

AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION OF CONTEMPORARY HARRIEDNESS

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Why would I make myself more harried than I already am by agreeing to participate in the present Symposium? Reflection on this question made me increasingly uneasy about Staffan Linder's explanation of contemporary harriedness and suggested an alternative way of looking at the matter.

Linder divides the time available to man into work and consumption. At a low level of development there may be such a thing as idleness, but this is squeezed out by expanding work and consumption time in wealthier societies. There also is "time devoted to cultivation of mind and spirit," but Linder thinks of it as just another variety of consumption time: theater going, book reading, and the like represent the consumption of culture. The exhaustive subdivision of time into work and consumption that underlies all the reasoning of the book (and is formalized in the mathematical appendix) leads directly to its principal thesis: as productivity of work increases, the individual will have command over more goods while consumption time hardly increases, if at all; hence there will be an increasing "goods intensity" of consumption time, and the individual is harried because he tries to engage in Linder's (p. 79) simultaneous or hectically successive consumption stunts. The more entertaining parts of the book, the remarks on the changing time devoted to cocktail parties, sex, cultural activities, and religion are all extensions of this basic proposition.

Now I agree emphatically with Linder about the fact of harriedness. But I doubt that it can be explained, to more than a minor extent, by the attempt at stuffing an ever-increasing amount of real consumption into a limited amount of time.

The starting point of the alternative explanation I wish to propose is simple and none too new: man does not live by consumption alone. Linder has a fine time making fun of the notion that individuals might devote themselves increasingly to cultural pursuits as their income increases; but there are many other ways of spending time, outside of the consumption of ordinary goods and services. Here it is enlightening to recall Hobbes's view of men's favorite pastime: "men are continually in competition for honour and dignity." And it is particularly interesting that he declared this use

of one's time to be highly *income-elastic*: "All men naturally strive for honour and preferment; but chiefly they, who are least troubled with caring for necessary things."¹

What Hobbes views with some alarm here includes the activity also known as participation in public affairs that has been celebrated at other epochs as the noblest imaginable use of man's time, indeed as the justification for his existence. But no matter whether these sorts of time uses are viewed admiringly or apprehensively and disapprovingly, it begins to look as though Linder's subdivision of man's time into work and consumption is anything but exhaustive. There is a third set of activities that represents our truly final (or ultimate) demands: often mixed up in an inextricable jumble, they comprise the striving for power, prestige, and respect, the maintenance of old friendships and associations and the cultivation of new ones, participation in public affairs, and — why not? — the pursuit of achievement, truth, creativity, and salvation (this pursuit being something utterly different from the consumption of culture).

The high income elasticity of these pursuits does not, of itself, explain why the more affluent should be harried. Normally one would expect them simply to squeeze out some other equally time-consuming activities. But there is something about our mixed bag of "ultimate" activities (how is "obituary-improving" as a neutral term?) that makes people devoting lots of time to them peculiarly harried. What is it? First, these activities often become addictive beyond some threshold: in that case the time devoted to them expands autonomously and eventually encroaches on necessary work and essential consumption time. Second, and more important, the obituary-improving activities lend themselves, *more than other time uses*, to systematic and frequently wild *underestimates* of the time actually needed to accomplish what one sets out to do. Harriedness is typically the result of *time overruns* in relation to original estimates and intentions. It will surely be granted that such overruns are more likely to occur with respect to the intended "dashing off" of a letter to the *New York Times* than with respect to the eating of one's breakfast. The result is *overcommitment*, an essential ingredient of harriedness for which the view here presented is able to account.

One comment on income elasticity. It would of course be silly to say that low-income people do not worry about prestige, friendship, or creativity; often they do exceedingly well in all these respects. But at higher levels of material welfare, income earning and

1. Cited in Thomas (1965), pp. 190-91.

consumption are increasingly colored by these activities. The fee is the least important reason for which one accepts an invitation to lecture, and the need for drink and food is incidental to most cocktail parties.

Recognition of the obituary-improving activities as the principal source of harriedness alleviates, by the same token, the harriedness problem as described by Linder. A large part of these activities is incorporated into the national accounts on the product side. I am being paid for the conference I attend and for the bureaucratic fight I wage: they are part of my contribution to output solemnly registered in the national accounts as a portion of GNP. As a result, a considerable and probably increasing portion of the GNP in the "service economy" simply is not "there" to be consumed by anyone and, to that extent, the harrying problem of supply disposal does not exist.

By no means do I wish to dismiss altogether the phenomenon Linder has so amusingly depicted. It surely exists at some stage in the economic career of groups and individuals. At that stage people are intent on using their newly won affluence to the hilt, and they may well get into a bit of time trouble in the process. But this is likely to be a passing phase as they get used to their new purchasing power and possessions. The utility one gets out of his new gadget is apt to decay even faster than the gadget itself, for all of its built-in obsolescence. And just as there are few Don Juans in real life, so are there few people who continuously try to recharge their depleted utility batteries by trying out ever new gadgets, simultaneously or in rapid succession. Rather, they will at one point choose the much more vigorous and durable satisfactions to be gotten out of our bundle of obituary-enhancing activities, Hobbesian and the rest.

At the end of his book, Linder joins in the now familiar call against the "consumption society" and advocates a "change of heart of the individual." I have two comments:

1. The change Linder calls for is already vigorously under way. If my diagnosis of contemporary harriedness is correct, then a large portion of the leisure class — not only academics by any means — has already forsaken the consumption society for other far more fascinating pursuits.

2. When we invite others to step off the gadget treadmill, we

should be aware that, as a result, they may become more rather than less harried as they expand their obituary-improving activities. Also, to the extent that they will then devote themselves, in Hobbesian fashion, to "honor and preferment," things are unlikely to resemble Huxley's *Island* or any other utopia.

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