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Leisure *in Extremis*: A *Festschrift* for Karl Spracklen

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces the special issue theme (leisure *in extremis*), mode (a *Festschrift*), honoree Karl Spracklen, and (lastly) the essays that comprise this volume. A *Festschrift* is a publication that honors an academic, presented during their lifetime, with contributions from the honoree's colleagues, friends and former students. We consider Karl's work and leisure studies as a "worthwhile" pursuit that is theory-driven, meaningful within people's lives and professions, and operating at the edges of the field at a critical time. The nine essays span Karl's oeuvre, from extreme music cultures, to 'northernness', subcultures, social justice, real ale and whisky tourism, goth and dark leisure, sporting masculinities, rugby leagues, and events. The contributors engage with a 'paradox of leisure' characterized by freedom but also instrumental control, 'communicative' expression but also commodification, resistance and alternativity but also the erosion of its meaning and purpose. Throughout, we celebrate Karl's work on leisure, *in extremis*.

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Leisure *in extremis*? Introducing the special issue

Karl Spracklen's (2009) synoptic book, *The Meaning and Purpose of Leisure*, opens with a stark warning: "Critical studies of leisure face an uncertain future as meaningful, intellectual and professional pursuits" (p.1). This seems as prescient for 2009 as it remains accurate in 2026, when course cuts and closures, faculty redundancies, and a wider pall has been cast over the value of higher education broadly, and leisure studies particularly. Yet rather than "give up", Karl sought to "defend leisure as a meaningful, theoretical, framing concept; and critical studies of leisure as a worthwhile intellectual and pedagogical activity" (p.1). We view this defence also as an invitation to consider Karl's work and what it has meant for leisure studies as a "worthwhile" pursuit that is theory-driven, meaningful within people's real lives and professions, and also operating at the critical edges of the field at a critical time: leisure *in extremis*. In Latin, *in extremis* means "in grave circumstances" or "at the point of death." Another dictionary defines the phrase this way: "If someone or something is *in extremis*, they are in a very difficult situation and have to use extreme methods" (Collins Dictionary, n.d.).

We start with an attempt to put several lines into motion simultaneously: to introduce the special issue theme (leisure *in extremis*), the mode (a *Festschrift*), the honoree

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Karl Spracklen, and (lastly) the essays that comprise this volume. A *Festschrift* is a publication that honors an academic, presented during their lifetime, with contributions from the honoree's colleagues, friends and former students. We're not aware of a *Festschrift* in any leisure journals to date, although we've come across wonderful collections elsewhere, such as for the sociologist and ethnographer Paul Atkinson (Dimond & Lewis, 2017) and the sociologist of education Sara Delamont (Coffey et al., 2018). While celebratory, these volumes are not hagiographic; they honor and build upon the honoree's scholarship through engagements with their work and ideas, and—crucially—critique. We hope to see more *Festschriften* in leisure journals, in future.

We find the phrase *in extremis* appropriate to encompass Karl Spracklen's peripatetic and career-spanning interests exploring extreme forms of leisure, going to the exciting (theoretical) edges of leisure studies, while also navigating what's arguably been the decline (and death) of the field in the UK. Formerly a Professor of Leisure and Culture (and former Chair of the Leisure Studies Association, UK), The "grave circumstances" (or shifting centers of leisure studies) are characterized by Karl's academic journey, moving from studies of sport and leisure to popular music studies, then Sociology (all at Leeds Beckett University), and beyond. Due to the compound crises of Higher Education in the UK, after nearly 30 years with Leeds Beckett University, Karl has recently (2026) taken a new post as Professor of Communication Studies at Prince Mohammed bin Fahd University, Saudi Arabia. In this sense, Karl's career trajectory also provides a kind of metonym for the struggles of scholars navigating the decline of leisure studies degree programs (see Fletcher et al., 2017). Yet, Karl has kept leisure as a central conceptual 'home' for his scholarship, throughout. On topic and substance, Karl's work has embraced extreme music (death metal, Goth) subcultures, moved from the edges of extreme drinking cultures (whisky and real ale) to extreme research methods (e.g. exploring extremist, racist nationalist leisure in online fandoms), and to the edges of the death (and life) of leisure studies. This *Festschrift* is in honor of Karl's body of work; the collection brings together essays that critically reflect, comment and provide the reader with a *tour d'horizon* of Karl's scholarship.

We introduce Karl though our working relationships with him across many years. While still a doctoral student at the University of Alberta, Brett first met Karl at a Leisure Studies Association (UK) event hosted by Leeds Metropolitan University in 2003. Years later, Karl chaired the interview panel when Brett was hired for a lectureship with that university in 2009. Since, Brett and Karl have co-edited a number of books, ranging from popular music and leisure in cities, e.g. *Sounds and the City: Popular Music, Place and Globalization* (Lashua et al., 2014), *Sounds and the City: Volume 2* (Lashua et al., 2019), and *Popular Music in Leeds: Histories, Heritage, People and Places* (Lashua et al., 2023), to larger handbooks including *The Palgrave Handbook of Leisure Theory* (Spracklen et al., 2017) and the *Research Handbook of the Sociology of Leisure* (Spracklen et al., 2025). Karl has been a prolific author, and these outputs are a fraction of the over 200 publications listed on his ORCID profile. For the wider field(s), Karl has pioneered the founding of new academic journals, including the *International Journal for the Sociology of Leisure* and *Metal Music Studies* journal. More personally, Brett and Karl taught together on undergraduate and Masters courses throughout the 10 years that Brett was at Leeds Beckett University; they co-supervised a half dozen PhD students (including Spencer, and

Rio Goldhammer), attended innumerable faculty meetings, frequently ate lunch together, and both eventually took voluntary severance from that university and moved on to horizons new, outside of leisure studies. When Brett departed Leeds Beckett University (in 2019), he joined the Institute of Education at University College London (UCL) where he teaches sociology of media. This *Festschrift* expresses the recognition that Karl has been a significant collaborator, a great colleague, at times a lodestar, and overall, an impactful presence across 20+ years in Brett's academic life.

Spencer first met Karl when he was an undergraduate student at Leeds Metropolitan University, an encounter that would prove formative for both his intellectual orientation and personal development. Through Karl's teaching and scholarship, Spencer was introduced to a critical way of thinking about leisure, not as a marginal or purely recreational activity, but as a social practice deeply embedded within wider cultural, political, and economic processes. These early classroom encounters were instrumental in shaping Spencer's understanding of leisure as a serious and meaningful object of sociological inquiry. Karl's book, *The Purpose and Meaning of Leisure* (2009), was particularly influential in this regard. Through its engagement with Jürgen Habermas's work, the book encouraged Spencer to conceptualize leisure in relation to communicative action, ethics, and questions of meaning, rather than treating it as secondary to work or consumption. Spracklen's interrogation of leisure as a site where values are negotiated, identities are formed, and moral boundaries are contested opened new ways of understanding everyday cultural practices. This perspective was further deepened by *Constructing Leisure* (Spracklen, 2011), which introduced Spencer to the historical and philosophical foundations of leisure studies. In this work, Spracklen traces how leisure has been constructed and understood over historical time, examining the interplay among communicative reason, free will, and instrumentality across different periods. He also demonstrates how historians have reconstructed leisure through historiography, and how writers have explored its meaning and purpose through alternative histories and cultural narratives.

Spencer was privileged to work closely with Karl, alongside Brett, during his doctoral research which examined khat use and dark leisure within the British Somali diaspora. This PhD project explicitly drew on Spracklen's ideas to explore how leisure practices intersect with questions of identity, morality, and marginalization. The resulting body of work linked leisure to debates around identity formation (Swain et al., 2025a), moral regulation (Swain et al., 2024), and the relationship between leisure, space and place (Swain et al., 2018), demonstrating the enduring influence of Spracklen's ideas (and collaborations) on Spencer's scholarship. This influence continues in Spencer's current role as an Associate Professor in Social Sciences at York St John University, where his research and teaching remain inspired by Spracklen's work. Ongoing scholarship engages with themes of class (Swain & Sloanes, 2025), processes of Othering (Swain & Ritchie, 2025), and questions of decoloniality and anti-racism (Swain et al., 2025b), to extend Spracklen's critical approach to leisure into broader debates within sociology and social theory. Beyond formal supervision, Karl also played a significant mentoring role, supporting Spencer's involvement in the Leisure Studies Association and helping him to find a scholarly community that Karl himself has done so much to shape.

The *Festschrift*

The nine essays in this *Festschrift* attempt to honor Karl's body of work; we have invited colleagues, friends and former students to write, reflect, comment critically and build upon Karl's scholarship. The essays span the diverse range of topics that Karl has explored, from his doctoral research on rugby league, through to his most recent explorations of the sociology of leisure, heavy metal, real ale tourism, and beyond.

First up, in addition to his work in the sociology of leisure, Karl is perhaps best known for his work on heavy metal music cultures. In his essay, Nedim Hassan, chief editor of *Metal Music Studies* (a journal which Karl co-founded in 2015), locates Karl's work within the broader scholarship on metal music, his insider/outsider approach to studying metal scenes, and explores its relevance through specific examples (e.g. the Swedish metal band Katatonia) within leisure and sociological worldviews (and the uncertainties) of late modernity.

In the second essay, the cultural historian Dave Russell turns to look "up north" in a retrospective account of 'northernness' in Karl's work. Karl's northern cultural scholarship transverses such diverse terrain as rugby league, Brontëan literary tourism, Goths in Whitby, real ale and beer festivals, and musical sites of extreme metal, indie-alternative scenes and obscure folk bands. For Russell, the northernness threaded through Karl's scholarship signals, although unusual, unfamiliar or marginal to many, that this is "his north, the place of his birth, home and work" (Russell, this volume). In the process of exploring northernness, Karl articulates a socio-geographic imagination in his work which Russell describes as "vital" to understandings of working-class life, sport and leisure, particularly in Karl's heart of the north: Yorkshire.

The contribution from Shane Blackman and Rob McPherson explores Karl's work on subcultures "beyond the grim" (up north!). Centralizing the influence of British Cultural Studies in Karl's work (and his shift away from it, to Habermas), they especially note the origins and influence of the cultural theorist Richard Hoggart (who, like Karl, was from Leeds, England) in understanding how youthful music and leisure subcultures are collective responses to changing global societies and localities. This, they note, is reflected in Karl's varied attention to pubs, rugby league grounds, metal music venues and Goth festivals (and more!).

Extending the breadth and depth of Karl's scholarship, Christianne Luce Gomes, Denise Falcão, and João Lucas de A. Campos consider Karl's body of work in dialogue with leisure studies in the context of the Global South. They specifically note how Karl's attention to questions of freedom and control contribute to critical studies of leisure through lenses of intersectionality, decoloniality, and social justice to research in Brazil. This showcases the enduring and important ripples of Karl's work and collaborations with scholars around the world.

Neil Carr describes the (metaphorical) rollercoaster of consuming Karl's work on whisky and real ale tourism. While lighthearted and playful, Carr showcases the critical historical and sociological trajectories in Karl's scholarship of the changing patterns of drinking-as-leisure, of "being and becoming a learned cultural traveller" in the carnivalesque worlds of real-ale and whisky tourism. In doing so, Carr engages with broader philosophical ideas (as perhaps befitting musings over a pint!) about the imagined and imaginary worlds of leisure authenticity, debates over community, working

class traditions and spaces (such as pubs), and (as running through almost all of Karl's work) critical questions of commodification and consumerism in late modernity.

Turning to 'dark leisure', one of Karl's former doctoral students Rio Goldhammer writes on Spracklen's scholarship on goth music cultures, alternative music scenes and resistance to instrumental rationalities and the commodification of leisure. Framed within 'dark leisure', Goldhammer traverses the more 'extreme' territory of Karl's research—sex, drugs, pagans, goths, heavy metal, post-punk and rock and roll—to highlight how this work invited the field to consider dark leisure as a challenge to established norms, rules, and hierarchies, and question the value of leisure more broadly.

In the next two essays, attention shifts to Karl's work on sport, specifically rugby, along with critical questions of masculinities, and racialisations. First, Phil Borell traces the impact of Karl's work about rugby league and masculinities into his own research on Maori/Pasifika sports. Borell starts (like with Brett's experience) from a meeting at a global conference (and offers Karl a great nickname we wish we had known before!). He discusses the development of his ideas *via* Karl's work into his own PhD thesis—for which Karl was later the External Examiner—and then moves beyond, into questions and potential for Southern and Indigenous scholarship.

Jonathan Long and Kevin Bingham's penultimate essay, "'Abide With Me': being an insider in the Habermasian lifeworld" surveys Karl's work in two key areas—his early interest in Rugby League and his entwinement with the theoretical ideas of Jurgen Habermas on "communicative rationalities" in view of leisure in modernity. The essay's critical appraisal of Karl's work is especially befitting Long, who served as Karl's PhD supervisor in the mid-1990s, and offers, with Bingham (another former Leeds Beckett colleague) an incisive review of where Karl's work has been, where it has not, and where it may yet go.

Finally, writing in review of Karl's books that span "events", Stuart Moss showcases how Karl's work opens spaces for a rethinking of "critical event studies" and "events as protest." As a longstanding colleague, Moss traces how Spracklen's socio-cultural theoretical interests (e.g. in the meaning and purpose of leisure) led to his critiques of events (and by extension, event studies) "to remove the notion of what an event is away from the commercially accepted norms […] to a much broader interpretation involving politics and activism that people may pursue as a leisure activity" (Moss, this volume). Through this review, Moss (here again Karl was also his doctoral supervisor) frames Karl as a "gardener of ideas" offering "a dissenters guide to events." We think Karl would appreciate being both gardener and dissenter.

As postscript, in a "(de)Parting Thoughts" essay, Brett Lashua considers edges and change, in view of leisure *in extremis* (or in crisis) through the mode of a visualized essay focused on Recreational Vehicles (RVs) on the edges of a remote island.

Last, we offer thanks to Rasul Mowatt and Justin Harmon for allowing the space to share these essays, and—not least—huge gratitude to the contributors for their efforts to write them, for Karl.

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