

## **Leisurely Consumption and Freedom in Everyday Life**

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**Abstract:** *This paper comes as an initiative to unravel the areas, like leisurely and especially leisurely consumptions, popularly associated with freedom and show how those could become the very source of unfreedom. Upon discussing the nuances of the neoliberal society and its entwined practices of consumption, I have tried to highlight the dialectical relation between freedom-dependency. The desire to be free is universal and perpetual, but this very desire is fraught with tendencies of dependency. Therefore, metaphysics and science both together have tried to explore the desire to be free and consequently encountered conditions and notions of the unfree. This paper wants to unclog notions of “absolute freedom” and “relative freedom” from the popular imagination, hinting at the everyday sources of unfreedom and associated negotiations to secure either form of freedom. Thus, build a commentary that reflects as it recites the micro experiences of remaining vulnerable to power, both normative and culturally transpired, and then finding counter-power positions of liberation—as mere illusions leading to further unfreedom.*

**Keywords:** Consumption, Leisure, Consumer freedom, Neo-liberalism, Lottery, Agelessness, Cosmetic industry.

### ***Introduction***

In late capitalism, consumption is considered as a way to define self. “Being” and “becoming” of the self are now closely linked to modes of consumption, unlike production processes and acts of labour in the past. This has widened the divide between work and leisure and at the same time unraveled the overlaps between the two on many occasions. Post-modern scholars have widely associated freedom with consumption - with the market circumscribing almost every aspect of life in a capitalist system, the ability to consume could be the marker of one’s liberation from the production

process and its conditions of unfreedom. Freedom has always been closely tied to empowerment. Therefore, it needs to be explored if freedom, let it be of any kind (consumer freedom per se), is generating a sense of empowerment or merely leading to greater unfreedom. In this light, the ideas of positive and negative freedom will be revisited. And leisure as a domain of fast consumption for freeing one from the clutches of production/work shall also be discussed. After Zygmunt Bauman's (1988) idea of "Consumption as freedom" and Henri Lefebvre's (1905) notion of "leisure machine" and "compensatory leisure", this paper seeks to reflect upon leisurely consumption practices and its relation to freedom in everyday lives.

### ***Work-Leisure: The Dialectics of Subjection and Liberation***

Henri Lefebvre in his *Critique of Everyday Life* states how the criticism of everyday life profoundly finds expression in contempt for productive labour (i.e. forms and conditions of work) in capitalist society. To explore this contempt, light is thrown upon the practices and acts that break from this labour in search of the marvelous, surprising and not-so-banal elements. Thus, the work-leisure dialectics remain an essential point of departure for critically conceiving our everyday lives and consequent notions of subjection-liberation. It is the same man subjugated by his labour, who finds freedom in technocracies of relaxation. These techniques of leisurely pursuits could range from activities of passivity as produced by "leisure machines" (Television, the Internet and forms of new media) to disciplining our actions and engaging in 'cultivated leisure' (for example, photography and organized sports). Lefebvre argues:

In this way a "world of leisure" tends to come into being entirely outside of the everyday realm, and so purely artificial that it borders on the ideal. But how can this pure artificiality be created without permanent reference to ordinary life? (Lefebvre 1999: 31).

The answer lies in the creation of reverse images of the real (i.e. the struggling versus comfortable, painful versus pleasurable, ugly vs. beautiful, sordid versus perfect and empty versus full) that distance and distract one from real life through surreal images, fiction and films.

There is an increasing emphasis on leisure characterized as a distraction: rather than bringing any new worries, obligations, or necessities, leisure should offer liberation from worry and necessity.

Liberation and pleasure - such are the essential characteristics of leisure, according to the parties concerned (Lefebvre 1999: 33).

leisure that offers distraction and repose, compensating for the concerns of everyday life, is sought not only outside work but even outside day-to-day family life. Perhaps, the Sunday family get-togethers and a stroll with a friend in everyday parlance have now been substituted with higher levels of passive engagement in watching “illusionary” reverse images of the real. This replacing of the real unhappiness with fictions of happiness and mystics of liberty generates a passive attitude. It is this attitude that becomes easily exploited commercially, opening up trajectories of consumption for the man who now finds leisure as a “new social need”. To fulfil such needs the market deploys machines and methods that can tap the pleasure-seeking attitude and offer products/services to that end. Nevertheless, sinking consumers in a sense of liberation through passive consumption, even though illusionary.

### ***Playing Lottery: Getting Lucky, Seeking Escape***

Lefebvre asserts that the bourgeois society emphasized the value of labour, thereby formal work became the way of life like never before. Technical fragmentation of labour is followed by social segregation, forging complex social relations and turning individuals into isolated personalities with consciousness split between the public and private. Thereby the man in his natural free state is always negotiating with the “working man” in a capitalist society. Work and workplace are now separate from everyday life that once was inherent in family engagements, community-based collectivities as well as personal endeavours geared towards self-actualization. The self is seen turning into an atomized unit (defined through separation between different activities and specialization)—echoing either achievements or drudgery of work life. Thus, leisure finds some discreteness in our everyday, promising to provide some fruitful contradictions to work, even though at the cost of alienation. Perhaps it is this window of escape into an immediate, at times passive, sensory life full of possibilities that seduces the “tired man” into buying ploys, toys and tools designed for pleasure. I shall refer here to such an organised gaming industry of lottery to discuss the illusionary sensations of emancipation that the former sells to the suffering man.

“Bolo dada, bolo!” he calls out, teasing a middle-aged, comfortably pot-bellied regular. Unfazed by Goswami’s gentle attempt at bullying, the man takes time to think, scratching his head for a few hesitant

seconds before finally picking a stack of West Bengal State Lottery tickets for <sup>1</sup> Rs. 501. He takes the bunch and places it in his front shirt pocket for safekeeping. “This ticket gives me the permission to temporarily feel peace and relief,” says the buyer, Sushil Kumar, age 48, smiling to reveal paan-stained teeth. “I can sleep with the possibility of some dreams coming true,” he adds. Kumar, who is here every day, is just one of thousands of people stepping into the constellation of state government-licensed lottery ticket stores in Kolkata. (Vangmayi Parakala: HT News 2019)

Above is an excerpt from a news article in *Hindustan Times* published on January 12, 2019. The report highlights the West Bengal Government’s initiative to move into selling lottery tickets online. Goswami is one of the many Prominent lottery agencies’ owners and stockists who are ubiquitous in the Bura Bazar area of Mahatma Gandhi Road and Sealdah Station. These small outlets, often barely with a small table or a stall to display their tickets, serve at least 40-50 customers on average each day. Whereas, larger shops stock lottery tickets for wholesale as well as for retail customers, and claim to sell around 25,000 tickets daily. The report states an earning of up to 35 crores in revenue by the West Bengal state government through the sale of lotteries annually. lottery in West Bengal stands as a legalised activity, unlike many other states of India. The buyers of lottery tickets are seen mostly investing in a commodity that has no immediate consumption value, other than some hope of delayed return. Nevertheless, the eagerness to find relief, thus happiness, through such purchases upholds consumption that is beyond sheer utility - at times providing leisurely moments away from rigorous and meaningless work schedules and often aspirations to climb the social ladder.

Playing the lottery could be understood in the light of human behaviour that negotiates between desired ends and scarce means, having alternative uses ‘everyone who bets any part of his fortune, however small, on a mathematically fair game of chance acts irrationally’ (Bernoulli 1954: 23-36). The feelings to explore alternate means are necessarily initiated in a capitalist system that never allows man to integrate into the social system through his labour. Individuals are made vulnerable while being subjected to the production system, having no equal or fair opportunity to be successful as per the given social standard. However, the moral goal is set equally for all and expectations are pinned on the utopian notion that one must try hard to succeed. ‘In such conditions, gambling can help to reduce tensions and frustrations. By entering the game of lottery, individuals can dream of winning

a fortune and thereby be able to acquire all the attributes of success' (Binde 2009: 13). Success in such a game of chance is possibly another illusion that the already exploited and alienated labour pins his or her hopes on. The dwindling probability of winning a game of the lottery, thus a science that defies the principles of fair economic exchange, becomes the source of thrill and reference for a remote sense of win. Thus, one spends his hard-earned money buying these lottery tickets to acquire some fictional happiness.

At Sealdah Station in Kolkata, I met Dukhna Nayak (age 50 years), a temporary sanitation staff of Nil Ratan Sarkar Medical College and Hospital. Peering over the lottery ticket stall, Dukhna looked perplexed having to choose a winning combination of lottery ticket numbers. His daily extra earnings of 200-300 rupees is what he invests partly in consuming locally brewed alcohol and the leftovers to buy lottery tickets. He appeared quite an addict of both these leisurely activities, as his wife sitting at some distance kept whining over her husband's spendthrift attitude. Dukhna flagged a few bunches of tickets and said aloud, "abki bar to hum lottery jitenge, aur ek totto kharidke bhag jayenge" (this time I will win in the game of lottery and then buy a totto and run away). As I drew close to him to ask how much he had invested in lottery tickets today, he uttered, "aaj 500 rupiya ka ticket karidey hain, number lag gaya to 5 lakh milega" (today I have invested 500 rupees to buy tickets, if I win, I will get 5 lakhs). Upon hearing this, I went ahead to find out his everyday work schedule. Dukhna possibly had noted the hint of surprise on my face that had accumulated for long now having seen his squandering ways. He replied, "Saradin urine aur blood saaf karke 5 hazar milta hai, upaad se sab ka gali bhi. Iskey baad thoda jo extra mil jata hai ussey lottery ticket karid letey hain. Madamji, apne ko bhi to koi upay chahiye kuch enjoy karney ko" (the entire day after having cleansed human waste we just get 5000 rupees. Madam, I also need some way to enjoy). His toiling job and denial as a contractual labour possibly make him wasteful in his ways, but one could not overlook his desire to live a better and happier life, even if be it a lurking dream in a distant future or an absolute illusion. Dukhna also revealed how he manages to sleep peacefully every night ignoring his wife's complaints, just with some hope that tomorrow will be better at his work and also his luck at the lottery. Many like Dukhna engage in such a game of luck to merely transport oneself to a make-believe life that possibly is unattainable in reality.

The leisure industry, with specific reference to organised sporting activities, thrives by providing thrill, sensations of competitiveness, taste of victory

and temptation of lofty ambitions for the otherwise knocked-out man every day. The magnificently spectacular image that gaming creates through its posters, advertisements, vivid telecast, dress and other arrangements, come as some worthy compensation for the routine confinements.

People who go to the races and bet on their favourite horse are known officially as ‘sportsmen’. Every football club has its ‘supporters’ and a supporter can be someone who has never kicked a ball in his life. He goes to the match in his car, or by bus or the metro. He participates in the action and plays sports via an intermediary. He quivers with enthusiasm, he fidgets frenetically, but he never moves from his seat. A curious kind of “alienation” (Lefebvre 1999:36)

All of it pushes one into greater passivity and feeds them with certain kinds of “surreal” victories, defeats, exhilaration, and excitement. And to consume all of this and live surreal moments man spends much illogically. Thus, the man, not only ends up being captive of the unreal dream but also loses his consumer freedom, as he is lured into believing in the fictions of freedom. It’s like a vicious circle from unfreedom to an unreal escape and back to subjugation again. There is alienation, a state of loss, in leisure as much as in work. The freedom that the lottery player seeks in his leisurely endeavours, only visits him as an illusion, disappearing fast into the dark alleys of deeper captivity. We work to earn leisure, and leisure only has one purpose: to free us from modern-day work.

### ***Freedom and Dependency: Bauman’s View on Consumerism***

On consumerism, Bauman said:

It actually promises universality of happiness. Everybody is free to choose, and, if everybody is let into the shop, then everybody is equally happy. That is one duplicity. Another duplicity is the limitation of its pretence that you resolve the issue of freedom completely once you offer a consumer freedom. So, it is a reduction of freedom to consumerism. That is the other duplicity. People are led into forgetting that there could also be other ways of self-assertion than simply buying a better outfit (Bauman 1992: 225).

Zygmunt Bauman in *Intimations of Postmodernity* (1992) exposes the pressing need for consumption to assert oneself socially and thereby frame an identity. While discussing so, he makes a note of how there remains a

possibility for free choices, as offered by the market society, to help in the realisation of personal liberation. He suggests that the consumer seeks his representation through his choice, as the freedom to choose becomes the new mode of stratifying society. The presupposition is that when one can exercise greater freedom of choice, one is assured greater privileges, which places him/her higher up the social ladder. Nevertheless, in his later writings like *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (1998), Bauman argues how consumer choice leads to real dependency on the market. Choices in the guise of freedom merely set up parameters of constraint. The choices are pre-determined by the expectations of the social group and economic deliberations of the society that the individual belongs to. Thereby, Bauman poses the dialectical relation between freedom and dependency, with one always trying to strike off the other.

Bauman's intention throughout his analysis of 'liquid' modernity was to show how individual decisions over a range of choices are limited by the very fact that he has no power in choosing, in the first place what all shall lie in the range of choices. In conveying this polemic, he introduced two concepts: "Agenda of Choice" and "Code of Choosing". (Bauman 1999: 72) Consumers are neither to decide what shall be the alternatives, but merely choose, nor are they free in their choice-making initiatives. For Bauman, man is always bound by the agenda of choice that is beyond his reach to decide upon. Market dynamics and qualifiers like the opinion of experts (authority of technology), substantiation by scientific enquiry and research polls determine the agenda to which the individual remains ever gullible. Man can become skilled in choosing goods and services that hopefully render gratification, reassuring that one is sensibly exercising free choice. However, skills acquired for making such informed choices are not free of influences. Codes for choice are established based upon one's challenges with self-identity, relation with social groups and, importantly, accurate cultural belongingness. Since every individual is solely responsible for his/her choices, which are free, decision-making is fraught with risk. To manage this anxiety emanating from consumer freedom, individual consumers develop a dependency on the market structure itself. They devote themselves to learning the nuances of the *codes* of choice and place trust in "everyone's choice"—an attitude to follow about wider choice pattern (authority of numbers). This brings forth how illusionary consumer freedom is. To exercise so-called free choice the consumer ends up rationalising his actions in tune with the market. For developing a sense of existential security man becomes acutely dependent. And this play between dependency and freedom never reveals itself. Rather the

celebration of freedom often negates the stresses and negotiations made in the background. In the following section, I shall draw reference to advertising techniques to uncover such illusions of freedom that consumerism seeks to foster.

### ***The “Ageless” Agenda of Choice***

The ageing population globally is the seat of incredible purchasing power and that is what the beauty and personal care industry hugely exploits. The population beyond 40 years is the best target of this market and the agenda of choice is wisely encumbered around the notion of “agelessness”. The cosmetic market manufactures collective concerns around ageing bodies and skin and generates public opinion about perpetuating youthfulness. And in doing so, the anti-ageing cosmetics market is expected to touch 60.26 billion USD by 2026 (as reported by Fortune Business Insights). This market very carefully fashions its agenda around age, by moving away from the term “anti-ageing” to “ageless beauty”. Whereby the age-embracing rhetoric in the former term is skirted. In August 2017, women’s magazine, Allure, dropped the term “anti-ageing” from all its publications to reinforce this battle against ageing. The Royal Society for Public Health also asserted the need to discard the term anti-ageing, as ageism is seen to have an impact on the public’s mental health. Such measures culturally help create a “code of choice” in favour of the market— a market that is interested in only offering alternatives (in terms of products and services) choices around agelessness as if the desire to be young is the only principle guiding consumer preferences and consequently buying anti-ageing products the path to individual freedom. Freedom disguises this acute form of dependency on market-generated choices rather than unravelling how choice turns consumers into victims of cultural hegemony.

The illusion is, however, safely protected from unmasking in a context in which the processes of agenda- and code-setting are more or less invisible and in which the products of such processes reach the individual in the form of an “offer one cannot refuse” rather than a commandment. Obedience to the code is disguised as self-propelled conduct; the poison of oppression has been squeezed out of the sting of unfreedom. (Bauman 1999: 78)

The anxiety generated by the codes of choice often pushes consumers to align with the mass choice as promoted through strategies of numbers, scientific intervention, research polls and expert opinions.

### *Advertisements of Anti-ageing products*



*Figure 1: photo of a cosmetic product*

Advertisements of cosmetic products of some renowned brands display the common strategies used in terms of product deliverables and product ingredients to create a uniform code of choice among consumers. Firstly, Cosmetic and personal care suppliers focus on the list of ingredients that make the ageless range of products, bringing some common scientific names of chemical compositions like Collagen, Hyaluronic acid, Folic acid, Botox and Retinol onto the list. With mention of such ingredients and claims of year-long research through images of women in the laboratory undergoing skin treatment, the market reassures the customer that she is being enabled to exercise her free choice wisely and rationally. Secondly, the claims made about what the product shall deliver are not at all unique. All the brands assure: wrinkle lift, firm skin, bright complexion, diminished dark patches, cell renewal etc.

Interestingly, no product seems to differ in their offering, limiting the alternatives of choice as per the agenda of the larger socio-economic goals.



*Figure 1: advertising poster of an anti-ageing cream*

Nevertheless, Consumers are pleased to make free choices with the belief that these products will help them remain 'ageless' — a newly revered self-identity, as propagated by social rituals and cultural injunctions. A frantic chase for social security pushes individuals into shopping as per the market's directives, but all the while nurtured to disbelieve so. Perhaps the promise of freedom is at times illusory and often a tool to make consumers even more unfree. These personal care products trying to promote a social archetype of female body and beauty, set principles that are non-subjugating and liberatory ideologically. However, in practice, they move out of into the field that

associates women with youthfulness and thereby their productive endurances. This field of “productive women” is not essentially produced and reproduced by her labour, rather she is created through her grooming practices and leisurely engagements of adorning herself. she falls in line with the images that the cultures of “productive women” put forth and those that the economic system sustains. Thus, caging her within the strategies of the market, while upholding notions of liberation in being “young”— the young who is an embodiment of energy, action, ambition, hope and therefore power. Ideas of empowerment are proposed in such a fashion that the deep-seated subjugation beneath it goes unnoticed.

### ***Conclusion***

Both Lefebvre and Bauman contest the idea of freedom because it merely leads to alienation, and illusion and generates further dependency. But both have also hinted at conscious non-passive leisurely endeavours that do not merely create illusions of free choice. Lefebvre has talked of the “cultivated leisure” that garners self-identity through honing skills and gaining knowledge that supports an actively liberated life. Bauman on the other hand has talked of the “new poor” that makes negotiations for free choice about resource/ income scarcity - the biggest constraint that helps redefine free agency. Thus, this paper comes as an initiative to unravel the areas popularly associated with freedom and show how those could be the very source of unfreedom. Upon discussing the nuances of the neoliberal society and its entwined practices of consumption, I have tried to highlight the dialectical relation between freedom and dependency. The desire to be free is universal and perpetual, but this very desire is fraught with tendencies of dependency. Therefore, metaphysics and science both together have tried to explore the desire to be free and consequently encountered conditions and notions of the unfree. This paper wants to unclog notions of ‘absolute freedom’ from the popular imagination, hinting at the everyday sources of unfreedom and associated negotiations.

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