

Over the wall ...

Alan Maley
considers greed
and need.

All the titles reviewed here tackle the consequences of the headlong rush of humanity towards its own annihilation. Of course, there have been plenty of precursors, from Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (he invented the phrase *conspicuous consumption*), Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* in the 60s, through Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*, Packard's *The Status Seekers* and *The Waste Makers* and Tenner's *Why Things Bite Back*, to Meadows et al's *The Limits to Growth* and its updates. More recently, Lovelock's *Gaia* books have continued this critical tradition.

Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic

Affluenza is defined as a disease: 'a painful, contagious, socially-transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more'. According to John de Graaf et al, 'the affluenza epidemic is rooted in the obsessive, almost religious quest for economic expansion that has become the core principle of ... the American dream'. The book is in three parts: *Symptoms*, *Causes* and *Treatment*. Part 1 is rich in case studies and examples of stress, family dysfunction, community breakdown, exploitation of children by

advertising, environmental damage, etc, all attributed to the greedy pursuit of material goods. Part 2 attempts to unveil the causes of the disease, though this is perhaps the least satisfactory part of the book. Essentially, affluenza is contracted when industrial productivity requires us to consume the goods produced in ever-increasing quantities, leading to a culture of greed and waste, where the keywords are *more, faster, bigger*, and where 'efficiency' is procured at the expense of human well-being. In Part 3, there are suggestions for treating the disease: slowing down, 'voluntary simplicity' (see <http://voluntarysimplicity.org.uk> among many others), group action, better design, more contact with nature, resistance (see www.adbusters.org) and political action by government, such as reducing statutory working hours. Although the book is based on the United States, the disease it describes is now so widespread that it clearly affects us all.

Enough: Breaking Free from the World of Excess

The theme of voluntary frugality is taken up in *Enough: Breaking Free from the World of Excess*. John Naish contends that we need to learn to live in a 'post-more' way if we are to avoid global and personal catastrophe. He examines the

consequences of too much information, too much food, too much 'stuff', too much work, too much choice, too much chasing after 'happiness' (the 'fulfilment industry' – I found this chapter particularly rewarding) and too much growth. For each category, he makes practical, commonsense suggestions for reducing excess to a more balanced and sustainable mode of living. He recognises the schizophrenic reaction of the majority ('Yeah! It's scary. Whatever'), warning that 'our entire society is filling its ears with sand'. Yet he is cautiously optimistic: 'all the higher-level human commodities that we might increasingly value as status symbols – such as time, space, leisure, balance, energy and autonomy – are now becoming increasingly scarce and precious'. We have to hope that he is right.

Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives

The consequences of the consumerist economy for conditions of employment are examined in much greater detail in *Willing Slaves*. Madeleine Bunting 'seeks to disentangle how the dictates of the market, with its cult of rationalism and efficiency, extend into people's individual lives'. The book focuses on Britain, which has one of the world's highest hours-per-week

working practices (without correspondingly high levels of productivity so, paradoxically, more = less!). The book has five parts. In Part One, she analyses how work has encroached on life in a 24/7 world: the way work has intensified so that workloads have increased as people become 'totally accessible' through mobile phones and the internet, and the cynically unethical way employers have hijacked the emotional commitment of workers to their jobs. In Part Two, she considers those responsible for pressurising workers in this way. This includes a description of 'missionary management' – 'give us your hearts and minds and we will give your life meaning'! This, she asserts, amounts to the 'commodification of human beings'. Government, too, is held responsible for the imposition of a 'measurement culture', involving endless inspections, targets and documentation, which has imposed greater levels of work and stress than ever before, and has led to the emasculation of professionals in many fields, especially health and education. Part Three looks at why we accept this without organised protest against it, and Part Four details the human costs in terms of stress-related sickness, the care deficit for children and the old, and the erosion of human relationships brought about by overwork. Part Five offers some discussion of possible solutions, including individual opting out, trade union pressure and more enlightened management. The final chapter, 'The Politics of Well-being', considers measures the government might take to develop a 'wisdom ethic' to replace the ruthless logic of the market.

Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything

James Gleick's book documents the speeding up of life in virtually all its aspects. He takes us on a rollercoaster ride from compulsive button-pushers in lifts, through the development of watch technology, the global synchronisation of time, the speeding up of the stock market, the growth of telephonic communication, the exponential growth of computing capacity and technological change, the triumph of the soundbite, the shaving off of milliseconds in sport, the saving of nanoseconds in manufacturing, the reduction of sleep (and of sex – 30 minutes a week on average!), fast food, the culture of overwork, multi-tasking, remote-control TV zapping, three-second commercials, the farce of customer

support telephone lines, and much more. Although he does not adopt an overtly critical stance, there are many telling quotes along the way: 'there is nothing so boring in life ... as the boredom of being excited all the time'; 'a restless clientele' existing in Saul Bellow's 'unbearable state of distraction'. In the final chapter, he quotes Stephen Jay Gould: 'If we continue to follow the acceleration of human technological time so that we end in a black hole of oblivion, then Earth and its bacteria will only smile at us as a passing evolutionary folly.'

In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed

By contrast, *In Praise of Slow* describes the gathering momentum of the worldwide movement to counteract the 'time sickness' which afflicts our society. Carl Honore describes the trends towards a more humane and pleasurable lifestyle (a *tempo giusto*) in a number of domains: slow food, with its positive effects on the environment and health; the new urbanism, reinventing cities to reduce car use and increase social contact; mind-body movements promoting what Kundera called 'the wisdom of slowness'; alternative/complementary medicine, with slower, less-invasive effects; slow sex, which fosters improved relationships; slowing down work so that working less = working better; slowing down the frenetic pace of leisure activities through more slow-paced activities like gardening, knitting (yes, knitting), cooking, music, art, and reading; raising children in a more relaxed way by making space for unstructured free play, 'slow schooling', rationing TV, etc. There is an excellent list of related websites at the back of the book for those who would like to follow up on any of these topics. The style is discursive and anecdotal but the message is well-conveyed and delivered with a degree of realism. 'Even when we long to slow down, we feel constrained by a mixture of greed, inertia and fear to keep up the pace.' But, as Gandhi once said, 'Speed is irrelevant if you are travelling in the wrong direction.'



What relevance might this all have for us as teachers of English? Surely, as educators, we have a social responsibility

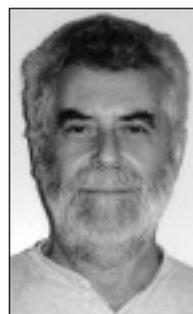
to our learners? There need be nothing 'holier than thou' or sanctimonious about the way we do this. There are real limits – to resources, to time, to life itself – so unless we can help our learners understand the importance of substituting less for more, smaller for bigger, slower for faster, restraint for cupidity, the consequences for humanity are bleak indeed. Some, like James Lovelock, contend that it is already too late – Gaia is already in terminal decline. Even if he is right, we can do something to slow down the rate of that decline and to postpone the day of our own extinction. 

Reviewed books

- Bunting, M *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives* Harper Collins 2004
- de Graaf, J, Wann, D and Naylor, T H *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* Berrett-Koehler 2005
- Gleick, J *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything* Vintage 1999
- Honore, C *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* Orion 2004
- Naish, J *Enough: Breaking Free from the World of Excess* Hodder and Stoughton 2008

Further reading

- Galbraith, K *The Affluent Society* Mariner Books 1958
- Lovelock, J *The Revenge of Gaia* Allen Lane 2006
- Meadows, D H, Randers, J and Meadows, D L *The Limits to Growth: The 30-year Update* Chelsea Green 2004
- Packard, V *The Status Seekers* McKay 1959
- Packard, V *The Waste Makers* McKay 1960
- Schumacher, E F *Small is Beautiful* Blond and Briggs 1973
- Tenner, E *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences* Vintage 1997
- Veblen, T *Theory of the Leisure Class* Penguin Classics 1994



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the Oxford Resource Books for Teachers.

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