC13), in 1970 (Roberts, 2006; Blackshaw, 2010). Then, sociologists from multiple universities had the opportunity to develop and share a common academic interest and lead to the formation of multiple departments, especially in the USA, then also Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and China (Roberts, 2006). Despite all of this, the field had and continues to have difficulties in defining borders and ownership of the area of study.

1. Sociology of leisure: its object of study

The clear definition of the object of study of the sociology of leisure has posed great problems over time. The first definitions of leisure can be identified in Ancient Greece, in the writings of Plato and Aristotle (Koshar, 2002; Rojek, 2006; Spracklen et al, 2017). What we can remember from here is the opposition of leisure in relation to work and the attribution of the function of leisure as a binder – more so than work or war -, seen as a cultural arena in which conversations took place, in which people could engage each other in public discussions, to engage in politics, to create works of art, to play sports, to create music and to carry out free activities that were the very essence of their culture. Leisure was also a privilege of the citizens, of the free people.

Beyond all the philosophical or sociological approaches of the last century, what I think is necessary to remember is that leisure can be operationalized at three contrasting levels (Haywood & Henry 1986; Rojek, 2005: 30): it can be investigated in residual terms, then as time and space for the acquisition of personal pleasure or prosperity, and thirdly it can be analyzed as a "functional activity" through which socially defined goals are achieved, such as social integration, cooperation.

The so-called "residual" definition of leisure is very easy to integrate into research due to its non-normative nature and that is why it is often used at the moment. It views leisure as that time which is not occupied with paid or unpaid work, obligations or duties (Roberts 2006; Roman, 2006). The main criticism of this definition is that leisure is considered to be less important in relation to work or other daily activities and considers leisure practices to be invariably dependent on them (Rojek, 2005). Leisure, seen as time and space for the acquisition of personal pleasures and for the cultivation of the self, strongly links with the area of positive psychology and is one of the recurring discourses at the moment, outside the scientific circles. Starting from Csikszentmihalyi (1997) this definition places a very strong emphasis on motivations, beliefs and perceptions at the individual level and loses sight of the social, historical or cultural context. Therefore, the critique of this vision on leisure aims at the lack of interest of researchers towards the power structures existing in each society, giving too much importance to the decision-making

power of individuals over leisure practices. Looking only in terms of power structures, this definition completely eliminates individual options.

What I think is essential to remember about leisure are the following aspects: leisure is voluntary; although leisure practices are voluntary, they must be considered in the context of existing ideological processes; leisure practices involve a struggle to reach limited resources; the scarcity of resources is the basis of competition, but in the same time, represents the starting point of solidarity; the analyses of leisure must always take into account that space / place and context are in a dynamic relationship; one of the central problems of leisure is ethnocentrism and universalism, which can be diminished by comparative historical analyses; leisure practices always involve power, and power both constrains and legitimizes (Rojek 2005).

2. Theoretical landmarks in the sociology of leisure

Although the sociology of leisure has a history of just over half a century, sociologists studied various forms of manifestation of leisure long before its institutionalization. The sociology of leisure appears in a context of economic prosperity in Western states, in which there was discussion of a possible decrease in paid working hours and an expansion of leisure activities. This sub-branch of sociology experienced a strong development in academia until the 1980s; after the 1990s, sociological studies on leisure began to decline in terms of the volume of research produced, and the field of sociology of leisure began to be largely occupied by other branches of sociology.

Thorstein Veblen - the predecessor of the sociology of leisure. If we aim a staged approach of the sociology of leisure and sociological theories on it, we first turn our attention to Thorstein Veblen, who, although coming from the economic sphere, is the first to focus explicitly on the theorizing of leisure. In *The Theory of Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899/2003), Veblen treats leisure as a "form of competition between modern social elites" (Veal 1992). Starting from ideas discussed by Karl Marx, Herbert Spencers, but also by Charles Darwin, Veblen focuses primarily on the relationship between economy and society, more precisely on how various social classes consume certain goods and services differently and as a differentiator. Like Marx, Veblen provides a critique of capitalist society and divides society into two major social classes, which are in opposition, especially in relation to productive labor.

According to Veblen, the moment that triggers inequalities between individuals is the same time when the division of labor occurs, which can be found ever since the "evolved" barbarian tribes, in which leaders enjoyed certain privileges, spent less time working and procuring the necessary daily life due to their position within the group. Veblen believes the same structure is transmitted to modern society; through the division of labor the same distinction appears between the *industrious class* and the *leisure class* (2003: 5

[1899]), where the industrious class is understood to be made up of the majority of members of society and is the one that produces consumer goods, being involved in productive work.

Broadly speaking, the new lifestyle, specific to those in the leisure class, was associated by Veblen with a predilection for the new rich Americans of the late nineteenth century, eager to accumulate goods whose purpose is no longer simple consumption for the satisfaction of needs, but what determines this accumulation is the prestige that the consumed or accumulated goods offer to the possessor, and thus the wealth and possession of goods becomes something honorable: "Wealth is now inherently honorable in itself and honors its possessor"[1899]). When describing this type of consumption, Veblen uses the concept of conspicuous consumption. Closely related to this concept is that of ostentatious leisure (Comşa, 2006; Hărăguş, 2010), which refers to involvement in activities that are not economically productive, but which give those involved the opportunity to display financial abundance and to attract the admiration and respect of others, having as a first consequence a waste of resources, not only material, but also time.

As a consequence of an increasingly competitive capitalism, which has allowed the development of the leisure class, whose lifestyle is strongly centered on extravagance and waste, there arises what Veblen calls "pecuniary emulation", meaning an attempt of the less wealthy to reproduce the consumption practices of those positioned at the top of the leisure class, in an attempt to join the strongest groups from a social point of view, in their respective society (Comşa, 2006; Hărăguş, 2010). At the same time, those positioned at the top of the hierarchy will constantly try to find new forms of differentiating consumption, inaccessible to the majority. From here, leisure could be used in further studies (Clarke & Critcher, 1995; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2003) to make visible the differences between social classes, to highlight that the main purpose of consumption is to indicate a certain social status and not that of consumption itself.

1960-1970's - the birth of the Thesis of the Leisure Society. In this first period, leisure theorists put a strong emphasis on technological development and hoped that it would lead to an increase and at the same time equalization of living conditions in general and leisure in particular. The idea was also developed by what Gershuny (2003) calls the progressive tendency of individuals to allocate time for recreational activities. What sociologists later considered to be an error in the theory of leisure issued in the 1960s and developed until the late 1970s is to ignore the analysis of power structures, the effect of globalization, or illegal leisure behaviors. free. In short, this period is characterized by a positive view of leisure, in general, in which social and structural factors seem to be omitted from the analysis. Leisure is most often described as a social institution endowed with certain functions, highly valued, for individuals and society as a whole. In this context, free time

counterbalances work and provides workers with a reward and at the same time task detachment frameworks, necessary for recovery after work.

In Western Europe and the United States, in the context of post-war economic and political change - the liberalization of leisure, the diversification and emergence of new forms of leisure - there is an increasing awareness of the importance of leisure. Thus, in the first period of the development of the sociology of leisure (1960-1970), it is characterized by sociological predictions (Bell, 1973; Jenkins & Sherman, 1979; Stonier, 1983) that anticipated the development of a post-industrial society, the decline of working hours, the increase of leisure that would require an education of society towards the use of leisure, in a new, responsible lifestyle. In this first period, the emphasis was rather on the analysis of various forms of leisure, the unit of analysis being often the individual, representative of the middle class. Studies tend to focus mainly on data at the national level (in Western countries), on rather quantitative analyzes - surveys of time use -, starting from the idea of rational behavior and taking leisure trajectories out of leisure experiences. The result is that economic, cultural or political problems are poorly or almost never examined (Rojek, 2009: 119). Rojek says that the main flaw of this paradigm is the confusion or overlap produced between the concept of causality and that of correlation.

During the same pioneering period of the sociology of leisure, the development of a leisure society is increasingly discussed - supported, among others, by Kaplan (1975), Bell (1973) or Dumazedier (1974) - starting from the following simple premise: benefiting from technological progress, industry will become more and more efficient, will be able to produce more high-quality goods in a shorter time, so labor time will decrease and wages will increase more and more. Therefore, the main concern of advanced societies for the next century will be the management of leisure time. Also, economic progress will lead to an increase in resources in the area of education, health, culture, to a welfare state.

Also now, the interest of the French School of Sociology in the issue of leisure is beginning to develop more intensely, in a context in which the sociology of work and the interest of researchers in capitalist society had also developed substantially. At the heart of this interest was the relationship between the norms and values of leisure and the implications for the development of society and culture (Dumazedier & Latouche, 1962). So the branch of leisure sociology in France, as in the United States, became increasingly visible due to the awareness of the importance of activities outside of work hours in a changing society and in the context of economic progress. Due to financial stability, new forms of leisure begin to appear and become accessible, which arouses the interest, motivation and at the same time the concern of researchers in the social sciences.

Through the work of pioneers in the field of leisure sociology, leisure practices become of interest for sociological analysis and are often put in a relationship of codependence with other spheres of daily life. Although the

thesis of the leisure society has been drastically criticized, the role of the pioneers of leisure sociology cannot be disputed, especially due to the courage to take leisure activities out of anonymity, giving them a central position in understanding and explaining economic development and social change (Rojek, 2005), especially in capitalist societies.

Criticisms of the Thesis of the Leisure Society (Sociology of Leisure after 1980). Against the background of the lack of benefits of technological progress over leisure, in the 1980s, paradigm shifts appeared in the sense of revising existing theories and including in analysis what free time meant in the context of globalization and social change, changes in employment and growth in life expectancy in Western countries. The review of leisure theory focused primarily on issues related to class, gender, and structural inequality. Also, the studies from this period showed the limitations that the interventionist state has in solving class inequalities. Therefore, in the second period of the sociology of leisure, leisure practices are understood and interpreted through the use of conflictualist theories, among which the neo-Marxist critique stands out. Unlike structuralism, which designates society as a factor of control over individuals, neo-Marxist theories consider that it is not society that exercises power over individuals, but in every society there are certain individuals who hold power and have the necessary means of control over others. Thus, the analyzes focus mainly on the concept of power and class relations, often placed in a historical context. From this perspective, each social class has its own means of leisure, specific only to them.

Factors such as income, education and the social environment, which neo-Marxist analyzes often take into account, explain much more about the behavior of individuals than do cultural theories, which consider that individuals are free to express themselves in their free time in any way they want. In contrast to this approach, which hardly explains the inability of individuals to decide on their own free time, neo-Marxism seeks to explain the mechanisms of control over individuals by resorting to leisure activities; first, each individual has a certain amount of free time that does not belong to them, it is not individuals who decide how much free time they have or not, but those who hold power (for example: number of days off in a year, number of days off in -one week, the way work is organized and the duration / interval of breaks, accessible forms of leisure). In addition to the fact that individuals cannot decide how much free time they have, external factors largely decide how this time will be “consumed” (Rojek, 2005, 2009). We can never speak of undifferentiated access to leisure goods and services for all individuals.

What is often blamed on neo-Marxism is that its emphasis on “power” completely inhibits personal impulses, which can no longer take place even in private. According to neo-Marxism, individuals have the impression that they act voluntarily, although in their actions they are always controlled. In other words, autonomy and individuality represent two great illusions of individuals, which the general vision of leisure (time without obligations, on which each

individual can decide how / with whom and where to spend it) manages to feed more strongly than anything else.

One of the challenges facing researchers in this period is to show how the class struggle manifests itself through the analysis of forms of leisure. Exponents of this narrative line are Clarke and Critcher (1985). They make a rigorous critique of the way in which various authors treat the issue of leisure and consider that leisure cannot be understood and problematized outside a historical context, outside the "structural and cultural processes that constitute society" (ibid.: 48). Their critique of leisure texts in general is most often directed at the authors' non-historical view and the fact that most portray or describe situations valid for middle-class people, with a strong emphasis on the expression of individual freedoms, without trying to observe inequalities at the societal level.

Leisure as a form of control over individuals has increased significantly with the development of the consumer society (Clarke and Critcher, 1985; Baudrillard, 2008; Rojek, 1985, 2009). As society became increasingly obsessed with consumption, understanding the ideological implications of what was consumed became an extremely pressing issue especially for the interventionist state (Cassar in Spracklen et al., 2017: 541) while also providing a very enticing environment of sociological analysis (Baudrillard, 2008). Leisure goods and services, in post-industrial societies, induce the idea that they fulfill the important function of building individual identities, which in many situations has led to increased consumption, to excesses (Roberts, 2006). Thus, individuals are driven to consume more and more or to try to acquire hard-to-reach goods, resulting in the reproduction of power structures in the cultural space and in social life (Rojek et al., 2006), leisure becoming a source to observe the manifestation of hegemonic forces. But as hegemony is difficult to conceptualize, one of the criticisms leveled at researchers is in relation to how they classify, specify, or differentiate activities that strengthen hegemony from those that do not.

Continuing the critical perspective: feminist theories. Also detached from the critical perspective, feminist theories, approached rather in specific studies, focus on power relations, referring to gender inequalities in terms of duration and access to forms of leisure. The emergence of feminist theories coincides with a shift in the interest that sociology has faced in general, at a time when social analyzes no longer focused primarily on work; now the analyzes on unpaid work, domestic life, consumption and the relationship between work and leisure are beginning to be much more visible (Wearing, 1998). This approach often speaks to a "double burden" on women created by both paid work and domestic work. Looking only at the statistics provided by the "Time Use Survey" or "American Time Use Survey" we can see the gender inequalities in the allocation of free time; regardless of the state we are referring to, women have less free time compared to men, but this inequality cannot be explained only in terms of statistics, but requires an in-

depth analysis, in which, in addition to the feminist perspective, a number of cultural factors are taken into account.

The role of Betsy M. Wearing - "Leisure and Feminist Theory" (1998) - is undeniable in the field of leisure analysis. It details all other theoretical approaches and at the same time criticizes the lack of questioning the position of women in other perspectives, in terms of access to leisure. From her position, she criticizes theoretical approaches based on masculine worldviews that place too much emphasis on the sphere of production and work ethic (especially specific to men) and ignores the experiences of everyday life lived by women. In her presentation of various theoretical approaches, Wearing tries to explain how the sphere of power, knowledge and theory are interconnected, starting from two assumptions stipulated in the very introduction of her text: the first is based on Weber's (2003 [1904]) notion of "elective affinity", and the other on Foucault's concept of "discourse" (1980 in Wearing 1998: IX). Elective affinity refers to the fact that the ideas that are adopted and propagated in various historical moments are those that serve the interests of the groups in power, in the case of the present text, those of men, through the prism of which leisure was problematized. Then, she uses the concept of "discourse" as problematized by Foucault, as a set of statements, in written form, which the recipients take as credible and which are built to authority and universally recognized as knowledge, these "messages" being eventually issued in a world under male hegemony. Her book also focuses on the various leisure experiences that women face and practice in their daily lives and how they relate, what they mean to them. Last but not least, Wearing shows how leisure is an arena in which a struggle is waged to challenge male hegemony.

What is often criticized in all other theoretical perspectives is that, with a few exceptions, they were not receptive in recording empirical data on the forms of leisure in which women were involved in the first half of the twentieth century. The established sociological texts did not focus at all on the forms of leisure practiced by women, and the empirical data either underestimated the differences between gender and age, or totally omitted from the analysis the ways in which women spend their free time, although the discrepancies between genres were colossal. Feminism and post-structuralism also bring a critique of social theories, which are based on assumptions from the perspective of "white" elite men.

The feminist perspective is a desire of researchers to make women's lives more visible and to reduce gender inequalities in the sphere of leisure, as well as in other spheres of social life, to reduce oppression and to improve the quality of life of women. Lorbel (1998) argues that gender is institutionalized and aims at sexual stratification. Gender is so endemic, because apart from seeing differences we cannot justify inequalities. In the same narrative, Monica Roman (2006: 67) says that "the crucial problem is not that women have less 'primary' free time than men, but that their free time is not of the same quality

as men's." This differentiation between genders remains constant even after the individuals leave the field of work, as I will show in the last part of this text.

Post-structuralism and understanding power. As I have tried to point out, a number of researchers have shown a particular interest in the concept of power in relation to the forms of manifestation of leisure, to understand how it works and is exercised over the leisure options of individuals in liberal and / or neoliberal societies. Starting from the analysis of the relationship between power and structure, structure and agency, post-structuralism detaches itself from the emancipatory policies of the leisure society thesis and offers a much more heterogeneous reading of social life, leisure and recreation than that offered by other paradigms (Rojek, 2005).

Post-structuralism began to impose itself in leisure studies since the 1980s by problematizing the individual's relationship with the self and social institutions, thus managing to provide valid explanations to date. This perspective stands out both from the arid individualism, which emphasizes too much the autonomy of the individual, but also from the structural vision, which annihilates any manifestation of individual beginnings (Rojek et al., 2006). It uses methods that demonstrate that the power of "society" is only partial and that individuals or groups do not lack the ability to decide, only that there are certain patterns of thinking (emotional intelligence) specific to individuals with a common socio-cultural background. Post-structuralism looks at the relationship between power and freedom, which outlines contemporary forms of subjectification and social commitment, which makes the manifestation of forms of leisure in Western societies offer a very good field of study.

Researchers who have been framed under the dome of this perspective have managed to develop a new way of interpreting the liberal vision of leisure, influential in Western societies. Their task was to show that it is no longer pertinent to look at leisure strictly in positive terms, as a reward, as free time without constraints or obligations, but we must have a much more nuanced perspective in which to look at - on the one hand, the subtle forms of control that are manifested through the forms of leisure, and on the other hand, through the prism of individual options. What liberal and then neoliberal societies manage to create is a strong sense of freedom instilled in individuals, which manifests itself in all spheres of daily life, especially in terms of leisure activities. Along with this freedom, individuals also feel a strong responsibility for their actions, so that neoliberal society simultaneously creates a sense of full individual freedom, but also a leisure ethics that ensures the self-responsibility of each individual. In other words, at a theoretical level, individuals have access to a colossal variety of leisure options, but depending on individual choices they are either rewarded or penalized, which makes each one exercise self-control over one's actions.

The study of leisure becomes more and more demanding as its forms diversify, fueled by the consumer society, but more importantly, as new prerogatives that impose an excessive concern of the individual for himself

begin to develop. Here I am referring to the fact that individuals are inspired by the idea of self-cultivation / development (physical activities, personal development techniques, adjustment of body and mind) during leisure, in order to be better prepared for the demanding and competitive daily life. These indications remain valid even after the moment of retirement, being very present in the public space as a discourse on the need for active aging.

In the last twenty years, no certain dominant paradigm has been imposed in the sociology of leisure, but contemporary theorists - including Rojek (1991, 1995, 2005, 2010), Veal (1992, 2011), Wearing (1998), Aitchison (2003), Roberts (2006) and Stebbins (1982, 1997, 2006, 2015) - have made significant contributions to the conceptualization of leisure, which is most often understood as part of a complex network of power relations. Today, many of them often resort to the classics of sociology: Marx, Foucault, Bourdieu and Baudrillard, but also Veblen.

3. Current directions in sociological research on leisure practices. Case study: corporate employees.

Almost all the studies on the Romanian space focus on the interpretation of statistical data, often highlighting the differences between socio-demographic categories. Most of these analyzes point to a structuring of free time towards private space and do not have the capacity to capture the motivations and direction towards which leisure practices tend, not only due to their general character, but also due to the lack of data collection at short intervals (Tobias, 2019). For example, the Time Use Survey contains the most complex database on the structure of time, but the distance between two waves of research is about 10 years (the last time data were collected in 2012). Alternatively, sociologists also use data provided by Eurostat, but they can only provide a general overview. In order to understand the motivations and mechanisms behind the actions of individuals and at the same time to develop new approaches in the sociology of leisure, the importance of qualitative studies cannot be neglected.

A major change in the social perception of leisure occurred at the same time as the change in perspective regarding work (Rojek, 2009). With the emergence of flexible jobs, with the decline of the manufacturing sector along with the tendency of consumers to differentiate (Binkley, 2014) a new vision of leisure begins to develop. At the same time, the neoliberal ideology makes its presence felt in almost all spheres of daily life, and the delimitation between productive and unproductive time is blurred. The distinction between work and leisure is increasingly difficult to define (Rojek, 2005). At present, leisure can no longer be perceived as an unproductive time, but more and more often it is perceived as a time and space for personal improvement (Tobias, 2016).

To understand the distinction between "productive" and "unproductive" leisure, it is essential to understand a new key concept for contemporary sociology: serious leisure. Robert A. Stebbins (1982, 1997, 2006) is the one who introduces the concepts of serious leisure and casual

leisure to illustrate, by comparison, what the former refers to. Serious leisure is considered to be more important and is the one that gives the name of a new perspective in leisure studies. What differentiates serious leisure from casual leisure can be synthesized through six characteristics, these being: 1) the need to persevere in the respective activity; 2) willingness to develop a career in the field; 3) the need to make an effort to gain knowledge and skills; 4) by practicing this form of leisure, the individual obtains special benefits; 5) acquiring a unique ethos in society; 6) the development of an attractive personal and social identity (Stebbins, 1982). The importance of practicing a leisure activity in the category of serious leisure began to be exposed through the neoliberal lens of specialists in leisure studies, psychologists, company managers, trainers or pedagogues against the background of the change of vision regarding how it would be desirable that "respectable" individuals should spend their free time in order to continuously develop and define the self clearly.

This change of perspective on how free time begins to be perceived, has made possible the development of a prolific industry that satisfies all consumer desires. Unlike the perspective on leisure until 8-10 years ago, in which hedonistic practices were not incriminated at all, the new range of offers (especially dedicated to the middle class living in large cities in Romania) includes programs and practices with a rather strong sense of utility. As I have seen from the 20 interviews conducted with people employed in various positions in corporations, the leisure activities that attract them the most are those aimed at a specific goal and which are quite close to what Stebbins called "serious leisure."

Starting from the newest directions of study, which discuss a change of vision on the meanings given to leisure, I started a field sociological research. For 8 months I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews, through which I aimed to record as many aspects of the lives of individuals working in corporations. The structure of the interviews followed the methodology required in lifestyle interviews and had a minimum duration of 70 minutes. Being a qualitative research, whose purpose was represented by understanding how to assign the value of leisure practices, the selected sample was one of convenience. In the selection of respondents, I was careful that the people I talked to (individually) did not have close relationships with the other interviewees, on the one hand in order to maintain their confidentiality, and on the other hand to capture a wide range of opinions from the selected niche. I also tried to take into account a similar weight between genders, as well as between married and unmarried. In the end, the analysis is based on the reports of 9 men and 11 women. Out of the total of 20, at the time of the interviews, 8 were married, another 4 were in long-term relationships and cohabiting with the partner, and another 8 either did not have a partner or did not consider that they were in a very solid relationship.

In my sociological research, I was interested in how individuals relate to their own free time. Beyond the way leisure is structured, I focused on the

meanings that individuals give to their actions and on the most valued actions related to free time. Behind the desire to find out which are the appreciated leisure activities and which are the discredited ones, there was never a desire for a value judgment. Through this value judgment that I requested from the respondents, I aimed to find out to what extent they manage to internalize significant ideologies at the moment. In other words, I was interested to find out to what extent the explanations from the perspective of leisure sociology manage to bring a pertinent explanation on the current way of life: a very alert one, in which the delimitation between work and non-work is difficult to establish.

Following the interviews, the leisure activities practiced by individuals could be classified into three major categories: one category is oriented towards the personal development of the individual, another category fulfills entertainment functions, and the third category is rest (Aluaș and Dragan, 1971; Bears, 1996). Compared to my research, in many of the situations, individuals faced difficulties in separating the activities according to the main functions, mentioned above; many of the practices being simultaneously included in two of the categories. Taking into account the selection criteria, it was natural for all respondents to divide their time between work (the first mention for almost all respondents), household activities and leisure activities.

The main factors that influence the leisure activities, felt by the respondents are, as follows, in the order of the frequency of their mentions: lack of time, existing offers, family, own person. Material problems (lack of money needed for that activity) were reported only in two situations. What was common in most of the interviews we conducted was the need to attribute meaning to the actions in which individuals are involved. Another common aspect was the pleasure that individuals feel when they engage in unique, self-organized activities or activities that manage to "produce" something, whether that good is a material one (for example, DIY, hand made objects), whether it accumulates certain knowledge or skills. I understood this as a desire to differentiate oneself from others, to consume safer products or to have unique products that represent them, thus trying to differentiate themselves from mass consumption. Many of them are eager to gain new experiences, whether it is trips to unvisited areas, or new types of activities or emotional states. Of course, apart from these activities, which according to Stebbins' definition, we could include in the category of serious leisure, the strictly hedonistic side of some of the leisure activities on which individuals turn their attention is undeniable. As I said before, one of the aspects noted was the need to involve individuals in meaningful activities. Chris Rojek (2005) notes that individuals are increasingly criminalizing leisure activities that do not pursue a specific goal and are not productive, so hobbies begin to develop.

One of the objectives of the study was to capture the distance between free time practices (what individuals actually do in their free time) and projections on ideal practices (what they would like to do in the ideal way). The most valued activities were those that involved both financial and

temporal resources - such as trips or vacations. Then, among the leisure practices that did not involve the interruption of daily activities, the most valued were those that involved the psychological or physical development of the individual such as: training in high-performance gyms, walks in parks (which, from the perspective of subjects, requires arranging with fitness equipment, music, kiosks with consumer products or books), participation in more diverse activities where they can develop certain skills (courses and practical workshops on various topics), involvement in organizing certain "novel" events (concerts, performances in unconventional spaces).

The interviews showed an increased interest of individuals in leisure activities that contribute to the enhancement of certain skills or individual occupations that are ultimately related to self-government; even if part of their free time is directed towards unproductive activities, the most valued were those to which they can give meaning, there is an attached goal and it facilitates the development of certain skills transferable to other levels of life. A strong meritocratic discourse was easily noticed in many discussions, in which the well-being and psychological comfort of the individual are directly dependent on his actions and the ways in which he decides to think. Quite often the idea has been circulated that for the state of health (physical and mental) the first person responsible is the individual, which is why leisure practices must agree with this goal, to support not just comfort, but also health.

Although leisure practices are not considered basic needs of the individual, there is both theoretical and empirical evidence regarding the functions of leisure activities on the individual. As I pointed out at the beginning of this text, leisure activities have long been considered a privilege of those best placed in the social hierarchy. Especially since the twentieth century, the accessibility of all individuals to leisure activities, regardless of their social position, has increased considerably. Leisure practices are now seen as part of the routine of daily life. As I have shown above, it is possible to establish a hierarchy of preferences regarding leisure practices; the activities at the top of this hierarchy are those that some individuals consider "necessary". Through the research I carried out, I tried to show how the leisure practices valued among those in today's society are extremely strongly focused on oneself and on self-government. The most appreciated leisure practices, as could be seen from the interviews, were those that pursued a predefined purpose, were perceived as "constructive", transmitting skills that can be used in other areas of life.

Final considerations and further directions of study

What I tried to show in this text is that different sociological theories conceptualize leisure in distinct ways depending on a number of factors, such as social context, historical period, institutional affiliation, but especially the perspective from which they look at practices of leisure. In order to understand the forms of manifestation of leisure in contemporary post-industrial, neo-liberal societies, but also the possible future directions of research, it was

necessary to review the main currents that have emerged in the sociology of leisure, especially since the second half of the twentieth century.

Beyond the need to study the enshrined forms of leisure in Western societies and the specific eclecticism of contemporary times, I think it is important to look further at the complex mechanisms that leisure practices involve. If at one time the interest of researchers was closely linked to the development of the middle class, consumerism and concerns about what individuals could do in their spare time, trying to anticipate what influences will take place on culture and society, as later, in another period to turn your attention with predilection to accentuating social inequalities - to unequal access, to structural differences in the use of free time - now I think it is appropriate to look at the strong entrepreneurial spirit, present both when we look on the diversification of offers (the import of ideas and practices from anywhere, from as far as possible), as well as on one of the priority goals of consumers, the desire to add value (intrinsic resources, mental, physical, spiritual or financial resources) and conversion of free time into an exploitable good. If until recently free time was perceived as "wasted", "residual", "consumed", fueled by the entertainment industry, now we are facing a situation where the agents involved create "opportunities" for the development of capacities convertible or usable in work. So, I think that one of the contemporary approaches to leisure could be mainly about this type of "work outside work".

The sociology of leisure, at least in Romania, is not one of the central branches of sociology. Its object of study is often of interest to related fields such as lifestyle sociology and work sociology. An increased attention to the characteristics and mechanisms behind leisure practices could provide a clearer picture of the existing social processes in Romania. Beyond the macro-sociological analyzes of leisure patterns, which I consider very important especially for the overview they offer and for the fact that they allow for comparisons to be made, qualitative studies in this area of interest should be better represented. I believe that this level of daily life deserves to be investigated more closely on the one hand because it provides a very complex environment for analysis of social processes, inequalities and the ways in which power can manifest, and on the other hand because it is of great interest both to individuals who invest time, energy, money, and to the very prosperous industry created around it.

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