

HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL LEISURE AND RECREATION CONFERENCES

By Ken Roberts

University of Liverpool

Beginnings

By the early 20th century there were recreation movements in all the industrialised and industrialising countries of Europe and North America. They were promoting forms of recreation, mostly recent inventions – modern sports and other forms of outdoor recreation, hobbies and the art forms – that were compatible with the rhythms of life in industrial, urban societies. These were great social movements of that era, comparable to the feminist movements of the late-20th century and the Green movements today. These recreation movements may have received some state support, but they were not all created or directed by governments. Prior to the First World War, they were all voluntary, third sector, non-profit, civil society actors. The ethos of the recreation movements was anti-commerce. They were promoting alternatives to drink, gambling and vice. They received support from some wealthy philanthropists and some ‘progressive’ employers – the types of employers who had tried to build the first livable cities, called garden cities in Britain by the early 20th century, and who were pioneering industrial recreation within their own businesses. The aim of the recreation movements was to civilise the urban masses, to work alongside churches and schools, and to act as buffers who would prevent ‘at risk’ youth reaching the police and justice systems. Their aim was to create and maintain healthy bodies and minds, to create and re-create fit and productive workers, and model citizens.

These movements for recreation had the support of organised labour - from trade unions wherever these had been formed. Their priorities were always rates of pay and working conditions, and also hours of work, which they wanted to reduce. Thus trade unions became advocates of the right to work and the right to leisure, for rest and recreation, and the first international recreation conferences were under the auspices of an emergent international labour movement. There was a socialist wing in the early recreation movement. Working men’s (sic) clubs survived longest, but in the early-20th century there were also cycling, hiking, sports, hobby and arts clubs, and workers’ holiday centres. The idea was to strengthen working class solidarity and to enable workers to discover their capacity for self-organisation. The overlap with other wings of the recreation movement was opposition to commercial leisure.

Inter-war conferences

The Geneva-based International Labour Organisation (ILO), which became a specialist United Nations agency in 1946, was created in 1919 with the support of trade unions, (some) governments and some employer federations who agreed that lasting peace in Europe would depend on the decent treatment of working people. Immediately, in 1919, the ILO reached an agreement on working hours and between 1928 (Paris), then 1930 (Liege) and 1935 (Brussels) held a series of international (really European) conferences promoting the cause of recreation and making sure that employees had the necessary free time. However,

these events were superseded and over-shadowed by international conferences organised by national recreation associations.

At that time international events were difficult to organise. This was before the era of inter-continental air travel, and when the telephone and telegraph were unreliable and unsuitable for long messages. The success of the conferences is therefore testament to the enthusiasm of the organisers and participants. The initiative was from America's National Recreation Association (NRA, later to be renamed the National Recreation and Parks Association) which convened an international conference in Los Angeles in 1932 to coincide with the Olympic Games. This event was attended by 700 delegates from 40 countries. It was decided that this conference should be repeated, and should continue to shadow the summer Olympic cycle and venues, so the second international recreation conference was held in Germany (Hamburg) in 1936. This World Congress for Leisure Time and Recreation was held under the motto, Joy and Peace. There were around 3000 participants from 61 countries, and a crowd estimated at 1.5 million watched the main parade (the largest event ever to be held in the recreation movement's history). At Hamburg an International Central Bureau, Joy and Work, was formed to organise future events. At this Hamburg conference the recreation movement became associated with fascist ideology, and it was decided to abandon the Olympic cycle and venues. A third conference was held in Rome (Italy) in 1938 and a fourth conference was planned for Osaka (Japan) in 1940. Thus an 'axis of leisure' was being formed. However, the Osaka conference was not held due to an escalation of the Sino-Japanese war and the outbreak of war in Europe. Most countries, not just Germany, Italy and Japan, were by then concerned about the poor physical condition of the young males who were being recruited into the armed forces. Recreation was to remedy this, and the countries' industries were also to benefit from fitter and healthier citizens. These are the reasons why young males were the principal targets of the recreation movements. Girls, the countries' future wives and mothers, were also catered for, but usually with different activities.

America's National Recreation Association withdrew from the series of conferences that it had initiated, and stressed the democratic character of its own version of recreation. The 1930s (the years of the Great Depression) was a period of growth for America's recreation movement. By the end of the decade over 1000 colleges and universities had courses educating recreation leaders – one of the foundations from which post-war Leisure Studies grew.

The Second World War marked the end of the pre-1939 series of international leisure and recreation conferences. Although not known at the time, the heyday of the recreation movements was shortly to become history. There have been no subsequent events of the same scale and character.

Post-1945

After the Second World War it was once again America's NRA that took the initiative in an attempt to revive the international recreation movement and its conferences. In 1952 the NRA created an International Service which offered advice, training and support to

recreation movements and professionals, mainly in developing countries. An international conference was convened in Philadelphia in 1956 at which the International Service was renamed as the International Recreation Association. This event attracted around 2000 delegates from 33 countries. The event was never to be repeated. National recreation associations proved more difficult to mobilise than in the pre-war years. Some of the movements and their activities had become tainted with militarism. When Japan's National Recreation Association was re-established in 1948, under American military occupation, martial arts and other wartime-related activities were restricted, and square dancing and folk dancing were promoted as alternatives.

The International Recreation Association renamed itself as the World Leisure and Recreation Association (WLRA) in 1973, and tried to revive the international movement by assisting in the formation of world regional associations. Just two were formed, in Europe (ELRA) and Latin America (ALATIR). The idea was that the world regional associations would coordinate the activities of national bodies, but the national bodies had either disappeared or proved unresponsive. National governments were less keen to lend support to recreation movements than in earlier times, and philanthropists/sponsors proved more difficult to attract.

In the late-1980s WLRA decided to turn itself into a member-based organisation, meaning that it sought individual members as well as national and world regional associations. In 1988 it began the ongoing series of World Leisure Congresses which, unlike the inter-war series, are attended mainly by individuals who represent themselves rather than national recreation movements.

In 2006 WLRA rechristened itself as the snappier titled World Leisure Organization (WLO).

New times

Since 1945 there has been global expansion in leisure and recreation whether measured in time, numbers taking part or money spent. International communication and travel are much easier today. So why has the crusade weakened?

Growth has been accompanied by fragmentation. Different leisure industries – particular sports, outdoor activities, tourism, arts, computer games and so on – all have their own world conventions. However, a more basic truth is that 'recreation' and 'leisure' have lost their former missions.

By the 1950s western countries were being described as affluent, post-scarcity, consumer societies. People had more leisure time and more money to engage in leisure activities. There was no longer a need to campaign: these battles had been won. More basically, trying to tell consumers what recreation was good for them was out of tune with the new zeitgeist, the spirit of the post-war age. People felt able to make their own decisions about how many hours to work and earn, and how to spend their own time and money.

Another change was that leisure became more commercial. There has been all-round growth in leisure time and leisure spending since the Second World War, but in the world's richer countries it is spending that has grown most strongly. Today, leisure is big business.

Commerce has entered fields which were formerly run mainly by public authorities and voluntary associations. Today most radio and television broadcasting is commercial. Top sport and 'fitness' for the masses have been partly commercialised. Voluntary and public sector organisations operate as if they were profit-seeking businesses – FIFA and the International Olympic Committee, for example. Government departments with responsibilities for leisure (as a whole, or just a part) may no longer act primarily in the interest of their people's welfare. Elite sport and culture are supported in search of international prestige. Governments seek to attract tourists and to maximise their shares in all leisure markets (producing media content, computer games, and so on). Events, including leisure congresses, are sought as means of attracting visitors and publicising the destinations to other potential visitors.

Leisure and recreation are now competitive markets and are hardly compatible with the ethos of the original recreation movements.

The academy arrives

International leisure and recreation symposia have revived largely due to the arrival of a new stream of conference goers – the academics. Leisure studies departments and courses opened throughout North America in the 1950s and 60s, and have subsequently spread, still very unevenly, all over the world. International leisure and recreation conferences are now attended mainly by persons who teach, research and write about the subject.

There is competition for these scholars' conference budgets. They can form and affiliate with specialist groups in basic disciplines such as economics, history, psychology and sociology. World Leisure Congresses offer a complementary, trans-disciplinary forum. That said, as in the leisure industries themselves, there are centrifugal forces. The scholars themselves can fragment into those who focus on the media, tourism, sport and so on. There is competition among potential umbrella concepts. Recreation and leisure have rivals – popular culture, everyday life, and consumption. Recreation and leisure carry suspect (to some scholars) cultural baggage: many present-day academics will not identify with the histories and movements that have been associated with the terms.

Nevertheless, the WLO has been changed by, and has changed to accommodate its academics. During the 1980s it created a research commission. In 1999 its former house journal which had addressed 'professionals' became a fully-refereed academic journal. In 2010 a World Leisure Academy was created to recognise the achievements of leisure scholars.

Common ground?

It is not unusual for organisations to be held together by the contributions of groups with entirely different agendas. Present-day international recreation and leisure conferences are not particularly odd in this respect. The preceding paragraphs have simply attempted to identify how their particular oddities have arisen. An organisation with a history that can be traced to the pre-1939 recreation movements, and which still has true believers, lends its logo to cities and countries which are seeking business, and the events are attended mainly

by scholars who may be critical of all other parties', and indeed of each others', motives. Fortunately there is some common ground: leisure as a source of 'wellness', as a means of rescuing 'at risk' groups, and of incorporating groups that are otherwise excluded or disadvantaged on account of their sex, sexuality, ethnicity, poverty or disabilities. The underlying tension is the same as 100 years ago: is commerce/capitalism/the market friend or enemy?