

פנאי רציני: על תרבות וצריכה בימינו, הוצאת רסלינג.

Serious Leisure: Culture and Consumption in Modern Society, Resling Publisher

Tali Hayosh

Abstract

A culture of consumption impacts upon contemporary society. This culture is perceived as shaping social order (Campbell, 1987; Gabriel & Lang, 1998; Featherstone, 1991; Katz-Gerro, 2002; Miller, 1995; Ritzer, 1999; Slater, 1997), leading to the situation where we “find ourselves in a setting devoted to consumption (Ritzer, 1999, xi). The influence, which spreads over various realms of life, is expressed among other ways in the objectification of leisure, tourist, and entertainment practices, all of which have expanded to become commodities in these billion-dollar industries (Ben-Porat, 2002; Bourdieu, 1984; Butsch, 1990; Iluz, 2002a, 2002b; Rojek, 2005; Veblen, 1975).

One of the leisure phenomena that have developed in Israel in recent years and is the focus of this study, is the voluntary participation in classes, workshops, and various leisure courses¹ which operate in informal settings. These settings do not grant participants diplomas or accreditation, yet time, money, and effort all go into making them. These courses, which take place throughout Israel (as year-long series, or as one-time, short-term programs) cover a variety of subjects offered to participants through marketing and advertising in the media. Courses include Vipassana, aviation, bicycle riding, papier-mâché, yoga, carpentry, childbirth education, home arrangement, rose trimming, home repairs, and more.

¹ Henceforth we will primarily refer to “courses.”

The study is designed to examine whether the capitalist ethos and the organization of the consumerist world, seen as affecting one's consciousness, affect leisure consumption, or whether this voluntary (as it yields no material benefit such as professional or academic accreditation) consumption contains sovereign elements that attest to the fact that the consumerist world contains loci where authentic desires can be expressed, desires that could affect the meaning of an individual's life.

Stebbins (2001, 2007) distinguished between "casual leisure," which is mostly directed at enjoyment and release of tension, and "serious leisure." This study will focus on the latter. Serious leisure is characterized by perseverance; an investment of personal effort; the learning of unique skills, values, and norms; a deep identification of the participant with the occupation; identifying a professional path; the development of a unique world in which a rare ethos is materialized; and receiving long-lasting benefits from participating in the activity (e.g., self-fulfillment, self-enrichment, self-renewal, deep satisfaction, etc.). We assume that serious leisure has a high potential for expressing the sovereign side of consumption.

We shall examine the patterns of consuming leisure courses according to four types of theoretical approaches to consumerist culture: irrational manipulative consumption, autonomous consumption, consumption driving from power struggles and integrated approach.

One family of theories sees consumption as primarily irrational and manipulative. The most succinct example of this approach is the critical work of the Frankfurt School, who

view the consumer world as meant to advance economic interests, and as being reproduced by the culture industry, advertising, and the media. These are perceived as binding the individual to the manipulative needs of capitalists (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1937; Benjamin, 1983; Fromm, 1992). In this consumption, individuals are not free to express their authentic choices, desires, and will. Instead, the consumerist agenda is motivated by a will imprinted upon them by consumerist agenda. While these scholars maintain that the individual's position is difficult but not hopeless, Baudrillard's (1988, 2000, 2007) approach is much more pessimistic. According to him, current reality has turned everything into a value and a sign, so that the lack of that which is original and authentic does not allow us to return that which was not there to begin with. This approach emphasizes the oppressed place of individuals who are perceived to have no chance at changing, so that they are forever distanced from the ability to do those things that make them happy.

The opposite approach to the manipulative one portrays a rational-autonomous consumption culture, one which opens a world where a profusion of varied and endless products are offered. It is up to the individuals to choose any one of them, finding the one that could provide emotional aspects that encompass their inner aspirations, loves, and desires. The abundance and the free choice enable people to select from among the options those goods which they desire to fulfill their inner passions, passions that are not directed by "others." The scholars who espouse this theoretical view believe that goods produced by modern capitalism enable individuals – within their budget – to fulfill significant and inherent needs, to improve their well-being, and bring happiness. According to this approach individuals are sovereign and responsible for their consumerist choices, as these are aimed at granting their feelings importance (Campbell,

1987, 2005), creating social relationships (Douglas & Isherwood, 1978), enabling the existence of life that expresses their inner values (Schor, 1992, 1998), realizing their creative abilities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997, 2001), shaping their identity (Bauman, 1988), etc. In other words, the emphasis here is on enjoyment, satisfaction, fulfillment, realization and development of oneself, all of which are attained due to the development of consumerist capitalism.

Another approach to rational consumption focuses on power struggles and interests that create a hierarchical social structure. The approach deals with the relationship between the act of consumption and social stratification, and sees it as a factor that helps shape social order (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1991; Katz-Gerro, 2003). Veblen (1975) noted that social distinctions are created through increased use of goods and through accelerated participation in leisure activities, and that both point to the wealth of an individual. Veblen claims that the rich are accorded prestige and respect, based on the fact that they have time and money for conspicuous consumption, among other things, of leisure. Today, however, high-status positions are not necessarily related to leisure (Gershuny, 2000), as such positions require intense investment of time, which, in turn, gives individuals fulfillment and satisfaction, just as these are achieved through leisure. Bourdieu, too, examined the formation of taste in consumption, and claimed that lifestyle and taste create social distinctions, as members of the high social group consume a lifestyle that is distinct from that consumed by the lower class.

The plethora of theoretical approaches, research, and the variety of the approaches also combine, as seen, for example, in the work of Featherstone (1991) and Schor (1992, 1998). These researchers suggest that the contemporary act of consumption combines

manipulative consumption and sovereign consumption. Schor (1992, 1998) maintains that capitalist society creates an endless cycle of work and spend, and that individuals tend to consume more and more products aimed at satisfying needs that are imprinted upon them by “others” (media influence and the desire to imitate others). The need to finance these purchases forces individuals to increase their earnings, thus creating a cycle of work and spend which creates dissatisfaction and morbidity. Some, who want to leave this cycle, seek a break and go on vacation, but soon realize that these vacations do not ease life’s burden. Others, therefore, choose to change their lifestyle, a move defined by Schor as *downshifting*. Downshifting is an expression of decreased importance attributed to the consumerist values that hold work, money, and material goods in high esteem, and increasing the importance accorded to spiritual values such as fulfillment, enjoyment, family life, frugality, etc.

The research approach at the core of the present study is the qualitative paradigm, a hermeneutic approach which focuses on people’s interpretation of the world they live in and on the narrative that expresses explanations of intimate experiences, thoughts, and actions. Within this paradigm we selected the phenomenological approach, as it is perceived as an approach open to the individual’s subjective narrative and enables entry into a person’s realm of consciousness and to the core of the meaning of that person’s experiences, which are considered to be a significant and valid source of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1989). The assumption was that this sensitive approach would allow us to hear participants’ voices, understand their wishes, learn about the reality within which they live, and examine whether this reality satisfies them or whether it creates discomfort.

By its very nature, qualitative research does not aim at generalizing the findings and applying them to the overall population. Yet, in establishing the research sample, we wanted to examine the research question against a variety of courses. Our aim in doing so was to learn, insofar as possible, about patterns of leisure consumption typical of contemporary Israeli society. It was therefore determined that the sample would refer to courses and not to people.

A preliminary study revealed four courses that represent various types of leisure courses marketed in Israel. We observed yoga classes, selected as a representative of spiritual quest and physical activity; blacksmithing and ceramics were selected to represent creative leisure activities (arts and crafts); in addition, we observed a course for yacht skippers, selected because we expected to find participants of a high socioeconomic status. The courses were given in northern and central Israel, as well as in the coastal region, and Jerusalem. In addition to the observations, we conducted 63 in-depth interviews with 34 men and 29 women who participate in these four courses, all of middle or high socioeconomic status. These interviews were intended to extract the meaning attributed to the experience of participating in a course during leisure time, and interview questions referred to the reasons that motivated the person to choose the course, the negative and positive experiences during the course, and the reward from participating in it.

Enter all observations and interviews using Word. All 155 files were fed into the Atlas Ti program for qualitative data analysis, which provides tools for data management, and for creative, flexible, and methodical comparison and segmenting. However, Atlas Ti does

not build a theory, but represents relationships between categories and constructing higher-order classifications and categories.

Findings reveal three main reasons behind the choice of leisure pursuits: A high proportion of the participants expressed desires that included emotional considerations (Iluz 2002a, 2002b; Campbell, 1987; 2005), stemming from love of the subject matter, a desire for learning and self-enrichment, and social considerations (viewing the pursuit as a space to improve social relations with family and friends or to create new social relationships). A lower proportion expressed considerations that involve interests – choosing a course that is motivated by a hierarchical power struggle for social standing. These participants chose their courses based on considerations of status and fashionable trends. Other motives for leisure pursuits demonstrated instrumental desires that expressed three aspects. Some viewed leisure as a space that can contribute to tension reduction and to lightening the hardships of everyday life, all a result of obligations to work, family, and material values (attributing importance to money, pursuing achievements, competitiveness, etc.); a minority choice was based on a desire to create an object (vase, plate); finally, there were those who joined the leisure occupation aiming for a professional change (although such courses – like the present study – are not aimed or targeted to examine this aspect).

Unlike the motivation, a look at the rewards of leisure experiences reveals that they represent, primarily, the emotional aspect of consumption, as all participants reported that the courses give them a deep feeling of mental satisfaction and enjoyment, which add joy and pleasure to their lives. It was further found that participating in leisure courses contributed to gaining insights, self-confidence, and tools that led participants to

express willingness to change various aspects of their everyday life (personal, interpersonal, and cultural values), and actually make these changes. This insight is manifested in a process, which begins with the experience of distancing from everyday life. This distancing carries not only release of everyday stress and burdens, withdrawing into oneself and gaining significant insights about one's life and one's self. It seems that the leisure experience, which entails acquiring skills, tools, and rules which are quite different than those of daily life (heating the hot iron, navigating a yacht into the marina), give participants tools to distance the mundane, resulting in a new look at routine which compares the world of leisure and the insights derived from it and everyday life. This examination leads a significant number of participants to decide that they wish to make changes in their lives, and in many cases these changes were actually made.

A comparison between motivation and rewards reveals that while motivation has emotional and instrumental components, as well as serving an interest, rewards express the emotional and autonomous side, and include considerable benefits beyond initial expectations. In other words, it was revealed that leisure, embedded in the capitalist and consumerist rules, accords a space for personal empowerment, improved well being – as well as enabling the individual to protest against undesired elements of everyday life.

At times, the opposition which is expressed by leisure pursuit is built in from the very beginning, as part of the motivation for leisure pursuit is aimed at it. Other times, this opposition is retroactive, when participating in leisure activities allows time to reflect on everyday life. At the same time, this opposition does not express a subversive, extreme approach of storming the Bastille, as Fisk (1989) describes the looting of the capitalist street (with graffiti, dirt, noise, destruction, and theft) with the intent of destroying

conspicuous pleasures and the attempt to define meaning via consumerist imagery.

Additionally, leisure does not express an organized action by protest groups (e.g., punks, as per Hebdige, 1979). Instead, leisure expresses the practicing of a culture of resistance by individuals who are not organized, but who are leading a quiet, and deeply significant revolution. This revolution has the ability to change the manipulation and interest inherent in consumption, and significantly improve the lifestyle of individuals who prefer to determine their own fate.