

“Not only is there no contradiction between dependence and liberation; there is no other way to pursue liberation but to ‘submit to society’ and to follow its norms. Freedom cannot be gained against society. “

- Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Cambridge: Polity Press, P.20

I will be arguing in this essay against the key claims given in the above passage. When we consider these assertions, we are immediately faced with the following questions: Can an individual ever achieve true freedom through submission to societal norms? Does not the act of conforming inherently limit the essence of freedom? Although many philosophers argue that societal submission is vital to achieve the freedom of the individual, I challenge such a view. Instead, I argue that conformity inherently restricts the essence of freedom and will demonstrate that genuine freedom involves resisting societal constraints rather than adhering to them.

To contextualize, it is important to comprehend the term ‘submit to society.’ Broadly speaking, it involves yielding a proportion of individual autonomy to the collective interests of a community. Social contract theories observe that individuals agree to submit some of their personal freedom in exchange for the benefits of living in a cooperative society (citation). However, the notion of submission to society has often been a topic of philosophical tension. While thinkers like Émile Durkheim state that societal norms are fundamental to liberation (citation), thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche argue that it stifles human creativity (citation).

Durkheim observes that conformity to societal norms is not antithetical to freedom. He argued that true freedom arises in a society on the basis of value consensus where individuals agree to a shared set of norms and values thus leading to a morally cohesive society. True freedom is not the absence of constraints, rather, it is the capacity to act within a structured system that offers guidance and purpose. There are external coercive norms, structures, and values that shape an individual's behaviour. These social factors are believed to facilitate the participation of individuals in a shared moral and cultural order. The structured norms and values of society do not oppress the individual, rather they provide conditions which enable one to live a meaningful life. Freedom within order, can be best understood through the critique of *anomie*, the state of normlessness. In an anomic state people experience a sense of dislocation and purposelessness due to the absence of normative framework that influences their actions (citation). Moreover, Durkheim believed that individuals who lack conformity to society's moral and cultural order have feelings of despair and alienation due to the absence of being part of a collective consciousness and this overemphasis on individual autonomy can lead to socio-psychological disintegration (citation for this entire para).

Contrary to Durkheim's compelling argument, it can be observed that societal norms can become rigid and oppressive. Imagine a child playing with blocks who is instructed to build anything – but only with red and blue blocks. The child might feel free in such a context; however, what if the child wants to include green blocks in the mix? When the rule does not permit green blocks, their choices are limited. Philosopher Herbert Marcuse suggests that true freedom is involved in finding out that one can get green blocks (and other colours) and make new rules. Marcuse critiques the idea of ‘repressive tolerance’, suggesting that societies permit only a certain degree of freedom to dissent and protest as long as it does not threaten existing social order (citation). This implies that such tolerance is actually a form of control, because it exists within the confines of a repressive system. The system falsifies freedom by creating an illusion of choice which ensures that deeper structures of the society remain unchallenged. This systematic illusion of freedom is particularly evident in modern capitalist societies, where the

emergence of “one-dimensional individuals” whose desires, thoughts, opinions, and behaviours are largely influenced by consumerism and mass media. Individuals falsely believe that they are free because they can choose between products or lifestyles. In reality, these choices reinforce systems that limit their autonomy.

For instance, in modern day consumer culture, the illusion of choice is clearly visible: while people may believe they have the choice to choose between two brands of chocolate, their range of choice is confined to what is profitable within the capitalist system. Only such products will be available in the market, leaving consumers with limited choices. This form of restricted freedom aligns with existentialist philosophy, especially Sartre’s concept of *bad faith*, which postulates that when individuals conform to societal norms, they engage in a form of self-deception (citation). Through this self-deception, individuals surrender their ability to live according to their own values and succumb to external societal pressures leading to the absence of authenticity of one’s life. The self-deception that Sartre pointed to, and the illusion as Marcuse defined, both lead to inauthenticity and the loss of genuine freedom.

To conclude, freedom and submission to societal norms cannot co-exist due to the persistent tension between societal conformity and individual liberation. While some argue that submitting to societal structures facilitates moral and social cohesion and provides an environment for exercising freedom, such frameworks often underscore rigid constraints. The argument for conformity involves the fallacy of assuming that societal norms and collective values are naturally aligned with an individual's autonomy, rather than recognising how such norms can suppress personal choice. The critique I have presented provides a more accurate and comprehensive analysis of this relationship. To be truly free, individuals must challenge the norms that seek to define them. Submission and liberty are fundamentally incompatible, as genuine autonomy can only be realized by overcoming the exploitative societal norms that restrict it. Indeed, through conformity, individuals effectively internalize the very forces that oppress and exploit them, thereby mistaking superficial choices for genuine autonomy.