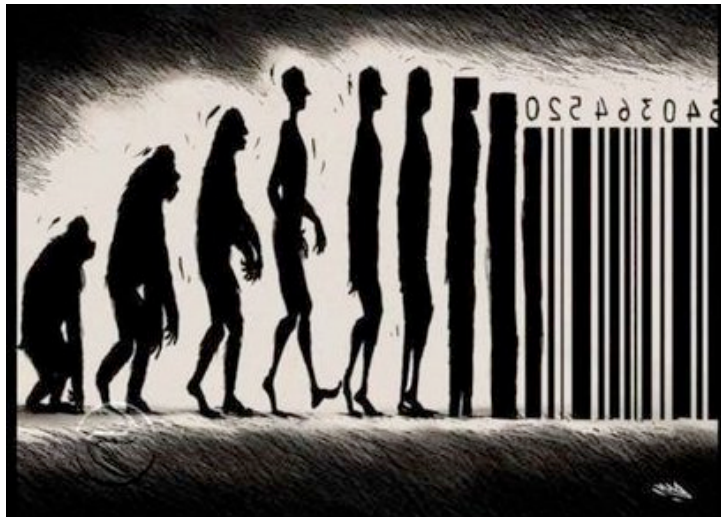


# The Illusion of Freedom in an Unfree Society

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“The most effective and enduring form of warfare against liberation is the implanting of material and intellectual needs that perpetuate obsolete forms of the struggle for existence.” (Marcuse, 2008 [1964]: 430)

Freedom is a concept boldly proclaimed on a regular basis in contemporary society, a transitive concept but that which is often presented as fixed, proclaimed across society from politicians and policy makers, to corporations and business correspondents, to the average individual. The citation of this freedom is fundamental to the economic structure and political ideologies which increasingly dominate our post-industrial society. This critical reflection intends to examine whether we have personal freedom, or in fact have been sold the illusion of it. By illusion I do not detest that as individuals, we do have personal freedom, this freedom is heavily confined, controlled within specific socio-economic-



political climates whereby personal freedom correlates with the social institutes and apparatus, confined to a range of consumer products/services, generated by corporations to sustain their production and profit. Profit produced by our need to exert personal freedom through consumption, which requires financial stability that we earn through work. So here, our proclaimed freedom is already

attached, economically and to a degree politically (through systems of taxation) to powerful conditions. Suddenly we appear far more controlled rather than free, as our freedom simultaneously ties us into a system of work, for financial exchange to consume, within

this existing society.

Post modernists argue an increasingly fragmented and decentred society, where social structures and institutions are argued to be fundamentally less significant to one's self-identity (Seidman and Wagner, 1993). The question then becomes, what are the dominant signifiers of the self? Consumerism, which dominates every sphere of our life, is argued by

some to have pervaded social structures and constraints to assert itself as the religion of the late twentieth century onwards (Miles, 2000). Baudrillard (in Ritzer, 1997) evaluated this idea that in post modernity, consumption was not widely linked to freedom of choice but rather an exertion of manipulation and control over objects and individuals, creating a “code of signification”. Baudrillard claimed these codes signified certain qualities or traits one would like to exert in themselves, identifying through consumption. Lyon (1999: 95-96) argues “clothing – or rather the Benetton and Levi labels – can simultaneously serve to distinguish social statuses, thus giving a sense of identity and social integration to the wearer”. What could this entail for a society whose signifiers of self, lie in material objects?

Consumption is the major signifier of contemporary society. There are damaging consequences of such concepts which will be examined later in this reflection.

When combined with this post-modern idea that social structures (which were previous strong signifiers of identity) are declining,

Lang and Gabriel (2006: 8) argue that the rise and prominence of consumerism is a moral doctrine, whereby “consumerism is the vehicle for freedom, power and happiness”. They elaborate further to claim consumerism has become a political ideology, used as a tool for self-expression. If consumerism is seen as a vehicle for personal freedom and happiness, what about those unable to excessively consume due to financial constraints, are they now refused personal freedom and happiness?



Whilst the concept of self-identification through consumption may appear creative, liberating and autonomous, we must explore just how much freedom and control we actually have over what we buy and at what consequences this breeds to other significant needs. Edward Bernays, hailed as the father of public relations and propaganda developed powerful techniques from psycho-analysis on how to influence and manipulate the minds of the masses, as individuals (Curtis, 2002). Bernays (2004) describes how in a system of post-Fordism, whereby a maintainable rhythm of sales is required for stability in production and consumption, public relations or propagandists must invade the private lives of the public to understand how, where and to what the public consumers interest is steering.

Bernays (2004: 85) argues the size and distributive power and influence of modern media and corporations is inescapable by the consumer, “business is seeking to inject itself into the lives and customs of millions of people”. This throws into question just how free we actually are, if corporations now have a vested interest in our private lives as well as public.

There seems to be a persistent argument that the process of consumption signals personal freedom, freedom to excessively consume products and services which procreates one’s identity, but who is setting these social profiles and consumer trends? To justify this freedom it’s argued that the phenomena on consumerism is a reflection of individual consumer demand, however in the information age, this may not be the case. Foster, McChesney and Wood (1998: 2) elaborate

further by claiming that “indeed, global media and communication are in some respects the advancing armies of global capitalism”. An all-encompassing information society transcends every frequency, where un-comprehensible amounts of data is gathered, stored and indeed monitored across the globe, from personal data, private data to most dominantly, consumer data. If consumption is the dominant doctrine of contemporary society, seen by the masses as signifiers of freedom to consume one’s status and identity, then wouldn’t it be in the vested interest of powerful corporations to obtain data on consumer trends? This is where, as Bernays claimed, business has the jurisdiction to inject itself into the private lives of individuals.

Lyon (2007) offers strong critiques of this form of generating information as it undermines and invades personal freedom and privacy. He states that “the potential consumer, like the potential offender, is singled out for attention by virtue of being identified as part of a group with certain characteristics. In one case, the goal is to attach suspicion, perhaps leading to a criminal charge. In the other, the goal is to seduce the individual into making purchases. There is an alarming relationship between data gathered for consumption trends and governance by such data, amplified through the proliferation of social stereotypes and profiles, originally developed to serve corporations and consumer trends, but increasingly subject to governmental control.

Schiller (in Webster, 2014: 270) examines this governance by data proclaiming that “the corporate voice is the loudest in the land. Immense amounts of new information are produced but only available mainly to those who can afford their costs”. Referring to the vast amount of consumer data collected by corporations to build social stereotypes and consumer profiles, one may struggle to identify where the impeachment of personal freedom is

located, Schiller (in Webster, 2014: 270) elaborates further: “Public communications, for the most part, is underwritten and directed by the corporate sector”. This unprecedented power must be questioned, the corporate world is driven by profit and forecasted maintenance of this profit, not necessarily what is in the public interest, if as Schiller argues, the corporate voice is the loudest and has control over public communications, what freedom do we really exert beyond corporate, strictly selective, consumer products? Whilst advocates for such a society see this form of freedom as satisfactory for the masses, others see it as an insult to the intellectual potentiality of society.

A strong critique of this organisation of society is Herbert Marcuse, who developed his ideas in the influential Frankfurt School of critical theory about a highly repressed, controlled society which he described as “One-Dimensional” (1964). Central to Marcuse’s thesis is the manufacturing of “false needs” (p: 4) whereby individuals seek to satisfy inner desires through processes of conformity and ultimately, consumption. “Such needs have a societal content and function which are determined by external powers over which the individual has no control. [...] products of a society whose dominant interest demands repression” (Marcuse, 1964: 5). The concept of false needs represents the idea of an illusion of freedom and the nature of which this freedom is administered to us, through commodification. According to this society, to be free we must buy it and exert it through meaningless consumer objects. Such incessant and intense perpetuation of false needs detrimentally renders true needs, (food, shelter, clothing, and social belonging) incomprehensible, in our society psychological happiness is falsely masked in the marketing and advertising of infinite consumption. Marcuse argued that “freedom must be defended against those who claimed it at

others expense" (Wiggershaus, 1995: 613). True freedom would surely not directly rely and exist on the enslavement of others, enslaved through the need to work, to earn money which provides spending power, spending devoted to needs that are obsolete from true human existence; consumption.

Returning to Baudrillard (in Kellner, 1994), who accuses this free society of being a spectacle society, in a "permanent opium war (...) which stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life (...) recovering human activity through social transformation" (47). Here one must understand the serious implications this form of freedom has on our society. In this paradigm, the code, style and colours of one's consumed outfit outweighs the powerful and urgent need for social change, such crucial and significant discussions are not being had in this society. Growing inequalities, the state of representative democracy or the deterioration of mental health, issues that should be of top priority for all in the society, unfortunately fall behind the superficiality of consumerism and the need to preserve this system. Baudrillard (in Kellner, 1994) is highly critical of the consumer society, and what he sees as the "commodification of previously non-colonised sectors of social life and extension of bureaucratic control to the realms of leisure and everyday life."

Contemporary society's concept of freedom, ultimately, resides in one's ability and desire to consume. Paradoxical in its expression and glorification of this freedom it simultaneously demands the enslavement, exploitation and mystification of true personal freedom. Consumption has infiltrated every corner of this society, as a code of signal, self-identity, public and private interests, false desires seeking happiness and as a deterrent from social improvement. Technological advancements that define our post-industrial

society as an information society are equally tools of social control as the corporate world is increasingly dominant in monopolising such information, as data, to build social stereotypes and consumer profiles whilst simultaneously infiltrating public communications and our private lives through surveillance. The goal; the proliferation and extension of economic growth driven by a consumer society, the cost; personal freedom is merely freedom to consume within structured frameworks developed through aggressive and often unconsented surveillance, the ultimate price; stagnation of social growth.

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Image1:

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