

## Scarcity of time

by Bob Goudzwaard

Nearly everyone in western society suffers from a frightful shortage of time. A new saying has it that in the past men perished from lack of food but today they perish from lack of time. This lack of time is apparent not only from the quick tempo of our lives and from our crowded schedules, but also from the manner in which the modern family spends its time.

The Swedish economist S.B. Linder deals with this problem in a fascinating book pointedly called *The Harried Leisure Class*. According to the author, economic science has always claimed that increased welfare will offer more leisure time. But today nothing seems to be as scarce as time. One of the causes for this miscalculation by economists, says Linder, is their neglect of the time aspect of consumption. Every consumption product automatically takes our time. We need time to buy it, to maintain it and to replace it. For that reason, he argues, a culture which becomes richer materially becomes poorer in terms of available time.

Linder also explains how this scarcity of time affects our life styles. The appearance of time-saving household appliances can in part be explained as a result of this situation. That also holds for disposable articles. We no longer have the time to maintain our possessions or to return items like empty bottles. Further, a direct connection seems to exist between the growing shortage of time and the changes in methods of advertising and sales. Only a few decades ago advertisements were of a decisively informative

nature. They informed the consumer about an article so that he could compare it with others in order to make a choice. However, since we no longer have time to compare the quality of various items — a situation aggravated by the quantity and variety on the market — modern advertising has become suggestive in nature. Advertisements often merely aim at creating the illusion that the consumer will feel better and happier after he has acquired a certain article. The act of purchasing has increasingly become more impulsive — a situation which modern advertising exploits by orienting itself more and more to the consumer's subconscious. Clearly the "helplessness" of today's consumer has sharply intensified. The possibility to mould and manipulate his tastes runs parallel with his shortage of time.

An even more incisive consequence concerns our relationship to our fellowmen. Because of the demands on our time by the material welfare we experience, our time and our reflections are increasingly determined by our preoccupation with material goods and decreasingly by our personal association with fellow human beings. Thus also here the bond between man and fellowman is secondary to the link between man and things. For that reason there is undoubtedly a direct connection between the growing material welfare and the growing loneliness in modern society. This of course in particular affects people living outside the bonds of the immediate family. But it also affects the life of the family itself. A modern western family takes on the image of a miniature society in which each child has his own room and enough money to meet his needs. In this "society," watching TV and listening to records, which are technical objects, fill the void with respect to genuine personal contacts.

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