Western Urban Man Faces Leisure

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Western man is developing a unique civilization which is at once industrial and urban as well as global in its influence. It grows out of his persistent dedication to work and his unceasing devotion to increasing the effectiveness of his work. As a by-product he has given himself abundant leisure, for which some feel he is unprepared. Work and leisure are seen as overlapping in all phases of living, and the relationship changes continuously. Society and the man-made environment of Westerners are urban-centred. Urbanism extends vigorously outward. Some of the characteristics of industrial urbanism (milieu of Western man's work and leisure) are high mobility, high tempo and time awareness, mass organization for production, consumption and sharing the agglomerate life, the emergence of a new type of individualism, as well as new social class relationships.

In this article the focus is on the work and leisure of Western man. The writer is not competent to make comparisons with work and leisure in other regions. Throughout leisure is seen against work, for it is born in work and rooted in work. Man has always lived by work and with it and, because he has worked well, he has gained leisure. He faces the problem of learning to live easily with leisure, which heretofore has had little place in his way of life. In the course of making his work increasingly productive, Western man has set himself in the midst of a new environment. In this changing environment, we ask how he is learning to live with work and leisure.

Leisure's Ambiguous Position

Domenach observes that work and leisure in our society reflect and supplement each other. Western man works that he may have leisure and he must learn to enjoy leisure against a background of work. It is equally true that Western man traditionally works ever to get ahead. In the ideology of his work we find no intent to create leisure; it comes as an unplanned by-product of his work.

To say that leisure reflects and supplements work is also to say that

† This institute is now in process of becoming the European Institute of Social Sciences. The present article grows out of a study by the writer of work and leisure.

leisure is enjoyed as release from work. Some are of the view that one who has not worked cannot enjoy leisure. They hold that while one works to earn a wage or salary, he also "earns" leisure. It is work, they say, that puts one in a frame of mind to enjoy leisure and not feel guilty.

Leisure, that curious anomaly about which books are written, comes on the scene, not in a region where life is lived easily, but in Western society where life is strenuous. It is characteristic of Western man to load himself with work, to find in work the chief values of life and to use his gains for extending his work into wider areas. Science and technology gain importance to him as they can be used in advancing his work, to get more gain out of the labour expended. With each step ahead, he endeavours to widen the scope of his activity.

Not only has Western man forced work upon himself and learned to like it, he tries with missionary earnestness to stimulate others to accept his strenuous way of life. Those who do not respond with energy are called backward. Because of this global urge, Toynbee speaks of ours as a "world-wide Westernizing society." All industrialized and urbanized Western countries are identified with these missionary objectives, but the term "Westernizing" applies especially to the United States.

And now to this hard-working society leisure comes out in the open confronting its creators with baffling problems. Here is where man tries to build more efficient factories, to create more effective cities, to improve his networks of communication and transportation; all so that he can work to greater advantage. Inadvertently, he also gives himself more leisure, and this leisure in different ways gets between him and his work.

Working, building and rebuilding the structural side of our civilization, man also changes the social milieu. More people who must become urban-oriented also adopt the radically new urban way of life. As the organization of this life becomes more complex, the tempo of life quickens, which again is disturbing. More than ever people find themselves mixed in urban agglomerations, becoming part of "life en masse". And all the while this society with its level of culture oriented to organized and strenuous work finds itself confronted with leisure.

Leisure was always present in our work-conscious society, but earlier it was the privilege of a small upper class. Now this unplanned-for gift comes to the many who, as some believe, lack the background for making use of it. However, as we look about we find they are learning, but in the meanwhile the position of leisure in our society is ambiguous.

Our Industrial Culture

When we speak of Western man as a machine-user, this applies also to