LEISURE AND ANCIENT ROME

J. P. TONER

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Preface

I have incurred many debts of gratitude in the course of writing this book and I am pleased to have the chance to repay them, however inadequately, in this preface. For their frequent acts of kindness and generosity, my thanks go to: Neil and Melanie Crosby, Jon Gifford, David Holton, Sue Jeffreys, Chris Kelly, Rustom Khandalavala, Bruce Kiddy, John Leigh, Ashley and Jane Meggitt, Bernard and Brenda Meggitt, Nicholas Purcell, and Andrew Wilson. For their institutional assistance, my thanks to Selwyn College and the staff of the University Library. I am also grateful to Gill Motley and John Thompson of Polity Press for their enthusiastic and long-suffering support.

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This work is dedicated to my parents.

Texts and Abbreviations

Teubner and Oxford classical texts have been used throughout. In the interest of accessibility, I have tried to keep all translations as close as possible to those of the Loeb Classical Library. Classical texts are abbreviated in accordance with the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982, or, if not contained within that work, the *Oxford Greek-English Lexicon*, ed. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968. Other titles are in accordance with the list of sources, with abbreviations, in vol. 3 of A. H. M. Jones' *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey*, pp. 394–406. The titles of periodicals and journals are abbreviated in accordance with the *Index des Périodiques Supplément à L'Année Philologique* 57, ed. P. Rosumek, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1982.

The following abbreviations are used:

ABull	The Art Bulletin
ANRW	Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt
CIL	Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum
CPh	Classical Philology
CQ	Classical Quarterly
FL	Folklore
G & R	Greece and Rome
H & T	History and Theory
JbAC	Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum
JHI	Journal of the History of Ideas
JIH	Journal of Interdisciplinary History
JLR	Journal of Leisure Research

JLS	Leisure Studies: The Journal of the Leisure Studies Association
JMH	Journal of Modern History
JPh	Journal of Philosophy
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JRA	Journal of Roman Archaeology
JRS	Journal of Roman Studies
JThS	Journal of Theological Studies
P & P	Past and Present
PBSR	Papers of the British School at Rome
PLM	Poetae Latini Minores
TLS	The Times Literary Supplement

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History, Leisure, and Ancient Rome

In his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume asks: 'Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English. You cannot be much mistaken in transforming to the former *most* of the observations which you have made with regard to the latter.'[1] As with the Greeks themselves, Hume's idea of history was one which revealed the eternal in the actual. But history has moved on, and, according to Schama, the search for the timeless has been replaced by the 'insoluble quandary' of the historian: 'how to live in two worlds at once; how to take the broken, mutilated remains of something or someone from the "enemy lines" of the documented past and restore it to life or give it a decent interment in our own time and place.'[2] This work is an attempt to confront that double life of an historian by using the concept of leisure to analyse Rome, whilst using the history of Rome to analyse the concept of leisure itself. It is, therefore, an inquiry into both the form of history and its epistemological foundations which is based on the practical reality of writing a history of Rome.

This work is an attempt to write what Bloch called 'une histoire plus humaine'.[3] This is an idea which rests on the belief that history is not lagging behind other disciplines. Rather, history is its own mode of thought, one which is better able to cope with the practical problems of life. Atkinson has observed:

> ... if there is a key to the understanding of history and with it historical explanation, it is that it is a study which has achieved the highest level of sophistication and professionalism, *without becoming theoretical*; without to any significant extent developing a technical vocabulary of its own; and without attempting to classify the

phenomena with which it deals in the systematic way, which is the
only sure path to laws and theories and the sort of explanations
offered by the sciences. There is a marked contrast between the
precision and subtlety of the content of historical thinking and the
somewhat homespun simplicity of its form.[4]

However, this 'more human history' hopes to achieve an understanding
of Roman life and all its problems by becoming, at least in part, theoret-
ical.[5] For the interdisciplinary influences which now affect history mean
that the historian cannot escape from methodology. Nor is this necessarily
a harmful development, so long as theory can be expressed in a somewhat
homespun and simple way. In fact, its very simplicity makes history well
suited to theorizing, in that it cuts to the heart of problems without ever
losing touch with the realities from which they arise.

In that my approach seeks to understand the Romans by treating all
parts of their culture equally, it is akin to a Geertzian cultural history.[6]
Both approaches are informed by our egalitarian social ideals. However,
whilst the use of the term 'culture' has served to reintegrate many of the
different approaches to history, such a centripetal concept has also ob-
scured ideological and class issues by assuming a uniformity in its sub-
jects. It has imposed our ideal of equality on others by seeing equality in
their cultures. The problem is that it is impossible to create a harmonious
image of Roman culture because their society was fiercely hierarchical. In
fact, there is no society where all its members share the same linguistic
and non-linguistic practices. As Crapanzano has asked of Geertz, 'How
can a whole people share a single subjectivity?'[7] Much social knowledge
could be termed 'discultural' in that it is knowledge which is held by a
minority of a society's members, as opposed to cultural knowledge which
is generally understood. Geertz's 'webs of meaning' need to be historicized,
for that will bring out a culture's disparate, inegalitarian elements. A
more human history is precisely that because it does not dictate the terms
of engagement with the past. It allows others to express their culture on
their own terms, however abhorrent those terms might be to us.

The problem for cultural historians is that they tend to treat all evidence
as coming from one ideal, homogeneous entity. The problem with tradi-
tional historians is that they see only the scattered, surface products of
human life – the words and the artefacts – without looking to connect
them in any fundamental way. If a deeper analysis is to be achieved,
human life should be thought of as being temporally and spatially multi-
levelled, with its different strata organically interconnected. The base
consists of the emotive responses and the systems of ordering meaning
which are common to our humanity; then there are the levels of culture
and society; and finally the top plateau, on which the human personality

sits, each with its own psychological structure. Every individual is influenced by the input of every level, and this creates a series of unique products: to the influence of the broader lower levels of geo-cultures (that is to say, Mediterranean culture, Chinese culture, etc.) is added that of higher, more localized, cultures, as well as specific societies and their particular constructs. The study of people therefore entails not only a study of their personal psychology, but of the many cultural, social, and mental levels which support their existence. Each individual displays his or her own influences – their hues and textures as it were – and it is the task of the historian to separate the colours of individuals into their constituent pigments. Different sections of the whole model will be closely matched – reds and blues will be the primary mix in one place, greens and yellows in another – but individuals will reveal their own subtle shadings, and it is these that allow us the opportunity to reconstruct the structures which prop up their way of life. For the differences in colour reflect not only the various levels of a culture, but its discrepancies in discourse, temperament, and behaviour as well.

As such, culture consists of a continuum between humanity and personal psychology. Culture is knowledge, for it is everything that has to be learnt as opposed to the learning processes themselves. Culture is also power, since, as Foucault has shown, knowledge is not ideal and abstract, but material and concrete; it cannot be divorced from the workings of power throughout society at all levels. The study of a culture, therefore, should be a matter of relating knowledge to power relations and structures, not of creating a unified image which naïvely papers over the social cracks. For cultures do not always have the flat, horizontal mien that our modern Western culture possesses; more often they are steeply inclined and stratified.

This image of culture represents not so much an organic unity but an organic totality. It is not a picture of Durkheimian static harmony but of a differentiated, dynamic structure in which the parts and the whole are internally related and reciprocally determine each other. All cultural parts can be seen analytically, as if even the smallest act contains a kind of social DNA which allows us to isolate specific genes and correlate them with societal features. Change comes to be seen as the organic product of constant cultural reproduction. As with an organism, culture is constantly changing in its attempts to maintain its balance; and it is well balanced only if it has achieved both homeostasis – a dynamic inner equilibrium – and a *modus vivendi* between this inner play of forces and its external environment. There is, therefore, a dynamic interplay between ideals and the changing circumstances to which they must adapt. The tensions which afflict a society can be thought of as being a function of this gap between its ideals and reality, and it is in order to bridge it that cultures build

ingenious rationalizations and justifications of the *status quo*, as well as releasing pent-up stress through means as various as moralizing and the law. For cultural forces are directed towards achieving equilibrium by means of attempting to circumvent the obstacles which prevent it from achieving its ideal, harmonious state. All of a society's members, whatever their status, have to turn themselves to this task. The highly intelligent and educated may achieve it more elegantly than peasants but together their collective force provides the basis for the development of mentality.

Since homeostasis is never perfect and organisms are never isolated from their environment, change is the precondition of human life; there is no need to account for it. Yet it is possible to account for the direction and speed that change takes. The direction of influence is not only upwards, from the macro to the micro. There are different levels of both change and explanation. Changes at the top level of culture – human activity in other words – can affect the lower layers. Usually that produces only small-scale change and its influence does not penetrate far downwards, but that is not always the case. Some individual actions can have profound and long-term effects because they converge with structural and cultural forces, and this promotes their speedy transmission. At the lower cultural levels, change is more general and allows a greater range of possible responses from above. Changes are also frequently the result of outside agency, when one culture is forced to join another higher up and the sudden confluence of colour creates a strikingly different tone, or when external disaster splits cultures apart. There is, therefore, no need for an Annalistic favouring of the *longue durée*, since each of these cultural layers has an equal claim to analytical importance (although in practice, it may be discovered that any one level of input has had greater influence than another). After all, the 'deep' are not more important than the 'surface', since they are both what they are only in relation to the other. Take away the surface and what you are left with is no longer deep but shallow.

The principal concern of this model is to illuminate the relationship between ephemeral events and deep cultural forces, but it offers some flexibility as well. It allows a moving picture of growth and development to be shot, and also a still-life to be drawn, whilst simultaneously permitting an amalgam of the two to produce a more general impression of a mode of life and its enduring traits and characteristics. There can be no doubt that this model simplifies, but then that is what a model is meant to do. It is an intellectual construct that 'simplifies reality in order to emphasise the recurrent, the general and the typical, which it presents in the form of clusters of traits or attributes.'[8] There comes a time, though, when you have to stop making models and start dating them. Therefore, the main body of this work aims to produce a history of Rome which

accords with this model by splitting Roman life into its constituent parts and processes.

There are, however, fundamental and practical problems which stand in the way of analysing Roman culture as outlined above. There is the practical difficulty of historical translation, that we cannot understand the Romans' conceptual world in their own terms and to attempt to do so leaves us trapped in an alien culture, prisoners to their tastes and doctrines, or as Geertz puts it, 'awash in immediacies, as well as entangled in vernacular'. To try by using only specialist tools, leaves us 'stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon'.[9] Hence, the one-sided quantifying approach of the social sciences cannot be used. For little can be gained from the wholesale deployment of strategies and signifiers if the result is that we become deaf to the voices of the very people we wish to comprehend. Without doubt, the powerful position from which most of the surviving works from antiquity were written and their ideological content cannot be ignored (indeed, their rhetoric is at the heart of an attempt at cultural analysis), but to reduce their beliefs to power matrices and data alone is to run the risk of losing touch with the harsh immediacies of their lives. If we are to discover anything about what it meant to be Roman, it will not be enough to strip away the 'facade' and reveal the 'figures and coordinates'[10] of the 'real' structure beneath. To do so would be merely to impose our way of thinking on theirs. Therefore, if we wish to comprehend these long-extinct people, a blend of the new and the old must be created with which we can appreciate the symbolic forms they used to communicate with one another. This is an acceptance that 'history is a conversation with the dead.'[11] Hopkins considers it an advantage that 'we can do all the talking', but this would hardly seem to make for a balanced exchange. Rather, by applying our concepts it will be possible to recover the meanings which the Romans' words and actions had for the Romans themselves, as if we were looking through the windows of their perceptions into the rooms beyond, and simultaneously seeing our own reflection in the glass.

The nature of the historian's engagement with the past has to be redefined. The usefulness of historians' traditional sense of 'being there', their ability to 'feel and think as another', in short, their supposedly superior sense of historical empathy, are all thrown into doubt. It will no longer be sufficient, as if dreaming on the verandah, to 'wonder what it was like to be there'.[12] Instead, this almost divine sense of oneness with the subject is replaced by an effort to appreciate the modes of others' thoughts in the modalities of our own. It is a far more distanced relationship, and whilst sympathy, even compassion, are necessities, they are to be aimed at the investigation of the whole range of cultural expressions, not only at a more obvious group of targets.

Hence, an anthropological obsession with the mysterious and the out-
landish will be of little benefit. Griffiths quotes Darnton's principle of
research method: 'the best points of entry in an attempt to penetrate an
alien culture can be those where it seems most opaque.'[13] But as Griffiths
rightly points out, 'there is no reason to believe we are more fully in the
presence of history when we encounter the bizarrely other.'[14] If there is
an excuse for the practice of fastening onto the oddities of others, then it
is the Johnsonian principle of writing so as to enable the reader better to
enjoy life, for there can be no doubt that the weird commands more
interest, and can thus initiate more thought. What seems obscure to us can
be of more use when it is marginal also to the culture which is under
scrutiny. To examine the edges of a society can reveal a clearer outline
of its overall shape and literally define it. As Edwards observes, 'Cultural
identity is constituted by its limits. Social deviants, those on its edge,
define the central order.'[15] But seeing what distinguished insiders from
outsiders is only one way of defining the perimeter of the culture itself.
The social silhouette provided by these means needs to be supported by
throwing light onto the culture's more solid masses. The practices and
beliefs which maintained these boundaries have to be revealed and exam-
ined, otherwise the image will remain insubstantial and its detail will stay
in the dark. Yet a more accurate picture will not be obtained by concen-
trating, as Griffiths would wish, on the 'finest blooms'[16] which a culture
has nourished. To study the best of Roman *otium* – the art of aristocratic
patronage – is indeed to observe the peaks of Roman temperament, but
culture can be as wide and broad as high and low. The mundane and the
central have as much claim to historical importance as the spectacular and
the marginal. It is by contextualizing both that the historian will be able
to understand what exactly constituted these frames of reference.

The problem we face is defining the terms of engagement with the past
and the 'others' who inhabit it. This is why it is so useful to employ a
concept like leisure as the tool for analysing Roman culture. For if we
were to try to preserve 'leisure' as a stable category of historical analysis
we would merely idealize and sterilize it. To the extent that a history of
'leisure' succeeds in concerning itself with 'leisure', it is doomed to fail
as a history, unless it also includes as an essential part of its proper
enterprise the task of demonstrating the historicity, conditions of emer-
gence, modes of construction, and ideological contingencies of the very
category of analysis that undergirds its own practice.[17] To analyse another
without analysing oneself would be an act of cultural imperialism. The
questions we need to ask are: 'What is the general form of our leisure?';
second, 'What was the general form of their *otium*?'; then, 'What was the
form of Roman leisure, and the vehicles in which it was embodied?'[18] By
using each to elucidate the others, it will be possible to create not only

an interpretation of Roman free time within its overall cultural context, but perhaps also a more human history of Roman life and leisure.

Why leisure in particular? The first reason is that leisure sociologists' enthusiasm for their task does not seem to have extended into the past. The history of pre-industrial leisure remains an underdeveloped field, a third-world country to whose aid few have attempted to come, and which has languished in the aridity of positivism. There should be no doubt that the collation of detail is an essential part of the historian's task, but the history of pre-industrial leisure has often been unrelated to its wider cultural environment. For whilst accounts of the Romans' games and pastimes are two a penny, the social, political, and moral environments in which these practices occurred have been ignored.

The second is that, despite the well-established school of leisure sociology, leisure has often not been perceived as being a matter for serious research (I can bear witness to the smiles which habitually greet my subject). It might seem paradoxical to search for antiquity in a sketch drawn from seemingly non-serious leisure activities, but there is huge scope in these playful, often idealized, constructions of what life is and should be like. As with any man-made construct or institution, they express beliefs about a desired order of things, and simultaneously reflect the order as it actually stands. Furthermore, in leisure, everyday experience is ordered into events less cluttered with the demands of immediate practical purpose, and thus becomes concentrated into a form where meaning can be more powerfully articulated. They provide metacommentaries, and are undertaken in 'full awareness of the absence of the life they contrive to represent, and hence they may skilfully anticipate and compensate for the vanishing of the actual life that has empowered them.'[19]

The centrality of work and efficiency to our industrial society has also meant that leisure has come to be seen as a mere adjunct to productivity. This attitude was not prevalent in the ancient world, where *otium* competed on a far more level footing. The study of leisure, therefore, will be a helpful way for us to highlight the differences between the Romans' mentality and our own. Leisure, I would argue, also provides the best possible tool for the dissection of Roman society. Other studies of Roman life could be made – of their work, religion, family, to name only a few – some of which might conflict with the analyses which leisure offered. Leisure, though, would be the institution that revealed most of the traits of Roman life. Leisure would be the study to cover the most important areas of Roman culture. For the central themes of Roman life were most clearly connected in their leisure on account of the fact that Rome was felt to be characterized by its abundant leisure and the immorality it seemed to foster.

The study of leisure can thus offer a way into the wider life of ancient

Rome, and provide insights into the details of what it meant to be a Roman. It also reveals the cultural frictions which existed within Roman society and the attempts that were made to lessen the heat which they generated. For the use to which Roman people put their free time was the thin end of a very large cultural wedge. Ideas about leisure were some of the sturdiest of the pillars on which Roman perceptions of society and selfhood stood, and as conditions changed so new concepts of man and society were required with which to rebuild, and sometimes shore up, the old structures. Leisure represented, as in many ways it still does, the 'good life'. It offered people the chance to do what they wanted to do, and realize their hopes and potential free from the crushing constraints of everyday life. But there was no comfortable consensus about what the good life was, or about who could attain it. Leisure was not a neutral area. Strains and conflicts existed within Roman society, between the emperor, the elite, and the masses, and these found their most telling expression in anxieties over the use and misuse of free time. Leisure discourse was integral to ideas concerning the ordering of society and the worth of the individual within it. A similar view is also reflected in the etymology of our word 'leisure'. Derived from the Latin *licentia*, leisure carries connotations of licentiousness and freedom, and also the need for this behaviour to be licensed and controlled from above.

Concepts of morality, pleasure, and luxury were closely associated with these misgivings over the corrupting potential of free time. For these tensions also reflected the 'anxieties of superabundance', to borrow Schama's phrase.[20] That is to say, they revealed moral concerns about the influx of new wealth and practices which accompanied the acquisition of empire. The increase in prosperity allowed for greater and more extravagant leisure provision for a much enlarged section of the populace, and as the pleasures of the aristocratic lifestyle were made more widely available through the agency of a beneficent emperor, *otium* was seen clearly to be no longer the preserve of the rich. The new circumstances of life under an autocrat threatened the traditional qualities of *otium*, challenging them with the thrills of popular entertainment and the extravagance of imperial largesse. Leisure discourse became the vehicle for the expression of elite concerns over the transformation of Roman society, and held a double significance. On the one hand, leisure was all that was left to the elite since, with the end of the republic, they were denied their traditional position of political authority. On the other, that very leisure which had traditionally been their preserve, and to which they had retired, was increasingly encroached upon by the lower orders.

No easy correlation should be assumed between these competing moralities and definable social groups. As Roman society developed from republic to empire, the distinctions between the plebs and the elite became

hazier, albeit only at the margins,[21] and their relationship changed. Different cultural levels existed both at societal and individual levels, and so whilst these rival moralities will be referred to in terms of their primary social origin – that is as belonging to either traditional elite, imperial, or popular cultures – there will be a constant awareness that these labels belong as much to the historian's tool-box as to the realities of the Roman empire. These categories were never stable: 'the Romans', 'the elite', and 'the plebs' were all groups whose composition and structure underwent constant transformation and development. In many ways, it was the partial fusion of these various levels which generated the new image of the Roman that the emperors tried to inculcate, and also allowed individuals greater scope for resistance through the selection of other modes of expression.[22]

This book does not cover an exact period, for a conceptual study cannot be marked out temporally in the same meticulous manner as a traditional history of politics. The social evolution of leisure ideas and the assignation of values to activities occurred at a near sedentary pace in comparison to the high-speed chases of public life. Attitudes towards certain forms of leisure seem barely to have changed for centuries. But these enduring concepts were put to work in fresh areas and served new functions, thereby assuring their continued development alongside the contingencies of the day. Nor can the inquiry be given free rein to race through the ages, if the concepts involved are not to be left stranded in historical generalization and unintegrated with their immediate context. It is not so much a case of our taking snapshots of events at particular moments and fixing them against the motion pictures which frame them, as the very opposite – locating the action from sets of interrelated dramas against a far more static cultural backdrop. Accordingly, for the purposes of this investigation, two time-scales have been in operation. The analysis of the political evolution of leisure has concentrated on the transition period from republic to empire, that is to say the first centuries BC and AD, with the evidence for the establishment and maintenance of an imperial image of Romanness being drawn principally from the first and early second centuries AD. However, the examination of the underlying currents of social opinion and custom has flowed on a different temporal plane. That has been allowed to meander more freely, drawing on whatever sources were to be found (mostly the period from Cicero in the first century BC to Ammianus in the fourth century AD). This may have created a farrago of convictions and prejudices, along with all their individual and local bias, but the approach has two justifications: one is the practical excuse that the ancient historian cannot afford to pass over any details that might help to build up a picture of the Roman mentality; the other is that the difficult and perplexing network of perspectives produced by