SURFING AND SOCIAL THEORY: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SURFING
AND ITS SOCIAL CONTEXTS

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Surfing and Social Theory: The Significance of Surfing And Its Social Contexts

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by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, whose unwavering support and unconditional love has allowed me to create and achieve the things in life I am most proud of, and to my father, whose pragmatism and affability taught me that while those things must be meaningful, there is no reason why they cannot also be fun and unpretentious.
...and when wars and flags and religions and nations and cities and rockets and taxicabs and monosodium glutamate and television are gone, there will still be an order to things far beyond the order of power crazed men. It will be the order of a universe at equilibrium with all natural forces in balance. And that's what riding a wave is.

-Drew Kampion, 1970
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Surfing and Social Theory: The Significance of Surfing And Its Social Contexts
by
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Despite surfing’s popularity, and the ubiquity of the image of surfing and the surfer on the modern landscape, the social phenomenon that surfing represents has been surprisingly under-analyzed. Though there are many excellent journal articles and even books that tackle the subject from various angles, they represent a piecemeal collection of studies and historical accounts. But surfing, like all social phenomena, does not occur in a vacuum. Understanding the context within which surfing, and surf culture, exists is as essential as any other element. A full examination of surfing requires dissection from all directions, and the larger social framework surrounding this social phenomenon has been largely ignored.

This thesis seeks to analyze the meaning and significance of surfing within the context of the social, economic, and political environment of the past and present in order to take surfing away from the *sui generis* and particular mindset that has heretofore dominated its analysis. In this way I hope to provide a more comprehensive and holistic approach to understanding the social meaning of surfing, and the factors that draw people into the water to surf.

Viewed through the lens of the seminal social theorists (Marx, Weber, Freud, etc.), and supplemented by more contemporary thinkers, surfing is examined alongside and contextualized within the social critique of these influential thinkers. Through these writings, the deeper social significance of surfing begins to take shape, and the relationship between surfing and the larger social framework is scrutinized. Beyond simple enjoyment, which is still a central and essential component of the compulsion to surf, other motivating factors are discovered that link together the appeal of surfing and the possible shortcomings of modern social organization. In this way a more fundamental understanding of surfing is created while the social theory employed is enriched through the illustrative properties of this unique social phenomenon.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Surfing has been studied by a small number of dedicated and enthusiastic historians, anthropologists, and other authors of varying disciplines (Booth 2001; Nazer 2004; Stranger 1999). Their efforts are well researched and insightful and their specific topics are grounded in a range of theoretical frameworks. Surfing has also been examined within the context of social theory itself (Farmer 1992; Flynn 1987; Ford & Brown 2006). These works are valuable in understanding the context within which surfing can be found and they offer detailed analysis of specific topics within the realm of the surfing experience. However, surfing is rarely approached holistically, and the various social theories employed to tackle a specific facet of a much larger phenomenon are rarely coalesced into a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of surfing and its significance within the social framework it finds itself. This thesis is an attempt at filling in a gap that I believe exists in the study of surfing from a social science point of view. Great attention is paid to interesting components of the larger phenomenon (localism, sexism, commodification etc.) and appropriate social theory is dutifully applied to gain a deeper and contextualized understanding. But what is needed is a theoretical step-back, and to pay less attention to the particulars of surfing, and to attempt to see the “big picture” while utilizing a combination of social theories and theorists to ground the entire discussion within a more complete and general understanding.

While these theorist and their work are invaluable in understanding our own social organization, surfing itself is also a effective tool for not only illustrating the application of social theory by representing a distinct microcosm of the larger structure, but also for turning the social mirror back on the theories themselves. In this sense a two-way street of dialogue is created between social theory and surfing. For instance, how can classical Marxist theory help us to understand surfing and its place in our culture, and how does surfing illustrate some of Marx’s insights on economics and social organization? Can Weber help to explain surfing’s tumultuous history and uncover the roots of the surfer stigma while also utilizing its classical application in socioeconomic theory? Instead of utilizing a theoretical foundation to
study surfing with a specific topic in mind, I will review and evaluate social theory as it relates to and helps to understand the larger phenomenon of surfing itself, and I will discuss surfing as a tool to help understand and illustrate the lessons of social theory.

Surfing, in the most general sense, is the act of riding an ocean wave as it breaks on the shore while standing on a surfboard. However there are many derivations of surfing across the globe. Though surfing is most commonly accomplished with the aid of a surf board, body boards are also often used, and no board at all is required to body surf. Recently, stand-up paddle boards have become very popular as well. Also, not all waves break on shore. Natural reefs can cause beautiful waves to form just off shore or miles away from any land mass at all. Not all waves even break, as there is surfing on standing waves at river mouths, tidal bores, or on artificial waves. Surfing in any of it’s manifestations takes years to master, and understanding what surfing means to those who surf and what it represents in a modern capitalist economy can also be rather esoteric.

On the most basic of levels surfing is simply an act of play¹, done only for the immediate satisfaction it provides. But what surfing represents in the lives of its most dedicated practitioners is a subject deserving of deeper investigation. Also, surfing can help reveal quite a lot about society at-large by looking at society from the outside. In order to understand the significance of this simple act of play some of the great social theorists can be employed to effectively shed some light on surfing’s place in society and ground this understanding in a larger theoretical framework. Knowing this will demonstrate why surfing can be so important to those who shape their lives around their ability to surf as much as possible and it will also detail the social significance that surfing and other forms of play have.

First, the works of Johan Huizinga will create foundational understanding of play upon which the rest of the thesis can be build. Huizinga’s writings on play and its importance in creating culture will be detailed. It will be demonstrated that surfing represents a pure form

¹ Throughout this discussion surfing is referred to as play, a sport, an industry, and a craft to name just a few. In reality surfing is all those things, and to narrow the definition too strictly would be to sacrifice much of the meaning it carries. At the same time, too broad a definition risks losing all meaning and context as well. For the purposes of this thesis surfing will be referred to as whatever is most applicable and appropriate for each instance. When in the context of play, it will be referred to as such. When the more competitive elements are outlined it should be appropriate to refer to surfing as a sport, and so too with the other definitions.
of play, and in many cases a very special instance of a unique form of play. The writings of Max Weber will not only provide a theoretical framework to help understand the social context within which modern surfing will be discussed, it will also help illustrate part of surfing’s most significant historical periods. Bertrand Russell’s repudiation of the ethos outlined by Weber will lend credence to a surf-centered life and the value of idleness. Next the classic social treatises of Karl Marx will be examined to further illuminate the social context, but also to illustrate the social afflictions common in a modern industrial capitalist setting. Marx will also help illustrate the social need for play. Then the social meaning of surfing will be discussed using the writings of Jock Young, John Fiske, Sigmund Freud, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

It is important to note that surfing is practiced worldwide, and in each locale a distinct sub-cultural pattern emerges that incorporates the history and social context of the particular region. Even with common roots, surf subcultures around the world are very different in important ways, and very similar in others. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be focusing almost solely on the American surfing experience. This specific subset the surfing world is greatly informed and modeled after the post-colonial Hawaiian resurgence of surfing, which will be discussed later. More specifically, this thesis revolves around the Southern California surfing culture, which is the site of the genesis of American surfing and the cradle within which the American surfing subculture was formed and codified. Unless otherwise stated, this thesis also focuses on “free-surfing” or non-competitive, non-professional surfing. As is later stated, surfing that is done in competition for some extrinsic goal (money, fame, sponsorship etc.) is considered a much different sociological phenomenon that does not fit into the theoretical framework of this discussion.²

To an outsider, or a non-surfer, the act of surfing seems like a simple pastime. It may appear beautiful, or relaxing, or even a little scary at times. For those who don’t surf, surfing isn’t a complex activity or a challenge to understand, it’s just “surfing.” Curiously, for those

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² It should also be noted that there is another category of surfing known as “professional free-surfing,” in which a talented surfer is paid to tour around the globe surfing in idyllic paradises so that his or her sponsors can take pictures of them while they surf using their equipment. The photographs are also used as promotional materials for any number of products or services, but what is important in this case is that a surfer can make a living through surfing without competing.
who do surf, especially for those who dedicate a significant portion of their lives to it, surfing is far more esoteric. It may seem odd that those who spend a great segment of their lives in the water chasing waves have a less fundamental grasp of the event than those who rarely or never attempt to ride an ocean wave with a specifically shaped piece of foam, fiberglass, and wood. And this is certainly not the case. Those who do not surf may generally believe surfing is an easily understandable and simple phenomenon, those who do surf know much better (Brown 2003; Kampion 2003; Peralta 2004).

In reality this dichotomy makes perfect sense. A non-surfer can only understand surfing based on the information they are given and what they observe. A superficial knowledge of surfing will almost certainly result in uncomplicated conclusions: that the sport in itself is pretty straightforward, albeit requiring a great deal of skill and mastery by the surfer, that surfing is the simple act of riding a wave with a board, and that it is probably really fun. Pop-culture has seized the image of surfing and the surfer, and the surf industry promotes itself in such a way that outsiders are left no real option but to see surfing as the sport of laid-back, counter-cultural drop-outs or stoners with long blond hair and baggy clothes. (This image is less applicable in other places like Hawaii and Australia where surfing is more culturally central and accepted as a valid and estimable pursuit.) Except for the regard given to surfing’s most prominent and successful professional competitors, this image of surfing is accepted by consumers and persists as the popular and standard embodiment of the sport (Lawler 2010). There just isn’t much mystery in a one-dimensional understanding of surfing.

For surfers, those who commit to a life of surfing, whose day-to-day ephemera are considered first through the filter of surfing, the craft is anything but straightforward. This is not to say that the more one surfs the less one understands surfing, quite the opposite: the more one surfs the more one is exposed to the complexities of surfing and the more they realize how much there is to know (Flynn 1987). The further one travels down the path of the surfing lifestyle, the more one is confronted with forces and phenomena that elude rationality and surpass the ordinary. Surfers often struggle to describe an inexplicable and ineffable state of harmony. As transient as these feelings are, their impact is lasting and the impressions left on the surfer pull them further and further down the path. A lifetime of surfing only broadens
one’s awareness to the possibilities of nature, life, and existence so that surfing becomes anything but straightforward.

My own experience in surfing started over 15 years ago and followed a path that many surfers share. I’ve learned through my own research and some rare studies on the subject that most people who have been surfing regularly for over ten years go through a sort of maturation process whereby their understanding of, and relationship to surfing changes through experience over time (Fisher 2005; Irwin 1973; Pearson 1979). For beginners surfing is a challenging and fun experience with a slow learning curve punctuated by fleeting moments of revelation. Those moments, rare they may be, are what keep the surfer coming back as they attempt to recreate those moments and reach those short instances of ecstasy again. This carrot is forever dangled in front of both the novice surfer and the veteran as new challenges are constantly presenting themselves. Every wave is different and every session contains new lessons. For this reason, slow though the learning curve may be, it is quite limitless (Butts 2001).

Through time the relationship the surfer has with his or her pastime changes dramatically as well. As some aspects become second nature others are discovered. Beyond the physical movements one learns and develops, a cognitive, psychological, and social progression is also common as the relationship to the ocean, to nature in general, and to other surfers also develops (Flynn 1987). Many surfers experience an attitudinal shift, as I did, when surfing slowly changes from being a whimsical caper in the ocean into a meaningful (but still very fun) lifestyle (Pearson 1979). At some point a person crosses a threshold, albeit vague and ultimately subjective, whereby they cease to be a person who surfs and they become a surfer. Referring to oneself as a surfer, or having the honor of others doing so, comes with it a necessary degree of commitment, authenticity, and respect, which is demanded simultaneously by the sport, the distinct sub-culture, and the ocean itself.

Personally, surfing has been a 15-year journey through moments of elation and absolute terror, camaraderie and introspection, chaos and lucidity, pure fun and peacefulness, and dotted with rare but lasting moments of a feeling of revelation and wholeness. Shared by other surfers, these feelings accumulate over time to contribute to what surfing means to those who do it. What it means to them affects what surfing means to society. A large part of my personal experience with surfing has been as an observer of social phenomena. As a
research subject, surfing represents an incredibly rich history and culture. The participants are a diverse and international mixture of men and women of all ages and span the spectrum of socioeconomic status. Through its history surfing has been vilified and extolled, it has represented a central cultural characteristic as well as a distinct counter-cultural subgroup. Surfing has been repressed, revived, corrupted, and reborn. Through all this the actual act of surfing has changed very little while the world surrounding it has evolved in unimaginable ways. For all these reasons and more surfing is an incredibly fertile resource for study.

In my own experience surfing often involves an incredible amount of sitting and thinking, which is often a stark contrast to everyday modern life. Often the surfer is alone during these periods, and even when he or she is among others, surf culture cultivates an air of calm appreciation and respectful stillness. This calmness is, of course, variable from day to day and break to break. During large swells and at crowded breaks there can be a great deal of tension and danger rather than peace and stillness. It is during these calmer times, however, when the surf is small or inconsistent, which represents the overwhelming majority of any surf session that I often observe and contemplate the complexity of the sport and the intricacies of the culture it has engendered with the larger social context. With the backdrop of blue ocean water and tranquil coastline settings combined with compulsory downtime: introspection, reflection, and mindfulness are inescapable. Thus the impetus for this thesis derives directly from surfing itself.
CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SURFING

PRE-COLONIAL HAWAII

Surfing’s roots are so ancient that there is no strong consensus regarding how old the pastime is or where exactly it originated. How can one possibly determine the first time someone rode a wave for fun? And what exactly are we trying to pinpoint: the first time someone body surfed, the first wave ridden with some kind of craft, or the first use of a stand up surf board? All that is known is that humans have been riding waves, with and without some kind of craft, for fun, for thousands of years.

There are independent reports of people enjoying the thrill of riding a wave in places like West Africa, Peru, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji. Reports of body surfing from Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Ghana from as far back as the 1830’s indicate that perhaps an independent form of surfing sprouted up there (Finney & Houston 1996, p. 25). In northern Peru fishermen use small boats made from reed bundles called “caballitos” (little horses) to navigate through the surf on their way to and from the calm waters where they fish. At some point it was discovered that catching and riding a wave toward shore on their return not only was faster and more stable than battling the broken waves, but that it was also a lot of fun. The moment a fisherman left his fishing gear on the beach and took his caballito out just to ride some waves surfing was born. Images of just such things appear on pre-Columbian pottery. One popular source dates surfing as far back as 2000 B.C. (Finney and Houston 1996, p. 21) amongst the people of the Pacific Islands. They are famously skilled watermen and navigators, and it is widely believed that although surfing may not have originated solely in Hawaii, it was certainly perfected there. It is the surfing of the Hawaiian island and it’s people that is practiced around the world today.

The history of Hawaiian surfing before the Colonial era is sometimes difficult to retell with any authority. Since the ancient Hawaiians practiced mostly an oral history the facts and legends of its history are often indecipherable. In many cases the Hawaiian people
do not distinguish between historical fact and cultural legend (Finney and Houston 1996). To Hawaiians it is all considered essential to understanding their history.

To the pre-colonial Hawaiian people surfing was far more than a national pastime. Surfing was deeply ingrained into a culture that worshiped the land and the natural bounty they were blessed with. Surfing was more than a pastime or recreational activity, it was a significant cultural phenomenon that was imbued with the status more closely resembling a religion. “Surfing was more than just catching and riding an ocean wave it was the center of a circle of social and ritual activities that began with the very selection of the tree from which a board was carved and could end in the premature death of a Chief - as was the result of at least one famous surfing contest in Hawaiian legend” (Finney and Houston 1996, p. 27). The board was a status symbol, and was created by a priest or “kahuna” involving a detailed and lengthy ritual process. The length of the finished board and type of wood to be used was determined in part by the hierarchical status of the rider. A Chief or Chiefess was entitled to the longest boards made of the best wood. Other members of the royalty or ali’i were privileged as well to enjoy the best boards as well as the best surf spots. But surfing was in no way relegated to the elite of the islands. Commoners and royalty alike practiced surfing, but it was also governed by strict social mores and taboos, called the kapu system. The kapu system was series of restrictions that governed contact with the chiefly class as well as between all men and women. Kapu also regulated the kinds of food one could eat and the type of fish one could catch (Finney and Houston 1996; Trask 1993). Despite the strict kapu rules, surfing was a cultural priority, imbued with equality and sexual freedom, and a chance to commune with nature in a profound way. Men and women, children and older adults alike practiced it. When the waves were of a high quality it was normal for the people to drop whatever they were doing and paddle out into the surf. The Christian missionary William Ellis once described this “mass reaction to a sudden run of good waves.”

Thatch houses of the whole village stood empty, daily tasks such as farming, fishing, and tapa-making, were left undone, while an entire community, men, women, and children enjoyed themselves in the rising surf and rushing white water (Ellis quoted in Finney and Houston 1996, p. 27).

Chores were abandoned temporarily so the gifts of the ocean could be enjoyed. Festivals that lasted for months centered on surfing and competitions and excluded any sort
of work so that the waves could be enjoyed fully. Not coincidently, these festivals occurred in the winter months when the surf in Hawaii is at its best.

Surfing was at the center of a culture focused on living harmoniously with their rich natural surroundings. The Hawaiians did not think of themselves as being in or on the land, rather they saw themselves as being part of the land and the sea (Trask 1993). The Hawaiian’s relationship with nature stands in stark contrast to the Western approach that sees nature as something separate, and something to be conquered and tamed (Fiske 2010). These discordant viewpoints would eventually and dramatically collide with the arrival of the Westerners to the Hawaiian Islands.

In religion, in language, in festivals, in love, and in song and story, surfing was woven into the life of ancient Hawai‘i. Its related activities overlapped one another in the complexities and contradictions of the old social order: a surfer might sweat for weeks shaping and shining a new board to perfection, then avoid work of any kind for days on end as he joined his fellow villagers in the mounting surf. He might dedicate his alaia to the gods and then gamble his life away in the riding of it. With chants, contests, ten dozen places to surf, and literally thousands of hand-carved boards to ride upon, surfing was truly the sport of commoners as well as chiefs – a vital part of the isolated island world European voyagers chanced upon in 1778 (Finney and Houston 1996, p. 49).

**Western Contact: Decline and Revival**

Despite the centrality and cultural significance of surfing, with the arrival of Western people and influence in Hawaii, the sport was nearly wiped out in a very short time. In 1778 the famed British explorer Capt. James Cook chanced upon the Hawaiian Islands. He named them the Sandwich Islands, after the Earl of Sandwich who financed his voyage. Almost immediately the Hawaiian people began to suffer. Some were killed in disputes with the crew of Cook’s ships. The Hawaiian people had no system of ownership, and many natives were shot for “stealing” boats, when in reality they believed they were borrowing the boats and intended to return them. Cook himself died in a dispute not unlike those mentioned. The most damage done to the Hawaiian people was not from direct aggression however. With no natural immunities to the Western diseases the natives died quickly and painfully from diseases like small pox or measles, the many of those who survived were sterilized by the
venereal diseases contracted from the Western invaders. By the 1890’s the Hawaiian natives had been so ravaged by outside disease that their population decreases from an estimate of around 400,000 to only 40,000, a catastrophic decrease of 90% (Finney and Houston 1996; Kampion 1997; Trask 1993).

The damage done by Western contact did not stop with biological warfare. Those who survived were left to wrestle with the cultural attack perpetrated by the Westerners who followed Cook to the islands. Three main groups of Western settlers followed Cook’s voyage. Whalers used the islands as ports to make repairs and rest. They were notorious for preying upon the curious and open sexual attitudes of the Hawaiian people, often kidnapping and raping young girls. Sugar planters also came to the islands to reap the benefits of the incredibly rich soil. These capitalist planters exploited the island’s natural resources and imported workers from Japan and China to work the fields because most of the native population was dead and many who remained resisted the Western approach to work. The last group to come to the islands did perhaps the most cultural damage to the Hawaiian people, and certainly represent the greatest historical enemy to surfing ever. The Calvinist missionaries who came to the islands to convert the natives to Christianity undertook a full-fledged culture war against the Hawaiian people in order to “civilize” them. The missionaries sought to reform every aspect of the Hawaiian culture so that the natives could be saved from, what the missionaries perceived to be, wicked ways. The Calvinists spurned the Hawaiian’s polytheistic religious beliefs and sought to replace their spiritual framework which worshiped nature and believed in many gods who are manifested in the plants, animals, and ocean with a single God who rules from Heaven and demands strict adherence to prescribed commandments. The sexual freedom practiced on the islands was of particular disgust to the Western missionaries. The polygamy, polyandry, adultery, and nudity that were commonplace to the native people were all sinful acts in the eyes of the Christian missionaries. The Calvinists believed that they must be taught to live monogamously and only engage in sexual relations for the sake of procreation within a formal marriage.

The Calvinists also sought to reform what they perceived to be a lack of any kind of work ethic and general savagery in the native people. The Christian missionaries viewed the native Hawaiians as dirty, violent, uneducated, uncivilized, lazy, dumb, and sinful. Despite the fact that the native Hawaiians lived a relatively beautiful and harmonious lifestyle until
the invasion of Western influence, the Calvinist missionaries sought to reform and convert
the natives from what they saw as a hedonistic and barbaric existence. The sport of surfing
was one of the first things they sought to destroy, for it not only stood at the center of the
culture they so disdained, but it also represented a naked and hedonistic waste of time.
Instead, the natives were put to work and sent to church (Kampion 1997, p. 36; Trask 1993,
p. 36).

The Western invasion of Hawaii transcended cultural and religious influence. The
bountiful land was exploited by capitalists who saw the potential for profits to be pulled from
the land. This invasion culminated with the eventual violent military invasion of the islands.
The Queen was displaced and the islands were eventually and officially annexed by the
United States in 1898 (Kinzer 2006).

Surfing, which was the national pastime and cultural center point around which all
over activities centered was all but dead. Only a few secret holdovers still surfed in the years
following the colonial onslaught by the west. Ironically, it was another group of westerners
who helped bring surfing back to its place at the center of Hawaiian culture.

Many westerners who came to the islands in the late 19th century saw the potential
for tourism. They knew the idyllic scenery and perfect climate could attract wealthy
adventure-seeking travelers, and surfing was used as a marketing tool to convince them to
visit Hawaii. It turned out to be just the thing. A few very creative and industrial American
journalists and entrepreneurs initiated a series of magazines, advertisements, and newspaper
stories that centered around Hawaii’s natural beauty, the relaxing atmosphere, and the
therapeutic properties of its climate that highlighted the adventure and majesty of Hawaii’s
original and exciting sport, surfing. Postcards and advertisements from that time featured
surfing as the main attraction to draw in potential visitors (Brown & Pauahi 2006). The allure
of riding a wave in the warm waters off the pristine beaches was enough kick-off a huge
tourism boom to the islands, one that continues to this day.

Crafty businessmen and promoters like Alexander Hume Ford utilized the native
people to add to the allure of the islands. The men were employed by the hotel owners as
“Beach Boys” who would teach the wealthy divorces to surf, or sing them native songs on
the ukulele, and generally keep them company as they soaked in the majesty of the islands.
To this day the image of the tan, muscular, and friendly Hawaiian Beach Boy persists in
popular culture. Accurate or not, the iconic representation that was created is an enduring symbol of the exoticness, sexuality, and welcoming of the islands. The women were also used to entertain the visiting westerners, showcasing the hula dances which were taken from their original ceremonial contexts and adapted to dinnertime entertainment suitable for a luau for tourists.

The most famous of the Beach Boys was a man named Duke Kahanmoku. He earned his fame as a four time Olympic swimming champion and world record holder and toured the world giving surfing exhibitions. Because of his glowing smile and infectious demeanor he landed dozens of roles in Hollywood movies. For his contributions in making surfing a worldwide phenomenon he earned the nickname as the “Johnny Appleseed” of Surfing.

Despite the exploitative and capitalistic motives of the western hotel and resort owners to profit from the islands, one of the positive results of their efforts was that surfing was thrust back into popularity and thrived on the islands again. In an ironic shift, it was the efforts of Westerners once again that affected surfing so profoundly. Now that surfing could be used to turn a profit it was valued by the Western visitors. But not long before that time a different group of Western colonists rejected the sport as sinful and barbaric. The revival of surfing was aided in no small part by the attention it received from some of America’s most famous writers and adventures. Clever hotel promoters invited these men to visit the islands and made sure to get them into the water for a surf lesson. Men like Mark Twain and Jack London came to Hawaii and tried surfing, and the stories they wrote that followed depicted the sport as a magical and thrilling adventure and the people as strong, beautiful, and proud (Warshaw 2004). Such positive attention from these revered writers not only helped change the image of the Hawaiian islands and its native people, but it also introduced surfing to millions of excited readers.

It was only a matter of time before surfing left the shores of the Hawaiian Islands and spread around the world. Duke Kahanmoku had already circled the globe bringing surfing to distant shores. A crafty hotel and railroad owner by the name of Henry Huntington seized on surfing’s appeal as well and invited a skilled Hawaiian surfer named George Freeth to give surfing exhibitions on the waves in front of his beachside hotel in Southern California.\(^3\) His

\(^3\) Huntington so effectively marketed the allure of surfing and beach lifestyle that his legacy lives on to this
idea was that people would ride his trains to the beach, watch the surfing expo, eat in his restaurant and stay in his hotel. It worked, and the people came in droves from all over California to watch a man walk on water. Huntington cleverly played-up the aura of freedom and leisure associated with surfing too. Other such exhibitions cropped up around California, Florida, and as far as Australia and soon surfing was a not an island curiosity practiced only by a handful of native holdovers, it had gone global.

**CALIFORNIA IN THE PRE-WAR AND WAR ERAS**

In the pre-World War II era surfing was a small sport that was practiced by a small but significant number of dedicated surfers. Among them was a great surfer named Tom Blake, who had grown up in Wisconsin and came to Hawaii to learn to surf after he saw a movie about surfing and actually met Duke Kahanamoku at the movie’s premier. Blake, like Kahanamoku was a championship swimmer, and when he moved to Hawaii he quickly mastered the sport. Renowned as a world-class waterman, Blake took to the sport with ease. He was also known as quite an inventor as well and he developed designs and concepts in board building that kicked off a revolution of design and material use that culminated in the complete reinvention of the surfboard. Blake also invented various life-saving devices and underwater photographic equipment that helped bring some of the best pictures of surfing ever photographed at the time to publications around the world (Kampion 1997, p. 45).

Blake’s contributions in surfing were more than just the tangible design elements and various pieces of equipment he improved upon or invented outright. Tom Blake studied the Hawaiian culture and way of life and he brought back elements of each to California. His hybrid lifestyle, which combined island mentality with western culture heavily influenced the Southern California surf culture he was so central to. Blake’s long blond hair, muscular build, and loose fitting clothing became the standard for Southern California surfers and Blake himself literally became the poster boy for California Surf Culture. Though not as famous as Duke Kahanamoku, Tom Blake’s contributions to the development of, and influence on, California Surf Culture is undeniable. He is the most sociologically significant surfer of his time in that he bridged the gap between the ancient world of surfing and what day, as the beach community he shaped in the Los Angeles area is still known as Huntington Beach.
eventually became modern surfing. He nearly created California surf culture himself by combining elements of native Hawaiian culture with Western culture to create what we call “Surf Culture” today (Kampion 1997; Lawler 2010, p. 70-74).

World War II had a huge impact on surfing and surf culture. Before the war surfing was practiced by mostly adult men living in Southern California. It was a gentlemen’s sport with a distinct culture of brotherhood and cooperation. There were only around five hundred surfers in all of California (Irwin 1973, p. 131), meaning there were plenty of waves to go around and the spirit of collaboration extended beyond the beach. Since surfboards were expensive and hard to make, most surfers helped each other build their boards together. With the small numbers and need for cooperation, surfing became a very well codified culture centered around fun and cooperation. But when WWII ramped up and most of the draft age men were sent to war the surf culture was thrown into a state of disarray and ambiguity. The only people left surfing were the kids who were too young to be drafted.

The war produced a discontinuity in their socialization into the surfing world. While they were learning the sport and spending most of their time at the beach, they had not been accepted into many facets of the older surfers’ lives – such as the club, family and occupational activities (Irwin 1973, p. 134).

At that time in California there were seven surf clubs, and everyone that surfed was in one of those clubs. Membership in a club was necessary to learn to surf since; not many people were surfing and you had to learn from someone, it provided knowledge and access to surf spots, and membership provided a potential surfer with the people and materials to make a surfboard. Since surfboards were all handmade by their practitioners for the most part, the only way to get a board was to make one or have one made for you.

During the war surf culture floundered and those who remained were left with a disjointed and less codified culture. When the war ended surf culture underwent what is probably its most significant change ever. The first major impact was from those who were lucky enough to return home from the war.

**POST WAR BOOM**

When the war ended… Boom, we were back in the environment. It was devotion – like seeing a girl again… like I’m never gonna leave! Anyway, after the war we plunged into this thing… gave ourselves over to it entirely. I think it was because
we had spent four or five years in war and we had survived. And it had all been bad. Now there was no question what had us by the throat. It was the ocean. Everything else was secondary (Irwin 1973, p. 135).

Many who returned from fighting abroad sought out surfing for the first time because of its carefree and hedonistic lifestyle, and those who surfed before the war rushed back to the ocean. The previous quote from one surfer at the time summed up the feeling of returning from war to come back to the beach. For those who did surf before the war and those who were new to the sport, surfing represented something new, something that it was not previous to the war. Many youth subcultures emerged in the United States following World War II, most notably motorcycle gangs and surfers (Stratton 1985).

… when World War II ended, it supplied surfing with large numbers of potential members. There were many returning veterans who were not ready to pick up civilian life, which, after the intensity of the war, seemed dull and meaningless. In addition, many civilians were experiencing a letdown and a reluctance to return to the “petty pursuits” of civilian life. Consequently, after 1945, there were multitudes of postwar disaffiliates, who turned to unconventional life styles, such as the beat life, hot rodding, motorcycling, and surfing (Irwin 1973, p. 134).

Post-war America was dominated by homogeny, conformity, and fear of enemies both real and imagined. The image of children ducking under their desks at school to protect themselves against atomic weapons is both laughable and frightening. The United States emerged from the war a mechanized and industrial juggernaut and a world super-power. The culture that emerged, combined with the mindset held-over with those who grew up during the Great Depression, made for a national culture at the time that could be characterized as work-oriented, paranoid, and ultra conformist (Rutsky 2007). In this environment surfing, along with other sub-cultural and counter-cultural activities, represented an escape from the negative aspects of the new American hegemony. Southern California was the perfect place for surf culture to take root again. “Southern California has, for decades, been a location where persons spend enjoyable days engaged in pleasant activities … and avoid the strains and drudgery of routine urban worlds” (Irwin 1973, p. 137). The beach itself is where much of the Southern California culture comes from, “it has represented a way of life with slower pace, a life closer to ‘nature’, free from mechanization, responsibilities, commitments and drudgery ”(Irwin 1973, p. 137).

Going surfing, besides lots of wave riding, meant hours of days passed on a remote beach away from the “ugliness” of civilized life. The ocean was closely related to the
meaning of this aspect of surfing. It was more than just the locus of waves. In part, the waves were merely manifestations of something more profound. It was the ocean that presented a primeval way of life and force – the complete antithesis of a too mechanized, too routinized, too tame civilization that physically ended at its boundaries (Irwin 1973, p. 138).

For years following WWII surfing thrived as a distinct American sub-culture. With their relaxed attitude toward work and hedonistic desires to surf and have fun, surfers and surfing gained a reputation as a counter-cultural movement (Kampion 1997, p. 48-65; Lawler 2010, p. 65). Those who did surf were still part of a relatively small group, probably around a few thousand in the 1950’s. Their time spent together on the hidden away beaches, like San Clemente, surfing, playing music, sleeping in their cars, and hustling for food and money developed a very distinct and codified culture that appropriated elements of Island life (or what they perceived to be Island life), Beat poetry and aesthetics, and other sub-cultural elements that meshed nicely with their beach lifestyle (Rutsky 2007, p. 16). Soon two things would change surfing as much, if not more, than any thing ever had since Capt. Cook chanced upon the Hawaiian islands.

The first development to impact surfing was the advent of the light weight longboard, or The Malibu chip board. Prior to the Malibu chip, surfboards were made from wood, but even lightweight woods like balsa made for heavy boards. A standard 9-foot surfboard could weigh around 100 pounds. This made them very difficult to carry and transport and even more difficult to surf with. Before the fin was invented these boards were nearly impossible to turn as well. The Malibu board was made from foam which was covered in fiberglass. This made them very strong and durable, but most importantly it made them far lighter. The Malibu chip was easier to transport and far more maneuverable in the surf. The light-weight board opened up the surfing world to smaller and younger boys and girls since it was no longer necessary to be a strong person just to carry the board from the car to the seashore.

The Malibu board had a fast and significant impact on surfing, but no one thing influenced the culture and future of surfing more, nor did any other thing drive more people into the water to try surfing than a seemingly innocuous movie about a girl who wanted to surf with the boys. Frederick Kohner published a novel in 1957 about his 15 year old daughter Kathy who spent a summer learning to surf in Malibu. He gave the book the same name the boys at Malibu had given Kathy, “Gidget”. “Gidget” was a combination of the
words Girl and Midget, referring to Kathy’s small stature, about 5’1”. The book was a smashing success and was quickly adapted into a movie, which was released in 1959. As successful as the book was, the movie was a phenomenon. The overwhelming success of the movie led to seven sequels of the book, two sequels of the movie, and two television sitcoms. But the impact that Gidget had on the world of surfing has less to do with the content or quality of the books and movies considering that the sequels to the movies were box office flops (Morris 1993), and more to do with the reactions of those who read the books or saw the movies.

The Gidget phenomenon kicked off a nearly decades long national obsession with surfing. The numbers of people surfing multiplied exponentially in the months following the release of the movie and resulted in the surfer population in California going from a few thousand to a few million seemingly overnight (Peralta 2004). “Surfsploitation” flicks popped up all over to capitalize on the surf craze. Such movies like Ride the Wild Surf or the Beach Blanket series featured clean-cut teens dancing and singing on the beach and often depicted crudely staged actors pretending to surf on a soundstage cut together with stock footage of real surfers on massive waves in Wiamea Bay, Hawaii (Morris 1993). Dozens of “surf rock” bands were formed, magazine circulation increased rapidly, more movies were made, and the surf craze grew and grew. It’s reach was not limited to the beaches of Southern California either. Surf mania reached the Midwest, and it was not uncommon to see a car full of teenagers cruising down the street blasting a Beach Boys or Jan and Dean song on the radio with a surf board strapped to the roof despite the nearest beach being a thousand miles away.

Surfing became so popular among Americas youth because it represented freedom and fun. Surfing itself was a new adventure to be conquered that was relatively easy to get into (though hard to master). All one needed was a board to borrow and a ride to the beach. Beyond that actual act of surfing, the surf lifestyle that was depicted in these movies was very alluring the America’s youth. Surfers were depicted as rugged, tan, strong, and laid-back care-free adventurers, most famously immortalized in the original Gidget movie with the character Kahoona. The quasi-beatnik, globe trotting, philosopher poet nihilist appealed to young men and women because it represented freedom, rebellion, adventure, and sex.
Combined with the real-life fun that comes from actually riding a wave, surfing was ultimately irresistible (Morris 1993; Rutsky 2007).

This era of surfing represents the second major time surfing was co-opted by those who saw the money making potential of surfing. This time movie studios and record companies not only capitalized on surfing’s popularity, they had the largest hand in creating the surf craze to drive sales of movie tickets and records. The movies and records produced in this era were only superficially associated with surfing for its success in driving sales. They did not depict surfing in any accurate way, and those who had been surfing for years before the Gidget phenomenon took hold resented the pop-culture blitz that not only cheapened their passion but also created crowds at their favorite surf breaks (Peralta 2004). For as much attention that was thrust on surfing, the sport itself suffered during this era. Such a rapid period of expansion is too difficult to control, and surfing went from being a small and well-regulated sport of athletic gentlemen and ladies to a hugely popular pop-culture phenomenon. Along the way some of surfing’s most cherished tenets may have been compromised. In the pre-war era surf clubs dominated the landscape. These clubs were associated with a specific surf break or series of breaks in a general area. Though surfers could surf in different spots, the clubs regulated the numbers of people in the water which not only ensured that those who were allowed to surf got their fill of waves, but it also kept people safe. Surfing is a dangerous sport with enough inherent risk, but the most dangerous element in surfing is the danger presented by other surfers, especially inexperienced surfers. Thus there is a fundamental interest in keeping the numbers of surfers in the water to an acceptable and safe level and to also ensure that those who do paddle out are experienced enough so as to not endanger the other surfers (Evers 2006; Tomson & Moser 2006).

With the surf-boom that occurred in the post-war era the tightly regulated surf community was overwhelmed and outnumbered. They simply could not keep up with such a rapid expansion and their cherished and protected surf breaks were overcome with newcomers who were only superficially interested in surfing and driven by the inaccurate hype surrounding surfing at the time. Membership in a surf club went from being a necessity to essentially meaningless since the clubs had very little control over the sport. This expansion not only damaged the physical landscape of surfing by overcrowding the beaches and surf breaks, but it also corrupted the culture of surfing (Irwin 1973).
The surfing world places a lot of value in authenticity. Since surfing requires a lot of dedication in both time and physical effort, surfers typically respect those who have paid their dues and earned their way into the sport and seek to earn that same respect from their peers. But with so many people buying the newly mass-produced Malibu boards instead of having to make their own board and paddling out into the waves with no knowledge of surfing other than what they learned from the often inaccurate depictions of surfing in the movies and music of the era, the authenticity of surfing was compromised and the culture was corrupted. Those hordes of new surfers entering the water at that time cannot really be blamed for corrupting the existing surf culture. Ultimately they were drawn to surfing for the same reasons the seasoned surfers were: it’s fun, it’s different, and it offers an escape from everyday life. Despite how much the experienced surfers may have resented them, the new surfers were drawn to the alternative lifestyle that surfing presented in the same way that everyone was.

**BACKLASH AND REACTION**

The massive expansion of surfing in the post-war Gidget era corrupted and diluted the surf culture in numerous ways. Many long-time surfers perceived the damage to surf culture as irreversible and simply walked away from the sport. The most famous surfer to renounce the sport as irreparable was Miki Dora. Dora was surfing’s iconoclastic and reclusive bad-boy who shunned the spotlight and despised the pop-culturization of surfing. Despite his fame and success in surfing he so detested the direction surf culture had taken that he simply walked away from it and disappeared from the California surfing scene.

The influence of the Gidget era of expansion on surfing certainly did some damage to the surf culture, but not all that resulted from that influence was negative. Many of those who came to surfing in this time were genuinely interested in learning the craft and those who persevered in this era did so by adapting to the changes in the water. Previous to the surf boom what was required to get attention and gain respect on the waves was a far more simple matter. Control and grace were emphasized along with wave selection prior to the surf craze. Now in order to stand out from the masses of “pseudo surfers” (Irwin 1973), those who were more interested in associating with the surfer style than with actually becoming a good surfer, that were crowding the beaches surfers had to innovate to get noticed. An era of “hot-
“dogging” emerged where tightly woven tricks and maneuvers were strung together. Turning and “walking the nose”\(^4\) were part of the new style of surfing that emerged in this era. Surfboards themselves received a lot of attention as new materials, many invented during the war, and a more scientific approach to board shaping evolved (Kampion 2007).

The other major reaction to the crowded boom era of surfing was greatly inspired by the classic surf film *The Endless Summer*, surf travel and exploration. Instead of battling the crowds of the popular southern California surf breaks, many intrepid surfers set off on globe trotting expeditions in search of un-crowded and previously un-surfed breaks (Ormrod 2005). Just as the stars of The Endless Summer went off in search of the perfect wave, so too did many surfers of this era. A seasonal pilgrimage to the Hawaiian islands had long been a tradition in the surf community of California (Kampion 1997), but the new global search for paradise and perfection was kicked off by this canonical surf movie. To this day the “surfari” remains a quintessential rite of passage in surf culture. Such expeditions have uncovered some of the world’s greatest discoveries in wave quality and have pushed the boundaries of what was thought of as possible on a wave.

Many more innovations in surf technique and board design followed from these expeditions as surfers adapted to the type and size of wave they discovered on their journeys abroad. What was first an attempt to escape the crowds of their home breaks to surf undisturbed pristine beaches in exotic lands actually pushed surfing into a whole new era. Eventually the Gidget-era surf boom died out, just as all pop-culture movements do when the next big thing comes along and the previous fad is pushed aside. In the case of surf music, the British invasion and the Beatles took over the airwaves and dominated record sales. The surf movies suffered when the clean-teen image and their ultra-conformist theme became old hat (Morris 1993; Rutsky 2007). The movies themselves were viewed by critics as pretty vapid to begin with and it didn’t take long for their popularity to wane. Surfing itself remained popular despite the inevitable decline in participation. The sheer numbers of people in the water was so artificially inflated by the surf boom that the number of people surfing

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\(^4\) “Walking the nose,” according to Warshaw’s *Encyclopedia of Surfing* (Warshaw, 2003) is a, “Surfing maneuver in which the rider, moves to the front of the board while angling across the wave face, and assumes one of a half-dozen or so positions.”
simply had to normalize once the boom itself subsided. There were, no doubt, still more
generation after the Gidget era busted than there were before it began.

Those who surfed through the post-war surf boom and those came to surfing during
this time and stuck with it began to slowly shape the surf culture that was left. Surfing, a
pretty distinct sub-culture in America, is just like every other sub-culture in that it is part of
the larger culture. This means that although a sub-culture will have distinct norms and values
that differentiate it from the larger culture, the sub-culture itself is not isolated from that
culture it is contained in. This means that what happens to the larger society also happens to
the sub-cultures contained within it. But subcultures also play an important role in
challenging and sometimes changing the dominant culture as well (Pearson 1979). So as the
American cultural landscape evolved in some dramatic ways through the late 50’s and into
the 60’s, surfing reflected and even sparked some of those changes.

Surfing has always been associated with a free and easy lifestyle (Lawler 2010;
Young 2006). The ancient Hawaiians themselves would drop their chores in favor of good
surfing conditions (Bingham 1848). The freethinking, hedonistic, and anti-work ethic that so-
often accompanied the surfer lifestyle meshed well with the beatnik and “hippie” movements
that swept the American youth culture during this time (Kampion 1997). Surfers appropriated
some of the characteristics of these movements and very quickly the clean-teen image of the
surfer that was popularized by the Gidget and Beach Blanket era movies and embodied in the
lasting images of Tom Blake or Duke Kahanamoku was transformed. Soon the image of the
surfer was that of a longhaired, disheveled, pot-smoking dropout, not a clean-cut, well
dressed, coke-chugging college boy. The outside appearance of the surfer changed along
with the culture and drugs became a part of the surfing experience in the same way they were
a part of the youth movements of the 60’s and 70’s (Irwin 1973; Young 1971)). These
countercultural movements were drawn to the existing surf culture, and surf culture
appropriated parts of other counter cultures that fit within their ethos.

PROFESSIONALIZATION

Every winter surfers from all around the world flock to the beaches of the North
Shore of Oahu. This time of year some of the most perfect and challenging waves break
along the shores of this Hawaiian island and it has long been a proving ground or a rite of
passage for surfers to make the pilgrimage to surfing’s Garden of Eden and test themselves on the best waves alongside the best surfers. Such was the case in the mid 70’s when a group of Australian and South African surfers came to challenge themselves on the waves of Oahu’s famed North Shore and ended up challenging the entire surf culture and transforming the world of professional surfing forever (Tomson 2008).

The group, consisting most famously of Australians Wayne “Rabbit” Bartholomew, Mark Richards, Ian Cairns and Peter Townsend, and South African cousins Shaun and Michael Tomson came to Oahu each winter to pit their skills against each other and the local Hawaiian who dominated the waves. The professional surfing industry was small and unorganized and prize money was scant. The outsiders had to jockey just to be allowed to compete in the few contests there were since most of the spots were reserved for Hawaiian surfers, so when a few of them were allowed to compete they were very motivated to prove they belonged. This small group was very successful when they did get a chance to compete and they often won or finished near the top of Hawaiian contests. Their skills on the waves earned them wins and respect, but their bravado and braggadocio behavior outside of the water irked the native Hawaiians and landed them in hot water on many occasions. For a short time the Hawaiian surfers were so offended by some comments made by the Australian surfers in various surf magazines and newspaper articles that some of the more flagrant offenders were banned from surfing on the North Shore (Tomson 2008). The entire situation was fueled by the history of colonialism that so deeply affected the island culture. Some of the newcomers endured beatings and death threats when they did try to surf the protected spots and Rabbit Bartholomew spent weeks holed up in a hotel when he learned that armed men were looking for him. From the Hawaiian point of view, the native surfers had been so publicly offended by the brash attitudes of the white surfers that their reaction surely seemed far from an over-reaction and almost certainly justified. Eventually a peace was proctored when influential Hawaiian surfer Eddie Aikau reached out to Rabbit and the other non-native surfers as well as the leaders of the native surfer hierarchy and tempers were settled (Tomson 2008).

The impact the Australian and South African surfers had on surfing came in two parts. First, their style of surfing was very radical for the time. The native Hawaiian surfers were known for a flowing and graceful type of surfing that sought to match the beauty and
contours of the waves. On the other hand the white foreigners employed a far more aggressive style of surfing that attacked the waves. They jammed as many maneuvers into a wave as they could, often cutting back toward the breaking part of the wave and then turning back toward the unbroken face of the wave as well as maneuvering up to the highest point or “lip” of the wave. This aggressive style of surfing directly challenged the style of the older generation of Hawaiian surfers, but it also wowed the judges at contests. This challenge in style was part of what angered the Hawaiian surfers. The fact that their way of life was again being challenged by white foreigners also cannot be overlooked. Surfing is a native Hawaiian sport, and in the minds of the Hawaiian people their history and culture was once again being overthrown by colonial invaders (scars from pervious cultural invasion run deep among the native Hawaiians to this day), as their traditions and style of wave riding were being so iconoclastically uprooted. Not only were these young white surfers boldly challenging the Hawaiian style or surfing (their sacred pastime), but they were doing it with a brazen attitude, and they were winning!

The second major influence these surfers had on surfing itself was in their promotion and development of the professional surfing championship tour. As stated, the sport itself was unorganized and prize money was very small. But the surfers from South Africa and Australia worked very hard to transform the image of the surfer into a marketable commodity and reshape the professional surfing scene into a multi-million dollar global industry. The idea of a professional surfer was somewhat of a contradiction at the time. There wasn’t much money to be made as a surfer and the counter-cultural culture of surfing at the time was at odds with the idea of making money and surfing. These men challenged that image and rehabilitated it from the lazy drug taking “hippie” into the “Bronzed Aussie” image of an athletic and hard-surfing person who constantly challenged themselves and the sport to improve rather than simply “going with the flow.” Despite their desire to challenge the counter-cultural image of the surfer, these men were still not interested in 9 to 5 jobs sitting at a desk. They wanted to surf, but they wanted to get paid to do it. They sought out sponsorships for themselves and for contests and managed to create the governing body of professional surfing. Their efforts paid off and when these surfers began to dominate in contests the world began to pay attention. In a few short years professional surfing was jump-started into what has become an enormous global industry with millions of fans and billions
of dollars worth of business. From 1975, when their campaign began, until today, the professional surfing industry has continued to grow. All the while non-competitive surfing or “free” surfing has grown as well.

The Association of Surfing Professionals, or ASP, is the governing body of the professional surfing world and it oversees hundreds of yearly events within a multitude of divisions. Events are held all around the world and the prize money has grown enormously each year since the tour started. In the thirty plus years since the pro tour’s inception the current state of the scene is completely different than when it started. Events are broadcast live around the world, and instead of holding events on large metropolitan beaches on summer weekends when the surf is often very poor, a year long schedule brings surfers to the best breaks around the world at the best possible times so the absolute best conditions can be achieved (ASP 2010). Many other popular events are held outside the jurisdiction of the ASP, including many annual Big Wave invitationals and the Santa Cruz “Cold Water Classic.” All these events are made possible and profitable through television and web-casting technology, which allows fans around the world to enjoy the competitions without having to travel to the distant corners of the earth.

The history of the sport of surfing is far more detailed than anyone can hope to write about with any authority. Even the authors of the best and most comprehensive books on the subject admit that they can only achieve so much within the confines of the written text. The oral history and the experiential nature of surfing make a complete history an unreachable goal. My goal in this short history of surfing was to demonstrate that even a cursory overview of surfing’s past should demonstrate a source that is rich with culture and tradition that is ripe for sociological analysis. Any single era of surfing history is prime subject matter for investigation and discussion, and many others have done fantastic work exploring surfing’s rich past. This short overview should suffice in providing a foundation on which the significance of surfing itself, and not a particular era or person, can be evaluated within the context of social theory and sociological analysis.
CHAPTER 3

HUIZINGA: COME OUT AND PLAY

The act of surfing, in any of its non-competitive forms, is ultimately an act of play. Any discourse on the social relevance of play would be incomplete without paying close attention to the work of Johan Huizinga. Huizinga’s seminal 1938 work, *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1955) stands as the foundation of all research concerning the sociology of sports as well as the starting point for any discussion on the nature of play. Huizinga hesitates to define play before first discussing the definitions and theories on play that had been articulated prior to the publication of his own work on the subject. Most if not all of these definitions and theories on play focused around some sort of biological explanation for the need for play. These theories, listed by Huizinga, claimed that play was; a discharge of superabundant vital energy, a satisfaction of some imitative instinct, fulfilled a need for relaxation, served as training for skills that would be needed in later life such as hunting or wrestling, constituted an exercise in restraint noting that puppies will bite softly while playing but not break the skin, fulfills some innate desire to compete or dominate, serves as an outlet for harmful impulses, represents wishful fulfillment, or serves to boost one’s self esteem.

Huizinga’s criticism of these theories center around what he believes is their shared characteristic. “All these hypotheses have one thing in common: they all start from the assumption that play must serve something which is not play, that it must have some kind of biological purpose” (Huizinga 1955, p. 2). Huizinga states that these theories and definitions all presuppose that play serve some sort of purpose, that play is rational activity fulfilling a biological need. It is important to note that rational, in this sense, refers to something that is done for the purposes of attaining something, a means to an end. For instance, hunting may be considered rational behavior because it has the propensity to provide sustenance. Simply, hunting puts food on the table. Play, on the other hand, is irrational, which does not mean it is illogical or foolish, but instead refers to play as autotelic activity, or an end in itself. Play
doesn’t put food on the table. It’s not done for any reason other than that it’s fun. This is the center point of Huizinga’s position.

It is Huizinga’s primary criticism that all previous theories on play overlook something crucial to understanding the nature of play. He asserts,

They attack play direct with quantitative methods of experimental science without first paying attention to its profoundly aesthetic quality. As a rule they leave the primary quality of play as such, virtually untouched… play finds no explanation in biological analysis (Huizinga 1955, p. 2).

It is this profound quality which is overlooked by other definitions of play that is the center piece of Huizinga’s own theory. Huizinga simplifies his argument and states clearly that the element of fun is the overlooked piece of the other theories on play. It seems, to Huizinga, that their “quantitative methods of experimental science” may be to blame for their oversight, stating, “the fun of playing, resists all analysis, all logical interpretation”(Huizinga 1955, p. 3). A combination of overly empirical methodology and the search for rationality in play is what Huizinga believes led all previous theorist astray. Instead, the simple and ultimately irrational element of fun is the keystone to any treatise on play.

But for Huizinga, a rational explanation of play is not just an oversight of the “profoundly aesthetic quality,” it is outright incorrect. Citing the fact that animals play as well as human beings, Huizinga postulates that play must therefore be outside the realm of rationality. In fact, play comes before reason or rationality according to Huizinga. “Here we have to do with an absolutely primary category of life, familiar to everybody at a glance right down to the animal level” (Huizinga 1955, p. 3). Play’s status as a primary category means that it is a precursor to the basic elements of civilization, existing before the higher functions of human social activity. Huizinga’s main underlying thesis to all this is that play, in fact, predates culture, that play is the foundation of culture. The opening sentences to Homo Ludens states this unequivocally.

Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing. We can safely assert, even, that human civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play (Huizinga, 1955, p. 1).

The very fact that animals play proves two things for Huizinga. First, that play exists before culture does, since humans don’t teach animals to play, play must exist on its own.
Second, play must be irrational, since animals are not rational beings. Huizinga recognizes the esoteric nature of this argument but urges his readers to appreciate play as a phenomenon that exists sui generis.

Since the reality of play extends beyond the sphere of human life it cannot have its foundations in any rational nexus, because this would limit it to mankind. The incidence of play is not associated with any particular stage of civilization or view of the universe. Any thinking person can see at a glance that play is a thing on its own, even if this language possesses no general concept to express it. Play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play (Huizinga 1955, p. 3).

Huizinga goes so far as to suggest that perhaps our lack of understanding of the more ephemeral aspects of play can be attributed to a lack of sufficient linguistic structures rather than other factors. Citing other relative “abstractions” that can be challenged or outright repudiated, Huizinga states explicitly the irrefutability of play. Play exists sui generis and is the source of culture, not the other way around.

At this time it is necessary to focus on Huizinga’s central characteristics of play, of which he states there are six. These characteristics not only represent the foundation for Huizinga’s understanding of play, but they also represent the refutation of those previous arguments Huizinga is intent on deconstructing. Huizinga’s first central characteristic of play is that “all play is voluntary activity” (Huizinga 1955, p. 8).

Child and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom. Be that as it may, for the adult and responsible human being play is a function which he could equally well leave alone. Play is superfluous. The need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during “free time” (Huizinga 1955, p.8).

Huizinga actually takes his first characteristic, that play is done voluntarily, a step further and states, “Here, then we have the first main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom” (Huizinga 1955, p. 8). The superfluous nature of play is more than just a

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5 It was previously noted that hunting may be considered a rational activity, and since animals hunt it may be possible to associate animals with rational behavior. Huizinga would point out that animals hunt out of instinct, and not a rational deduction that they must find food in order to survive. Though hunting may be enjoyable for humans, it is still done as a means to an end.
way to pass some free time, but represents instead a place where people express freedom in its most pure sense.

The next central characteristic is that play is not ordinary or real. What this means is that it is a stepping out of “real life” into a temporary sphere with a disposition of it’s own. Later the concept of real life versus the play world will be discussed, but for the time being it should be enough to state that at this point that “real life” refers to the everyday normal life, the workaday world as it were. This doesn’t mean that play isn’t serious or unimportant, as we have discussed before. It just means that it is an interlude in our daily lives.

The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid. The inferiority of play is continually being offset by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness. Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play. Play may arise to heights of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far beneath (Huizinga 1955, p. 8).

Huizinga is saying that play is not only non-serious, but that it can surpass seriousness. Seriousness is held in high regard in western civilization and held up as a standard of behavior. But play, according to Huizinga, can and should go beyond seriousness and have as much as, if not more, of a cultural significance.

Not being “ordinary” life it stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites, indeed it interrupts the appetitive process. It interpolates itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there. Such at least is the way in which play presents itself to us in the first instance: as an intermezzo, an interlude in our daily lives. As a regularly recurring relaxation, however, it becomes the accompaniment, the complement, in fact an integral part of life in general. It adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual – as a life function – and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social association, in short, as a cultural function (Huizinga 1955, p. 9).

For Huizinga, play may begin as an intermezzo, an interlude, but over time it becomes a significant cultural function. Despite its non-serious nature, perhaps even because of it, play stands as a central function of social life and culture and as the foundation of culture (Huizinga 1955, p. 9).

Next in Huizinga’s list of central characteristics is that play is what he refers to as the “secludedness” and “limitedness” of play. Or more simply, play “is played out within certain limits of time and place.” Play creates realms where play is played out, commonly known to children as a playground, Huizinga expands the breadth of the term to include any area where play is undertaken.
The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. Forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (Huizinga 1955, p. 10).

An important point to be taken from this characteristic is that not only does play create playgrounds, be they physically delineated boundaries within which a game is played, or an imaginary arena built within the imagination of a small child. These realms are imbued with special meaning. The baseball diamond is sacred to many, the sumo circle is treated with respect by its participants. They are set apart from the profane and elevated to a status reserved for cathedrals. Ask any Cubs fan how they feel about Wrigley Field and you’ll hear them describe consecrated ground with an ecclesiastical reverence, though in reality it is an undersized and outdated pile of bricks.

Next Huizinga indentifies the propensity for play to create order. But this order does not refer to the rules and well-defined boundaries like one would find in an established sport. Huizinga speaks of order on a higher level.

Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme…. Play has a tendency to be beautiful. It may be that this aesthetic factor is identical with the impulse to create orderly form, which animates play in all its aspects. The words we use to denote the elements of play belong for the most part to aesthetics, terms with which we try to describe the effect of beauty: tension, pose, balance, contrast, variation, solution, resolution, etc. Play casts a spell over us: it is enchanting, captivating. It is invested with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony (Huizinga 1955, p. 10).

Clearly he is going well beyond rules and boundaries, instead Huizinga describes the higher order, that of beauty, that play creates. As evidence he points to the words we use to describe play, and shows that they are often the same words we use do describe things belonging to the world of aesthetics as opposed to those that are applied to the normal workaday world. In fact Huizinga places play firmly into the category of aesthetics. Play can be the simplest activity, chaotic and imaginary musings of a child. But play can and does evolve into a significant cultural function that represents the zenith of human achievement and aesthetic appreciation. For Huizinga, play can be the most beautiful thing a person can do.
Tension is the next central characteristic of play. Remembering that non-seriousness refers more to non-rationality and that play can be a very serious undertaking. It is certainly important to those who participate in it, and that importance is at the heart of the tension that is prevalent in play. The play matters to those who are playing. Huizinga’s words are perhaps best for describing tension in play.

Tension means uncertainty, chanciness; a striving to decide the issue and so end it. The player wants something to “go”, to “come off”; he wants to “succeed” by his own exertions. … Though play as such is outside the range of good and bad, the element of tension imparts to it a certain ethical value in so far as it means a testing of the player’s prowess: his courage, tenacity, recourses and, last but not least, his spiritual powers – his “fairness”; because despite his ardent desire to win, he must still stick to the rules of the game (Huizinga 1955, p. 10-11).

The desire to succeed, even though the consequences of failure are often insignificant in a rational sense, or non-existent all together, is what drives the tension of play. A player simply wants to do well, and one must succeed the right way. Again Huizinga points to the other worldliness of play, a theme that is common in his writings on play, and one that will become central to the rest of this thesis.

The final part of the previously quoted text points to the next of the central characteristics of play, all play has its rules. “These rules determine what ‘holds’ in the temporary world circumscribed by play” (Huizinga 1955, p. 11). Some rules are more clearly articulated and strictly enforced than others, but all play has rules. Those that break the rules or ignore them are outcast because in so doing they break the illusion or shatter the perfection that play can create.

Following the central characteristics of play Huizinga arrives at a point that represents what is really the entire backbone of his thesis that play creates culture. Noting that play is often undertaken in groups, Huizinga postulates that it is only reasonable that these groups begin to form a community. A team is a simple enough example of a play community. But Huizinga’s main point is that a team or other play community does not simply vanish once the game is over.

A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over… The feeling of being ‘apart together’ in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game (Huizinga, 1955 p. 12).
This statement represents the foundation of the idea that play creates culture. Since the players form a community that lasts beyond the duration of the play activity, and have shared something important, a culture has been created. They have been “apart together” and the bonds that are formed are strong and long lasting. It is at this point where the play world spills over into the real world. It is important to note, as well, that Huizinga highlights the rejection of usual norms and the withdrawal from everyday life. The player does not simply ignore or bypass the norms of the workaday world, but rather he or she rejects them, however temporarily, as being inferior to, less-perfect than, or less pleasing than the play world.

Huizinga restates this point more succinctly perhaps, “Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count” (Huizinga 1955, p. 12). A point we will revisit later. Luckily for the player, even when the game is over and in addition to the play-community persisting beyond the game, some of the ideal world is brought into the common everyday world. “But with the end of the play its effect is not lost; rather it continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside, a wholesome influence working security, order and prosperity for the whole community” (Huizinga 1955, p. 14).

**SURFING IS NOT A SPORT**

Perhaps so much attention needn’t be paid to one author’s work, but such a long discussion of Huizinga’s work sets up an important theoretical foundation and also outlines what the rest of the thesis will really be talking about, which is participation in play. This is especially important to note because I am working under the presumption (mostly my own) that non-competitive surfing, the kind done by millions of surfers every day, is not a sport. Surfing can be a sport. When surfers are organized into contests and there are time limits, boundaries, and rules for engagement and guidelines for judgment imposed on surfing then surfing begins to resemble a sport. At best surfing is a subjective sport, on par with gymnastics or diving. What I mean by this is that some sports are very objective in nature. In a sport like basketball or soccer there is a clear objective, put the ball in the hoop or the goal for a designated score. At the end of a preset time the person or team with the most points wins. There are boundaries that are clearly designated. There is a time limit. There are rules. And the combination of all those rules, boundaries, and scoring objectives are what make up the sport.
Other sports are more subjective. In gymnastics contests or diving meets the participants are judged on some aesthetic value to their feat. There are certainly time limits and in the case of some subjective sports there are even boundaries, but the “scoring” portion of the sport requires a judge to make a subjective assessment of their performance and assign a point value to it. This becomes a bit of a grey area of sports in my opinion. In basketball the ball either goes in the hoop for two points or it doesn’t. In football a player was either in bounds with possession for a touchdown or he wasn’t. Of course the human element of the referee or official may make mistakes, but it’s not a matter of opinion that is trying to be assessed. With technology and instant replay we can even take the guess work out of most of the officiating to determine objectively whether or not a ball went in the hoop, if the player stepped on the line, or if time expired. But no amount of technology will ever change the relationship between the subjective opinion of a judge and the score that is assessed. It doesn’t matter how graceful the play looked with he or she sinks a basket, if it goes in, it counts.

But in these subjective sports the gracefulness or aesthetic value of the activity being done is the main criteria for judgment. Judging a surf contest is the same as judging an ice skating contest or a dance contest. One can claim a degree of objectivism and say that if a trick or move is landed without falling then it is completed successfully. But two players or participants can complete the same trick without falling but if one does so with more grace then he or she will receive a higher score. In the objective sports a player may get more esteem for scoring with gracefulness and may be thought of as a better player, but the point value of a three-point basket or a touchdown are always the same regardless of the gracefulness or awkwardness with which it was achieved.

Surfing’s status as a sport is dependent on imposing on top of it certain things that do not normally exist in every day surfing. There are no time limits to surfing, just the natural limits of daylight and the conditions of the surf. Nature does not obey the 9 to 5 workaday world created by capitalist social relations. There are no boundaries in surfing other than those that exist naturally. There are not rules to surfing, at least none that are outlined by a governing body that impose sanctions for misconduct. The unwritten rules of surfing are the subject of many articles and discourses, and the sanctions for breaking those rules are determined not by any judge or referee, but by the participants themselves. Most importantly,
in surfing there are no judges, and no score. Some sports are dependent on having all these things to really be a sport. One isn’t really playing baseball without the field being laid out a specific way and there being teams and certain rules that are specific to the sport. You can go out and play with a bat and a ball and have a great time, but in order to be playing baseball certain things are required. Without them the participants are simply at play, and not playing a sport. And that’s what surfing is, play. There is no score in free surfing. There is success and failure to be sure, but success is measured relative to the surfer. For a beginner success may be measured in whether or not he or she stood up on the board or caught a wave (Butts, 2001). For the advanced surfer catching larger waves or pulling off tricks of increasing difficult may be the measure of success (Stranger 1999). Regardless of the how a surfer judges his or her own success in surfing there is still no score, there are no teams, no time limit, no rules. Surfing is not a sport.6

**SURFING IS PURE PLAY**

It is unknown if Johan Huizinga had ever heard of surfing, and it is very doubtful that he ever surfed himself growing up at the turn of the 20th century in the Netherlands. But even a cursory read of his work _Homo Ludens_, it often seems like surfing must have been the motivation for his piece. Huizinga’s work is centered on the nature of play, and the cultural centrality of play. Indeed, it is Huizinga’s thesis that play is older than culture, and it is play more than anything else that creates culture.

Fun is the central characteristic of play, and play need not fulfill any need outside of itself. According to Huizinga play is autotelic activity, justified by nothing but itself, irrational, non-utilitarian. He takes great lengths to demonstrate that play’s state as irrational does not mean it is not important, but that it is vital. Play is vital for it’s own purposes and does not need an outside source to justify its importance.

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6 Much discussion on the status of one activity or another as a sport seems to be imbued with a lot of emotion. This is because the title of “sport” is held up as being good, and the participants of other non-sport activities feel slighted to not have that status. But in this discussion there is no value placed on being a sport or not. This status does not make one activity better than any other. I personally value surfing above all other activities I have ever done, including sports. A lot of what I value about surfing are the very things that define surfing as play, and not a sport.
Reasserting Huizinga’s main characteristics of play it can be easily demonstrated that surfing fits seamlessly into each descriptor. So much so that one might be inclined to believe that Huizinga was writing about surfing.

**ALL PLAY IS VOLUNTARY ACTIVITY**

No one is ever obligated to surf. Surfing is done for fun, and no other reason. This line is blurred when one begins getting into the realm of professional competitive and sponsored free-surfing where a surfer very well may have an obligation to surf at a certain time or place even when they don’t want to in order to fulfill a contractual obligation to a sponsor or contest organizer. But this paper is not about professional surfing, which in this writer’s opinion is an entirely different phenomenon. The professionalization of surfing changes the act of surfing so much that for the purposes of this paper it is considered outside the boundaries of this study. Non-professional and non-competitive surfing, or “free-surfing” as it is called, is always voluntary. None are ever obligated to paddle out into the ocean and ride a wave. It is done purely for enjoyment and the activity can be stopped at any point, usually when it stops being fun because the surfer is too tired or the waves have gotten too small or too big to enjoy.

**PLAY IS NOT “ORDINARY” OR “REAL”**

Play is a stepping out of everyday life into a temporary sphere with a disposition of it’s own. This doesn’t mean that play isn’t serious or unimportant, as we have discussed before. It just means that it is an interlude in our daily lives. Many surfers would speak of surfing this way, as a complement to their lives. One that offers them relief from everyday life, from the so called “real world”. The idea that play, or surfing, could amplify life and become integral to life is not at all far fetched, and dedicated surfers describe their pastime as a central feature of their lives, and a defining characteristic that guides their decision making process (Brown 2003; Kampion 1997, 2003; Lawler 2010). Despite the obvious fact that surfing is fun, it is taken very seriously by it’s committed partakers. Lifelong surfers base their lives most basic and most serious decisions around their surfing life. Questions like where to work, where to live, and whom to commune with are all considered through surf colored glasses. Furthermore, just because a surfer may have a smile on his or her face while surfing, it doesn’t mean they are not also dead serious about what they are doing. Surfing can
be very dangerous, and the most lighthearted of surf sessions can turn to absolute seriousness when a norm is broken or someone’s safety is put in jeopardy.

**SECLUDEDNESS AND LIMITEDNESS**

According to Huizinga, play “is played out within certain limits of time and place” (Huizinga 1955, p. 9). Surfing fits this characteristic well. In fact surfing is ideal in illustrating this point. Play, according to Huizinga, creates arenas where play is played out. Surfing does this very distinctly. Though surfers do not create the beach, they do recast the beach and waves as an arena for their type of play. The beach surely existed before there was surfing, but it did not become the arena for surf until surfers envisioned it as such and undertook their play upon it. There is a limitedness to the beach and to surfing. You can only surf where there are waves, and when there are waves.

Huizinga describes the arenas that play creates within which play occurs. He describes them as “forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (Huizinga 1955, p. 10). The forbidden nature and hallowed appreciation for playgrounds applies very well to surfing as well. The beach and specifically the surf spot represent sacred ground for surfers (Preston-Whyte 2002). It is imbued with special reverence and respected above other places. As we shall soon see, there are special rules that apply to these playgrounds, especially for surfers and surfing. To a surfer the ocean and shoreline are interpreted as sacred playgrounds, anomalous categories overflowing with meaning (Fiske 2010).

**PLAY IS ORDER**

However temporary, play creates a perfect world within an imperfect world. Within this temporary sphere of activity is a profound beauty, which is imagined or experienced in surfing due to the already sublime nature of the milieu. Huizinga points out that this perfection is captivating and enchanting, that the player is easily lost within the act of play, something all experienced surfers speak of. He also notes that this world is temporary, and often fragile. The illusion can easily be broken, thrusting the player back into the “real”
Despite the seeming chaos of the ocean and the breaking surf, the experienced surfer finds beauty and order within the chaos and learns to see the unpredictable façade of the ocean in a different way, a harmonious and almost knowable rhythm which they can connect to. Much like chaos theory, which states that natural order comes out of seeming chaos, so too do surfers discover the beauty and perfection in the seemingly unpredictable and chaotic world of breaking waves (Flynn 1987; Stranger 1999).

**TENSION**

The world of surfing is filled with tension, generally between the rider and the wave. Especially for big wave riding, the goal is to “make the drop” or “make it” meaning to successfully paddle into a large wave and get to ones feet on the board while riding across the unbroken face of the wave without falling. In smaller wave the tension may center around pulling off a difficult maneuver like “hanging ten”, a trick which requires the rider to gently walk up to the nose of the board while on a wave and hang all ten of his or her toes over the front of the board without falling or driving the nose of the board into the water. It is an exceptionally difficult maneuver to do and takes years of practice to do with any style.

Beyond “making the drop” or pulling off a difficult trick, tension occurs at many other times in surfing as well. During large swells the first place a surfer encounters tension is simply getting out to the breaking waves from the shore. In consistently breaking waves, and without a channel to paddle through, a surfer must exhibit strength, endurance, and skill in order to navigate through the treacherous part of the breaking waves. Getting stuck in the impact zone of breaking waves, known as getting “caught inside”, is a very perilous condition and one the surfer must know how do deal with, otherwise a surf session can end before it really begins. Once a surfer “gets outside” or paddles far enough from shore that he

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7 An interesting discussion on this point happens in the Surfing documentary *Step Into Liquid* (Brown 2003) by longtime surfer Brad Gerlach. In it Gerlach describes how quickly he can be thrust out of a feeling of being in a perfect and unspoiled world apart from reality when a piece of trash floats by. In that moment when he sees the trash he is instantly reminded that he is only a few dozen yards from shore, which represents the “real” world and civilization.

8 For a fascinating discussion on risk and surfing one should read Mark Stranger’s article “The Aesthetics of Risk” (Stranger 1999) in it Stranger outlines the appeal that risk plays in drawing surfers into bigger and bigger waves. He argues that the aestheticization process distorts rational risk assessment and causes surfers to actively seek dangerous situations that rational people would do everything to avoid.
or she has reached a place where the waves are still unbroken he or she must still be weary of unexpectedly large waves that break further out and pose a great danger. So called “rouge waves” must always be watched for, since their sudden and unexpected arrival can wipe out a large group of surfer instantly and easily crush the unsuspecting surfer. Because of this, a standard guideline to surfing is to never turn ones back to the ocean, so that they can be ready to escape a rouge wave. The unpredictable nature of the ocean is a source of constant tension in surfing.

**ALL PLAY HAS RULES.**

There are some clearly defined rules in the competitive and professional surfing worlds, but in free surfing there are some pretty strict rules as well. They are not enforced by a governing body, nor are they imagined by a rules committee in order to facilitate fair competition. Rather the rules in surfing have evolved over time and they center mostly around maintaining safety on the waves. Only in last 20 or so years have these rules begun to be codified and solidified.\(^9\) For years they were the “unwritten rules” of surfing. But with beaches getting more crowded some of these rules have actually begun to be written down and posted near surf breaks for all surfers to see and hopefully observe.\(^10\) Though the wording and order change from beach to beach, the general idea is the same, and the first rule is almost always identical. The rules are often referred to as “etiquette,” implying an interpretive and looser held meaning, but they can be strictly observed at many places. They are:

1. First surfer up, closest to the curl has the right of way
2. When paddling out, stay out of the way of riding surfers
3. Hang onto your board
4. Help other surfers in trouble

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\(^9\) Shaun Tomson and Patrick Moser’s book *The Surfer’s Code* (Tomson 2006) is a very good example of this. The cardinal rules of surfing are outlined and a metaphorical transposition onto non-surfing life are outlined so that a surf rule is expanded into a lesson to be employed in everyday life.

\(^10\) These signs can be seen around various surf breaks in California, Hawaii, and Australia. Nick Carroll referred to the first rule as the “First Commandment” of surfing, also known as the drop-in rule (Warshaw 2003, p. 165). Warshaw also notes that this rule is a departure from a bygone era of surfing when surfers happily shared waves and often rode together. However, with the advent of more maneuverable boards, turns and cut-backs became easier and more common and sharing a wave was suddenly far more dangerous.
5. Respect the beach and ocean

The first rule is the most important in surfing. It determines right of way on a wave, which is very important on a crowded break. The first rule is meant to combat the cardinal sin of surfing, “dropping in” or paddling into a wave that someone else is already riding which is dangerous and considered nothing short of wave theft (Preston-Whyte 2002; Warshaw 2003, p. 165).

The second rule, which exists to curb danger and promote courtesy, simply means that when a surfer enters the water or returns to the breaking area to catch more waves, he or she should avoid the area where others will be catching waves by paddling around the break, and not straight into it as to avoid interfering with other surfer’s ability to catch waves safely.

The third rule, “hang onto your board” is very straightforward. When entering the water or trying to avoid breaking waves a surfer is obligated to control their boards at all times. “Ditching” or intentionally casting off ones board is taboo, very dangerous, and considered a worst-case scenario action. An out of control board is extremely dangerous, even if the surfer is wearing a leash or ankle rope connected to the board. Only in rare instances is ditching considered ok, but it is never the preferred method of dealing with a rouge wave or a heavy set.

The fourth rule explicitly mentions the obligation for a surfer to consider the safety of others and help a surfer who is in trouble. Though it does not say how one should help another surfer or even how another surfer might need help. Even though surfing is an individual sport, it is often done in groups and when a surfer becomes distressed it is the obligation of others to come to his or her assistance.

The last rule is the only one that does not directly relate to surfer safety. Instead it centers on the environmental tradition in surfing. Since surfing takes place in a natural setting, trash and pollution have a direct effect on a surf session. Trash is commonly seen floating in the water and it is tradition to pick up trash and dispose of it properly, and also not
to litter at the beach. Outside of the beach setting a surfer may litter like anyone else, but in my experience I have rarely, if ever, seen a surfer litter on the beach.

In addition to the six central characteristics of play that Huizinga outlines, another crucial facet to his theory of play revolves around the creation of play community and the connection between play and culture. This is the point where play begins to create culture outside of play itself. Surfing as play creates a surf sub-culture. All the previous points make for culture within the play world, but when the associations created within the play world bleed over into the outside world, then play is affecting and creating culture. This is the point where surfing can create surf culture. All the phenomena associated with surf culture, music, dress, slang, movies are in no way essential to the act of riding a wave with a surfboard. Those things are not “surfing”, but they come from surfing. The actual act of play, surfing, creates a culture based on that specific play act.

A community of surfers is created based on shared experience and mutual understanding and appreciation for each other’s skills and sacrifices in being a surfer. The bond created on the waves continues even outside of the water and onto the land. The surf community is created that exists outside of the water and it has its own distinct sub-cultural characteristics. The surf subculture is a well-documented and often pop-culturalized phenomenon. The act of riding a wave with a board seems like a simple enough activity, but imagine the industry that has sprung up around it. It is a multi-billion dollar industry comprising movies, clothes, travel, music, and home decoration. Almost all of what the surf industry produces is non-essential to surfing, meaning that almost none of it will help you ride a wave any better. Only a small portion of what the industry creates is essential to surfing (surf boards, wetsuits, wax, leashes, etc). Yet surfing, the act itself, has given rise to such a large industry that stretches far beyond the essentials.

Huizinga points out that play likes to surround itself with secrecy and create “insider / outsider” relationships. “This is for us, not for the ‘others.’ What the ‘others’ do ‘outside’ is no concern of ours at the moment. Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count” (Huizinga 1955, p. 12). Play loves to surround itself with secrecy. The groups formed by play will have a certain air of secrecy and create an “us” versus “them” dichotomy. This can easily be seen in surf culture. The surf clothing industry itself created the slogan “only a surfer knows the feeling” to play on this sentiment and find a
way to cleverly market this “insider” sentiment. However this sentiment is not totally an industry creation. As one study points out, “experience acquired through direct contact with the waves was communicated in social groups to become insider knowledge that enhanced the ‘We’ of a shared identity and exacerbated the perception and definition of ‘Others’ as outsiders (Preston-Whyte, 2002, p. 319). This insider-outsider dichotomy is fostered both consciously and unconsciously to imbue the insider with a sense of specialness to the exclusion of the outsider. But even within the sphere of those who surf, there is another level of secrecy and private association. Surfers will arrange themselves in smaller groups of surfers, usually around a surf spot or area, or within board type, like long boarders versus short boarders\textsuperscript{11}. There are rivalries between surf groups and access to spots can be limited to only the privileged insider (Nat Young, 2000). The air of secrecy is also cultivated to preserve the limited recourse of high quality waves. Though a surf magazine will sell the reader pictures of pristine beaches with perfect barreling waves, they will rarely if ever publish the location of these surf spots. This too is a clever marketing tactic perpetuated by the surfing industry to sell the general idea of a surfing paradise without over-emphasizing the details. A detailed and realistic portrayal is less marketable than a vague idyllic image of paradise and leisure.

Huizinga also makes special note of the “dressing up” or “playing a part” one undertakes in the act of play.

The “differentness” and secrecy of play are most vividly expressed in “dressing up”. Here the “extra-ordinary” nature of play reaches perfection. The disguised or masked individual “plays” another part, another being. He is another being. The terrors of childhood, open-hearted gaiety, mystic fantasy and sacred awe are all inextricably entangled in this strange business of masks and disguises (Huizinga 1955, p. 13).

Though the surfer does not wear a mask or disguise, I believe that Huizinga’s point is not lost on surfing and surfers. The surfer does undergo a transformation, on the surface at least. There is a change of dress, into clothing more suited to play in the ocean, and if the

\textsuperscript{11} A long-board is generally considered a blunt-nosed surfboard that is over nine feet long. A short board, on the other hand, not simply a board less than nine feet long, but rather a small, light, and highly maneuverable board around six feet long or less and designed for speed and maneuverability in competition scenarios. The term “short board” and “shortboarding” refer to a period of surf history in the late 1960’s known as the “Shortboard Revolution” when board design was radically changed to allow for faster maneuvers and the ability to ride waves that were, until then, considered too fast or steep to ride (Warshaw 2003).
water is cold, and entire suit that covers the body to keep it warm enough. In this way a surfer does make a radical transformation from the clothing of everyday life and into a play world where a skintight body suit is the norm. Along with this superficial change, other authors would argue that the surfer makes a deeper and more profound transformation when entering the surf world (Brown 2003; Fiske 2010). The clothing is only a functional transformation, sometimes imbued with style or culture; it is mostly a question of performance and function. There is underneath this a distinct mental transformation as the player, in this case the surfer, transforms from the normal world person into the player, the athlete, the surfer, the hero. In surfing one literally leaves the normal world and enters a water world (Fiske 2010)12, with different rules and conditions. In order to succeed in the play world they must become immersed fully within it. They must leave behind the trappings of the everyday world and commit to the rules of the playground.

One of Huizinga’s points that resonates most profoundly with surfing is the concept of stepping out of common reality into a “higher order.” I will let Huizinga restate this point:

The player can abandon himself body and soul to the game, and the consciousness of its being “merely” a game can be thrust into the background. The joy inextricably bound up with playing can turn not only into tension, but into elation. Frivolity and ecstasy are the twin poles between which play moves (Huizinga 1955, p. 20-21).

Surfing is clearly a very immersive activity. The surfer literally steps off the land and into the ocean, for all intents and purposes another world, when he or she surfs. Along with entrance into a new world, the old world and its norms and values are left behind. In addition to the literal and figurative “stepping out” the surfer undergoes, the act of surfing itself requires very deep concentration and focus, especially at the moment the surfer is actually riding a wave. Surfers experience a condition called “Flow”(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), a feeling of deep focus and full involvement, a topic we will delve into later. All athletes and many other “players” also experience flow. During the time when he or she is surfing, the outside world is of no relevance or consequence. Not only does the surfer choose to leave the

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12 The forthcoming discussion on Fiske’s chapter “Reading the Beach” in Reading the Popular (2010) will further examine this point. Fiske describes the seashore as an anomalous category that exists just outside the reach of civilization and culture. The beach is to be understood as text to be read and interpreted which is full of meaning to those who spend a lot of time there.
problems of the “real world” at the shore, often he or she is unable to even consider the non-
surfing world because surfing itself demands so much attention. Big Wave surfer Dave
Kalana said in the movie Riding Giants (Peralta 2004), “The wave commands so much focus
and so much attention, it’s the only thing that matters for a few seconds and it’s very
purifying because, as far as you’re concerned, nothing else exists.” There are lulls in surfing
when one is just sitting and waiting for waves, but when the waves come so much focus is
required of the surfer just to remain safe that nothing outside of the surfing world is even
considered.

**CONCLUSION**

Step by step Huizinga dissects the elements of play to show how immersive and
pervasive it can be. He highlights the all too often simple truth that play is fun, and that in
itself is enough reason to do it. This autotelic nature of play will be a recurring theme in the
chapters to come. The other elements of play, however, will also return as pivotal elements
alongside other social theorists.

Huizinga’s work is important for not only establishing a fundamental understanding
of the concept of play, but also for demonstrating the cultural relevance of play. If play is the
foundation for culture, then any analysis of social or cultural associations needs to pay
special attention to the play element in a given context. The centrality and relegation of play
will become a pivotal element in the forthcoming analysis. Keeping Huizinga’s theories in
mind it will be shown how play in general, and surfing in particular, fits into the social
contexts in which it finds itself. While other theorists and writers will be reviewed for their
analysis of social organization, we will revisit the issue of play and incorporate it into the
systems of ideas presented.
CHAPTER 4

WEBER: DIVINE CAPITALISTS AND DAMNED SURFERS

THE IDEAL CAPITALISTS

The work of Max Weber, particularly *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* represents not only foundational theory in the sociology discipline but also represents a particularly insightful source to help indirectly explain a rather significant and tragic era in the history of surfing. Weber’s account of the protestant work ethic as he observed around the early 1900’s serves not to define what surfing is, but rather helps immensely in defining surfing by pointing out what it is not.

In his essay, Weber observes that those who held the highest socioeconomic positions were overwhelmingly Protestant. This was not terribly out of the ordinary and was generally taken for granted that most business owners and powerful men were Protestant. It was Weber who first attempted to answer the question: why?

Weber outlines a certain “Spirit of Capitalism” as an historical “ideal type,” or the perfect set of traits and attitudes for success in capitalist economy. In this exploration of the spirit of capitalism Weber concludes that Protestants embody this spirit and represent the model capitalist.

First, work is valued as an end in itself. Weber was fascinated by the fact that a person's "duty in a calling [or occupation] is what is most characteristic of the social ethic of capitalistic culture, and is in a sense the fundamental basis of it." Weber states, “Labour must… be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling” (Weber 2001, p. 25). According to the Calvinist perspective, for true success in a capitalist economy, one’s job must become one’s purpose in life. No mention is ever made about personal development, psychological or emotional well-being, or existential stability. Dedication to a vocation is valued beyond happiness and personal well-being.

The next characteristic of the ideal capitalist is that trade and profit are taken not only as evidence of occupational success but also as indicators of personal virtue. In Weber's
words, "the earning of money within the modern economic order is, so long as it is done legally, [seen as] the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling" (Weber 2001, p. 19). In the capitalist world, earning great wealth is indicative not only of successful business practice, but also imbues the wealthy person with a certain degree of virtue as a person. Simply put, being rich makes you a good person, so long as your wealth was generated legally and fairly.

The next characteristic of the ideal capitalist is a methodically organized life governed by reason. This kind of organized and rational life is valued not only as a means to a long-term goal, economic success, but also as an inherently proper and even righteous state of being. This rationalization represents a cultural shift away from motivations like emotion, tradition, or custom. Instead more logical, calculated, and efficient systems are installed to increase productivity and rationality. Efficiency is emphasized not only because it is a basic tenet of capitalism, but also because wasting time and money is considered sinful.

Finally, embodied in the righteous pursuit of economic success is a belief that immediate happiness and pleasure should be forgone in favor of future satisfaction. As Weber noted, "the summum bonum of this ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of an eudemonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture" (Weber, 2001, p. 18). This simply means that it is proper and even righteous to accumulate great wealth, as long as it is not used for spontaneous enjoyment or spent on lavish things. The ideal capitalist does not use his profits to purchase objects of enjoyment; instead he invests his money back into his business and spends his profits wisely and conservatively. The accumulation of wealth is associated with the glorification of God if done properly.

Weber believed that this set of values were a unique and relatively new things. Traditional values dominated economic life in a time when science and reason were not employed to verify knowledge; rather religion and superstition ruled the day. The class systems of the time as well as the religious hierarchies, which conferred status unequally, influenced not only the application of law, but also the distribution of wealth. The market system was imbalanced in favor of those with status, and did not necessarily reward hard work in an unbiased fashion that has come to be a cornerstone of capitalistic theory.
THE CALVINISTS PROTESTANTS

Weber observed that Puritanism and Protestantism broke down these traditional values in favor of more rational ones. Though they did not reach the strictly rational doctrine of the scientific method, the application of the core values of Protestantism and Puritanism indirectly resulted in a life governed by more rational thought. When an ethos of efficiency and productivity are linked with divinity, the old values of custom, emotion, and superstition are quickly overwritten.

Weber focused his attention on the Calvinist sect of Protestantism, and studied the psychological consequences of following the Calvinist doctrine. He was interested in learning about what he called, “those psychological sanctions which, originating in religious belief and the practice of religion, gave direction to practical conduct and held the individual to it.” The primary factor, or tenet of Calvinism, that Weber believed influenced practical conduct the most was the doctrine of Predestination.

Predestination states that there are two types of people in the world, those who are saved and will spend eternity in heaven, and those who are damned, and are destined to an eternity in hell. Since god is all knowing, one’s fate is pre-determined, and nothing can be done to change it. From birth you are bound for either heaven or hell, and this destiny is unchangeable. The problem is: you don’t know which one you are, and you can’t possibly know until you die. Weber observed that this causes great inner loneliness and isolation as people struggled with their fate that was both an eternal inevitability, and a mystery.

In order to cope, people looked for signs to determine which fate they were bound for, even though it was impossible to know. There are basically two steps in dealing with one’s own predestination. First, Weber noted, all have an absolute duty to consider themselves chosen and to combat all doubts as temptations of the devil. Therefore an abiding faith in god is requisite. Second, in order to generate self-confidence and to alleviate doubt, intense worldly activity was also required.

Believers were expected to lead methodical and ascetic lives, unencumbered by irrational emotions, superstitions, or desires of the flesh. A good Calvinist was expected to “methodically supervise his own state of grace in his own conduct, and those to penetrate it with asceticism” with the result that each person engaged in “a rational planning of the whole of one’s life in accordance with God’s will.” This sort of ascetic lifestyle was
previously the charge of only monks and priests, but now everyone was expected to lead a
life according to this set of virtues.

This puritanical belief was dominated by three overlapping dictums. First, god
demands rational labor in a calling. There can be no relaxation, no breaks from work. Labor
is a sign of virtue and ascetic and methodical behavior in a calling is a sign of grace. When to
work is to glorify god, wasting time is the deadliest of sins. Second, the enjoyment of those
aspects of social life that do not have clear religious value is strictly forbidden. All forms of
leisure activity are irrelevant, morally suspect, and often outright forbidden. This made for a
very serious approach to life. Third, people have a duty to use their possessions for socially
beneficial purposes that contribute to the glory of god. Whereas the pursuit of wealth for its
own sake is a sin, accumulating wealth and using it sparingly and responsibly is to the glory
of god. Wealth is not to be used for enjoyment, idleness, or temptation.

PARALLEL PATHS

At this point it should be easy to see the obvious parallels between what Weber
believed to be the characteristics of the ideal capitalist and what he observed to be the central
tenets and resulting behaviors in Calvinists Protestants. The religious zeal of the protestant
who internally battled with their own predestination by outwardly living a sober, joyless, and
ascetic lifestyle made for the ideal capitalist worker and business owner.

The ability of mental concentration, as well as the absolutely essential feeling of
obligation to one’s job, are here most often combined with a strict economy which
calculates the possibility of high earnings, and a cool self-control and frugality
which enormously increase performance. This provides the most favorable
foundation for the conception of labour as an end in itself, as a calling which is
necessary to capitalism (Weber 2001, p. 26).

Weber is putting it all together in a very simple way, stating that Protestants,
particularly Calvinists, make perfect Capitalists. The question he was trying to answer was:
why did Europe develop modern capitalism when the rest of the world did not? His answer
was a particular kind of religion, specifically Protestantism. Their religion practically
mandated success in economic matters. An ethic that prohibits lavish spending results in
savings and reinvestment, two cornerstones in capitalist growth. In both spheres work is
valued as an end in itself, and success is interpreted as virtuous. The methodically organized
life governed by reason translates perfectly into a capitalist mentality of rational thinking.
Finally, the deferment of immediate enjoyment in favor of future reward bred a culture that was practically designed to spur economic accumulation. Success in business became proof of one’s own state of grace. And in so trying to feverishly prove one’s own status as a chosen being, many became very wealthy and powerful. These features of the model Protestant laborer match perfectly with the necessary qualities for successful capitalist accumulation. Hard work, rational expenditure, and reinvestment are basic elements of economic growth.

Whereas Christianity is classically suspicious of wealth, the Protestants believed that this hard working and rational ethic of labor is favorable in the eyes of god as long as it is done for it’s own sake, and any resulting wealth is simply proof that one’s efforts are favorable to god.

... asceticism looked upon the pursuit of wealth as an end in itself as highly reprehensible; but the attainment of it as the fruit of labor in a calling was a sign of God’s blessing. And even more important: the religion valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means to asceticism, and at the same time the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith, must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of that attitude toward life with we have here called the spirit of capitalism.

When the limitation of consumption is combined with this release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save (Weber 2001, p. 116).

It all represents a fairly simple equation for Weber. Normally the accumulation of wealth was associated with sinful and selfish behavior. But the Protestants turned that ethic upside-down and determined that as long as wealth was amassed to glorify God and as a byproduct of the rational lifestyle then it was not only allowed, but also indicative of favorable predestined fate. Combine the strict limitations on consumption with the ethos of efficiency, productivity, and reinvestment, all motivated by the obsessive desire to prove inwardly and outwardly one’s own divinity and place alongside God in the afterlife will inevitably result in rapid and widespread Capitalist accumulation.

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13 The Holy Bible states: “blessed are the meek” (Matthew 5:5) and “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24) (Oxford University Press., 1989)
CULTURE CLASH

At this point it should be necessary to describe just how these matters relate to surfing; this being an analytical exploration of social theory as it relates to surfing. Our analyses of Marxist theory will deal with surfing in an abstract way, postulating how Marx might view surfing or how surfing might represent a particular aspect of Marx’s theories on work and leisure. With Marx we’ll concluded that surfing represented an ideal way for a person to cope with the pitfalls of capitalism that Marx himself describes. In the case of Weber and the Protestant Ethic, there is no place for surfing, since the Protestants disdained leisure and hedonistic activity. But in this very rare case it is not necessary to try to intricately weave surfing into a hypothetical world based on Weber’s theories, because there was a time when surfing and Weber’s analysis of the Protestant work ethic met in the material world.

Following the discovery of the Hawaiian Islands, a group of Calvinist missionaries from the eastern United States learned of the nearly half-million native Hawaiians who were, in their opinion, living godless and hedonistic lives. They quickly set of to the islands with the intent to reform their entire culture, and when they arrived the practical application of Calvinist doctrine met the real world of surfing in its pure and original state. What resulted was not a theoretical or abstract postulation; it was nearly the end of surfing forever.

When the Calvinist missionaries, led by Hiram Bingham, arrived at the islands they were appalled at what they saw: nearly naked men and women playing together in the surf. They saw what they considered dirty, violent, uneducated, uncivilized, and worst of all lazy savages who not only knew nothing of hard work and modesty, they knew nothing of the teachings of Jesus Christ. Bingham, quoted in Gavan Daws’ book *Shoal of time; a history of the Hawaiian Islands*, himself commented on his own arrival in his journal.

The appearance of destitution, degradation, and barbarism, among the chattering, and almost naked savages, whose heads and feet, and much of their sunburnt swarthy skins were bare, was appalling. Some of our number, with gushing tears, turned away from the spectacle. Others, with firmer nerve, continued their gaze, but were ready to exclaim, ‘can these be human beings?’!...can such things be civilized? (Daws 1968, p. 64).

Surfing itself was the prime example of all that was wrong with the Hawaiian people. At a moments notice they would drop whatever they were doing and run for the ocean if word came that the waves were good. This lax attitude toward work and the prioritization of
fun was completely antithetical to the disciplined and ascetic lifestyle the protestant missionaries prided themselves on. It quickly became their first duty to get the native people out of the water and into some more modest clothes, and then into a church!

The missionaries sought to reform many central characteristics of the native Hawaiian people. Among their chief concerns was the polytheistic natural religion the Hawaiian’s practiced. The native people worshiped many gods who were present in their natural setting. They lived a life more in harmony with nature because they believed their ancestors were the trees and the mountains and the turtles and dolphins, and even the sharks. Because of this belief they did not strive to overcome nature and separate themselves from it, a central tenet of western life (Fiske 2010), instead they lived among nature and appreciated the bountiful resources found on the islands (Kampion 1997).

The sexual freedom of the Hawaiians was perhaps the most tangible and immediate insult to the Calvinist way of life. The missionaries were horrified by the common practice of polygamy, polyandry, adultery, and nudity. Bound by strict laws of marriage and possessing a puritanical approach to the body and sex, the missionaries were aghast at what they considered the terribly sinful lifestyle of the Hawaiians (Kampion 1997).

The missionaries wasted no time in baptizing the natives, teaching them the ways of Christianity, and educating them in subjects they felt were important. They even gave them new names, Christian names, in what has to be one of the most culturally insensitive elements of the Missionary’s involvement on the islands. The lack of resistance to the pressure to reform can be accounted for in the staggering loss of life the Hawaiians endured in the years leading up to and including the Protestant Missionaries stay.

Prior to the missionaries reaching the islands, Whalers had also come to Hawaii following the islands discovery by Captain James Cook in 1778 (Finney & Houston 1996, p. 51). The Whalers used the island as an outpost to make repairs and build up their supplies. But they also took advantage of the sexual “promiscuity” of the young island girls. Of course what the Hawaiian’s felt was natural sexual freedom was considered promiscuous by the Westerners. What these Western visitors left behind were diseases, both sexually transmitted and otherwise, for which the islanders had no natural immunity. Coupled with the existing culture of sexual freedom these diseases spread quickly among the people and in a few short years the population of the islands had gone from an estimated 400,000 to around 40,000.
This horrific decimation of the population left the Hawaiians scrambling for answers and for help. When the missionaries arrived they came with the promise of everlasting life and told the natives that their “wicked” ways were the cause of their recent suffering. They promised that by accepting the teaching of Christianity they would be saved, if not in this world, at least in the next.

There was, however, some resistance to the influence of the Protestant Missionaries. Bingham notes this resistance in his memoirs.

The missionaries found that the conflict between the light of Christianity and the darkness of heathenism was no momentary struggle… [many] clung with great tenacity to their heathen customs, and their heathen pleasures. Multitudes passed away quickly to the grave before much impression could be made upon them, and others resisted for years all the endeavors of missionaries to reclaim them (Bingham 1848, p. 127).

The amount of disdain and disgust that Bingham and his cohort held for the native peoples is evident in his wording. They sought nothing less than a total cultural annulment. Chief among the things the missionaries sought to reform was to put an end to the practice of surfing. The culturally central practice of riding waves was the symbolic and physical embodiment of everything the Calvinist thought was wrong with the Hawaiian people. Though they claim to have never outright banned the sport, some quotes from Hiram Bingham on the subject can be quite insightful.

The adoption of our costume greatly diminishes their practice of swimming and sporting in the surf, for it is less convenient to wear it in the water than the native girdle, and less decorous and safe to lay it entirely off on every occasion they find for a plunge or swim or surf-board race (Bingham 1848, p. 136).

In this passage Bingham is taking credit only for teaching the Hawaiians to dress in “civilized” clothes and claiming that with these new proper clothes the Hawaiians themselves simply no longer wanted to surf because it was less convenient. Indeed the repressive long sleeved dresses and Victorian era style of clothing was surely much less convenient to wear if one were to spontaneously wish to jump into the ocean for a good set of waves. Not to mention it was completely inappropriate for the climate of the Islands. This same Victorian sensibility and modesty produced perhaps one of the strangest devices for “appropriate” enjoyment of the ocean. The Bathing Machine (Young 2006, p. 36) was a wooden box that resembled a small changing room on wheels. This was rolled into the water a few feet deep
and the person inside could enjoy the therapeutic benefits of the ocean water while preserving their modesty by not wearing a bathing suit in public sight.

Bingham’s writings on the subject of modesty and productivity are further illustrative of both the Missionaries’ goals of cultural reform, and their denial of any predatory or persuasive tactics.

The decline or discontinuance of the use of the surf-board, as civilization advances, may be accounted for by the increase of modesty, industry or religion, without supposing, as some have affected to believe, that missionaries caused oppressive enactments against it. These considerations are in part applicable to many other amusements. Indeed, the purchase of foreign vessels, at this time, required attention to the collecting and delivering of 450000 lbs. of sandal-wood, which those who were waiting for it might naturally suppose would, for a time, supersede their amusements (Bingham 1848, p. 136-137).

This is perhaps the most telling of all the Bingham quotes and requires further analysis. First he admits that surfing has declined on the islands but will not admit that it was outright forbidden. He claims that the Hawaiians freely chose to stop surfing because; they had found more valuable use of their time, they had acquired a degree of modesty that kept them from wanting to enjoy the water, or they were just too busy praying to paddle out for a surf, all while ignoring the fact that surfing was previously a central characteristic of the Hawaiian culture. Finally Bingham admits that the Hawaiians were just too busy to surf, since they had been put to work collecting sandalwood, so that the missionaries and the capitalist entrepreneurs who also had come to the island could exploit the natural resources of the island. Curiously many of these missionaries ended up legally owning much of the land they had stolen from the people they came to save.

So just as the people died out, and as those who were left were put to work and forced into giving up their names and being baptized into Christianity, surfing too died out. It is estimated that at its lowest point there were fewer than a dozen people in all the Hawaiian Islands who still surfed (Finney & Houston 1996, p. 59). In a fascinating turn of history, despite it being a bunch of “ideal capitalists” who nearly destroyed surfing, it was a different group of Capitalists who helped revive surfing from these dark times.

For as much as the Calvinist Protestants represented an “ideal type” to Weber, the Hawaiian people prior to Western discovery and invasion would have represented just the opposite. Hawaiian author and activist Huanani-Kay Trask bluntly asserts, “… our Native culture… was as antithetical to the European developments of Christianity, capitalism, and
predatory individualism as any society could have been” (Trask 1993, p. 4). The history of
the Hawaiian Islands and its people is a long and storied one. Though much of Hawaii’s past
is memorialized in an oral tradition filled with interpretation and mysticism, its more recent
history was undeniably and irreversible shaped by what Max Weber called “the Protestant
ethic,” and by those who lived by it. Surfing culture at this time is indistinguishable from
Hawaiian culture, and what happens to Hawaii happens to surfing. Considering Weber’s
insights into the zealous motivations behind the behavior of those he studied, it is simple to
understand, though no less tragic, how surfing could come so close to vanishing forever.
Within Weber’s equation that correlates a certain brand of religious impulse with capitalist
accumulation, surfing and the surfing lifestyle, and all that it requires and represents simply
has no place.
CHAPTER 5

MARX: ALIENTATION IS A TOTAL BUMMER

INTRODUCTION

At first, including Karl Marx in a thesis about surfing may seem peculiar. However, this thesis is about integrating the meaning of surfing and social theory and investigating how surfing fits into the larger social context. Surfing does not exist \textit{sui generis}, and recognizing and understanding the larger contextual features are crucial in developing a comprehensive understand of what surfing is, or rather, what surfing is to those who surf. With the exception of the pre-colonial Polynesian era of surfing, the sport has since existed and grown as a pastime and subculture within (and often because of) the larger cultural sphere most clearly defined as modern western capitalism. Simply put, surfing happens in a capitalist world. Whether in spite of it or because of it remains to be determined. Surfing is full of contradictions, and the correct answer is probably: both. But the context within which surfing occurs cannot be overlooked, nor can it be understated.

No discourse on the intricacies and pitfalls of capitalism is complete, nor is any thesis in Sociology for that matter, without the inclusion and analysis of classic Marxist theory. Marx’s writings stand as canonized works within the realm of social and economic study and represent the foundational jumping-off point for a critique of capitalism. Within the context of this study, Marx’s work will serve not as a place from which to better understand surfing itself, but rather it will serve to more fully understand those who surf and why they often find it so rewarding. First it should be beneficial to review those areas of Marx’s body of work that pertain to this investigation and then they will be linked to surfing.

ESTRANGED LABOR

The foundation of Marx’s criticism of the capitalist economic model is that it must exploit the worker to create profits. A simplified analysis of Marx’s theory on surplus labor and surplus value shows us that to accumulate capital the worker is forced to work for less money than their work is worth, physical labor being the only real source of value. The
product is sold for more than the sum of the wages paid and the cost of raw materials and the
profit is pocketed by the owners of the means of production, the bourgeoisie class. In this
process of production the worker is alienated from the object they are producing, from their
work, from themselves, and from others. Furthermore, the more the worker toils in this sort
of system, the worse they make it for them self. Marx states:

The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his
production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper
commodity the more commodities he creates. The devaluation of the world of
men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things. Labor
produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity – and this at the same rate at which it produces commodities in general (Marx and

Essentially Marx is saying that the harder the worker labors for his or her
exploitative boss, the richer the boss becomes, and the poorer the worker becomes relative to
economic system he or she is helping to grow. The worker can never get ahead since the
system is designed to pay them only enough to keep them alive and working.

In addition to an analysis of the exploitative nature of labor in a political economy,
Marx also addresses the roots of alienation that is derived from this type of labor. The root of
the problem comes when the worker is no longer deriving the fundamental self-
understanding that is supposed to come from their labor. Marx calls this process
objectification. “The product of labor is labor which has been congealed in an object, which
has become material: it is the objectification of labor. Labor’s realization is its
objectification” (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 71).

**OBJECTIFICATION**

Normally, through their efforts a person produces an object of some sort or creates or
manipulates something in a way that fundamentally changes it because of their work. This is
objectification of labor. That object that is created is the tangible result of the physical,
mental, and emotional efforts from the worker, and through that object the worker can not
only touch and see the fruits of their labor, but also they can begin to understand themselves
through the embodied manifestation of their work. The worker has figuratively put himself or
herself into an object and their efforts are reflected back at them. Through this reflection the
person understands them self and how they fits into the world, which they themselves create.
Crucial to this positive objectification is the freedom a person employs throughout the
process of production. A person laboring in freedom has countless creative and aesthetic decisions regarding their labor and their object of labor. Their own choices shape the outcome of their labor, and in this way he or she is personally and individually objectified. Their unique reflection is captured in the object, so that whomever holds the object can begin to understand them through that object in the same way they can begin to understand themselves.

**ALIENATION FROM THE OBJECT**

In the capitalist economic system however, this process is inverted. Instead of the worker putting themselves into an object and receiving in return a positive reflection of their efforts, the object is taken from them and in return they are given nothing. Marx writes:

> In the conditions dealt with by political economy this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.

> So much does the labor’s realization appear as loss of realization that the worker loses realization to the point of starving to death (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 71-72).

This is because in the capitalist system the creative and aesthetic decisions are stripped away from the worker. They no longer have any decisions of any kind to make regarding their own labor. He or she is told what to make, when to make it, how to make it, etc. Often, and especially in assembly-line style manufacturing the laborer can no longer point to the products of his or her labor with any certainty or with any pride. Instead of producing a product from start to finish a worker may now only be responsible for a small potion of thousands of products every day, but feel no sense of accomplishment for any single one.

Furthermore, the object of production is no longer the property of the laborer. Instead the object of production belongs to the owner of the means of production, who utilizes the laborer like a tool and then takes and sells the product of their efforts for a profit. The appropriation of the object of production and the lack of creative input in the means of production mean that the object the worker has created is no longer a reflection of their efforts. As Marx states, the object of production is now alien and hostile to the worker.

All these consequences are implied in the statement that the worker is related to the product of labor as to an alien object. For on this premise it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of
objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself. The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. Hence, the greater this activity, the more the worker lacks objects. Whatever the product of his labor is, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he himself. The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 72).

Now, instead of the object of production defining and reinforcing the sense of self in the worker, it does just the opposite. The object is taken from the worker, and the worker loses themselves with each object they produce in this inverted system. The object of production is no longer a positive reflection of self to the worker, it is instead a hostile and alien object representing their bondage and suffering.

**ALIENATION FROM PRODUCTION**

Alienation from the object of production is only one of four ways that a man is alienated in one way or another in a capitalist economy. The second way a person is alienated is from the act of production itself. To Marx, the question of why has an obvious answer.

How could the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself? The product is after all but the summary of the activity, of production. If then the product of labor is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation. In the estrangement of the object of labor is merely summarized the estrangement, the alienation, in the activity of labor itself (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 73-74).

To Marx, it is plain to see that if the object of production is alien to the worker, then so too must be the means of production. He goes on at length to demonstrate the inverted nature of work in this scenario, as the sacrifice of the self instead of the development of the self.

First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is
forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 74).

The detrimental and alienating effects of work derive from the external nature of labor in this world. For in the capitalist economy a person’s labor is no longer their own, but it belongs to those who own the company he or she works for, the same people who own the objects of their production as well. For Marx, alienation from work is merely an obvious extension of the alienation from the object. In a very real sense, the worker is alienated from the object primary because they are alienated from the means of producing that object.

**Species Being**

Before discussing the third and fourth facets of alienation Marx introduces the concept of “species being” or “species character.” To Marx, species being and species character refer to the Hegelian concept of self-consciousness and the awareness of species or “essential nature.” This means that although animals may have a degree of self-consciousness, only humans possesses the knowledge that they can shape their own world and create their own world to fit their needs. Additionally, species being refers to the primary life activity of an animal or human. “The whole character of a species – its species character – is contained in the character or its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species character” (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 76).

The difference between man and animal is that man has a conscious control over his species character whereas an animal is indistinguishable from its species character.

The animal is immediately identical with its life-activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is its life-activity. Man makes his life-activity the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has a conscious life-activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity. It is just because of this that he is a species being (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 76).

The act of production has a special role in understanding man’s species character.

Again, Marx states:

In creating an objective world by his practical activity, in working-up inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as its own essential being, or that treats itself as a species being. Admittedly animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But an animal only produces what is immediately needs
for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 76).

For man then, production, or the act of “working-up” nature into objects that fulfill both immediate needs and non-essential desires is central the human character, or species being. It is in fact what defines man as different from animals. Marx continues as he describes how the objects of production fit into the species character of man and how the alienation from the object of production damages man’s species character.

The object of labour is, therefore, the objectification of man’s species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created. In tearing away from man the object of his production, therefore, estranged labour tears from him his species life, his real species objectivity, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 76).

For Marx, the knowledge of and ability to consciously shape one’s own species character was what placed man over animals in the hierarchy of living things. But the capitalist labor system so alienates man from their species being and inverts the relationship between man and their life-activity that mankind finds themselves worse off than the animals, for despite the fact that animals lack the sentience of their own species character. They are, regardless of this fact, always identical with it and indistinguishable from it.

This discussion will be supplemented when Marx discusses the difference between activity that is a means to an end, what he called the Realm of Necessity, and activity that is an end in itself, or the Realm of Freedom. Marx accepted that the capitalist economic system was an historical inevitability and a necessary step on the path toward a better economic structure. In the meantime however, Marx believed that the Realms of Necessity and Freedom represented the best way to differentiate between alienated and unalienated activity in order to balance ones requirement to work and their ability to develop their species character. It is within this set of concepts that surfing will be brought back into discussion, however a faithful review of foundational theory is necessary to proceed.

**NATURE**

Marx mentions nature in his discussion of labor and species being, and for the purposes of this paper it should be beneficial to make special further note of Marx’s beliefs
on how nature plays into man’s social existence. It is also especially relevant for a discussion on surfing. First Marx points out the obvious truth about nature as it relates to production. “The worker can create nothing without nature, without the sensuous external world. It is the material on which his labor is realized, in which it is active, from which, and by means of which it produces” (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 72).

It should be clear enough the nature simply provides the stuff from which all material things are made, the raw materials for production. But according to Marx, nature also provides for mankind as well.

But just as nature provides labor with [the] means of life in the sense that labor cannot live without objects on which to operate, on the other hand, it also provides the means of life in the more restricted sense, i.e., the means for the physical subsistence of the worker himself (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 72).

So not only does nature provide the raw materials for production, but it also provides mankind, the workers, with means of subsistence. Simply put, nature feeds labor with materials and it feeds the worker with food (plant and animal life.) Nature supplies both man and production with what he calls “means of life.”

But just as mankind is alienated from the objects of their labor and the means of production through estranged labor, so too are they alienated from nature. Marx states that people are alienated from nature in two ways, the two ways they relates to nature; as a means of life for labor, and the means of life for physical subsistence.

Thus the more the worker by his labor appropriates the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of the means of life in two respects: first, in that the sensuous external world more and more ceases to be an object belonging to his labor – to be his labor’s means of life; and, second, in that it more and more ceases to be a means of life in the immediate sense, means for the physical subsistence of the worker (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 72-73).

Man’s twofold alienation from nature will become all the more significant when it is shown that a deep connection with nature is considered essential to achieve personal fulfillment by Marx and other theorists.

**FURTHER FORMS OF ALIENATION**

By now Marx has demonstrated that estranged labor alienates the worker from the object of production, the process of production, and nature. At this point a “so what?” question may not seem totally uncalled for. People often hate their jobs, it’s not uncommon,
so why is this such a problem for Marx? The real issue at hand is uncovered when the link is made between estranged labor and species being. To Marx, a person’s job is not just what they do as a rational activity to provide for themselves and their family. But he shows that a person’s labor is much more.

For labor, life activity, productive life itself, appears to man in the first place merely as a means of satisfying a need – the need to maintain physical existence. Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species, its species-character, is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species-character (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 75-76).

For all the talk about what species character represents, in this passage Marx finally states what person’s species character actually is: free, conscious activity. To Marx a person’s labor is not just a job to put food on the table. Instead a person’s job is, and should be, the defining quality of their entire species character. To Marx a person should define them self by the work they do, and that work should be free and conscious. Through that work they should learn to understand the world around them as well as themselves.

It is just in his work upon the objective world, therefore, that man really proves himself to be a species-being. This production is his active species-life. Through this production, nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of man’s species-life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 76).

The real problem should be clear to see. If mankind’s species character is their labor, if the very essence of their existence is their work and they come to define themselves and their world through work, and they are alienated from this work, then they are alienated from their species character.

In tearing away from man the object of his production, therefore, estranged labor tears from him his species-life, his real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 76-77).

Marx states at length the third and fourth outcomes of estranged labor.

Estranged labour turns thus:

3) Man’s species-being, both nature and his spiritual species-property, into a being alien to him, into a means of his individual existence. It estranges from man his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual aspect, his human aspect.
(4) An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his life activity, from his species-being, is the estrangement of man from man. When man confronts himself, he confronts the other man. What applies to a man’s relation to his work, to the product of his labor and to himself, also holds of a man’s relation to the other man, and to the other man’s labor and object of labor.

In fact, the proposition that man’s species-nature is estranged from him means that one man is estranged from the other, as each of them is from man’s essential nature.

The estrangement of man, and in fact every relationship in which man [stands] to himself, is realized and expressed only in the relationship in which a man stands to other men.

Hence within the relationship of estranged labor each man views the other in accordance with the standard and the relationship in which he finds himself as a worker (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 77).

We can see that through estranged labor a person is finally and devastatingly divorced from an essential understanding of them self and nature. And that the consequences of being alienated from oneself are that one cannot relate to others. Now one person’s pain can be shown to affect others. Marx shows that people relate to each other through their most essential characteristics, their species beings. When one is alienated from their work, they are alienated from their own essence and thus quite incapable of relating well to others and what is surely for them an alienated species character as well. When one cannot develop their species character through their work, as is the most desirable way according to Marx, one must find alternative sources of personal development. For Marx, this source is the part of life outside of work where activity is done as an end in itself. This is what Marx referred to as the Realm of Freedom. It is within the Realm of Freedom that surfing finds its place in Marx’s disquisition.

**REALM OF FREEDOM**

Marx believed that one’s work should be the place where species character is created and developed. However the capitalist model creates an atmosphere where work is an alienating activity where people are divorced from their species character and also alienated from other people and things. This was not the end of the discussion for Marx though, and he states that there are other methods for personal development that a person can find.
Marx stated that there must be two forms of activity, which represented two realms of existence. The first is the Realm of Necessity (Marx and Engels 1978), where the activity that is done is rational, productive, and all too often alienating. This activity is the kind that is economically necessary, that puts food on the table and a roof over one’s head. It is the necessary evil of living in a capitalist economy; you have to work to live. But Marx spent a great deal of time enforcing the point that simply getting by is not enough, that a person’s species being demands activity that is creative, over which he or she has control, regardless of its utility or productivity.

If daily work is alienating then people must turn to the other realm of existence for what they need. Marx referred to this other type of activity as the Realm of Freedom (Marx and Engels 1978). This type of activity is non-rational, non-productive, and most important, unalienated. Marx outlines the basic tenets of the realm of freedom in Capital Vol. III

…the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite (Marx and Engels 1978, p. 441).

Marx is simply calling for a reduction in the working day, which he proved is possible by applying technology. In simplest terms Marx is saying we can and should work less and play more. For in play a person can find those things he or she can no longer attain through work. Our discussion on Huizinga demonstrated the social benefits of play, but applying Marx’s social needs to that discussion reveals that play is even more important than previously stated.
WHY MARX WOULD HAVE BEEN STOKED ON SURFING

For Marx, since normal everyday labor has degenerated into alienating activity in the modern economic framework, that kind of activity must be relegated to those rational and productive behaviors he defined under the realm of necessity. In order to find the kind of unalienated, self-developing activity one would ideally hope to accomplish through their labor, one must turn instead to the realm of freedom, where play, or non-rational, unproductive activity is capable of reuniting a person with their essential species character and fostering the kind of social and psychological development that is critical to a achieving a fully realized social and economic system. These activities provide the creative and developmental elements to a person’s life that their work is taking away from them. Therefore surfing, from a Marxist standpoint, is an ideal activity.

First, surfing is hard. Now of course work is hard, but surfing is hard in a different way. Work may be strenuous or boring, but either way in a capitalist system work is usually pretty taxing on the mind and body. Surfing is hard too, but in a different way. Surfing is difficult to learn, but very rewarding, and there is a clear line between the effort one puts in and the reward one receives. But since surfing happens in such an ever-changing environment one never really stops learning, so surfing is a constant and rewarding challenge (Flynn 1987; Stranger 1999). Since each wave is different a surfer must constantly adapt and improvise, always challenging themselves and learning new skills.

The constant challenge and reward system that surfing represents is a clear departure from the alienated labor of the capitalist system. In surfing a person can draw a straight line between the effort they put in and the reward they received. Their hard work is rewarding and they get much more out of this type of effort than they do from their jobs where their efforts do not necessarily lead to clear gains.

Furthermore, surfing requires a great deal of focus and concentration. Paired with the immersive quality of being in the ocean, surfing creates a situation where the doldrums of work are left on the beach and the mind is incapable of worrying about anything else because surfing requires total attention (Brown 2003; Irwin 1973). This element of play has been previously discussed in the chapter on Huizinga, and it will be further reviewed in chapters to come.
Surfing is creative and expressive. For as many surfers as there are in the world there are as many individual approaches to and relationships with surfing and the sea. Though there are standard conventions to surfing (paddling, standing up, etc.), there is plenty of room for creativity and individual expression. Each surfer has a unique relationship with his or her own surfing and is always expressing themselves through their surfing. How one approaches each session and each wave is completely their choice. Where to surf, how to surf, which wave to catch: these are all decisions that a surfer makes.

One of the most alienating factors of Marx’s critique of capitalism is that it does not allow for any creativity or expressivity. A person’s labor is owned by someone else and the laborer is told what to make, how to make it, and how much of it to make. They have no creative control nor do they have any chance for self-expression in the process of production. Surfing offers this type of control and expressivity in abundance.

Surfing is social. Just as all play creates culture, as we learned from Huizinga, so too does surfing. Surfing may be an individual activity, but it is usually done in groups. Even though surfing allows for personal and individual expression, there is also a crucial shared element to surfing that makes it very social. Many surfers enjoy a degree of shared experience that makes them intimately relatable to each other. There is common ground on which one surfer can easily and directly relate to another surfer through their specific vernacular or the shared embodiment of experience that is unique to surfing (Ford & Brown 2006). There is often a great sense of camaraderie between surfers in and out of the water. This is not to deny that there are also times when surfers do not get along and argue or even fight over waves or territory. Despite the problems that do exist, there is a very distinct and well-codified surf culture that enriches the surfing experience and demonstrates the shared elements from surfers around the world (Booth 2001; Daskalos 2007; Kampion 1997; Stratton 1985).

Marx points out that one of the consequences of alienated labor is that a person is alienated not only from their work and themselves, but also from others. For if a person cannot understand themselves they cannot relate to others. Alienated labor causes social alienation, where one person cannot relate to another because they have not developed their own identity and species being. But activity in the realm of freedom can help one to develop this identity and understand their species character. Surfing is an activity that not only helps
to develop a persons identity because of the expressive and creative elements, but it is also a social activity that brings people together on a common level and provides a shared experience though which they can further relate to each other (Butts 2001; Daskalos 2007).

That fact that surfing happens in nature cannot be overlooked either. Marx pointed out that person’s separation from nature is another consequence of the modern working environment. But surfing is an activity that not only requires the participant to become immersed in nature, but also to interact with nature. The surfer has to constantly observe and react to the conditions that nature creates (Flynn 1987). An experienced surfer develops a very strong relationship with the ocean and begins to understand the sea and waves in a profound way. This strong relationship with nature is one of the most beneficial elements of surfing from a Marxist standpoint. Surfing reunites mankind with the most crucial element of their existence, that which provides for them all subsistence and the thing from which they spawned.

Finally, the sheer joy that so many surfers derive from surfing is another element Marx would have pointed to as being socially and personally beneficial. It is just the type of activity one should pursue in the realm of freedom. Anything that is so clearly separate from work and the distinct from the working world, that reconnects a person with nature while challenging them in a physical and emotional/intellectual way and also creates a culture apart from and even challenging of the dominant social structure while also being a lot of fun… is the (or one of the) ideal forms of activity and precisely what the realm of freedom should consist of.
CHAPTER 6

RUSSELL: VIRTUOUS SURFING

In what represents an almost total refutation of the Protestant work ethic as outlined by Weber\textsuperscript{14} and emphatic support for Marx’s realm of freedom, Bertrand Russell challenges the very essence of this work ethic and states simply and emphatically that, “there is far too much work done in the world, that immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous, and that what needs to be preached in modern industrial countries is quite different from what always has been preached” (Russell 2004, p. 1).

This statement is especially relevant in our discussion of the modern industrialized western world whose social framework is very much grounded in the puritanical belief in the virtuousness of work. Russell does not deny the importance of work, and believes that a person’s labor is a crucial element to any social organization. But Russell believes that work, albeit necessary, should remain in the minds of everyone a means to an end, and not an end in itself. This contrasts directly with the protestant work ethic, which elevates work and imbues in it a consecrated status.

For Russell, the solution to many social ills and the first step on the path toward social contentment is to decrease the amount of work we all must do. “I want to say, in all seriousness, that a great deal of harm is being done in the modern world by belief in the virtuousness of work, and that the road to happiness and prosperity lies in an organized diminution of work” (Russell 2004, p. 3).

But this virtuous status assigned to work is more than mere overemphasis of the puritan’s morality, but a far more insidious mentality, which should have been long ago abandoned. Russell does not mince words and states bluntly, “The morality of work is the morality of slaves, and the modern world has no need for slavery”(Russell 2004, p. 5). His

\textsuperscript{14} To be clear, this is not a refutation of Weber’s analysis of the economic conditions and the Protestant Work Ethic. Russell is refuting the value that the Protestant Work Ethic has on creating a worthwhile social and economic atmosphere conducive to human development.
reference to slavery is more than just a moral indictment however; it is also an economic one. Russell demonstrates that for ages man has struggled to produce for himself and his family and also been able to produce a small surplus as well. For just as long that surplus has not gone to the laborer but instead been appropriated by landowners, priests, kings, and the like. Against their will, the worker surrenders their surplus to those who do not work in the traditional sense, and Russell makes clear what their preference would have been. “It is obvious that, in primitive communities, peasant, left to themselves, would not have parted with the slender surplus upon which the warriors and priests subsisted, but would have either produced less or consumed more” (Russell 2004, p. 5).

This slave mentality, however unjust, does have some positive consequences. Russell concedes that the surplus labor is what makes advancement in civilization possible. “Without the leisure class (sustained by surplus labor value) mankind would never have emerged from barbarism.”(Russell 2004, p. 13) This economic model is outlined and reinforced by many other theorists as well including Karl Marx. What Russell dutifully points out, however, is that the reason why this model tends to advance the arts, sciences, political and philosophical thought is because it allows for a leisure class to exist while a working class supports them. “Leisure is essential to civilization, and in former times leisure for the few was only rendered possible by the labours of the many. But their labours were valuable, not because work is good, but because leisure is good”(Russell 2004, p. 5). Though morally ignominious at best, this unjust system does have positive consequences.

But in modern times it is no longer necessary to unjustly force some to work so that others can have leisure. “…With modern technique it would be possible to distribute leisure justly without injury to civilization. Modern technique has made it possible to diminish enormously the amount of labor required to secure the necessaries of life for everyone” (Russell 2004, p. 5). Technology is the key to equitable distribution of leisure and diminution of the work necessary to sustain the system. Again, perfectly aligned with Marxist theory, Russell outlines a simple scenario: if a certain amount of production is required to sustain the needs of everyone, and technology makes it possible to produce as much in less time, shouldn’t we therefore work less and still provide enough for everyone? This seems only reasonable. The workers should receive the same earnings since they are producing the same quantity, only in less time. That extra time should be their own to do with whatever they like.
Instead we choose to work the same amount of time while producing far more yet earning the same wage. The larger surplus is not shared with the workers but instead goes to increase profits for the owners of production. The application of technology does not increase leisure time for the worker at all.

With out a considerable amount of leisure a man is cut off from many of the best things. There is no longer any reason why the bulk of the population should suffer this deprivation; only a foolish asceticism, usually vicarious, makes us continue to insist on work in excessive quantities now that the need no longer exists (Russell 2004, p. 8).

One of the key elements to that statement is the reference to “foolish asceticism” as being “vicarious.” Russell is exposing the fact that often those who most reverently espouse the virtue of work are not the workers themselves, but those who live off the surplus value of those who do work. Those who control the social institutions that teach the everyday man that work is a virtue are rarely workers themselves.

Russell calls for mankind to regain a mindset that used to exist and realign the cultural priorities in regards to labor.

There was formerly a capacity for light-heartedness and play which has been to some extend inhibited by the cult of efficiency. The modern man thinks that everything ought to be done for the sake of something else, and never for its own sake (Russell 2004, p. 11).

Connecting the dots between Marx and Huizinga, Russell believes that we’ve lost one of our most basic instincts, our capacity for play. Fun activities that are enjoyed as an end in themselves are absolutely critical for personal contentment and social progress. Russell’s “cult of efficiency” is damaging on both an individual level as well as a socio-cultural level. The mindless dedication to an ascetic approach to work leads man toward the social ailments tirelessly outlined by Marx. Russell, Marx, and Huizinga all agree in the virtue of autotelic activity, or play. Irrational and unproductive endeavors are essential for personal development and social progress.

Consumption plays a large part in leisure side of the work / leisure debate. Relating directly back to our discussion on Weber and the protestant work ethic, specifically the belief that money should be saved and not spent on luxury or enjoyment, Russell condemns this ethic as absurd.

Broadly speaking, it is held that getting money is good and spending money is bad. Seeing that they are two sides of one transaction, this is absurd; one might as
well maintain that keys are good, but key-holes are bad… The individual, in our society, works for profit; but the social purpose of his work lies in the consumption of what he produces. It is in this divorce between the individual and the social purpose of production that makes it so difficult for men to think clearly in a world in which profit mating is the incentive to industry. We think too much of production, and too little of consumption. One result is that we attach too little importance to enjoyment and simple happiness, and that we do not judge production by the pleasure that it gives to the consumer (Russell 2004, p. 12).

Russell points out the irony in the backward thinking we have toward production and consumption. He points out that the baker and chef are considered virtuous because of the productive work they toil at daily. But those who enjoy the fruits of their labor are considered lazy, gluttonous, and excessive. Of course, the chef and baker would be out of work if not for the patrons of their restaurants and bakeries. Consumption is essential to the economy, so it makes no sense to vilify the consumption side of the economic equation. Production, however sanctified, would suffer without proportionate consumption.

Russell calls for a switch in the economic model for the benefit of all mankind and society as a whole. He believes that working less while producing enough for everyone is the solution as opposed to working a full day and producing surpluses that drive revenue for only a few. By working a shorter day and having more time for leisure Russell believes that a utopian future will unfold.

Above all, there will be happiness and joy in life, instead of frayed nerves, weariness, and dyspepsia. The work exacted will be enough to make leisure delightful, but not enough to produce exhaustion. Since men will not be tired in their spare time, they will not demand only such amusements as are passive and vapid. At least one per cent will probably devote the time not spent in professional work to pursuits of some public importance, and since they will not depend upon these pursuits for their livelihood, their originality will be unhampered, and there will be no need to conform to the standards set by elderly pundits. But it is not only in these exceptional cases that the advantages of leisure will appear. Ordinary men and women, having the opportunity of a happy life, will become more kindly and less persecuting and less inclined to view others with suspicion. The taste for war will die out, partly for this reason, and partly because it will involve long and severe work for all. Good nature is, of all moral qualities, the one that the world needs most, and good nature is the result of ease and security, not of a life of arduous struggle. Modern methods of production have given us the possibility of ease and security for all; we have chosen, instead, to have overwork for some and starvation for the others. Hitherto we have continued to be as energetic as we were before there were machines; in this we have been foolish, but there is no reason to go on being foolish for ever (Russell 2004, p. 14-15).
There was a time when surfing was prioritized ahead of work; the native Hawaiians maintained a play-centered culture and many post-war American subcultures held a counter-cultural attitude toward work and opted to spend their time surfing rather than sitting behind a desk. Today surfing is a far more mainstream pastime that doesn’t overtly challenge the mainstream thinking the way it did when the Calvinist Missionaries arrived in Hawaii or when American’s came back from WWII and many who did decided they could not return to the doldrums of work. Even though surfing today exists within the mainstream culture, and has even become a huge profit-making tool for the economy, its anti-work ethic is still a big part of the culture.

There was a time in American culture when the attitude reflected the notion that one either surfed, or they worked. There wasn’t any room in between (Irwin 1973; Morris 1993; Rutsky 2007). Today this is not the case and most surfers hold down what would be considered mainstream jobs. Instead of being counter-cultural, modern surfing has evolved into the perfect play activity for those who do surf and work. Play is certainly not a leisure activity in the productive way Russell outlines. Surfing is play, in the most irrational and unproductive way possible. If leisure is meant to be restful and satisfy the consumption side of the production/consumption equation, then surfing does not fit. Instead surfing is outside of that equation, which makes it so appealing. The issue with leisure, as outlined by Russell, is that it falls squarely within ethos of productivity. Because of this it is ultimately unsatisfying because it overlaps to closely with work. In fact, leisure time is generally nothing more than just enough time away from work so that one can return to their job with optimal productivity. Surfing, for all these same reasons, is not leisure, does not fit into the production/consumption cycle, and is not productive.

Surfing is hard, and that it what makes it satisfying (Butts 2001; Stranger 1999). But the effort required to surf is what makes it unproductive. Considering that after a long surf session all I want to do is take a nap, I am certainly not better prepared to go to work. Surfing is part of the consumption side of the production/consumption equation. After a board is purchased surfing has very little consumptive quality to it. Waves are free, and money isn’t spent when one is surfing.

Surfing reminds those who surf of the importance of the world outside of work (Butts 2001; Elias & Dunning 2008). This world can be very satisfying not only because it is fun,
and not because it is easy. The allure of surfing is partly explained by the balance it creates in many of the lives of those who follow its path and offers the kind of insight that Russell was espousing: that far too much value is placed on work. This value, however, is deeply rooted in the social and cultural history of the west, and until it is uprooted surfers will probably remain one of the few groups with what Russell would consider a healthy approach to work and leisure.
CHAPTER 7

YOUNG: SUBTERRANIAN SURFING

In his important book *The drugtakers: the social meaning of drug use* (Young 1971), Jock Young ties together the works of Marx, Freud, Marcuse and others on the topic of productivity and leisure in the chapter titled “The Subterranean World of Play.” While corroborating the ideas of Huizinga, Young also identifies the important difference between leisure and play, which are not the same thing, as I will demonstrate.

Young begins the chapter by emphasizing the point that the values of any given subculture must be understood in relation to those of the larger culture, “…for they do not exist in a vacuum, they are a product of or a reaction to social forces existing in the world outside” (Young 1971, p. 71). Young goes on to claim that within the context of the whole of society and the values it espouses, there is another set of values that are allowed to be expressed at certain times and in certain places.

Coexisting alongside the overt or official values of society are a series of subterranean values. One of these, for example, is the search for excitement: for new ‘kicks’. Society, they argue, tends to provide institutionalized periods in which these subterranean values are allowed to emerge and take precedence. Thus we have the world of leisure: of holidays, festivals and sport in which subterranean values are expressed rather than the rules of workaday existence (Young 1971, p. 72).

These subterranean values are not deviant values per se, but rather they are a carefully regulated set of other values that exist alongside and subservient to the official values. There are institutional periods when these other values are allowed to be expressed. “All members of society hold these subterranean values; certain groups, however, accentuate these values and disdain the workaday norms of formal society” (Young 1971, p. 72). They may become deviant, from the viewpoint of the dominant culture, if they are overemphasized. Some subcultures, which are labeled as deviant, are typically building their culture around the subterranean values rather than the official values.

Before proceeding it should be necessary to delineate the formal values and the subterranean values. Young does just that:
Now the formal values are consistent with the structure of modern industry. They are concomitant with the emergence of large-scale bureaucracies embodying a system of economic rationality, high division of labour, and finely woven, formalized rules of behaviour. These values are functional for the maintenance of diligent, consistent work and the realization of long-term productive goals (Young 1971, p. 72).

The subterranean values are more or less the opposite of their official counterpart. Young lists what he calls “Formal Work Values” as: deferred gratification, planning future action, conformity to bureaucratic rules, fatalism, high control over detail, little over direction, routine, predictability, instrumental attitudes to work, and hard productive work seen as a virtue (Young 1971, p. 73). Their counterpart are the “Subterranean Values” which are: short-term hedonism, spontaneity, ego-expressivity, autonomy, control of behavior in detail and direction, new experience, excitement, activities performed as an end-in-themselves, and disdain for work (Young 1971, p. 73).

Young is also careful to point out that the official values he describes in a modern industrial society are not the same as the Protestant ethic. Though they have evolved out of the Protestant ethic described by Weber and discussed earlier, they are not identical and important differences should be highlighted. “For while the latter (the Protestant ethic) dictated that a man realized his true nature and position in the world through hard work and painstaking application of duty, the former (formal work) values insist that work is merely instrumental.

While aligning with a classic Marxist viewpoint, Young describes the instrumental nature of the formal work values and their departure from the Protestant ethic, “You work hard in order to earn money, which you spend in the pursuit of leisure, ad it is in his ‘free’ time that a man really develops his sense of identity and purpose” (Young 1971, p. 73). The Protestant ethic dictates that a man creates his identity through work, but Young and Marx claim that the evolution of bureaucracy and increasing specialization of labor have made this impossible.

The growth of bureaucracies in almost every sphere of social life have enmeshed the workaday world in a system of rules which have precluded to a large extent the possibility for the individual to express hid identity through his job. High division of labour and rationalization of occupational roles have made them inadequate as vehicles of personal desires and expressivity (Young 1971, p. 73).
Since the bureaucratization of the Protestant ethic has pushed out the possibility for individual development and identity construction, these must be made up for in other ways. Instead of through labor, they must be found in free time when subterranean values are permitted. “It is during leisure and through the expression of subterranean values that modern man seeks his identity, whether it is in a ‘home-centered’ family or an adolescent peer group. For leisure is, at least, purportedly non-alienated activity” (Young 1971, p. 73). Without citing Marx himself, but in what is a clear association with Marxist theory, Young is extolling the importance of non-alienated activity in the creating of identity within a social context.

At the heart of the leisure and subterranean values discussion is a problem however. The worlds of work and leisure, formal values and subterranean values, are purportedly distinct regions. The problem, Young describes, is that the two worlds are too closely related and overlap in important ways.

Leisure is concerned with consumption and work with production: a keynote of our bifurcated society, therefore, is that individuals within it must constantly consume in order to keep pace with the productive capacity of the economy. They must produce in order to consume, and consume in order to produce. The interrelationship between formal and subterranean values is therefore seen in a new light: hedonism, for instance, is closely tied to productivity (Young 1971, p. 74).

Consumption, and therefore leisure, is ultimately productive behavior because it is the necessary counterpart to the production / consumption equation that the entire economy is based on. Without consumption in proportion to production the economy fails. Therefore consumption is ultimately productive, and part of the formal values system and not separate from it.

The world of work and formal values seeps into the world of leisure and subterranean values to the point where the two are indistinct. Young states:

Subterranean values are subsumed under the ethos of productivity. This states that a man is justified in expressing subterranean values if, and only if, he has earned the right to do so by working hard and being productive. Pleasure can only be legitimately purchased by the credit card of work (Young 1971, p. 74).

Because the path to leisure and the right to express subterranean values, and ostensibly to personal development and identity construction, goes through this “ethos of productivity,” the entire system is spoiled. Because leisure and consumption are ultimately
part of the productive and formal side of the social system, the opportunity for unalienated activity outside the realm of production is lost. Ultimately, within the framework of the ethos of productivity, leisure time is really only about resting enough in order to return to work. This makes leisure time unsatisfying.

The ethos of productivity, then, attempts to legitimize and encompass the world of subterranean values. But there are cracks and strains in this moral code. People doubt both the sanity of alienated work and the validity of their leisure. For they cannot compartmentalize their life in a satisfactory manner: their socialization for work inhibits their leisure, and their utopias of leisure belittle their work (Young 1971, p. 74).

Simply put, Young is saying that neither the world of work nor that of leisure are satisfying because all you worry about at work is when you’ll get a chance to relax, and when you do get that chance you can’t fully enjoy your time off because you are worrying about work.

This fundamental contradiction in the system derives from the idea that true unalienated activity is counterproductive, and a threat to the ethos of productivity on which the entire economic system is based. Therefore the system defends itself against this threat of liberation. Young calls upon the work of Herbert Marcuse to help explain this issue.

The closer the real possibility of liberating the individual from the constraints once justified by scarcity and immaturity, the greater the need for maintaining and streamlining these constraints lest the established order of domination dissolve. Civilization has to defend itself against the specter of a world which could be free. If society cannot use its growing productivity for reducing repression (because such usage would upset the hierarchy of the status quo), productivity must be turned against the individuals, it becomes itself an instrument of universal control (Marcuse 1955, p. 93).

Because right to express subterranean values occurs in leisure time, and leisure is subsumed under the ethos of productivity, leisure is ultimately productive activity. Therefore it is not unalienated, it is not distinct from production, and it is not ego-expressive, spontaneous, or liberating. Young’s only solution is to upturn the entire value hierarchy. “What is necessary is that productivity should be harnessed in order to provide a material basis for the realization of subterranean values. The ethos of hedonism must hold sway over the world of productivity: the present order must be reversed” (Young 1971, p. 76).

This brings us to the final and ultimately decisive point in Young’s discussion of leisure and production: the difference between leisure and play. Young understands the
concept of play just as has been previously described in detail by Huizinga: play is superfluous, unproductive, irrational activity outside the realm of production and consumption. Play is the site where a person can truly express him or herself and construct a unique and individual identity. As we’ve stated earlier, leisure is grounded well within the ethos of productivity and supports the production / consumption model of economic utility. The problem is that we do not play, instead we have leisure. Young concludes:

Our leisure, then, is closely geared to our work, it is not ‘play’ in the sense of a sharply contrasting realm of meaning to the workaday world. It is merely the arena where just rewards for conscientious labour are enacted, where occupational status is conformed by appropriate consumption, and where the appetites which spur on productivity and aid social control are generated. Children from the age of about five are socialized by school and family to embrace the work ethic. For the young child play is possible, for the adolescent it is viewed ambivalently, but for the adult play metamorphoses into leisure. This process of socialization engenders in the adult a feeling of guilt concerning the uninhibited expression of subterranean values. He is unable to let himself go fully, release himself from the bondage of the performance ethic and enter unambivalently into the world of ‘play’…(Young 1971, p. 77).

The cultural centrality and importance of play have already been discussed and need not be reviewed further. The point that Young is making is that play exists outside the realm of the production / consumption cycle, and that is why it is so important. The metamorphosis of play into the ultimately utilitarian concept of leisure, which only serves to rejuvenate a person enough to be productive at work, changes the free and unalienated activity that play represents into another step in the production process.

This article lends support to the evidence that surfing, along with other forms of play, are distinct from the stealthily productive forms of leisure and consumption that the dominant culture espouses. This is why surfing and other counter-cultural subgroups that challenge the ethos of productivity and exist outside of the production/consumption sphere are vilified in the dominant culture and labeled as deviant (Booth 1995; Irwin 1973; Lawler 2010).

But the same elements that cause these groups to be labeled deviant are what make them the most individually and socially beneficial according to these theorists. What Marx, Russell, and now Young point to as critical elements in overcoming, or at least coping with, the evils of the modern condition, are the parts of play that exist outside of and challenge the dominant social and economic structure. Surfing teaches those whom it reaches that work is not the most important value, and that the slave mentality is immoral. Surfing shows people
that self-expression and unproductive, unalienated activity outside the sphere of production/consumption and apart from the ethos of productivity is not a vice or deviant behavior, but rather a virtuous and necessary path toward personal development and identity construction.
John Fiske’s work on pop-culture as it relates to social resistance is very informative in this setting. In his book *Reading the Popular* (Fiske 2010) he examines the symbolic meaning behind many pop-culture phenomena in general, and surfing in particular. But what is of greater concern to Fiske than the meaning of surfing as it relates to the larger social context is the meaning of the space within which surfing takes place: the beach.

Fiske identifies one of the tools that are employed by subordinated peoples, that of semiotic resistance, or the fight to controlling the symbolic meaning of things, in the struggle for social control and expression. Essentially this means that those who are without economic or political power can affect change in their worlds by controlling the meaning of things even if they have no power to physically change those same things. “Semiotic resistance results from the desire of the subordinate to exert control over the meanings of their lives, a control that is typically denied them in their material social conditions” (Fiske 2010, p. 10). Specfically, and most relevant to this discussion, Fiske details semiotic resistance as it relates to spaces. Though subordinated people cannot physically appropriate public spaces, like parks or beaches, they are capable of imbuing these spaces with meanings that are specific to their sub-group and instilling a symbolic control over those spaces.

To this point we have discussed the social significance of play. We have also raised the issues of the social contexts within which surfing takes place, be they modern industrial capitalism or traditional tribal associations, and the significance of that context on affecting the surfers and surfing. We have touched upon the significance of the playground or sacred space (Huizinga 1955). And though Huizinga discussed the special meaning that these sanctified grounds have to those who play on or in them, the social meaning of this space (in our case the beach) requires further attention. For surfing does not happen in a vacuum, social or physical, and as rich in meaning that the actual act of surfing has to those who make
it their life’s passion, the context within which surfing takes place may have just as fertile a source to find meaning.

Fiske states that the physical space of the beach and shore represent a source of semiotic meaning and interpretation that is crucial to understand. This meaning is created communally by those who the beach and instill their own values.

Semiotically, the beach can be read as a text, and by text I mean a signifying construct of potential meanings operating on a number of levels. Like all texts, the beach has an author – not, admittedly, a named individual, but a historically determined set of community practices…” (Fiske 2010, p. 43).

Fiske’s analysis of the symbolic meaning of the beach as created by a community, in our case a play community, lends support to Huizinga’s model of “the consecrated spot” (Huizinga 1955, p. 10) Though surfers do not create the beach and shoreline in order to surf, the way a basketball court is made so that people can play basketball, it is still imagined and utilized as a “playground” with all the meaning and apartness as any other “sacred sphere.” The beach is “dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (Huizinga 1955, p. 10) for surfers the same way any other playground is for any other activity.

One of the key elements of these sacred spheres is that they are “isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules apply” (Huizinga 1955, p. 10). Playgrounds are isolated from the dominant culture where subterranean values and unproductive activity can take place. The differentness in meaning is important, but it is also unique to the individual or play community who creates it. Fiske, in reference to the beach in particular, states: “People use beaches to seek out certain kinds of meaning for themselves, meanings that help them come to terms with their off-beach, normal life-style” (Fiske 2010, p. 43).

But for as meaningful as any playground is to those who use it and instill their symbolic meaning into it, the beach represents a special case. Not only is it a naturally occurring space, without which surfing could not be possible, it is also located on a physically and symbolically significant place in the world. The beach is on the edge of civilization, figuratively, and quite literally. The reach of the developed world and civilization ends where the ocean begins. Surfing occurs on the border of the two, the liminal zone, or the boundary between nature and the developed world. Fiske refers to the beach as an “anomalous category” (Fiske 2010) because of its special physical space, that gives it distinctive meaning.
The beach is an anomalous category between land and sea that is neither one nor the other but has characteristics of both. This means that is has simply too much meaning, an excess of meaning potential, that derives from its status as anomalous” (Fiske 2010, p. 43).

To truly understand Fiske’s interpretation of the special significance the beach has it is necessary to outline his understanding of the many elements the beach represents. Fiske sets up a dichotomy between “Nature” and “Culture” and adds a third category, “Natural,” to describe the anomalous disposition of the beach. Fiske explains, “Nature is pre-cultural reality. It is that external world before any cultural perception or sense-making process has been applied to it. But the natural is what culture makes of nature. In other words, the natural is a cultural product, and nature exists only as a conceptual opposition to culture”(Fiske 2010, p. 44) Thus the “natural” is an anomalous category between nature and culture, with elements of both. The natural is a safer, more easily accessible and tolerable form of nature that culture has shaped to its needs.

Fiske explains that the reason why the anomalous category of “natural” is created is to bridge the gap between nature and culture. The shift from one to the other is too distinct, thus a third category which transitions from one to the other is necessary. Fiske explains:

Man wishes to mediate this big binary opposition for reasons to do with comfort and the avoidance of terror (motives that gave rise to the creation of Jesus Christ, after all) and so he overlaps the physical structure of Land/Sea with the social structure of Nature/Culture, where he can create mediating categories that are both physical and social. The land, then, becomes culture, the city, civilization; the sea becomes nature, untamed, uncivilized, raw. The beach mediates this terrifying boundary (Fiske 2010, p. 44-45).

So the beach is right on the boundary, between nature and culture, with elements of both, making it “natural.” Fiske continues:

The beach, then, is an anomalous category, overflowing with meaning because it is neither land nor sea, neither nature nor culture, but partakes of both. It is therefore the appropriate place for anomalous behavior, behavior that is highly significant because it pushes the cultural as far as it can go toward Nature. It explores the boundary of what it is to be social, to be cultured, that is the nonphysical part of the human condition (Fiske 2010, p. 56-57).

So the beach is imagined as a natural setting, on the boundary between the uncivilized ocean and the comfort of the developed world. To this end the beach is given some of the comforts of the civilized worlds. Bathrooms and tables are put in place for convenience and sanitation. Walls are erected to keep different areas (sand, parking lot, etc.) separate. Lawns
are planted (themselves an anomalous category between natural growing plants and wall to wall carpeting) and paths laid between them all.

But for as much as adding all these comforts of home civilizes the shoreline, the beach is appealing because the job isn’t done. Fiske explains:

The appeal of the suburbanized beach depends crucially on the fact that the suburbanization is not complete: echoes of that which resists incorporation into the culture still exist to provide a frisson of the freedom, the danger, and the potentially subversive challenge that nature mounts against culture. And it is this end of the spectrum of potential meanings that the young tow-haired surfers mobilize to help them establish their position within our culture. For culture is not best understood by a consensus model in which the values at the center are agreed upon and can thus provide the yardstick by which to measure degrees of centrality/deviance. Rather, these values are constantly being contested and are having to defend their centrality, their dominance. So culture is not a relatively harmonious and stable continuum from dominant to deviant, but a confrontation between groups occupying different, sometimes opposing positions in the map of social relations, and the process of making meanings (which is, after all, the process of culture) is a social struggle, as different groups struggle to establish meanings that serve their interests (Fiske 2010, p. 57-58).

In this critical passage Fiske is transitioning from his examination of the beach as an anomalous category into his thesis that spaces like the beach are sites for subcultural and even “deviant” subgroups to stake a semiotic claim and wage their battle against the dominant culture. The beach means many things to many people, and while the dominant values are imposed on the shoreline to turn nature into “natural,” other groups constantly push back on those normalizing values and replace them with their own, sometimes deviant, values. Fiske points out that the beach plays in interesting central role for other groups, not just surfers.

The meanings of the beach that serve the family are contested by subcultures such as youth in general and surfers in particular. It is significant how the beach plays an important part in youth culture, because youth, too, is an anomalous category, the one between child and adult (Fiske 2010, p. 58).

An interesting parallel is put forth between the beach and youth groups: that both are anomalous categories. This may help to explain the role the beach often takes in youth culture, as both groups are parts of two areas of space or phases of life. Fiske continues that the beach is not only a place for anomalous people, but for anomalous behavior as well. One of the most common behaviors on the beach is simply relaxing on the sand and allowing
oneself to achieve a tan. Fiske notes this and explains how a tan is a telling example of anomalous behavior and a semiotic statement.

A tan is an anomalous category between skin (human, culture) and fur (animal, nature). A tanned body is a sign to be read by others, particularly others in the city. It signifies that the wearer, a city dweller, has been into nature and is bringing back both the physical health of the animal and the mental health that contact with nature brings into the artificiality of city life (Fiske 2010, p. 46).

The beach is the site for other forms of anomalous behavior. Fiske notes that scuba diving and surfing are considered anomalous. Scuba diving is the anomalous category between being a fish (nature) and being a man (culture). Surfing is the anomalous category between walking on land (culture) and swimming in the ocean (nature). Fiske even states that the surfboard is a good example of an anomalous category, which is required to surf.

The surfboard is perhaps the perfect example of a category anomalous between nature and culture. It is carefully designed, with scientific approach to the placement of fins and shape of the hull, yet it is also the most minimal object that enables man to float on the sea. The skill and art of the surfer resemble more the way a dolphin interacts with the sea or a bird with the air than man’s more normal technological imposition of his will and needs upon nature, typified by the modern giant ships. As befits its anomalous status, the surfboard is both sacred and taboo. To the surfie, it is an object of near worship…(Fiske 2010, p. 60).

The surfboard itself is overflowing with meaning due to its status as an anomalous category and its necessity in undertaking a specific anomalous behavior: riding a wave.

Fiske also notes that sexuality and other norms are redefined at places like the beach too, where cultural norms are challenged. It would be culturally taboo for young girls to walk around their neighborhoods or schools in only their underwear. But at the beach, and wearing a suit that covers no more (and often less) than their underwear would, this behavior is perfectly normal and acceptable. Men are permitted to wear nothing but shorts (sometimes very small ones) and everyone is welcomed to go bare-foot. Such a thing as bare feet may seem trivial, but image the reaction one would receive were they to walk into a bank without shoes on their feet.

But surfing, to Fiske, represents a far more fascinating case of anomalous behavior. Due to its potential for subversive sentiment and its association with deviance against the ethos of productivity, as we’ve outlined in chapters on Weber, Marx, Russell, and Young, surfing is more than just an activity that combines elements of nature and culture. Part of surfing’s subversive nature derives from the fact that is happens on the boundary of
civilization, just out of the reach of culture. The location of the “playground” surfing utilizes and the overabundance of meanings flowing through that sacred space add an element of social subversion to surfing. Fiske explains:

The potentially subversive meaning of the surf derives from this chain of concepts – the body, nature, the signifier, pleasure, and therefore desire seen as articulating an alternative, threatening way of making sense to the one proposed by the official culture. The subversion lies in the denial of control or power as socially constituted (Fiske 2010, p. 75).

The riding of an ocean wave, as has been discussed in the introduction, is a particular kind of joy that only the surfer experiences and seeks to understand. It is loaded with meanings and emotions that are the subject of any number of books and articles, (Butts 2001; Ford & Brown 2006; Lawler 2010) but are too great a subject to tackle in such a short space. But within that abundance of meaning and feeling lies just the thing that Fiske claims makes surfing so potentially subversive.

The wave is that text of bliss to the surfie, escape from the signified, potential reentry into nature, constantly shifting, needing rereading for each loss of subjectivity. It contradicts, defines momentarily, the ideological subjectivity through which discourses exert their control. The beach, however, is a text of mundane pleasure, not sacred bliss. It is laden with signifides, it controls the desire for freedom and threat to nature by transposing it into the natural. It is pornography rather than eroticism, desire institutionalized, given a social location subject to the power of the other who produces its signification, its meaning (Fiske 2010, p. 76).

The “sacred bliss” Fiske is referring to is part of the potentially subversive element that surfing contains. But this feeling is not enough. People can achieve this kind of bliss in any number of ways and there are innumerable activities that affect a person the same way surfing does. What makes the sacred bliss of surfing so unique and so potentially subversive is that it happens outside of the reach of culture, outside of the control that culture places on nature to transform it into the comfortable and safe “natural”. Natural is ultimately not dangerous, but appealing because it has elements of nature, because it butts up against the danger and wildness of nature. But surfing happens in nature, next to the natural. The surfer passes from culture, through the anomalous category of the natural, the culturized beach, and into nature. The wave is untamed, uncontrolled by man, free from the influence of culture, and outside the control of the dominant social structure. A wave is a naturally occurring phenomenon which is created in-part by winds from thousands of miles away which form
swells, those swells break upon rocks, reefs, and sandy beaches and form the kinds of waves that can be ridden. The shape and size of the waves is also affected by the pull of the gravity from the sun and moon as the tides ebb and flow. Surfing is a direct challenge to civilization because it teaches the surfer that there is the possibility for boundless joy combined with ego-expressivity, identity construction, and an immersion in nature that represents an escape from the cultural institutions that dominate modern living. All at once, surfing offers the things a person most needs, the things that the dominant social structure seems determined to eliminate.

Surfing offers something that the modern social framework cannot: the chance to define yourself outside the reach of the cultural institutions that set the parameters for personal definition. When a child is asked, “what do you want to be when you grow up?”, the question takes as settled the authority of the dominant culture to define a person within its rules. “What do you want to be” really means, “what job will you do.” The question really means, “how will you fit into the system, what will you do that supports the social arrangement we have created for you?” “Within the realm of possibilities we have created, pick a job and get to work.”

People are commonly taught that the path to success is to work hard, accept that what you are told is true, and find a way to exist within the system. A degree of coloring outside the lines is accepted and even encouraged, but ultimately one mustn’t stray too far off the straight and narrow path. One’s own worth is determined by one’s ability to succeed within certain parameters, parameters that are created by the social system in order to support and perpetuate the system. Things may change a littler here and there, slowly, and not without resistance. But what is always true is that the system works, and any failure is that of a person, or a group, or an institution, but the system works. Furthermore, the solution to any problem is found within the system, it is a contained system. Surfing teaches there are

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15 The influence of the billion-dollar surf industry can unfortunately bring surfing back into the realm of the dominant culture’s parameters for identity construction by co-opting the surf culture. In this way the culture is commodified and sold back to surfers as a pre-packaged “surfer” identity, which is defined by the industry and not by the individual. Capitalism, for its part, loves counter-cultural movements for just this purpose: to be appropriated, commodified, and sold back to consumers. This is an important point because it undermines one’s ability to define themselves outside the reach of the capitalist influence through surfing. But unfortunately such a weighty topic represents too great a digression and must be reserved for another discussion.
alternatives to the system. Surfing happens on the outside of the system, just barely on the outside, looking in. And what you learn when you are just barely outside is that what is inside isn’t necessarily the right way or the only way. The system creates a lot of doubt, but what people perceive as doubt in their own ability to navigate the system is more likely the failure of the system to nurture the development of the complete person.

Being on the border allows you see and feel the difference between the two sides. Perhaps being deeper into nature one might lose the ability compare, but on the border the difference is immediate. Playing in the liminal zone creates a world with both elements, and allows those who play there to define themselves in both spheres while taking the best parts of each and leaving behind the parts that are inhibiting their enjoyment. A life centered around fun, which takes place just outside the reach of the often oppressive social institutions, teaches a person that much more is possible than ever promised by those same institutions. Every surf session has to end at some point, but a lifetime of waves imprints onto a person the knowledge that the world has much more to offer than was ever promised. Perhaps a little play on the boundaries of civilization from time to time is just enough to make a life within those boundaries tolerable. Perhaps the solution to the problems inside the system can be found outside the system.
CHAPTER 9

FREUD: CIVILIZATION’S GREAT WIPEOUT

Sigmund Freud is best known as the father of psychoanalysis and for his influential contributions to the study of psychology. But Freud is also a seminal contributor to the field of sociology, particularly in his work relating to the psychological neuroses deriving from social and cultural frustrations. *Civilization and Its Discontents* considers the problems of civilization and the quality of sublimation of instinct. Freud investigates the roots of this cultural frustration and concludes that the source of our shared neuroses does not come out of our civilization as much as it is the fact that we are living in a civilization at all. In the context of a theoretical exploration of surfing, Freud’s deductions are useful in explaining the enthusiasm with which many people take to the water.

For Freud, our basic instincts are fairly easy to understand. All people want to be happy, and happiness is a function of eliminating the things that cause us pain and emphasizing those things that bring us pleasure. Freud outlines what he considers the three sources of suffering and pain. First is the pain we receive from our own bodies, derived from the knowledge that we will, one day, get old and die. Eventually the body breaks down and the inevitable consequence of being alive is that we experience pain and decay.

Next is the suffering we experience from the external world. Because we feel inferior to nature and are scared by the perceived violent and dangerous state of the world we feel pain and worry from external forces that are out of our control. Freud states:

> We shall never completely master nature; and our bodily organism, itself a part of nature, will always remain a transient structure with a limited capacity for adaptation and achievement. This recognition does not have a paralyzing effect. On the contrary, it points the direction for our activity (Freud 1962, p. 37).

Instead of surrendering to the superiority of nature, says Freud, we are motivated by our shortcomings. The anxiety we experience as it relates to our place in nature motivates us to overcome our feelings of inferiority. This is done by distancing ourselves from nature by creating a civilization that seeks to overcome nature’s influence as much as possible.
Finally, Freud states that a great portion of our anxiety emanates from the dissatisfaction we feel from the relationships we have with other people. To Freud, this is the worst pain we feel, and it originates from “inadequacy of the regulations which adjust the mutual relationships of human beings in the family, the state and society” (Freud 1962, p. 37).

Freud outlines the mechanisms we have developed to cope with the frustrations and pains we face from these three sources of suffering. First there are “powerful deflections,” or distractions that keep us busy and occupy our minds with more pleasant things. Hobbies and participation in other activities are useful in distracting us from the things that cause us pain. Next are “substitutive satisfactions,” which are more aesthetically inclined pleasures such as the appreciation of art or music, which entertain and stimulate our minds. Beauty, both natural and man-made, is at the heart of these substitutive satisfactions. Freud believes that the aesthetic appreciation of beauty is a powerful and instinctive human characteristic that can be a considerable source of contentment:

We may go on from here to consider the interesting case in which happiness in life is predominantly sought in the enjoyment of beauty, wherever beauty presents itself to our senses and our judgment – the beauty of human forms and gestures, of natural objects and landscapes and of artistic and even scientific creations. This aesthetic attitude to the goal of life offers little protection against the threat of suffering, but it can compensate for a great deal. The enjoyment of beauty has a peculiar, mildly intoxicating quality of feeling. Beauty has no obvious use; nor is there any clear cultural necessity for it. Yet civilization could not do without it (Freud 1962, p. 37).

The final mechanism man has created with which to cope with the suffering that is endemic in civilization is the use of intoxicating substance. The use of drugs and alcohol, though not necessarily a healthy approach, is nevertheless an effective method of, temporarily at least, dealing with the social ailments that plague modern life.

Beyond these three mechanisms for managing suffering, Freud also discusses other methods people may deal with the hardest source of suffering, the unsatisfactory relationships with others. Freud states:

Against the suffering which may come upon one from human relationships the readiest safeguard is voluntary isolation, keeping oneself aloof from other people. The happiness which can be achieved along this path is, as we see, the happiness of quietness. Against the dreaded external world one can only defend oneself by some kind of turning away from it… (Freud 1962, p. 37).
This is the first time Freud mentions at least a partial renunciation of civilization. This will not be the last time he examines this point, however, but before he delves deeper into this idea he further discusses the sources of suffering and the coping mechanism that have been developed.

Though Freud later critiques the Communists because he believes their ideology is based on foundation that is an “untenable illusion” (Freud 1962, p. 37), in at least one respect he and Marx are in agreement: that a person’s job can be satisfying, if certain conditions exist:

Professional activity is a source of special satisfaction if it is a freely chosen one – if, that is to say, by means of sublimation, it makes possible the use of existing inclinations, of persisting of constitutionally reinforced instinctual impulses. And yet, as a path to happiness, work is not highly prized by men. They do not strive after it as they do after other possibilities of satisfaction. The great majority of people only work under the stress of necessity, and this natural human aversion to work raises most difficult social problems (Freud 1962, p. 37).

Freud and Marx agree that a person’s vocation can be a source of satisfaction and personal development, if it is freely chosen. But one of the great causes of social problems, and indeed one of the great symptoms of social problems, is that most people have a strong aversion to work and must find their sublimating possibilities elsewhere.

Freud is careful to point out that too much attention on any one method or type of method of compensation is dangerous, and that a diversification of coping activity is the healthiest approach:

Just as a cautious business-man avoids tying up all his capital in one concern, so, perhaps, worldly wisdom will advise us not to look for the whole of our satisfaction from a single aspiration. Its success is never certain, for that depends on the convergence of many factors, perhaps on none more than on the capacity of the psychical constitution to adapt its function to the environment and then to exploit that environment for a yield of pleasure (Freud 1962, p. 37).

This passage hints at, and further passages emphasize, the importance that man’s relationship with nature plays in his suffering, and his overall happiness. One of the methods we undertake to make ourselves safer and ostensibly happier is to separate ourselves from and dominate over nature. So many uncertainties and threats seem to come from the untamed and raw state that nature represents. But Freud notes that the modern ability to dominate over nature, which has been a human goal for eons, may not deliver the outcome it seeks to provide.
During the last few generations mankind has made an extraordinary advance in the natural sciences and in their technical application and has established his control over nature in a way never before imagined. The single steps of this advance are common knowledge and it is unnecessary to enumerate them. Men are proud of those achievements, and have a right to be. But they seem to have observed that this newly-won power over space and time, this subjugation of the forces of nature, which is the fulfillment of a longing that goes back thousands of years, has not increased the amount of pleasurable satisfaction which they may expect from life and has not made them feel happier (Freud 1962, p. 37).

So much of the efforts that we employ to “civilize” ourselves derive from our desire to impose order onto a seemingly chaotic world. Our first encounter with order as a species comes from our experience with nature. Man observed order in the cosmos, in the seasons, and in the tides. Man learns order from nature, Freud states:

But whereas cleanliness is not to be expected in nature, order, on the contrary, has been imitated from her. Man’s observation of the great astronomical regularities not only furnished him with a model for introducing order into his life, but gave him the first points of departure for doing so. Order is a kind of compulsion to repeat…(Freud 1962, p. 37).

As an extension to our desire for order that comes from observing natural order, we attempt to regulate the interactions and relationships we have with others. In short, we strive for social order. The creation of civilization is an attempt to bring order to social interaction and to spare humans from the fear associated with the untamed natural world:

… the word ‘civilization’ describes the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes – namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations (Freud 1962, p. 37).

But rooted deep within our civilization is a contradiction that causes us much psychological and social harm: it isn’t working. Thinking about the problems of society we are faced with the reality that we make up the rules that regulate our interactions with each other. We can’t do a lot about our relationship with nature or our bodies, but with the social regulations we create we should have ultimate control. Yet we still suffer from any number of social problems and we fail to make ourselves any happier with our own efforts. Freud asks if there is something we are missing when we consider this.

… we come upon a contention which is so astonishing that we must dwell upon it. This contention holds that what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery, and that we should be much happier if we gave it up and returned to primitive conditions. I call this contention astonishing because, in whatever way we may define the concept of civilization, it is a certain fact that all the things
with which we seek to protect ourselves against the threats that emanate from the sources of suffering are part of that very civilization (Freud 1962, p. 37).

What Freud is saying, simply and directly, is that we are making ourselves miserable through our attempts to protect ourselves from our sources of suffering. The cure we’ve concocted is only exacerbating the problem. This is the sad irony to the civilization we have created. If the point is to create an arena where people can be free to safely pursue their dreams, then we have missed the mark. Freud concludes, “The liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization. It was greatest before there was any civilization…” (Freud 1962, p. 49).

The reason why civilization is the enemy of liberty, in Freud’s opinion, is a powerful condemnation of the foundation of our society. Freud concludes:

… it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression or some other means?) of powerful instincts. This ‘cultural frustration’ dominates the large field of social relationships between human beings. As we already know, it is the cause of the hostility against which all civilizations have to struggle (Freud 1962, p. 51-52).

Freud opens the book *Civilization and Its Discontents* with a discussion about a particular sensation or emotion that he calls the “oceanic” feeling. What follows in his examination of this “oceanic” feeling may contain the beginnings of the solution to the social and cultural problems Freud goes on to describe. Perhaps, our best chance to overcome the frustrations and alienation that is symptomatic of the civilization we have created for ourselves can be found on the path to understanding the “oceanic” feeling. What Freud is sure about is that at the heart of our problems lie a skewed value system.

The cultural values that our social structure espouses perhaps leads us down the wrong road, away from contentment. Freud warns, “It is impossible to escape the impression that people commonly use false standards of measurement – that they seek power, success and wealth for themselves and admire them in others, and that they underestimate what is of true value in life” (Freud 1962, p. 37).

Though Freud does not claim with any authority to know that is of true value in life, he does possess an interesting personal fascination with a religious friend. In describing this friend it is claimed that the appeal of religion is an “oceanic” feeling. A sensation of “eternity”, a feeling of something limitless. This feeling is purely subjective, and not an article of faith. This feeling is what religious systems seize on and direct toward worship of
God. The oceanic feeling is the only necessary part of religion, but it is not derived from religion, it is a naturally occurring sensation that religion labels as “God” and employs to their ends. The oceanic feeling “…is a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (Freud 1962, p. 37).

Freud states that the reason the oceanic feeling is so powerful is because it is somehow a primitive and essential sensation. It’s something we all had at one point and we long to regain.

In her book *The American Surfer* (Lawler 2010), Kristen Lawler reviews this concept to introduce the chapter titled “The Oceanic Feeling: Surfing’s Lost Paradise.” She so brilliantly encapsulates the concept and draws the connection with the ocean and surfing that it is valuable to cite her own words here. Lawler states:

In psychoanalytic terms, we’re all shaped fundamentally by a sense of paradise lost because our most primal memories involve the total connection between self and other, between inside and outside, that characterizes the original, oceanic feeling. Whether it’s the experience of connection and gratification, utterly sans scarcity and alienation, that characterizes the womb, or the baby nursing at the breast, or even a phylogenetic, cellular memory of early life forms in the ocean, what is original to the personality is the oceanic feeling of connection and plentitude. Unconsciously, we all continue to be driven by this memory, this desire to return to what is symbolized so powerfully by the ocean (Lawler 2010, p. 69).

To summarize Lawler’s words and connect them with Freud’s, what the underlying problem seems to be is that the further our civilization progresses the deeper we experience a feeling of loss. What is lost is a fundamental and personal connection with nature. With that connection comes a sense of place, of belonging, of security in abundance. Whether this feeling ever really existed is beside the point. What is important is that we are driven by this sense of loss, and we long to return, at least temporarily, to this state.

In a thesis about surfing, which is an interaction with the ocean, it is a happy coincidence that Freud focuses so much attention to his metaphor of the “oceanic” feeling. It is not hard to connect the dots between Freud and surfing, particularly his condemnations of society’s foundation of renunciation of instinct and surfing’s cathartic and sublimating capabilities. In one passage, it seems that Freud is actually talking about surfing when describing a friend’s practice of Yoga and the ability to regain certain oceanic and primordial elements.
…by withdrawing from the world, by fixing the attention on bodily functions and by peculiar methods of breathing, one can in fact evoke new sensations and coenaesthesias (sensation as a whole) in oneself, which he regards as regressions to primordial states of mind which have long ago been overlaid (Freud 1962, p. 37).

Indeed, some of the same benefits one can derive from Yoga are frequently touted as being available in abundance in surfing. Surfing, for its part, has been described as a moving mediation requiring strength, balance, agility, and controlled breathing. But going step by step through Freud’s outline of the problems with civilization and drawing connections to surfing shows some interesting connections. Relative to Freud’s causes of social frustration and the coping mechanisms available, surfing finds a welcomed comparison.

Early on Freud mentions the centrality of aesthetic endeavors in the pursuit of happiness. Freud strongly supports the notion that appreciation for the beauty in human forms and gestures along with natural objects and landscapes can compensate for a great deal of the threat of suffering. Surfing, of course, is a combination of dynamic and flowing human gestures set in the context of tranquil natural landscapes. Surfing, it should be clear, is among the most naturally aesthetic pastimes.

Next Freud describes the happiness in quietness that one finds by voluntarily isolating oneself from society. “Against the dreaded external world one can only defend oneself by some kind of turning away from it…” (Freud 1962, p. 37). Surfing is an individual pastime often performed in groups. It’s not a team sport that requires collaboration, and as crowded as any surf break may get, it is still a collection of people acting individually in their own self-interest, and cooperating only to maintain safety, courtesy, and camaraderie. So though one may not be technically alone while surfing, when they are around others they are still apart from society, they are simply apart together. Surfing not only happens outside the reach of civilization, as we have demonstrated through Fiske, but much of the surfing subculture is predicated on a counter-cultural mindset. Surfing challenges many of the basic tenets of modern society, mainly the virtuousness of work and the value of consumption. In this way surfing is isolating on different levels, and represents a chance for the surfer to withdraw in a meaningful, albeit temporary, way from society.

Part of the social discontentment one may experience derives from the dissatisfaction one feels from the relationships with others. Part of the value Freud places on isolation is the turning away from other people. Surfing may occur in isolation, but more often then not
surfing is done in a group. However the group one is turning away from is far different than the group one is turning toward when they surf. Though it may contain some of the same people, the surfing culture, with its distinct norms and values, represents a far more ordered, and frankly more fun group of people. It is a culture predicated on the value of fun and dedicated to rejecting the most alienating aspects of modern living (Butts 2001; Irwin 1973; Stratton 1985).

Freud spends a lot of time emphasizing the point that the civilizing efforts through time have aimed to protect us from the threat of nature, but have ultimately led to our misery. The further we get from the instinctive patterns of living associated with nature, the worse we seem to be. And though surfing cannot replace the civilization we have built, it can help compensate for its evils. Because surfing requires one to interact on a personal level with the order of nature and the ocean, one can regain the instinctive and sublimating awareness that is lost through civilization. Though the ocean seems chaotic, the experienced surfer begins to perceive that within the chaos there is actually order (Flynn 1987). This same natural order, according to Freud, is the basis for all civilization and model on which all man-made order is created. Though civilization is created with the natural order as its foundation, the result is a far cry from its origin. Surfing, however, requires a profound and individual relationship with that original order to be formed and honed through years of dedicated application. That primordial interaction can have a profound and meaningful effect that may counteract the cultural frustrations that are characteristic of the modern social condition. These mitigating factors contribute to explaining part of the appeal of surfing. Surfing may simply represent what a person feels they have lost, even on a subconscious level, and a chance to find it again.
CHAPTER 10

CSIKSZENTMIHALYI: THE ANATOMY OF GETTING STOKED

The Hungarian born Psychologist and Sociologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has written many books and articles on a phenomenon he calls flow, a term he coined and an area of research he pioneered. In his publications he outlines his theory that people are most happy when they are in a state of flow. His seminal work *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) is particularly illuminating when considering a topic like surfing set in the context of modern life.

Csikszentmihalyi’s initial analysis aligns with Russell’s, as he dismisses the modern notion of leisure as mundane rest time, and not truly satisfying free-time. His notion that the passive and relaxing time apart from work does nothing more than return a person to a state where they can be productive at work again, aligns with similar notions by Huizinga, Russell, Young, and even Marx. What is most satisfying is not rest. Instead, says Csikszentmihalyi, the most enjoyable times are when a person is challenged both physically and mentally.

Contrary to what we usually believe, moments like these, the best moments in our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times – although such experiences can also be enjoyable, if we have worked hard to attain them. The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3).

The resulting state that comes from these moments, when a person is stretched to their limits, is what Csikszentmihalyi refers to as “flow.” Though his entire book, and other books, are dedicated to developing the concept of flow, he briefly and initially defines flow as, “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3).

Not until much later in the book does Csikszentmihalyi provide a more complete definition of flow. From this we will dissect and expand on each element as well as relate each piece to surfing. It should become clear that Csikszentmihalyi’s place in this discussion
is not only to introduce the concept of flow, but to tie together nearly every other theorist and concept and to arrive at the coalescent conclusion of this exploration. Csikszentmihalyi summarizes flow more completely here:

We have seen how people describe the common characteristics of optimal experience: a sense that one’s skill are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even if it is difficult, or dangerous (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3).

For Csikszentmihalyi, however, simply defining the phenomenon of flow and discussing the elements that constitute a flow moment would be to miss the larger contextual basis of his theory. Csikszentmihalyi, like all the other theorists discussed heretofore, believes that the context within which anything takes place is vital to understanding that phenomenon. Csikszentmihalyi is meticulous in expounding the context within which flow is to be discussed. The context he describes is a fairly severe condemnation of the general psychological state of modern Americans and the social and economic framework we have created. First, Csikszentmihalyi states that our modern social foundation has created a sense of inner chaos, rather than order.

The lack of inner order manifests itself in the subjective condition that some call ontological anxiety, or existential dread. Basically, it is a fear of being, a feeling that there is no meaning to life and that existence is not worth going on with. Nothing seems to make sense. In the last few generations, the specter of nuclear war has added an unprecedented threat to our hopes. There no longer seems to be any point to the historical strivings of humankind. We are just forgotten specks drifting in the void. With each passing year, the chaos of the physical universe becomes magnified in the minds of the multitude (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3).

One of the primary sources for this “ontological anxiety” is the broken promise of a capitalist economic structure and the illusion of the “American Dream.” According to Csikszentmihalyi these cultural myths prop up a notion of cultural and historical superiority, neither actually develop a fully realized human identity nor give a person the tools to do it himself or herself. Eventually, says Csikszentmihalyi, the illusion is broken.

From the earliest years we have been conditioned to believe that a benign fate would provide for us. After all, everybody seemed to agree that we had the great fortune of living in the richest country that ever was, in the most scientifically
advanced period of human history, surrounded by the most efficient technology, protected by the wisest Constitution. Therefore, it made sense to expect that we would have a richer, more meaningful life than any earlier members of the human race. If our grandparents, living in that ridiculously primitive past, could be content, just imagine how happy we would be! Scientists told us this was so, it was preached from the pulpit of churches, and it was confirmed by thousands of TV commercials celebrating the good life. Yet despite all these assurances, sooner or later we wake up alone, sensing that there is no way this affluent, scientific, and sophisticated world is going to provide us with happiness (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3).

The great promise of the modern-western system and the American Dream, it turns out, it nothing more than sophisticated ruse perpetrated by those who control the cultural institutions that espouse their own virtuousness. Though we’ve moved away from a religious motivation to demonstrate our own godliness through virtuous labor, the puritanical spirit lives on within our social and cultural institutions that maintain the cycle of production and consumption to bolster their own needs.

The workaday laborer is assured that with enough hard work and dedication, he or she will eventually attain all they could ever want or need in this life. Through work, and only through productive behavior, a person can achieve the goals that are fed to them from birth through cultural institutions. Financial independence and material wealth are promoted as the ultimate measures of success and the source of happiness. The only path toward that goal is clearly delineated through steadfast and committed work, and any failure to reach that goal is presumably the fault of the individual, and not in any way a failure of the system to provide realistic and meaningful goals.

Once the illusion is shattered, and the realization is made that our civilization has not provided for us the happiness we seek, the resulting existential angst and dissatisfaction with the social order requires that people look elsewhere for what society cannot provide. The only alternative, says Csikszentmihalyi, is to look outside the sphere of our social structure. “To overcome the anxieties and depressions of contemporary life, individuals must become independent of the social environment to the degree that they no longer respond exclusively in terms of its rewards and punishments” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3).

Instead, says Csikszentmihalyi, we must seek enjoyment ourselves through challenging actions, and not expect it to come from consumptive behavior earned through
productive action. Enjoyment, according to Csikszentmihalyi is a product of personal development, even if it is accomplished in a social setting.

Enjoyment is characterized by this forward movement: by a sense of novelty, of accomplishment. Playing a slow game of tennis that stretches one’s ability is enjoyable, as is reading a book that reveals things in new light, as is having a conversation that leads us to express ideas we didn’t know we had… None of these experiences may be particularly pleasurable at the time they are taking place, but afterward we think back on them and say, “That was really fun” and wish they would happen again. After an enjoyable event we know that we have changed, that our self has grown: in some respect, we have become more complex as a result of it (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3).

Csikszentmihalyi outlines the elements of enjoyment, and through them arrives at a more clear definition of flow. For it is through these elements of enjoyment, when undertaken to the right degree and in the right balance, that flow can be achieved. It should become very obvious how surfing fits into a discussion about flow, and I will demonstrate certain elements of surfing in parallel with Csikszentmihalyi’s description of the contributing factors of his notion of Flow.

**THE CHALLENGE**

Csikszentmihalyi’s first requisite for flow is a challenging activity that requires skill, or in his words, “activities that require the investment of psychic energy, and that could not be done without the appropriate skills” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 49). Csikszentmihalyi reinforces this point, and states that though simple little games may be an pleasant way to pass the time, they are ultimately not satisfying in the way a challenging activity may be. The key, to Csikszentmihalyi, is complexity and arduousness.

But how enjoyable an activity is depends ultimately on its complexity. The small automatic games woven into the fabric of every day life help reduce boredom, but add little to the positive quality of experience. For that one needs to face more demanding challenges, and use higher-level skills… enjoyment comes at a very specific point: whenever the opportunities for action perceived by the individual are equal to his or her capabilities (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 52).

The most important factor in predicting if an activity will provide the enjoyment and sense of personal accomplishment is the level of complexity and difficulty that is required to complete the task. Activities that are too simple and undemanding do not challenge a person to achieve a higher level of activity. Enjoyment comes from a sense of achievement when one’s skills are tested and the challenge is met. Even a task that is ultimately not completed
may be enjoyable if one’s skills are challenged and he or she gains knowledge or develops his or her skills. A activity that is outside the range of one’s skills is just as unsatisfying as an activity that is not challenging enough. The better matched the skills required are with a person’s abilities, the more likely the result will be an enjoyable and developmental experience.

This tenet of enjoyment holds true in the world of surfing. Waves that are either too small, have poor shape and structure, or generally are not a suitable test to one’s skills pose no challenge to the surfer. On days like this nothing is to be gained, save for possibly an aesthetic appreciation for the natural beauty of the ocean and the shore, the camaraderie associated with participation in a subcultural activity, or the tranquility associated with time spent outside of civilization in a natural setting. All these factors are pleasant byproducts of spending time in the ocean, but surfers paddle out to surf and to grow as riders of waves. If they are not challenged by conditions that test their skill they will ultimately be unsatisfied. Furthermore, waves that are too big or fast for a surfer represent too great a challenge and require more skill and strength than they possess. Conditions like this not only defeat any chance of skill development, but they also tend to overwhelm the more aesthetic elements of surfing as beauty and tranquility are replaced with fear.

**AUTOPilot**

When a person’s skills are evenly matched with the challenge they have undertaken, their complete attention is demanded by the activity. Such focus and concentration is required that the world outside of that activity seems to disappear and a person becomes engrossed solely in the activity they are performing. Csikszentmihalyi refers to this as the “merging of action and awareness” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 53). Because of the focus required for a challenging task, Csikszentmihalyi states:

As a result, one of the most universal and distinctive features of optimal experience takes place: people become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3).

The unity between consciousness and action is the most notable facet of flow. Many athletes refer to this element as “being in the zone,” when one’s efforts seem effortless and automatic. Some athletes even report a sort of out of body experience in the moments when
they achieve flow, as if they are watching themselves move and act (Stranger 1999). All the while they almost lose conscious control of their bodies, as if it were directing its own movements in a way more powerful and graceful than the conscious mind could achieve. This element of flow is not easily achieved, the body has to be conditioned to reach this level of performance. Furthermore, these moments are tenuous, and easily broken by distraction.

Although the flow experience appears to be effortless, it is far from being so. It often requires strenuous physical exertion, or highly disciplined mental activity. It does not happen without the application of skilled performance. Any lapse in concentration will erase it. And yet while it lasts consciousness works smoothly, action follows action seamlessly. In normal life, we keep interrupting what we do with doubts and questions. “Why am I doing this? Should I perhaps be doing something else?” Repeatedly we question the necessity of our actions, and evaluate critically the reasons for carrying them out. But in flow there is no need to reflect, because the action carries us forward as if by magic (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3).

For a beginner there are countless variables to consider when attempting to surf. A novice must contemplate where to surf, where specifically to paddle out, how far to paddle out, which waves to duck under and which to paddle over, which waves to attempt to ride and which should be avoided. They must further decide when to paddle for a wave, when to stand up, when to turn, and when to end a ride. With the additional variables of all the other potential surfers at any given break there are a remarkable number of factors that must all be accounted for, any one of which that gets neglected could lead to embarrassment or injury (Evers 2006; Flynn 1987; Preston-Whyte 2002).

At first all these variables are measured consciously as the body learns to balance and maneuver a surfboard on the water. Through time and experience the body learns to negotiate through many of the variables automatically. For instance, the difficult and precise action of going from a prone position on a surfboard to standing in just the right place goes from being one of the primary challenges of any surfer to a routine and unconscious background task. Eventually most of the skills required to surf become instinctive, and the surfer doesn’t think about doing them, they are just done effortlessly and unconsciously.

**Clear Goals and Feedback**

One of the essential features in achieving a flow experience is the simple relationship between the goals one sets for oneself and the feedback they receive. Csikszentmihalyi states that achieving complete involvement in a flow experience is a function of, among other
things, the establishment of clear goals and the receiving of immediate feedback. These can be, and often are, very simple goals, like hitting the tennis ball correctly or taking an opponent's king in a game of chess. In both cases the goals are clear, and if performed well the feedback is immediate. Part of the enjoyment one receives is the positive feedback that comes immediately after achieving a goal, but Csikszentmihalyi warns, “if one chooses a trivial goal, success in it does not provide enjoyment” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3). Going back to the first element of flow, the goals have to be set high enough to challenge the skills of the participant.

Sometimes, however, goals and feedback are more esoteric. In a game of basketball the ball either goes in the hoop or it doesn’t. If the goal is to make a shot, then it is very easy to determine the outcome: did it go in or not? But Csikszentmihalyi recognizes that not all goes are so empirically judged, and in cases like the arts, one’s goals may be harder to define. “In some creative activities,” Csikszentmihalyi states, “where goals are not clearly set in advance, a person must develop a strong personal sense of what she intends to do” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 55). In these cases it is not a matter of setting up an quantitative goal like completing a task in certain amount of time or scoring a number of points, but rather of creating a personal and aesthetic set of goals that, though they be more qualitative in nature, are no less enjoyable to achieve.

Furthering this point, Csikszentmihalyi discusses the role that feedback plays in the production of enjoyment and the experience of flow. What is most striking in his discourse on feedback is the ultimate irrelevance of the type of feedback, and overall importance of receiving any kind of feedback at all.

The kind of feedback we work toward is in and of itself often unimportant: What difference does it make if I hit the tennis ball between the white lines, if I immobilize the enemy king on the chessboard, or if I notice a glimmer of understanding in my patient’s eyes at the end of the therapeutic hour? What makes this information valuable is the symbolic message it contains: that I have succeeded in my goal. Such knowledge creates order in consciousness, and strengthens the structure of the self (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3).

To Csikszentmihalyi the most important facet of feedback is the “symbolic message” it represents. The actual feedback of watching the ball sail toward its goal or watching the clock stop in record time is immaterial. What is important is that the player experiences the joy of succeeding at a personal goal, regardless of it’s rational or productive potential. The
character building and identity constructing nature of achieving personal goals is the greatest factor of the goal/feedback relationship. As long as the goal is a significant challenge and the feedback is clear and immediate, the sense of personal satisfaction and enjoyment will contribute toward creating “order in consciousness” and bolster the “structure of the self.”

In surfing many of these elements apply. Goals in surfing can range from the overt, catch the wave and stand up on the board, to the more aesthetic, reach a level of harmony with the wave and move gracefully along its face. Just as Csikszentmihalyi points out, the surfer must often create personal goals associated with a creative task, and these are melded with the more direct goals of successfully catching a wave or landing a new trick. One reason surfing poses such an engrossing pastime is that because of the ever-changing and unpredictable character of the ocean one’s skills and goals are constantly challenged and rewritten.

In the case of surfing, the feedback is immediate as well. A surfer knows instantly if he or she has landed a take-off since they will either find themselves riding along a wave face or being tossed around in the white water after falling. But on a level deeper that just the basic feedback, the surfer may receive feedback of a different sort. The flow experience itself is that feedback, and it is achieved when a level of harmony and congruity is achieved with the wave.

**PSYCHIC ENTROPY**

One of the great benefits to doing something challenging, something that requires focus and attention and demands the entirely of one’s efforts, is that there is no cognitive energy available to think about anything else. In this way a person can, at least for a moment, escape alienation. This is the next element of the flow experience: the subordination of all other mental processes to the task at hand.

One of the most frequently mentioned dimensions of the flow experience is that, while it lasts, one is able to forget all the unpleasant aspects of life. This feature of flow is an important by-product of the fact that enjoyable activities require a complete focusing of attention on the task at hand – thus leaving no room in the mind for irrelevant information… the clearly structured demands of the activity impose order, and exclude the interference of disorder in consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3).

Within the context of the ontological angst and existential trepidation that is, according to Csikszentmihalyi, ubiquitous in the modern social milieu, a welcome reprieve is
achieved in the flow experience. So much attention and focus is required that there simply is not enough cognitive potential to both sustain the task at hand and to ponder one’s apprehensions. Furthermore, not only are the social ills of the world subordinated temporarily, what is left to the conscious mind is ordered and meaningful for the time it is preeminent. “The concentration of the flow experience – together with clear goals and immediate feedback – provides order to consciousness, inducing the enjoyable condition of psychic entropy” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3). This is the exact state many surfers credit as being one of their primary motivations for surfing (Brown 2003; Butts 2001; Daskalos 2007; Farmer 1992; Peralta 2004; Stranger 1999).

THE PARADOX OF CONTROL

The concept of control and the role of consequences of actions play an interesting part in understanding the significance of flow experiences. This element of flow, like so many others, overlaps with Huizinga’s depiction of play. It is in this section that the dichotomy between the flow experience or the world of play, and the “real world” is contrasted. Csikszentmihalyi introduces this dichotomy:

Enjoyment often occurs in games, sports, and other leisure activities that are distinct from ordinary life, where any number of bad things can happen. If a person loses a chess game or botches his hobby he need not worry; in “real” life, however, a person who mishandles a business deal may get fired, lose the mortgage on the house, and end up on public assistance. Thus the flow experience is typically described as involving a sense of control – or, more precisely, as lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations in normal life (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 59).

Thus the paradox of control is set up. In the flow experience a person may experience a sense of control, or rather may feel the freedom that comes from losing control within an arena with no real-world consequences. In the so-called real world, the world outside of flow and play, where failure has real-life and often-permanent consequences, the lack of control is the source of great anxiety. Indeed this is one of the main sources of alienation according to Marx (Marx and Engels 1978). Though people constantly fight for control over various facets of their lives, the irony is the freedom they experience when they have none at all. One of the problems of control is that it is so illusory and transient. The thirst for control derives from a drive to perfect ones surroundings to their needs. But perfection in the real world is
impossible according to Csikszentmihalyi, however “at least in principle, in the world of flow perfection is attainable” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 60).

Though fleeting and inconsequential beyond its own time span, the imaginary sense of control that is achievable in the flow experience is very desirable. According to Csikszentmihalyi this sense of control, however transient, explains why flow activities can be so addictive. Within the larger context of a chaotic world where one has no control at all, the small amount of seemingly perfect and absolute control is a highly sought after sensation. The potential of the sensation to become addictive represents the largest drawback to the flow experience, and it may result in making one’s normal life even less tolerable.

Thus enjoyable activities that produce flow have a potentially negative aspect: while they are capable of improving the quality of existence by creating order in the mind, they can become addictive, at which point the self becomes captive of a certain kind of order, and is then unwilling to cope with the ambiguities of life (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 62).

The concept of control becomes all the more paradoxical when considering the case of surfing. If control implies mastery, however temporary or illusory, over one’s self and one’s environment, then surfing poses an interesting case. For as adept as any surfer can become at their craft, control over their environment never gets any closer than it was the day they first paddled into the ocean. They will, undoubtedly, master their own bodies and learn to maneuver through and adapt to the various conditions the ocean will present (Flynn 1987). But at no point will any surfer ever control the environment in which they practice their craft. The pinnacle of achievement for any surfer isn’t mastery over the ocean, rather the experiential zenith is a temporary state of harmony where for a moment the surfer feels totally in sync with the ocean wave, able to interpret and react seamlessly with the moving medium of the water. At that moment what the surfer is experiencing is not control over the ocean, but control over their senses and their bodies to achieve an unconscious, automatic, and seamless transition from stimulus to response (Flynn 1987).

In regards to the addictive potential of the sense of control, surfing also adds an interesting mitigating element to the discussion. Fortunately the logistics of surfing tend to mediate the addictive properties because one simply cannot surf all the time, even though many people surely would like to. For one thing, there are not always waves to surf on, and often there is a great deal of time between truly excellent waves. Also, surfing generally happens in daylight and requires a great deal of physical exertion, so surfers are limited to
how long they can surf by natural forces, thus mitigating the addictive properties. Surfing is still very addictive (Butts 2001; Stranger 1999), just as much if not more so than other pastimes, but built into the reality of surfing are natural obstacles and limits that moderate one’s participation.

**THE LOSS OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS**

Expanding on one of the more salient elements of Huizinga’s discourse on play, and relating intimately to Freud’s “Oceanic Feeling,” Csikszentmihalyi turns next to the aspect of flow associated with the loss of self-consciousness. In what is a consequence of the psychic entropy described earlier, the loss of self-conscious is not to be mistaken for a loss of consciousness but rather “the loss of a self separate from the world around it is sometimes accompanied by a feeling of union with the environment” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 63).

The element of self-awareness that is subjugated to the moment is the part of consciousness that recognizes the self as being distinct from other people and things. What occurs in the flow moment is the stripping away of sense that one is in the world and what is left is a sense that one is of the world, a small but essential element balanced with all the others that constitute the universe.

Csikszentmihalyi states that due to the overwhelming mental demands associated with a flow moment a person not only losses the ability to think about things outside the moment, but they also lose the ability to think about themselves in an important way. Csikszentmihalyi continues, “… in flow there is no room for self-scrutiny. Because enjoyable activities have clear goals, stable rules, and challenges well matched to skills, there is little opportunity for the self to be threatened” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 63). What is left, when all the other mental processes are subordinated to the requirements of the flow moment, are the essential elements of self-understanding. In that moment identity is stripped down to its most fundamental state and the person is secure in his or her own self as part of a greater whole.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, rediscovering one’s essential self by losing consciousness of self is an enjoyable experience. Here he paraphrases this element of the flow experience and describes the enjoyment in the loss of self-consciousness.

… loss of self-consciousness does not involve a loss of self, and certainly not a loss of consciousness, but rather, only a loss of consciousness of the self. What
slips below the threshold of awareness is the concept[italics] of self, the information we use to represent to ourselves who we are. And being able to forget temporarily who we are seems to be very enjoyable. When not preoccupied with our selves, we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are. Loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 64).

In what bridges Huizinga’s description of the immersive nature of play with Marx’s understanding of species being, Csikszentmihalyi states that the flow experience strips away all unessential elements of self, leaving only the fundamental and basic elements of identity and meaning. On top of that most basic foundation a person can more easily build a better understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Marx commented that modernity has forced man to move further away from his species being. Perhaps, according to Csikszentmihalyi, it is possible to re-identify with that most elementary model of self through the flow experience.

Surfing certainly does not lack for this sensation. Countless articles, books, and movies are filled with accounts of the self-transcendent feeling that accompanies riding a challenging ocean wave (Brown 2003; Butts 2001; Ford and Brown 2006; Kampion 2003; Peralta 2004; Stranger 1999). Famed big wave surfer Dave Kalama said, “The wave commands so much focus and so much attention that it’s the only thing that matters for a few seconds. It’s very purifying, because as far as you’re concerned… nothing else exists” (Peralta 2004). Those who ride inside the open tube of a wave in particular report a feeling of “oneness” with the environment and a revelatory sensation, as if they briefly understand and feel connected to the natural forces of the universe (Brown 2003; Peralta 2004).

**TIME WARP**

The final element in Csikszentmihalyi’s depiction of the flow experience involves the perception of time, and the effect that flow can have on warping that perception. Though this facet of flow may play a less significant role in the social/cultural discussion of flow within the context of modernity, it is nonetheless a fascinating element of flow, and a particularly relevant one in the discussion of surfing. Csikszentmihalyi summarizes the transformation of time in this way.

One of the most common descriptions of optimal experience is that time no longer seems to pass the way it ordinarily does. The objective, external duration we
measure with reference to outside events like night and day, or the orderly progression of clocks, is rendered irrelevant by the rhythms dictated by the activity… during the flow experience the sense of time bears little relation to the passage of time as measured by the absolute conventions of the clock (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 66).

This sensation is also very common among athletes and surfers when discussing their experiences on the water. For many surfers time seems to be warped in two ways. First, though a single ride on a wave may only last five to ten seconds, it can feel like much longer as time seems to slow down. Many surfers report a sense of “slow-motion” when riding a wave, as if the wave is moving and breaking slower than is physically possible, all the while their minds are working at top speed to interpret and react to what the wave is doing (Brown 2003; Flynn 1987; Peralta 2004; Stranger 1999).

Secondly many surfers experience the seemingly rapid passage of time when they are not actually surfing, but waiting in the time between sets of waves. The amount of time between sets can add up to hours, and many surfers will paddle out for three or four hour sessions and feel as though they had been out for far less time. I have observed this in my own experience. This sensation of common among other athletes and to anyone participating in a particularly absorbing activity. One can sit down for a game of chess or to read a book and before they realize how long they have been at it, the entire day has gone by (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

THE AUTOTELIC EXPERIENCE.

The concluding element to Csikszentmihalyi’s investigation into the concept of flow has to do with the motivation for participating in an activity leading to flow in the first place. Again, his work here brings together the ideas brought forth in previous chapters by Huizinga, Marx, Young, and Russell. A crucial piece of Csikszentmihalyi concept of flow is that the impetus for action must be an end in itself. Just as Marx and Huizinga extolled the virtues of irrational and unproductive activity, so too does Csikszentmihalyi assert the importance of autotelic experience, or activities having no end or purpose beyond themselves. “The key element of an optimal experience is that it is an end in itself. Even if initially undertaken for other reasons, the activity that consumes us becomes intrinsically rewarding” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 67).
The intrinsic reward is ultimately the purpose of undertaking such an activity. That reward, as Csikszentmihalyi will demonstrate, reaches beyond the sphere in which it was experienced. Just as Huizinga proved that the culture created on the playground reaches beyond its own boundaries and creates a culture of its own, so too does the flow experience reach beyond the boundaries within which it was founded. But where flow differs from Huizinga’s play culture is in its ameliorating effect on the social and cultural malaise that seems so pervasive and inescapable in a modern industrial economic organization. Csikszentmihalyi concludes:

The autotelic experience, or flow, lifts the course of life to a different level. Alienation gives way to involvement, enjoyment replaces boredom, helplessness turns into a feeling of control, and psychic energy works to reinforce the sense of self, instead of being lost in the service of external goals. When experience is intrinsically rewarding life is justified in the present, instead of being held hostage to a hypothetical future gain (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 69).

**CONCLUSIONS AND CONNECTIONS**

Csikszentmihalyi’s work goes a long way to explaining the draw people have toward surfing. Beyond the ultimate and essential element of fun, there are obviously many other contributing factors that add to the compulsion to paddle into waves. But one facet of the flow experience, especially as it pertains to surfing, that Csikszentmihalyi overlooks is the significance of the spatial element. In this matter the work of Fiske can help bridge the gaps Csikszentmihalyi may have overlooked, and conversely, Csikszentmihalyi may also provide a better understanding of Fiske’s ideas.

As the concept of flow is applied to surfing it is essential in understanding the spatial element that contributes to the overall experience. Surfing does not happen in a vacuum, this is a foundational precept of this thesis. And it is Fiske’s work that demonstrates the social significance of the space that surfing occurs in. Fiske’s elucidation of the liminality of the shoreline serves to illuminate the abundance of cultural meaning that is imbued within that space. Fiske then points out that the symbolic meaning of that space is appropriated and rewritten by the surfer, or anyone else who exploits it. But Fiske fails to indication how those symbols are rewritten and how that space is reappropriated.

In this way Csikszentmihalyi’s theories can be employed to inform the missing elements from Fiske. It is simple enough to see that what takes place in the liminal zone so
thoroughly detailed by Fiske is the flow experience itself. The battle between nature and culture that occurs on beach and the area transitioning toward the city merely adds an element of cultural significance to the essential element that is occurring just outside the bounds of that battle. Flow happens in this liminal zone, and it is the flow experience that rewrites the symbolic text and injects the surfer’s meaning into that text.

Fiske’s work deals primarily with how groups affect and are affected by their environment. But the flow experience is by definition an individual one, which sometimes happens in a group setting. Using Csikszentmihalyi’s psychological analysis (which is individually based) can show us that the way this critical space is symbolically appropriated, and the reason becomes so culturally significant, is because it is the specific site of a large number of individual flow experiences that contribute to the creation and richness of an entire subculture centered around that very experience. The combined flow experiences of surfers are the foundation for their subcultural associations and the source of their symbolic appropriation of the shore.
CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION

The goal of this thesis is to build a better understanding of the significance that surfing has not only to those who do it, but also to discover the significance that this meaning has within the larger social contexts. The works of some preeminent social theorists are needed to build a foundation for understanding the social contexts in question, and inserting the discussion of surfing is meant to not only add an illustrative element to those theories, but also to introduce surfing as a phenomenon that is as much a reflection of its environment as it is a reaction to it.

Huizinga exposes the cultural centrality of play and represents a theoretical jumping-off point. Through his work it is seen that play creates culture, but also that the drive to play is an instinctual as any other impulse found in humans or animals. Weber’s work demonstrates the consequences of ignoring that instinctual impulse. On one side of his analysis it can be shown that an ascetic reverence to work can create unimaginable wealth, but it is also shown that through history this ascetic preeminence has the potential to create devastating consequences. The Missionaries and the Native Hawaiians are sad proof of this. Though Weber himself only examines the roots of this devotion to productivity and austerity, Marx demonstrates the social consequences of focusing too vigilantly on profit making, and too little on personal development. His detailed examination of the roots and consequences of social alienation highlight the need for activity that is outside the realm of productivity and rationality.

The dangers of an overdeveloped faith in the virtuousness of labor is reinforced by Russell’s evaluation of the modern economic system. Russell claims that such “foolish asceticism” is not only an anachronistic remnant of a slave owner mentality, but also a dangerous approach to social and economic organization. Within his analysis he points to the social benefits of free time and the ironic disdain for consumptive behavior, despite the fact that productive performance is dependant on consumption. Russell helps illuminate the value that surfing, or any fun-centered lifestyle can have as well as exposing the cultural biases
toward work and productivity. Reinforcing Russell’s critique of the “ethos of productivity” is Young’s analysis of the subterranean value system that exists alongside the formal values of any given social structure. His thesis concludes that within the cycle of production and consumption, true non-rational and free activity is superseded by leisure, which is merely the carrot on the end of the production/consumption stick. Leisure, which is essentially rational and productive, replaces the subterranean nature of play. But the loss of true play activity means the loss of that element that challenges the formal values and creates a world outside the realm of production.

Fiske’s work demonstrates how those elements of culture that distance us from a more natural and instinctive approach are re-imagined and the symbols of culture rewritten to represent the values of the various sub-cultural and counter-cultural entities that appropriate space for their needs. For Fiske, the beach and shoreline can be read as a text that exposes the meanings that these groups place on the elements of culture. Interestingly the reappropriation of cultural symbols, in the case of surfing, happens on the fringes of civilization as it were. In this way, surfing, like many other beach activities, is considered an anomalous activity, with elements of both culture and nature contributing to the wealth of meaning intrinsic to it’s being. It is postulated that, perhaps being just out of the reach of the dominant social structure allows the user to appreciate both sides of the struggle for supremacy and meaning.

Following Fiske, Freud lends psychoanalytical as well as social credence to the notion that the civilization we have created for ourselves is somehow flawed in a fundamental and significant way. But more than just underpinning the theses of Marx and others, Freud’s understanding of human motivations furthers the appreciation for the impetus to paddle out into the ocean. Along with Huizinga, Freud concludes that the order to be found in nature along with the satisfaction of instinctual impulse is a healthy and necessary part of life. Freud’s work is particularly expository of the drive so many experience to regain a sense of place, freedom, and abundance that they find in surfing. If freedom is a lack boundaries, and society is predicated on the notion limits, then the boundlessness and “oceanic” sensation to be found in surfing can be credited for its appeal.

Finally, the strength of the drawing power of surfing is bolstered with the understanding of “flow” as examined by Csikszentmihalyi. In a more psychological parallel to Huizinga’s outline, Csikszentmihalyi examines the immersive and often paradoxical
properties of intense autotelic experiences. Alongside Freud and Russell, and in reaction to
the principles outlined by Marx and Weber, Csikszentmihalyi demonstrates the potential for
free, unalienated activity to foster identity construction, ameliorate the more deleterious
elements of civilization, and replace cultural anxiety with a sense of self-control and
peacefulness.

When considering the problems of the world, a one hundred page thesis on the
significance of surfing may seem superfluous. However, when viewed through the lens of
social theory, analysis of surfing has the quality of highlighting and illustrating the
shortcomings of our social, economic, and political organization as well as demonstrating the
possibility of contentment relatively outside of that system. Surfing is not the cure for what
ails modern society. However a careful examination of the sport and the subculture help to
illuminate the fact that there are practical deficiencies in the way we have chosen to associate
by revealing the prospect of alternative and possibly more successful approaches to life,
work, and social organization. If everyone experienced the alienation and cultural angst that
seem endemic in our society in the same way, and to the same degree, then those problems
could be reconciled as essential truths of the human condition. But surfing proves that just
outside the reach of our cultural framework exists another world, distinct in its
characteristics, and relatively free from the ills so common on shore. Not everyone can surf,
and surfing is in no way a utopian enterprise. Nonetheless one of the most powerful and
detrimental elements of the modern social structure is the pretense of preeminence. Surfing,
if nothing else, proves that alternative means for achieving a sense of place, identity, and
well-being are possible.\footnote{I think it is important to note that I don’t believe that surfing is any \textit{better} than any other sport or pastime. It happens to be a passion of mine, and that passion is what motivated me to study it and write about it. But this thesis is not intended to elevate surfing above any other activity, certainly not in any moral or
categorical sense. But it clearly is an interesting case. Surfing seems to have many factors working for it to
produce flow experiences and the ameliorating elements that contribute to a balanced and satisfying life. Of
course other activities do this, any person who is dedicated to a craft or activity will tell you that they feel the
same way when they are in the midst of their pastime. But surfing seems to have a greater propensity for
creating these moments, maybe because of the connection to nature, or the fringe elements. Perhaps because of
surfing’s counter-cultural history or from all the factors combined. But with no scientific evidence to prove it,
surfing does seem to be an especially good source of the kind of fun and thrill that alleviates the more alienating
factors of modern living. At the very least, it is an activity and culture that is both fascinating to study, and
incredibly fun to do.}
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