

PHILOSOPHY OF LEISURE AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

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to,

the students of my first underground study
class of 1942-43,

who vivified the working class ambience
of Bombay and

opened up my mind to the fundamentals
of proletarian alienation

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Leisure is a peculiar and typical ruling class concept. Over historic time, whatever the ruling classes have considered to be time spent away from labour that yielded surplus value to them, has been defined as "leisure time"¹

Actually, from the point of view of an unalienated intellectual, what is leisure? For him, the entire day, or month, or year, is spent in a diversity of activities, all of which are useful and fulfilling to him. He may have been, at worst, forced to "waste sometime". But his definition of the "wasted hours or days" may be diametrically opposed to that of the bourgeoisie. He may consider five hours spent at a classical music concert, or 'X' hours spent at an art gallery, or whilst reading a book, to be entirely unwasted, rewarding and profitable. But the ruling classes may not always agree with him. They may think that the individual concerned is engaged in "leisure-time activities".

For instance, Aristotle (*Politics*, viii,2) wrote that enjoyment of music is a fit occupation for the leisure hours of a gentleman. Music should be a part of the educational curriculum even for children, provided they cease performance when they get older. For, "professional musicians we speak of as vulgar people, and indeed we think it not manly to perform music except when drunk or in fun". Aristotle also thought that the only purpose in acquiring knowledge about painting was to acquire expertise in pricing of paintings.² Seneca spoke in the same vein: "We offer prayers and sacrifices before the statues of the gods, but we despise the sculptors who make them." Plutarch added: "No generous youth, when contemplating the Zeus

1. Of course, exploitation also occurred during the so-called "leisure-time", which was devoted to the "services sector" of the economy. However, "surplus value" is an averaged figure for the service sector and the "received" opinion is that leisure is the residual time leftover after earning hours have been exhausted. In fact, "leisure" as a concept is so vague that it is incapable of precise objective definition.

2. See in Vinayak Purohit, "Arts of Transitional India; 20th century, 1988, Vol.1, pp.127-9 and 166-70, detailed discussion of Aristotle's aesthetics.

of Olympia or the Hera of Argos, will desire to become a Phidias or a Polyclitus".³ Such a strangely idiotic attitude was natural for the slave society. Manual labour was performed by the slaves. Most musicians, dancers, actors, artists and craftsmen were slaves. Slave - owners were the gentlemen, who would not deign to perform either strenuous manual labour or even intensive mental labour. For the ruling classes of the Graeco-Roman slave society, all the time was more or less leisure-time and was to be occupied by dilettantish speculation, aimless contemplation and gentle light-hearted amateurish dabbling in amusements.

Parenthetically, amateur, like leisure, is an ideologically loaded concept. In reality, there never were "amateurs". Those who called themselves so were either rich dilettantes or those who were anxious to pre-empt criticism. In sports, amateurs have almost ceased to be. There used to be 'Sunday' painters, but that tribe is also now more or less extinct. Generally, leisure-time was assumed to be devoted by rich gentlemen to, entertainment and relaxation. The poor were not supposed to possess much "leisure". Whatever they enjoyed as "leisure" was contemptible or criminal, or sub-human and vulgar.

The feudal attitude of the medieval period was not much different. Manual labour was naturally despicable. It was to be performed by *sudras*. The contempt for manual labour was so emphatically proclaimed that in feudal China, feet used to be bound so tightly that the gracious lady could only hobble about with great difficulty. In Burma, and in certain African feudal set-ups, other devices were used (neck-elongation, lip-enlargement, ear-lobe-lengthening, and so on) so that the person concerned was seen to be visibly incapable of much movement. Enormous deposits of fat on the body were often considered to be points of beauty.

In Indian feudal society, all the artists and craftsmen were almost invariably *sudras*, or in any case, they belonged to the backward and lower castes. The rich, the *umraos*, the elite deliberately wore such costumes,⁴ crowns, ornaments and footwears, that they were incapable of anything except stately, slow-motion, theatrical or dance movements.

In bourgeois society, especially those permeated with puritanical virtues, it was, of course, not proper to display the parasitism, which was *de rigueur* in feudal and slave societies. Industriousness was deemed to be a virtue, but at the same time necessary labour-time was sharply distinguished from leisure-time. A certain number of hours were sold for a specific wage or

3. Harold Osborne (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Art*, 1975, p. 32.

4. In fact, many dance movements originated out of adaptations to varying types of costumes, including masks. Marionettes in puppet plays are such "costumed characters".

salary and the remainder of the day outside the factory or office hours, during which the labourer was supposed to replenish his capabilities and to renew his energies, sufficiently, to return to work the next day, in roughly the same state in which he had originally begun the labour cycle. It was the same in urban or in rural situations. In rural areas, the labouring landless, and peasants in general, were expected to adjust to a slower annual cycle of expenditures of energy and renewal of psycho-physiological capacities during rest periods.

II

The implications of the concept of leisure are revolting and horrendous. First, the stigma of "wasted hours" is implied, though without replenishment of psycho-physiological capacity, no man can perform any useful or profitable labour at all. So that the so-called wasted hours are, strictly speaking, not wasted at all. They are actually indispensable.

Secondly, there is the suggestion that leisure is to be expended in the pursuit of secondary matters, e.g., in pursuit of so called "hobbies". The concept of hobby is a mysterious one in bourgeois society. What is hobby for one is hard work for another. I have read hundreds of biographical notices, particularly of sportspersons, and cine stars, where "reading" is described as a hobby or leisure time activity. But personally, I can only marvel at those who can read so aimlessly and thoughtlessly.

The service industry is sacrosanct, especially to the American way of life. But the service industry includes pimping and prostitution, night-clubbing, gambling, drinking and fornicating, and such other lumpen activities. The businessman who buys sexual favours may be consuming his leisure-time, but for the prostitute, it is unpleasant, sweating hard labour. It is certainly not leisure-time activity for her. Actually, she needs intermittent periods free from customers' demands, for her to be able to renew her sexual energies, even to the limited extent that they have been expended in her routine encounters with paying patrons.

Sports is supposed to be a leisure-time activity. But for the professional sportsperson it is full-time intense labour. Even in amateur meets, the officials are generally not at leisure. They are paid employees, paid to carry out boring but essential supervisory services.

Thirdly, all leisure-time activities are often placed on par with each other. One may drink, another may jog, a third may paint, a fourth may go to sleep,

a fifth may visit the corner video parlour, a sixth may read, and so on. All the activities, outside of labour pledged to bourgeois enterprise, of one sort or another, are supposed to be leisure-time activities for the individual involved. It is a slot of empty time. It is equally valid to fill it anyhow. Cheat, grab, intrigue, manoeuvre, anything you do within the time-slot, is leisure-time activity.

Actually, from the social point of view, the time-slot during which human psycho-physiological energies are replenished, or enhanced by education and training, is just as essential as the time-slot during which they are spent. In fact, if they are not spent, they will not require renewal and life will cease. Therefore, psycho-physiologically, the essential period of expenditure of labour time may be termed "leisure" and the so called leisure-time considered as essential. The obverse and the reverse are logically interchangeable. And it goes almost without saying that not all the so-called leisure-time activities are equal or equally rewarding.

Fourthly, leisure attributes fetishism to time. It is not only when man is relaxing that he is occupying a time-slot called leisure. He may or may not be at leisure, when he is ostensibly at leisure. He may or may not be working, during his official non-leisure working hours. Bourgeois subjectivity reigns supreme in the matter of theory and practice of leisure.

III

Leisure is a myth invented by those who do not labour and who command others' labour to yield surplus value to themselves. Leisure is an ideologically loaded concept. Leisure can be abolished and will inevitably wither away, as class society is overthrown, as man ceases to exploit man, as a nation ceases to oppress another nation, as expropriators are expropriated, as the state withers away, as the distinction between manual and mental labour evaporates, as all labour becomes joy, and as the fruits of all labour are shared equally by all men.

This may sound utopian. However, that is the only way. And utopias have the habit of becoming harsh realities, sometimes in less, but inevitably in a matter of centuries. For, we can think only what is possible to think. And what is possible, is realised sooner or later. Therefore, leisure shall cease to be, as necessary labour-time dissolves into general human living time.

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