

THE UNFREE CONSUMERS: CONSUMPTION AND FREEDOM UNDER SUBALTERN CONDITIONS

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Several scholars have argued that in this period of late capitalism or postmodernity, consumption is increasingly defining human freedom. In this video, we question this conceptualization of human freedom with consumption as its prime facilitator. We contend that the relationship between consumption and freedom is only a tenuous one. This argument is based on a case study of a subaltern group of consumers. We observe that majority of consumers continue to live in abysmal material conditions. In a capitalist system governed by markets, *access to resources* remains critical for consumers *to exercise freedom in the domain of consumption*. For a vast majority of consumers, especially the subaltern groups, work continues to be defining for their state of unfreedom. We show that *lack of empowerment in the domain of production translates into lack of freedom in the sphere of consumption*. Most significantly, through this research we question the artificial nature of separation of the spheres of production and consumption suggested by some theorists. We argue that capitalism as an economic system is fundamentally concerned with its propagation and separation of spheres of production or consumption offers only a limited understanding of this systemic thrust. Finally, with the concept of positive freedom we contend that realization of this systemic thrust is essential for subaltern groups to emancipate themselves.

Our video provides an account of extremely tough living and working conditions of subaltern workers in a North Indian city of Kanpur. These workers lack legal protection, despite existing

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government laws, to ensure payment of minimum wages. This subaltern group puts in long working hours, far exceeding legal working limits, without any system of over-time payment. This group has no employment guarantees, which make them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Inefficient and corrupt government machinery fails to provide any protection against exploitation by their employers. Disempowered workers in the sphere of production find it impossible to protest and demand better wages or exercise greater control of their working conditions. Video exhibits that *lack of control in the domain of work directly translates into unfreedom for workers in the sphere of consumption*. Abysmally low levels of access in the areas of food, clothing, and shelter provide a powerful, albeit tragic, description of unfreedom of this subaltern group in the area of consumption. We further contend and demonstrate in our video that consumption itself can become a panopticon and freedom entails self-realization. Positive freedom also raises the issue of consciousness and understanding of the ideological forces at a systemic level.

Summarizing, the discourse of freedom inflected with elite interests, obfuscates the systemic dimensions of capitalism. For the subaltern groups described in the video, liberation from the systemic exploitation will only translate into freedom in the domain of consumption.