



# Work, leisure and the social order: insights from the pandemic

Yaniv Belhassen

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NOTE



## Work, leisure and the social order: insights from the pandemic

Yaniv Belhassen

Department of Hotel & Tourism Management, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

### ABSTRACT

Regardless of one's perspective on the relationship between paid work, leisure, and social order, it is widely accepted that paid work is a central activity in light of which one may examine this linkage. There are rare cases in which the freedom associated with leisure choices explicitly challenges the existing social order and the values on which it is founded. Types of leisure that are not in harmony with the core values of society have been discussed under the conceptual category of deviant leisure. Inspired by previous work on leisure and the social order, as well as by some observations on Israeli society during the pandemic, this paper offers some reflections on the possible theoretical contribution of the concept of deviant leisure to the study of the interconnection between work, leisure, and the social order.

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The concept of leisure is associated mostly with the cultivation of the body and the mind based on relatively free choice, in contrast to work and errands. Therefore, many definitions of leisure as a way of measuring time, as an activity, or as a state of mind are derived largely from a perception of work as a central activity, in light of which leisure should be understood. This is even more evident in a consumer society, in which the social order relies partly on the ability to spend money and engage in leisure activities. Consequently, leisure activities can be considered a promising means of preserving the primacy of work over leisure. This approach is reflected in classical studies of leisure, such as that of Veblen (1899) on the 'leisure class,' which distinguishes itself through ostentatious leisure pursuits, or in Stebbins' research on serious and casual leisure (1992). At the same time, there are rare cases in which the freedom associated with leisure challenges the existing social order and the values on which it is founded. In an insightful chapter dedicated to the role of deviant leisure in society, Rojek (1999) concluded that deviant behaviours in society usually emerge in leisure time, and that deviant leisure plays an important role in socio-political change. This body of literature that integrates the concepts of leisure and social order has yielded useful concepts, such as 'civil leisure' (Mair 2002), 'pleasure politics' (Sharpe 2008), 'pleasure citizen' (Riley, Morey, and Griffin 2010), and 'leisure as resistance' (Gilchrist and Ravenscroft 2013), which seek to capture the political aspect of leisure, practically and epistemologically. Viewing some leisure practices as forms of resistance recognizes their potential to serve as a critical arena in society to express discontent, act out, and empower individuals

(Mair 2002; Shaw 2001; Wheaton 2007). Inspired by participant observations in Israeli society during the pandemic, the current essay follows this direction by highlighting the usefulness of the deviant leisure perspective in studying the connection between paid work, leisure, and the social order. I ask: In what ways can the study of deviant leisure inform our understanding of the relationship between paid work, leisure, and the social order? I assume that the lockdowns and curfews imposed by the government during the COVID-19 pandemic created a unique social environment for investigating this question.

Much of the scholarship about deviant leisure has relied on labelling analysis which holds that research on the labelling of an individual as deviant should focus on analyzing the social context in which that individual is labelled as deviant, and less on the activity itself (Becker 1973). In this context, deviant leisure is usually examined as an outcome of the unique characteristics of places, such as nude beaches and men's clubs, in which the norms that govern mainstream society are loosened (Clarke and Critcher 1985; Clinard and Meier 1998). Among the concepts associated with the study of deviant leisure are the notions of liminality and marginality of places (Shields 1992; Swain, Spracklen, and Lashua 2018; Weinberg 1981). Goffman's (1967) study on unrestrained behaviours in urban commercial entertainment businesses, such as dancing clubs and casinos, also echoes this spatial perspective on deviant behaviour and leisure-related settings. As in the study of social deviance in the social sciences, two analytical approaches can be distinguished in the study of deviant leisure. The first is the situational approach, according to which deviation from the norm is possible because of the unique characteristics of leisure as a framework that allows engaging in unusual activities, such as spontaneous graffiti spraying, impulsive violent behaviours, or sporadic use of consciousness-altering substances, which is not part of one's lifestyle. By contrast, the subculture approach focuses on leisure activities associated with groups or communities on the fringes of society. Examples of this are communities that turned the use of consciousness-altering substances originating in native South-American culture, such as mescaline or ayahuasca, into a central component of their lifestyle (Labate, Cavnar, and Gearin 2017), parkour communities (Bavinton 2007), or communities that adopted a non-normative sexual lifestyle, such as bondage, discipline, dominance and submission (BDSM) (Franklin-Reible 2006) or consensual non-monogamy (Sheff 2020). In these cases, the deviant activity creates a sense of affinity among participants by drawing attention to those values that constitute the collective identity of the deviant group.

Arguably, the study of deviant behaviour tends to focus on negative aspects of non-conformity, such as addictive behaviours, social marginalization of individuals and groups, and so on. However, few scholars have examined positive deviance in the workplace and in leisure settings. In a conceptual paper on positive deviance in organizations, Spreitzer and Sonenshein define positive deviance as 'intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways' (2004, 828). In the study of athletes, this idea is discussed in relation to the over-adherence, or supraconformity, to social norms that can be found among bodybuilders or long-distance runners (Ewald and Jiobu 1985). Frequently, positive deviant behaviours in sport are encouraged through values such as sacrificing and subjugating and in common phrases used by coaches and the media, such as 'pay the price', 'play with pain,' and 'dedication to the game' (e.g. Blackshaw and Crabbe 2004; Hughes and Coakley 1991). Despite the usage of the

word 'positive' to describe this abnormal behaviour, the ramifications of such unquestioned commitment to this value system (i.e. sport ethic) can be negative for the health of professional or amateur athletes.

An additional concept that is relevant to the arguments this essay seeks to advance is that of an 'alternative leisure class,' a term coined by Rojek (1999), which refers to artists, nomads, and members of communes or other separatist groups, who express their dissatisfaction with the existing conditions of the society in which they live. Rojek (1999) suggested that their leisure embodies their refusal to accept mainstream values, such as the perception of work and career as a central aspect of life, the heteronormative family as the desirable lifestyle, and consumerism as a symbolic language of individual and collective meaning-making. The unique lifestyle of the alternative leisure class expresses its opposition to the oppression and injustice inherent in the society in which its members live, which is somewhat similar to more recent findings on activists who share some other traits with this class (e.g. Mair 2002; Riley, Morey, and Griffin 2010; Sharpe 2008). From a functionalist perspective on the study of deviance, this group can be considered a stabilizing social factor precisely because of its anomalies, as it marks the normative boundaries of the mainstream. From a poststructuralist view, based on the Foucauldian notion of the fluid and fragmented nature of social power, members of this class, regardless of their marginal position in society, exercise their power through leisure activities and may affect the social order (Rose 2000; Shogun 2002).

My first insight is that crises, such as the one caused by the pandemic, which for many has upset the balance between leisure and paid work, are likely to turn the unusual lifestyles of members of the alternative leisure class into an inspiration. According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, the unemployment rate in February 2021 stood at about 14%, compared to only 3.9% before the pandemic, in February 2020 (CBS 2021). Furthermore, the number of employed people working from home also increased dramatically. Arguably, such changes in the lives of so many people may cause individuals in the mainstream to observe the alternative lifestyles of members of the alternative leisure class and the criticism of the norms they express from a position of eagerness, while seeking the kind of social change that economic crises spur in mainstream values and culture. Recall the past influence and involvement of members of the alternative leisure class in protests as expressed, for example, in the art that grew out of the Occupy Wall Street movement (Gilchrist and Ravenscroft 2013), in the role of punk music in protests in Russia (Aizman 2019) and, more broadly, in the increasing role of creativity and the aesthetics in social protests and struggles (Barnard 2004; McGarry et al. 2019).

My second insight is that the abrupt changes in the social order affect our leisure preferences, making us more prone to deviant leisure practices. This insight is inspired by growing empirical findings about the rise of deviant leisure activities during the pandemic (see also, Cherkasova 2020). For example, the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA 2020) has recently reported a shortage of cannabis at the retail level in some countries during lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Pornhub, a popular pornography website, has reported a sharp increase in pornography use in several countries (Mestre-Bach, Blycker, and Potenza 2020). It is reasonable to argue that it is the change in the balance between work and leisure that has affected leisure behaviours in these cases. This somehow contradicts the implicit premise of the concepts

of 'civil leisure' and 'leisure as a resistance,' according to which individuals ask to change the social order through their engagement in what can be seen as deviant leisure practices. Arguably, the difference between these two epitomes of deviant behaviours during the pandemic—addiction and activism—can be understood in light of psych-sociological factors, such as participants' locus of control, participants' socialization before and during the crisis, and the various constraints that affect our leisure preferences (Stebbins 2005).

My third insight that has emerged from my observation of changes resulting from the current pandemic derives from observations on the role of illegal parties and concert held in Israel during the various lockdowns, curfews, and restrictions on gatherings imposed by the authorities. These illegal pockets of celebration suggest a new reading of partygoing as a form of protest. Similarly to 'civil leisure' (Mair 2002), 'pleasure politics' (Sharpe 2008), 'pleasure citizen' (Riley, Morey, and Griffin 2010), and 'leisure as resistance' (Gilchrist and Ravenscroft 2013), these events can be regarded as an integral part of a political act. Yet, as opposed to these examples, the political action was only a secondary goal. In other words, attending these parties turned people into deviants and offenders by definition, but did not make them activists in the traditional sense of the word. From my observations and informal interviews with some of the participants in such parties, I came to the conclusion that some of them can be labelled as 'reluctant deviants' or 'reluctant activists.' Paradoxically, these parties were often framed as protests because the gathering restrictions of the government during the pandemic allowed protests. This has led the government to pass a law that bans mass protest, which was viewed by the 'real' activists as exploitation of the health crisis to suppress these demonstrations and to criminalizes the weekly rallies against Netanyahu (Holmes and Kierszenbaum 2020). Therefore, deviant leisure is an important social apparatus for those who seek to act out their discomfort with the social order, regardless of the motivation of a person to attend such events—an illegal party that merely by taking place became a protest, or a weekly protest against alleged corruption by Prime Minister Netanyahu, which occasionally may have the quality of a street party (Figure 1).

My fourth insight concerns the labelling approach to the study of deviance, according to which social deviation is the outcome of a social process. The vaccination campaign conducted by the Israeli government can be also understood based on this approach. In short, to encourage the population to vaccinate, the Ministry of Health has created a Green Passport that is given eight days after the second shot. The Green Passport grants access to leisure activities, such as gyms, hotels, swimming pools, concerts, and indoor dining in restaurants, cafés, and bars. Notwithstanding the epidemiological reasoning behind this administrative practice, one must acknowledge the implicit social consequences of labelling those who refuse to vaccinate as deviating from the normative suggestion to be vaccinated (see for example, Holmes 2021). In practice, the unvaccinated are singled out by the absence of the label. Noteworthy in this context is the coincidental way government authorities exercise their power through leisure spaces and activities.

In conclusion, the conceptualization of leisure as a potentially contested political domain of social life is not new. Viewing some leisure practices as forms of resistance to the social order recognizes their potential to voice discontent, act out, and empower



**Figure 1.** A staged photo during one of the weekly anti-corruption rallies held in Jerusalem during 2020-2021. The photo is inspired by the painting “Liberty Leading the People” by Eugène Delacroix commemorating the July Revolution of 1830. The photo reproduced with permission from the photographer Sharon Avraham ([www.sharonavraham.com](http://www.sharonavraham.com)).

individuals (Mair 2002; Shaw 2001; Wheaton 2007). Deviant leisure is a valuable concept that can help us better understand the connection between paid work, leisure, and the social order. Leisure generally serves as a mechanism that helps maintain the existing social order by its very construction as an activity whose meaning is derived from work and labour. Economic crises, which often disrupt the leisure/work balance, allow groups identified with the alternative leisure class to be a source of inspiration for alternative lifestyles, which they embody. The non-normative lifestyle shared by the diverse communities of the alternative leisure class often places some of these groups at the forefront of various social struggles. In addition, the concept of ‘positive deviance’ can be used to interpret the manner in which some civil-leisure activities that may have been viewed as ‘non-confirmative’ prior to the pandemic were transferred into acceptable activities due to social interruption that occurred during lockdowns. The empirical data regarding deviant leisure activities, such as substance and porn use, indicate that the change in the balance between work and leisure may lead to an increase in deviant leisure activities occurring in the home. Rare cases in which leisure practice becomes a platform for social protest and cultural transformation, such as the parties held during the lockdowns, illustrate the potential of deviant leisure activities to serve as a playful mechanism for challenging the existing social order.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Yaniv Belhasen** received his PhD from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2007, after which he joined Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. His research interests include critical theory and the sociology of leisure and tourism.

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