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THE HARRIED LEISURE CLASS: A DEMURRER

EDMUND S. PHELPS

Linder's book is built around the observation, simple yet intriguing, that the enjoyment of consumer goods takes time. A consumer is a one-man, Mincer-Becker-Lancaster factory. Commodities are unfinished materials that need to be combined with the factory's at-home labor time (and sometimes consumer durables) to produce final utility.

Linder connects this observation to what he believes has been happening to patterns of time use, or life style, with advancing productivity. Wage rates have reached such levels, he suggests, that even the average earner in a rich country lives under the pressure of time. Unless goods purchased and time spent on them have to be combined in fixed proportions, an extreme case, the ratio of goods purchased to consumption time will increase with wage rates over time. The result is what his title signals, "(The consumer) may find himself drinking Brazilian coffee, smoking a Dutch cigar, sipping a French cognac, reading *The New York Times*, listening to a Brandenburg Concerto and entertaining his Swedish wife — all at the same time, with varying degrees of success" (p. 79).

This hypothesis of increasing harriedness is not a necessary implication of the goods-take-time theory. It is possible that, as incomes rise, people will devote increased time to contemplation and introspecting. They could do this by purchasing more time-saving services and less time-consuming commodities, or by working effectively less by means of shortening work days, lengthening lunch breaks, or taking more vacation days. Yet the hypothesis of a quickening pace with the mounting scarcity of time is certainly plausible. It is this hypothesis of Linder's that I want to examine and to question here.

Someone once said that there are two sorts of people: Those who view the world as consisting of two sorts of people, and those who do not. Let me discuss Linder's thesis with reference to two sorts of people: First, those who are obsessive-compulsive, manic-depressives and, second, those who are not. Our evaluation of Linder's hypothesis depends, I believe, on the sort of people we have in mind.

1. The "time problem" for depressives, such as myself, is not the scarcity of time but rather the dearth of consumption-type uses for it. We do not find the ordinarily available consumer activities

sufficiently engaging. The usual run of leisure-time activities lacks vividness for us. Most consumption-type uses of our time are spectator activities. They fail ultimately to satisfy because they are not vehicles of self-assertion. The time problem is the boring leadenness of consumer activities, and the interesting manifestations of this are the commitments, roles, and pursuits that we adopt to work around that problem.

To illustrate, take Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. None of my friends has been too harried to get to this monumental novel. The problem of depressives has been to finish it. The old ennui returned to me at about the two-fifths mark, some sixty years of solitude still to go. My kind of writer is Donald Barthelme, who writes as though it were imperative to keep below ten pages if he would hold his reader's attention.

In music the problem of boredom intensifies with familiarity. When I first heard the *Messiah* at eighteen, Roger Voisin's trumpet set my hair on end. No subsequent performance has seemed like the real thing. For many of us, it has taken the electricity of a Moog synthesizer to re-establish contact with Beethoven's Ninth.

The problem of depressives then is to fill the time, not a mounting need to economize on it. How does the depressive fill the time? Linder's starting point is that consuming is work. For depressives, however, work is consuming. The excitement and ordeal of constructive work is the depressive's answer to the boringness of ordinary consumption activities. The determination and enlistment needed to perform a song, sculpt a figure, or produce a book lend such creative activities the vividness that ordinary consumption activities — the mere spectator sports of bicycling, gallerying, opera-going, and the rest — cannot sustain. In particular, the style imparted to creative work has been interpreted as a vehicle of self-assertion, even an act of aggression, that is not available or allowable in other activities.

Linder has several interesting pages on the acceleration of consumption in relation to sexual activity. They are a breakthrough over the chapter on the Indian rupee devaluation at which economics texts had formerly reached the climax of excitement. He says that the growing efforts of people to save time in their love life manifest themselves in three ways: Affairs, which by their very nature occupy a great deal of time, become less attractive; the time spent on each occasion of lovemaking is being reduced; and the total number of sexual encounters is declining. Thus economic growth has inhibited sex as much as the other way around.

How wholly different is the behavior of the typical depressive!!! Precisely because of their prodigious time requirements, the depressive is drawn to affairs as the moth to a flame, and he always will be. It should be mentioned in a symposium whose subject is time that both working and conducting affairs bid to exhaust the depressive's time (if not the depressive as well), so that these have to be alternating compulsions, not simultaneous ones. . . .

2. The preceding section has described the ways by which depressives fill the time. In capsule, they work as hard as they can, work at working and work at sex, independently of the level of their real wage. Their behavior is a corner solution, at maximum hurriedness, to the problem of the allocation of their time.

The depressive's case may not, of course, be so special as it seems. "Nature," Kinsey observed, "rarely deals with discrete categories." It is not a world of two types, depressives and not; it is a continuum in that dimension. If one wanted to identify "the" normal case, where would one draw the line between the true depressive at the one end, and, at the other, those who merely love their subject or who are fitfully subject to the work ethic and pride of performance?

Yet most people, most of the time, surely do not conform closely to the depressive's pattern. To get serious about Linder's hypothesis, we must deal with the middle persons on the aforementioned continuum. The question is whether they feel increasingly hurried owing to the time requirements of mounting consumption.

How does one take the pulse of life in a country? Richard Caves tells of the inquisitive Martian who, on reaching earth, ordered, "Take me to your *lieder*." My evidence will be mostly drawn from books, plays, and films. Since Linder wheels freely from America to Europe in his argumentation — Europe also has a high productivity today compared to a "reference point" like 1925 — let me do the same, and begin with Europe.

In the works of Antonioni and Bergman, Becket, Ionesco, and Pinter one gets a picture of nostalgia, restlessness, disquiet, and a sense of puzzlement and helplessness — insofar as any generalizations can be made about this diverse group. Nobody, it should be underlined, is busy frantically consuming in these works. In Becket's *Waiting for Godot* and the equally interminable *Happy Days* it is appalling and hilarious how the littlest signs of animation and hope in the world around them persuade the characters to go on idling the time away ("another happy day") instead of blowing their brains out. The figures in these two plays are not creative obsessive-

compulsives but ordinary people who, nevertheless, demonstrate the most astonishing resourcefulness and creativity to get through the days. The fact that these playwrights and film-makers are fairly popular in America must indicate that their characters and themes are not peculiarly European and inapplicable here.

Passing quickly to American literature, one might at first be inclined to contrast these European themes with American classics about manic, optimistic activists, as played in films by Stewart, Tracy, Doris Day, and others. But clearly this American type is now obsolete, and it may never have been representative. For contemporary American portraits of average life in America we might turn to contemporary fiction — to Updike, Oates, Gass, and to early Cozzens, Roth, and Malamud. In most of their novels and stories, the business of earning and consuming hardly has any significance any longer, and life in middle America is normally far from harried. The "hectic pace" Ms. Oates locates as "citified," not general. In *Couples*, *Rabbit Redux*, *Marriages and Infidelities*, *By Love Possessed*, and so many others, the preoccupation of their characters is with the dynamics of love — with sequential marital decision making under incomplete information, including incomplete knowledge of current and future self.

From another viewpoint, the theme of much of this literature is the problem of time, a person's developing sense of choice and change. Love is merely the current frontier where such personal experiences and sensations are importantly taking place. Updike, in particular, is a poet of time. He presents his characters in suspended animation at small incidents, and they seem to feel their own lives to be unwinding in slow motion. The leisurely exploration of museums becomes the metaphor as well as the setting for the conduct of affairs. His characters often feel decisionless, sensing that their lives are mostly predetermined by one or more past decisions then little understood. ("He had drawn a straight line from that night to the night of his death, and began walking on it.") It is remarkable how contemplative, how nostalgic and wistful they are. The recollected, analyzed past seems more meaningful than the unabsorbable present. While Updike's people are not imaginative artists, they live in their imaginations, their reminiscences and desires. Desires in the sense of wishes or hopes rather than aspirations, for life seems increasingly momentary and the future unplannable. The pace of life is slow because whatever it is that is desired, it is not something that can be won by hurrying, if it can be "won" at all.

The sociologists say that what the middle American desires is

the respect and prestige that he believes would come from rising to a loftier social class. High wages are merely a compensation, not a remedy, for the injuries of class. The ego psychologists, from Erikson and Maslow to May, say that what people desire is mastery. They want to be able to make something of themselves. But there seems to be the suggestion in recent American fiction, if I am not reading something into it, that the middle American has begun to reassess the aspiration for prestige and achievement. What he wants increasingly is equanimity, to stop being buffeted so much by the pleasures and pains from aspirations, calculations, and their disappointment. There is a desire for more spontaneity and less planning. It is the old European idea, earlier Eastern, of being rather than becoming. To know how to exist! What is not clear is whether this knowledge is a rare and lucky gift, inherited virtually at birth, or whether it can be attained with effort and experience.

This impressionistic five-page survey is hardly comprehensive or conclusive. I have not even mentioned the more leisurely life styles of the counterculture youth movement; this consideration would add further doubts that American lives are becoming generally more harried. However, the foregoing observations perhaps lend some support to my counter-impression: Most Americans in the 1970's are actually somewhat less occupied with material enjoyments, are more contemplative, more introspective, in this sense *less* harried, than were their counterparts two and five decades ago. I am not sure whether this trend is for good or ill, or whether it is occurring because of, or in spite of, the growth of productivity. But it does seem to me that it is in this direction, not the opposite direction as Linder contends, that the wind is blowing.