

THE POSSIBILITY OF A LEISURE SOCIETY: COMMODIFICATION OF LEISURE AMONG WELL-TO-DO OLD PEOPLE IN TURKEY*

Boş Zaman Toplumunun İmkanlılığı:

Türkiye’de Varlıklı Yaşlılarda Boş Zamanın Metalaşması

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Özet

Boş zaman toplumunun imkanlılığı konusu, üzerinde çokça tartışılan konulardan biridir. Bu türden bir imkanlılığı değerlendirebilmek için iki noktaya temas etmek gerekir. Bunlardan ilki, dünyadakine benzer bir biçimde Türkiye’de de 20. yüzyıldan günümüze değin süregiden yaşlı nüfusun toplam nüfus içerisindeki oranının ve de ömür uzunluluğunun yükselmesine işaret eden demografik değişimdir. İkincisi ise, moderniteyle ilişkilendirilen Sanayi Devriminden farklı olarak, postmodernitenin etkileriyle birlikte sadece malların değil hizmetlerin de birer gösterişçi tüketim nesnesi haline dönüştüğü gerçeğidir. Bu makalede boş zaman toplumunun imkanlılığı, postmoderniteyle ilişkilendirilebilecek olan iki eğilimle açıklanmaya çalışılacaktır, bunlardan biri yaşlı nüfus oranı ve ömür uzunluluğunun giderek yükselmesi diğeri ise tüketim toplumunda gösterişçi tüketimin öneminin artmasıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Boş zaman toplumu, Boş zamanın metalaşması, Yaşlılar, Demografik yaşlanma

Abstract

The possibility of leisure society is an issue which is commonly debated over. Two important points should be indicated here to assess this possibility. Firstly, the demographical trend in Turkey, as it is in the world, shows that both percentage of old age population and longevity have increased especially since the early 20th century. Secondly, just after Industrial Revolution, which is associated with modernism, goods became agents of conspicuous consumption, whereas with postmodernism, not only goods but also services began to be consumed. In this paper, it is argued that leisure society is turning into a reality by contribution of two trends which refer to the increased share of old people and longevity and the increased importance of conspicuous consumption in the consumer society both of which are mostly associated with the effects of postmodernism.

Keywords: Leisure society, Commodification of leisure, Old people, Demographical ageing

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Introduction

The question whether the leisure society is somehow possible is generally handled in terms of shrinking working hours. However it is blurred whether working hours will occupy shorter time of people's daily lives in the future or not. Especially in developing countries like Turkey, the anticipation is more likely to be failed due to the fact that traditional working patterns are long-established. On the other hand it can be clearly seen that in the contemporary Turkish society people increasingly live longer and consume more, like those in many parts of the world. In other words, the coming of a leisure society will eventuate not because working hours will be reduced, but it will primarily eventuate because people will be willing to consume leisure services in order to spend long years after retirement in an efficient way. Until retirement, people hardly have time to participate in leisure activities. Especially in the second and third quarters of the life course, Turkish people are so much concerning with their working and family lives. Moreover, people who live longer years have already been retired at relatively early ages. Especially in Turkey, there are many people who have retired at their late 40's. If it is taken into consideration that life expectancy at birth is 70 in Turkey, at average, we would come into conclusion that people have a potential to live their last 20 years out of a paid labor. This means that they have the longest leisure time in their retirement period when compared with any human life course. But the important point here is that, whether they prefer to pursue any leisure practice actively or not, depends on to what extent they get involved in consumer culture. Because many people who retire at an early age economically need to pursue a second career. Or even people who do not work after retirement can not afford consuming leisure pursuits. Thus, the subjects of this paper are the people who do not take part in any kind of paid labor plus who can afford consuming the commodity "leisure".

In postmodern era, the image of old people is increasingly having the attribution of being "active". Among few social theories of aging, Activity Theory assumes that old people have higher life-satisfaction when they get involved in social life including social activities. It is imposed upon old people that they would better maintain their active image through consuming those leisure services. As a result, the years from retirement to death are introduced as "golden ages" and some kinds of old people-oriented activities are organized in order to attract them; that third age tourism -tourism which is carried out by people at 50 and over- has gained importance for the last decades proves this claim.

Indeed, especially in urban areas of Turkey this kind of category is arising. Old people from upper-middle classes are increasingly getting involved in leisure activities such as traveling, joining sports clubs, visiting the places which such as shopping malls, amusing parks, entertainment facilities such as

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restaurants, bars, etc. which Ritzer (2000) calls as “cathedrals of consumption”.

In addition, the socio-economic category of middle class with an average income can be added into the pool of old consumers. In this paper, it is intended to indicate by the category of well-to-do people is the people from both upper and middle classes. The reason can be explained such that people from middle class have a certain level of income, yet their children have already got married or been living by their own; hence disposable income is increasing in old ages. However whether old people who have relatively high disposable income are willing to spend their money in leisure activities depends on how high a cultural capital they have. In addition, this group is assumed as they have cultural capital at least, and cultural capital causes old people to spend their disposable income in leisure activities. In this regard, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) is the one who excellently demonstrates how class and consumption patterns are interrelated. According to Bourdieu taste is determined by classes; and classes in every strata have their own distinct tastes.

This is partly the case in Turkey. It is partly because classes are too much intertwined in Turkey and it is hard to make a distinction between classes depending on their practices. Thus, Bourdieuan perspective in terms of making distinctions based on leisure activities which they participate among classes is not fully applicable to Turkish society. That is why it is abstained from using the concept “class” in such a specific Turkish case. Instead it is preferred to handle the subject of this study in more general terms which is “well-to-do old people” as a “category” whose life styles determine their position in the socioeconomic scale.

Not only longevity, but also the percentage of old people within total population increases. This trend leads the market to pay more attention to old people, because they become a distinct category in society. Therefore increase in the percentage of old people has an indirect effect in commodification of leisure among old people. The perception of category of old people as a huge group resulted in seeing them as people who have a potential to be good-tempered consumers as they are appropriately oriented towards consumption. Leisure market, like others, apprehends that old people can not be ignored, and it is frequently claimed that the companies which realize this fact will gain in the long-run.

Today the world is defined in terms of some trends which are commonly seen in almost all parts of the world. Turkey, as a developing country, is also following these current trends. Two of these trends are of great importance in shaping the future of the concept leisure. One of them is the rise of consumer culture which can be associated with postmodernity, and the

other one is the increase in longevity and, as a result, higher percentage of old people in total population.

1. Rise of Consumer Culture and the Commodification of Leisure

In modern times, everything to be consumed used to be the means through which people meet their needs. However in postmodernity, consumption itself has become a means to be consumed. In postmodern society the object consumed becomes a sign, and the individual becomes a sign-gatherer. "Consumption, then, must be understood as the consumption of use-values, a material utility, but primarily as the consumption of signs" (Featherstone,2007:83). For Baudrillard (2004) consumer society is a society for learning of consumption and getting used to consume socially. In a similar view, Zygmunt Bauman (2006) analyzes the individual as an actor in consumer society. According to him, the contemporary society forms its members in a way it is ordered by the mission of playing consumer's role. The norm which our society imposes upon its members is the ability and willingness to play this role. Moreover consumers are consist of all people regardless of their age, years of childhood, adolescence, retirement and elderhood are all expected to be parts of a human life course in which people consume actively (Ritzer,2000).

Likewise, leisure begins to be taken as a commodity to be consumed in postmodern consumer society. However, in pre-modern times, leisure used to be a possession of upper classes (Aytaç,2006; Kelly,1982, Torkildsen, 1992; Urry,1991). Leisure "has been identified with elitism and class privilege since the earliest civilizations" (Torkildsen,1992:15); however in contemporary society leisure is primarily a right achieved by all social classes.

"The English word 'leisure' appears to be derived from the Latin licere, 'to be permitted' or 'to be free'" (Torkildsen,1992:25). Some writers argue that leisure refers to non-work time, and some argue that it is a time which is out of any kind of obligations including work. No matter which claim is taken into consideration, leisure is possessed by old people, who have already been retired and have few chores to do in rest of their lives.

Upper class has a privilege to consume without producing, which is directly indicating the concept leisure. For Bauman (2006), belongings of the others are contempered through exhibiting adventures of well-to-do people. The wealthy turns into a universal object of worship; not only the wealthy himself, but also the activities he performs begin to be worshipped in postmodern age. Thus lower classes imitate the activities, like all other kinds of belongings, of upper classes; these activities become reference points for the whole consumer society.

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Baudrillard (2004) analyzes the leisure in sign form; to him leisure is a sign because of two reasons. Firstly, having leisure explicitly proves that someone has not to work for a wage. Since it is a non-production time, it has a symbolic value in itself. Secondly, leisure is a means to exhibit the activities which require both cultural capital and discretionary income. Therefore Baudrillard provides a congruent evidence; leisure of well-to-do old people proves this statements. Firstly, they do not need to work for a second career unlike old people who need to rework after retirement. On the contrary, “for low-income elderly, leisure may be a meaningless concept, if they had to continue working or lack the resources for satisfying recreational time” (Hooyman,Kiyak,1991:404). Secondly, because they have sufficient cultural capitals, they have a strong tendency to get involved in conspicuous leisure services.

Leisure turned into a commodity which is an object to be sold in the market. Particularly well-to-do old people constitute a group of people who have both time and money for consuming leisure activities, such as having hobbies (painting, fishing, gardening etc.), joining sports clubs, having health and fitness memberships, visiting museums, going to theaters, concerts, cinemas, going out for eating, owning fields for gardening and viniculturing, having pay-TV services, magazines, books, and traveling.

It is the creation of industrialization that the concept leisure is used for mass of people. In pre-industrial age, the boundary between work and leisure was blurred and transitional. The fact that the masses got involved in industrialization process, paradoxically resulted in the widespread experience of leisure, which is not limited to upper classes. It is the innovation of industrialization and postmodernity that leisure is perceived as an object to be consumed and commodified. “Leisure as shaped by a flow of commodities became valued not simply for its ability to satisfy leisure needs (for its use), but also for its appearance, such that the collection of images and appearances advances in leisure activities became an end in itself” (Goldman,1983:95). Leisure has also taken its own share from the webs of consumption which wraps every sphere of human life. The meaning attributed to leisure is far beyond its functional value and “the ‘good life’ may be defined as one in which such goods are possessed and used” (Kelly,1991:9)

2. Increase in the Share of Old Age Population

Currently more people live longer. The number of people who survive until their old ages are much more in number when compared with the past. This is partly due to the fall in mortality rates at all ages. By all means, we can not overlook the improvements in health facilities. On the other hand, percentage of old people is increasingly getting bigger, not only because they survive until old ages thanks to improvement in health and care services, but

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because the fertility rates declined. The reasons why fertility trend declined in Turkey can be handled in terms of “urbanization, migration movements, increased educational level, multiplying and differentiating life styles” (Tufan, 2003:42), each of which is worth discussing so long.

It is not only today but also in the past, individuals used to be able to reach at advanced ages, however these individual cases were regarded as exceptional cases. People who have the chance to survive until their old ages used to be so few that it was considered that those people who reached at advanced ages were able to do so because of an hidden cause. In other words, this exceptional cases used to be attributed to a supreme power’s will. Therefore in the past, elderly were considered as people who are endowed some miraculous abilities. As people more in number get older, being old is stripped off its miraculous characteristic and become ordinary and begin to be perceived as accessible. Today, we witness that a large number of people have the chance to become an old person, and those old people who are many in number know that they have many years left to live effectively.

In the second half of the 20th century, especially developed world experienced a rapid demographic change. In the meantime, Turkey had a similar trend, and the share of the population at the age of 60 and older which was 5,8% in 1950, is 8,2% today. In the world, it is foreseen that a more rapid growth of old age population would be experienced in the 21st century than it is experienced in the previous century. According to McCracken&Phillips (2005), it is anticipated that the old age population, which is growing by 2% annually, would be much more in number by a growth rate of 2,5% annually by the years 2025-2030. “In 1990, there were 325 million people age 65 and older. By 2025 that number will more than double to 822 million (Preston and Martin,1994 as cited by Quadagano,1999:48)

Today, the claim that the world is graying dominates the social discourse about elderly. It is projected that the developing countries, including Turkey, would experience demographic ageing more rapidly than the developed world did (UN,2007). Thus today in Turkey, 6% of total population is composed of people at 60 and over. This means that the rest 94% of Turkey population is getting older. What should be considered is Turkey has a relatively young population now; but in the short-term this huge young population will constitute an old age population.

3. When the Two Trends Which Render Leisure Real are Consolidated

In the previous sections it is argued that two trends which are considered as outcomes of postmodernist effects render the concept leisure more and more real. In order to recall; these trends were an aggravated

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consumer culture and an ageing world. In this section, the moment where these two trends are intersected is discussed.

“Consumer culture publicity suggests that we all have a room for self-improvement and self-expression whatever our are” (Featherstone,2007:84). As a matter of fact, regardless of our ages we all are encompassed by consumptivity patterns in all spheres of our lives.

It is exactly true for Turkey; and these aged consumers of the near future will be healthier and will have different tastes than those of today. When it is projected to future in Turkey, it is asserted in this paper that well-to-do old people living in Turkey’s prosperous urban areas are increasingly having awareness that they can experience their retirement period actively. More and more people are pursuing leisure activities which are commodified. This category of people is characterized as “new elderly” and portrayed by Tufan (2003:24-28) in a noticeable way;

“The most distinctive characteristic of new elderly is that they have a high education level, had worked in upper positions and have an opportunity to obtain and raise assets. They turned into a special group of elderly with ‘new life styles’ who have an opportunity to withdraw from working life in relatively earlier stage, have an income more than average. The new elderly who are distinctive because of their active life styles participate in travels, educational facilities and cultural activities. Among the goals of new elderly, who have some features such as self-realization, creativity, personal development, being open to newnesses, are life taste (including consumption), mobility (they like traveling), using variety means of communication, social relationships, cultural activities”.

Old leisure consumers is a category which is increasingly attributed more importance because of the key forces that influence leisure market; these key forces are “a continuing rise in affluence, a growing desire for experiences over products, willingness to spend beyond income means, a shift away from ‘youth culture’ as the population ages” (Cox,2002:187).

Despite of their relatively shorter life expectancies, old people in Turkey with longer retirement periods can be handled as an efficient leisure consumer category. “The youngest retirees in Europe live in our country. The greatest contradiction our people has is that they are the old people who die at their earliest within Europe, but at the same time who have the longest elderhood period” (Tufan,2003:48).

It is clear that in the following years investments in leisure sector targeting well-to-do old people especially residing in urban areas will increase. Drawing on Veblen, it can be suggested that today’s well-to-do old people make up Veblen’s leisure class in postmodern terms. According to him leisure is consumption of non-productive time and conspicuous leisure is a method of

showing one's prosperity (Veblen,[1899]2005). Similarly well-to-do old people in Turkey who are in a complete withdrawal from paid labor at relatively early ages, get involved in conspicuous consumption pattern, however without producing.

According to Ritzer (2000), increasingly more people have time to spend their income; for instance, many people retire at their early ages while their expectations from life are still increasing. For him due to the rapidly developing economy, increasing number of retirees are becoming active consumers.

Leisure is an excellent area in which people, including elderly, can find opportunities to express themselves. The leisure sector presents many alternatives and package programs to old consumers especially who have discretionary time and disposable income. "Higher income individuals generally prefer activities that emphasize creativity and personal development, such as work with clubs and organizations, participation in cultural events, traveling and entertaining guests at private parties" (Kelly et al.,1986 as cited by Hooyman,Kiyak,1991: 405).

Conclusion

In a postmodern world, people tend to live longer and those people living longer tend to consume more. This is the basic assumption of this paper in which possibility of a leisure society is discussed in the frame of these trends. They have a feature in common; both of them occur out of people's rational choices, in other words they are external to the people in concern.

Firstly, consumption patterns are somehow pre-determined and structural, people are much more wrapped by consumer culture today than the world three decades ago. Leisure pursuits as conspicuous consumption commodities also fall into this category. "Leisure is not left on its own being since modern times, it no more exists by its own innate form" (Aytaç,2006:84). Leisure has a deep connotation about consuming some high pleasure elements which is directly associated with cultural capital. It has always been pre-arranged for us, and with the domination of consumer culture, leisure pursuits have immediately been prepared for selling in the market.

In terms of consumption of leisure by old people, it is not surprising to see a well-to-do old people who prefers to consume leisure pursuits instead of purchasing goods. In fact "elderly market is a market of 'experience' rather than 'products'" (Marangoz,2006:82). Thus elderly market is increasingly paying more attention to services provided for old people. In a similar view, Bone (1991:19) argues that old people "tend to use products and services that enrich their lives, enable them enjoy the beauty of their world". As a result, in the world and in Turkey, more educated, healthier old people who pursue

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leisure activities are getting bigger. Indisputably this can not be explained through free will of those people. The effect of economical view which points out the artificial creation of "active image" of old people by leisure market should not be ignored. "Leisure shifted from being under individual's own control to being a set of activities which as if they are 'need' and 'must'" (Aytaç,2004:117).

Secondly, people live longer and old people constitute a greater share within the population of all age groups. Increase of old age population both in absolute and relative numbers is literally a consequence of demographic change which occurs at macro levels. Except for migration, the other determinants -fertility and mortality-which affect demographic change have nothing to do with people's own wills. Besides, migration does not put an effect upon demographic ageing, unless the study's focus point is ageing patterns in a local area. The effects upon fertility and mortality rates are structural and can be improved or worsen only by macro interventions.

Although these trends occur out of people's agency, they have a direct effect upon people's lives. They provide answers for a wide range of issues from how long to live, to how to live and to what to consume. From a structural point of view, these are all overdetermined and people just live within the frame given. Likewise old people who are retired and have many years left to live actively are provided many alternatives by the leisure sector. "Over the long-term ageing of the population is the clearest and most predictable trend that will influence the shape of leisure demand" (Cox,2002:189).

Consequently, when the two general trends -rise of consumerism and the increase in the longevity- are consolidated, it becomes obvious that well to-do old people increasingly tend to consume leisure services, which render the leisure society more possible. These trends which are generally seen throughout the world are also followed by Turkish society which is experiencing postmodernist effects both on demographical ageing and consumption patterns.

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