

## Northrop Frye on Leisure as Activity

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### Abstract

This article argues that Frye's theory of leisure as an activity (distinct from the leisure industry) represents an example of meliorist thought in relation to culture. Clarifying this view involves contrasting this conclusion about Frye with the Bourdieuan perspective, which makes up the content of the second main section. Before turning to social class, this article considers Frye's discussion of leisure and boredom, and his overall view of the values, activities, historic struggles and class association of three sectors: industry, politics and leisure.

*Keywords* Leisure, education, boredom, distraction, meliorism

### Introduction

Frye's writings on leisure, as well as education, span his whole career. They include, on the one hand, student articles written as early as 1932 and pieces composed just a couple of years before his death in 1991, on the other. Frye lived through the turmoil on university campuses in the late sixties in the United States, when questions about the value of education and therefore leisure came to the fore. In a sense, the relevance that Frye had then is the same as now. We

are still wrestling with questions connected to how we may reconcile an aspirational view of leisure with a sense that, so much of the time, pronouncements about how one *should* spend one's free time betray traces of class privilege. Undoubtedly, Frye is of enormous importance to today's debates on account of the fact that he manages to speak in a meliorist manner about leisure ("activity X may represent a more valuable use of your time") without articulating a classist position ("my leisure is better than yours"). This article moves steadily towards that felicitous conclusion. His outlook, I argue, resists the thrust of a Bourdieuan reading. Frye's thinking about leisure and its opposite, "boredom", is suggestive of two contexts rather than social classes, I explain, and he thinks of the individual as participating in *both* societies.

The first phase of my analysis involves putting together (for the first time) tables of correspondences related to what Frye thinks of as the three main sectors in society: industry, politics and leisure. We learn a great deal about leisure as an activity by positioning it in a table detailing associations connected to all three sectors. The first part then moves on to a look at what Frye has in mind when speaking of leisure as an activity, his association of it with education, and why he opposes it to "distraction" and "boredom". In the second part of my analysis, I continue to clarify Frye's view of leisure as an activity by turning to social class and responding to possible misrepresentations of Frye's meliorist view. Of course Frye's view contrasts starkly with those of many sociologists of leisure, especially sociologists influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose work still has a certain cachet in today's academia. In this second half, Frye's views are related to a hypothetical Bourdieuan critique of his outlook, which serves to further clarify the nature of his thinking.

### **Industry, Politics and Leisure: The Setting for Leisure as an Activity**

In his work, Frye invokes a conventional distinction between industry and politics and connects a number of factors with these two sectors. In the first place, he associates a historic struggle and a *value* with each sector. The struggle fought in the arena of politics is the fight to wrest power from the hands of elites, and the value at stake is (democratic) freedom. In Frye's view

The evolution of political democracy, as it fought against entrenched privilege at first, and then against dictatorial tendencies, has to some extent been a genuine evolution of an idea of liberty, however often betrayed and perverted, and however much threatened still. (Frye 2003, 57)

The historical battle related to industry is the long struggle to prise a share of wealth out of the hands of the bourgeoisie; its value is equality:

The evolution of industry into a society of producers, as labour continued to fight against a managerial oligarchy, has been to a correspondingly modified extent an evolution of an idea of equality. (ibid.)

Frye’s two sets of associations suggest *activities*, which are partly the fruits of the struggles: owning property (industry) and voting in elections (politics). A table of correspondences suggests itself:

<b>Sector</b>	Industry	Politics
<b>Value</b>	Equality	Freedom
<b>Struggle</b>	Against proprietors	Against oligarchs
<b>Activity</b>	Owning property	Voting

To these associations Frye adds social classes, an idea he derives from the work of Matthew Arnold. Though the franchise in Western societies extends to the working class, he associates democratic freedom with the middle class: “liberty is the specifically middle-class contribution to the classless society of genuine culture” (Frye 2005, 320). Similarly, equality has a class connection: it, in his view, is the specifically working class contribution to the same society of culture (ibid.). Thus:

<b>Sector</b>	Industry	Politics
<b>Social class</b>	Working	Middle
<b>Value</b>	Equality	Freedom
<b>Struggle</b>	Against proprietors	Against oligarchs
<b>Activity</b>	Owning property	Voting

Frye thinks of leisure (as an industry) as a third sector in society. Perhaps the first thing to say about his view of leisure is that he has a deep interest in its enjoying some level of independence. High politics and commercial interests are ready to gain control over leisure, but the nation state may protect its leisure industry:

At present the so-called mass media are sponsored mainly by advertising, which means that they are related primarily to the economy: these include television, newspapers, and the dwindling body of fiction and picture magazines which function as retail advertising journals. The turning of sponsorship into direct control, as when an editor is dismissed or a programme cancelled for offending an advertiser, is felt to be pernicious by those who are not completely cynical in such matters. Every effort of a government, however timid, to set up national film and broadcasting companies, and thus to turn over at least some of the mass media to the leisure structure, is part of a fateful revolutionary process. (Frye 2003, 51)

Following his own pattern, Frye associates the leisure industry, particularly a leisure industry free of an excess of economic and political control, with an activity, a historical struggle a value, and even a social class. It is not stated explicitly by Frye, but the struggle in question is clearly the expansion of education, especially historic movements for universal education. (The connection between leisure and education in Frye's theory will become clearer as we proceed.) Fascinatingly, the value which he ties in with this sector is the third revolutionary value: fraternity. Tying leisure in with education and even the work done at universities, Frye speaks of the meaning of fraternity in this context:

Neither political democracy nor trade unions have developed much sense of the third revolutionary ideal of fraternity—the word “comrade” has for most of us a rather sinister and frigid sound. Fraternity is perhaps the ideal that the leisure structure has to contribute to society. A society of students, scholars, and artists is a society of neighbours, in the genuinely religious sense of that word. That is, our neighbour is not, or not necessarily, the person in the same national or ethnical or class group with ourselves, but may be a “good Samaritan” or person to whom we are linked by deeper bonds than nationality or racism or class solidarity can any longer provide. These are bonds of intellect and imagination as well as of love and good will. The neighbour of a scientist is another scientist working on similar lines, perhaps in a different continent; the neighbour of a novelist writing about Mississippi is (as Faulkner indicated in his Nobel Prize speech) anybody anywhere who can respond to his work. The fact that feuds among scholars and artists are about as bitter as feuds ever get will doubtless make for some distinction between theory and practice. (Frye 2003, 57-8)

Additionally, Frye associates the value (fraternity) – and therefore the other elements in this column – with a social class. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly again, he associates fraternity with the aristocracy. The association of leisure with the aristocracy is obvious, but the association of fraternity with the aristocracy may seem dissonant with the thrust of what he is saying. The connection, again, is derived from Arnold. “There is an implicit, if not explicit, link in Arnold’s mind between his third class, the aristocracy, and the third revolutionary ideal of fraternity” (Frye 2009, 67). This association completes the picture.

<b>Sector</b>	Industry	Politics	Leisure
<b>Value</b>	Equality	Freedom	Fraternity
<b>Social class</b>	Working	Middle	Aristocracy
<b>Struggle</b>	Against proprietors	Against oligarchs	Against elitist education
<b>Activity</b>	Owning property	Voting	Leisure as activity

The element not yet explicitly referred to but included in the table is of course leisure as an activity, the theme of this article. To focus upon the most germane points thus far: leisure as an activity in Frye’s thought parallels the business of owning property and voting. Additionally, it is related to a sector, a social class, a historic struggle and a revolutionary value. The next task is to look much more closely at what Frye has in mind when he thinks of leisure as an activity.

But what does Frye mean by leisure as an activity? He sets up a very sharp opposition between leisure, sometimes referred to as genuine leisure, by which he means leisure as an activity, and “distraction”. It is clear that genuine leisure is bound up with sublimation, while distraction is connected to instant gratification, though Frye is sceptical about the possibility of “distraction” affording any type of gratification:

As long as we think of society, in nineteenthcentury terms, as essentially productive, leisure is only spare time, usually filled up with various forms of distraction, and a “leisure class,” which has nothing but spare time, is only a class of parasites. But as soon as we realize that leisure is as genuine and important an aspect of everyone’s life as remunerative work, leisure becomes something that also demands discipline and responsibility. Distraction, of the kind one sees on highways and beaches at holiday weekends, is not leisure but a running away from leisure, a refusal to face the test of one’s inner resources that spare time poses. (Frye 2003, 49-50)

He throws further light on leisure by contrasting it with a yet more illuminating antonym, namely “boredom”. And here the notion that we are actually dealing with distinct activities when focusing on *leisure and its opposite* starts to fade. If we take a closer look at the dividing line, we discover that it is really different *mental attitudes* which are at stake:

The difference between leisure and distraction or boredom is not so much in what one does as in the mental attitudes toward it. It’s easiest to see this if we take extreme examples. Our television sets and highways are crowded on weekends with people who are not looking for leisure but are running away from it. Leisure goes to a hockey game to see a game: distraction or boredom goes to see one team trample the other into the ice. Leisure drives a car to see the country: boredom drives it to get in front of the car ahead. Leisure is not afraid of solitude, quiet, or unplanned stretches of time; boredom has to have noise, crowds, and constant panic. Leisure goes to a movie to see a play; boredom goes to get enough of a sexy or violent or sentimental shock to forget about real life for a while. Leisure doesn’t feel put upon when asked to take some civic responsibilities; boredom never contributes anything to society: it can’t think or create or help others; all it can do is try to forget that job that comes back on Monday morning. (Frye 2002, 224)

Frye can only go so far when focused on leisure as such, however; he must bring leisure into identity with education. Unsurprisingly, the stress falls on practice and the development of skills rather than simple fun: “any leisure activity which is not sheer idleness or distraction depends on some acquired skill, and the acquiring and practice of that skill is a mode of education (Frye 2003, 50). The education which he identifies with leisure extends to any educational activity, but he has formal education in mind, too. On one level, leisure *is* the educational process: “education is the positive aspect of leisure” (Frye 2003, 49). The flight from leisure, then, is really a flight from education. It is for this reason that he wants what he wants for the leisure industry. “Television, newspapers, films, are

all educational agencies", he states (Frye 2002, 225). Unsurprisingly, he stands for the expansion of tertiary education. Adults should return to education as much as possible.

It inevitably follows from the same principle, however, that the university, or at least the kind of thing the university does, can hardly remain indefinitely the exclusive preserve of the young. The question of adult education is still too large and shapeless for us to be able to look squarely at it along with all our other problems of expansion, but, apart from the very large amount of education within industry itself, the adult population will also need institutions of teaching and discussion as the organized form of their leisure time: I think particularly of married women with grown-up families. It is difficult for a government not to think of education in terms of training, and to regard the university as a public service institution concerned with training. Such a conception naturally puts a heavy emphasis on youth, who are allegedly being trained for society, the human resources of the future, as we say. Adult education will no doubt enter the picture first in the context of retraining, as it does now in industry, but before long we shall have to face a growing demand for an education which has no immediate reference to training at all. (Frye 2003, 52)

### **Leisure and Social Class**

It is becoming clear what Frye *prescribes* when thinking of leisure as an activity, but the picture is far from complete. We can make headway by turning to the class implications of his thought. We should avoid identifying the activities *connected to* historic social classes *with* social classes, the owning of some property exclusively with the working classes, etc. The individual at the centre of Frye's outlook appears to be the person who within these parameters transcends class, in that he or she is a producer, a voter and someone who enjoys leisure and/or has participated in the education process to an extent. We might think of him or her for now as a person who *metaphorically* is simultaneously working class, middle class

and an aristocrat. Genuine leisure, then, is one of the activities of the post-class individual.

It will of course be tempting to conclude that Frye has of course not moved beyond class so much as reconstituted it. Any sociologist worth his or her salt will recognize in the figure whose leisure time activities amount to “boredom” the present-day citizen who enjoys a paltry share of wealth and who has no party to vote for, and a moment’s reflection will tell us he or she is an embodiment of an underclass. We are drifting towards the viewpoint of Bourdieu, of course, “one of the most studied sociologists in Leisure studies” (Blackshaw 2013, 164). Bourdieu’s view is well-known, but we might profitably turn to an articulation of it which specifically connects it to leisure:

The most powerful groups in society maintain their positions in the social hierarchy with the aid of not only economic capital, but also the social and cultural capital embodied in their leisure lifestyles: a combination of earning power and superior taste. On top of that, the most vulnerable groups tend to be blamed for their own misfortune, since it is presumed that they lack the right social and cultural resources to determine what is appropriate for the inferior “them”. (Blackshaw 2013, 167)

It is (one might argue) as though Frye is contemptuous of people’s circumstances: their economic and political circumstances as well as their free time. Perhaps he not only feels distaste for the socially-exposed; perhaps he wants them to stay where they are, social mobility itself anathema. Perhaps Frye’s view of leisure as an activity is not so much a meliorist view as a component part of a highly classist *tableau*.

These points must be addressed if we are to complete this elucidation of Frye’s view of leisure as an activity. It would of course be scurrilous to suggest that he can be identified with such views. There is no contempt of the less well-off in his writings, and the classless society stands as the ideal in his work. “Antidemocratic activity”, Frye argues, “consists in trying to put class distinctions on some permanent basis” (Frye 2003, 255). He advocates an economic situation in which people in society can rely on, first, equality of

opportunity and, subsequently, full equality. Additionally, he stands for a society in which everyone has a vote, and everyone has a party to vote for.

Parallel to this, he also stands for a society in which people enjoy leisure. It is in relation to this specific area that Frye's view differs from that of today's academic Left. The current orthodoxy argues that while goals representing advancement within the areas of politics and economics are sound, the setting up of corresponding goals in relation to culture or leisure is a reactionary gesture. Frye, in contrast to this, thinks in terms of advancement across all three activities. Leisure is no different from one's participation in democratic politics or one's position in the economic reality of one's society in that regard. As regards what is desirable here, it is clearly that people favour leisure over boredom. Indeed, in as much as boredom may be removed from a life, no doubt Frye endorses that end.

Despite what might appear a likely conclusion, it is in fact impossible to see Frye's oppositional thinking as suggestive of a class structure. We actually learn more about this division in society by turning to his opposition between an active response and a passive one:

As usual, there are deficiencies in vocabulary: there are no words that really convey the intellectual and moral contrast of the active and passive attitudes to culture. The phrase "mass culture" conveys emotional overtones of passivity: it suggests someone eating peanuts at a baseball game, and thereby contrasting himself to someone eating canapés at the opening of a sculpture exhibition. The trouble with this picture is that the former is probably part of a better educated audience, in the sense that he is likely to know more about baseball than his counterpart knows about sculpture. Hence his attitude to his chosen area of culture may well be the more active of the two. And just as there can be an active response to mass culture, so there can be passive responses to the highbrow arts. These range from "Why can't the artist make his work mean something to the ordinary man?" to the significant syntax of the student's question: "Why is this considered a good poem?" (Frye 2003, 9)

What Frye is unsympathetic towards is not just, say, a hockey crowd baying for blood, but also a poseur at a vernissage. Unless we are prepared to see the latter figure as emblematic of an underclass, we cannot reconstruct his vision along class lines. The opposition Frye has in mind consists, on the one hand, then, of a *context* in which people enjoy leisure, be it the arts or a baseball or hockey game, and, on the other, a parallel context in which, struggling with boredom, people respond passively to the arts (even though they make a point of associating with them) and adopt a rather manic approach to other leisure-time activities.

This line of argumentation should lead the reader away from the notion that Frye's ideas may be interpreted along class lines. The final point should take us further still from that conclusion. It should be remembered that Frye's chief interest is in how individual lives – I would suggest we may say *all individual lives* – are lived with some relation to *both* these contexts. When speaking of genuine leisure and distraction, he is mainly thinking about a “twoness” or dividedness in the mind of a single person. He sees the challenge involved as an individual rather than a social one. A person may be capable of turning to genuine leisure some of the time, but also gets tempted by what Frye terms “boredom”. The individual must optimize the amount of leisure in his or her life. This is the vision Frye would inspire.

### Conclusion

Leisure Studies, if it is an open field capable of processing each and every major twentieth-century thinkers, should admit Frye's into its canon of leisure theorists. Hopefully, that process may be eventuated in the first instance by an articulation of Frye's view of leisure as an activity, fleshing out the social class implications of Frye's outlook, which is, of course, the purpose of this short piece. If this article has achieved its aim, it will be clear that in a situation in which there is extreme nervousness of the part of academics about any situation which might come across as snobbish, Frye provides us with a coherent theory of leisure which suggests more valuable pursuits without reverting to class-based value judgments.

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