

Resurgence & Ecologist - Vol 23 No 4 - July / August 1993**Page 131****Time Pollution**

by John Whitelegg

Although time-savings provide the principal economic justification for new road schemes, the expansion of the road network and the increase in traffic does not seem to have given people more

free time. This is because pedestrian time is not evaluated, because cars are deceptively time-consuming, and because people tend to use what time savings they do gain to travel further.

Time is money, we are told; and increasing mobility is a way of saving time. But how successful are modern transport systems at saving time?

Michael Ende's novel *Momo*¹ describes the changes which took place in the daily lives of a small community when "time thieves" persuaded the residents to save time rather than "waste" it on idle conversation, caring for the elderly and similar social activities. The effects were dramatic: as the traditional cafe was converted into a fast-food outlet and other changes took place, people were too busy saving time to find any time for each other. The village barber found that:

"he was becoming increasingly restless and irritable. The odd thing was that, no matter how much time he saved, he never had any to spare; in some mysterious way, it simply vanished. Imperceptibly at first, but then quite unmistakably, his days grew shorter and shorter. Almost before he knew it, another week had gone by, another month, and another year, and another and another." Ende's novel compresses into a few months the process of community disintegration that has been taking place over the last few decades in Europe. The observation that "no one has any time for each other any more" is a commonplace, particularly among older people; yet there are few attempts to examine why this should be so. How can we explain the Momo effect, the paradox that the more people try to save time, the less they seem to have? In other words, what do people do with the time they save?

More Speed, Less Access The work of Torsten Hagerstrand over the last thirty years is an important but neglected contribution to the understanding

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of people's use of space and time.² He suggests that the ability to make contact with places and other people is the central organizing feature of human activity and that it is ease of access to other people and facilities that determines the success of a transportation system, rather than the means or the speed of transport.

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It is relatively easy to increase the speed at which people move around, much harder to introduce changes that enable us to spend less time gaining access to the facilities that we need.

On this important matter there are very few indicators which can reveal how well our transportation systems are performing in the 1990s, by comparison (for example) with the 1920s. What is without doubt is that facilities are sited further apart and that people have to travel further than they did 70 years ago to reach them. In their home territories, they must travel further to supermarkets or leisure facilities and often must cover some distance while looking for somewhere to park. In their work, they must be prepared to commute further afield to find jobs. In their leisure time people contemplate day trips to Brussels, Paris or Stockholm when previously they would have thought the idea ridiculous.

C. Marchetti has shown that the amount of time each person devotes to travel is roughly the same regardless of how fast or how far they travel. "When people gain speed they use it to travel further and not to make more trips. In other words most individuals treat their territory the same way whatever size it is."³ Those who use technology to travel at greater speeds still

have to make the same amount of contacts — still work, eat, sleep and play in the same proportions as always. They simply do these things further apart from each other.

Do they do so by choice or through obligation? A circular logic operates here. While the distances between hospitals, schools, shopping centres and the like have risen, nothing can be done to increase the number of hours in the day. Speed must therefore be increased, and investments are made in quicker forms of transport — families buy faster cars, governments build faster roads and railways. But the time savings promised by new motorways and high speed trains appear to release time for more travel and thus spur the consumption of distance to ever higher levels of achievement. When people save time, they use it to buy more distance.

Social Speeds The suggestion that people spend about the same amount of time travelling, whatever their mode of transport, does not, however, explain the Momo effect: many people feel they have less time than they had before, despite faster means of transport.

There is another hidden time factor in the equation. Motor cars and other high speed vehicles do not save as much time as they appear to, as Ivan Illich pointed out in 1974:

"The typical American male devotes more than 1,600 hours a year to his car. He sits in it while it goes and while it stands idling. He parks and searches for it. He earns the money to put down on it and to meet the monthly instalments. He works to pay for petrol, tolls, insurance taxes and tickets."⁴

Elaborating on Illich's observations D. Seifried⁵ has coined the term "social speed" to signify the average speed of a vehicle, once a number of these hidden factors have been taken into account {see

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