

# The overdevelopment of the west<sup>1</sup>

*Bob Goudzwaard*

If someone were to ask you to give a radio talk on the theme "the overdevelopment of the western world," how would you react? I suspect that like me, you would not take the matter lightly. "The overdevelopment of the western world" is quite a mouthful; it sounds more like the title of some important philosopher's magnum opus (bound in six leather volumes) than the topic of a short radio talk. You might go on to say that a term like "overdevelopment" is much too vague. What could one possibly mean by it, whether rightly or wrongly?

Nevertheless, if you and I were to accept the invitation to spend some time on this theme, it might be best to begin with a term that means the exact opposite of overdevelopment, namely, "underdevelopment." What do we mean when we speak of underdeveloped countries? Surely we do not mean that every development all along the line in such countries is somehow retarded. That would be a gross insult and untruth; for interpersonal relationships, to take one example, have reached a noticeably higher level of development in social and cultural respects in many of these countries than in the vaunted western world. "Underdevelopment" means a relative lag in certain possibilities of development. For example, if hunger is a constant problem in the third world, and if sufficient work and shelter cannot be provided for all, this can be taken as an indication of a lack of economic development and an accompanying lack of usable, responsible techniques of production. (This need not be the case, but it may well be. Technological and economic growth can remain in a relatively retarded state within the whole of a culture.)

But if such underdevelopment exists, then the opposite must also be possible, i.e. a technological and economic growth that has advanced too far in relation to the culture as a whole. In other words, we can also speak of overdevelopment. This raises the question whether the economic underdevelopment on the other side of the globe is the mirror image of economic overdevelopment here.

Moreover, we are confronted with the additional question as to whether overdevelopment here may not be the cause of underdevelopment there. Have we perhaps shot ahead too quickly in our economic growth, just as a cauliflower plant can become worthless if it shoots up too rapidly and its stalk becomes too long? And have we remained within the sphere of what is responsible in the application of our technological know-how, or have we gone beyond it? Doubtless we are still growing in economic and technological respects. But is this growth healthy, or is a tumor forming? This is the question that concerns me. [1]

Let us approach these deep and difficult problems by admitting that we certainly have good reasons for asking ourselves critical questions. One of these reasons is the flurry of distress signals which various profoundly concerned scientists are sending us. They indicate that we are rapidly reaching the limits of possible economic expansion. We might regard these scientists as borderguards, bringing us reports about everything going on at the frontier as a result of our activities. Certain vital raw materials and energy reserves are being used up at a rapid rate - so the geological borderguards report. The number of species of plants and

---

<sup>1</sup> Chapter 1 *Aid for the Overdeveloped West* by Bob Goudzwaard (Wedge, 1975). This was adapted from radio talks given over the national Christian radio network in the Netherlands

animals is decreasing rapidly, and the fundamental chain of life in the oceans is being threatened - so biologists warn us. The pollution of the environment considered in worldwide terms is still accelerating - so the environmental experts inform us. In many people the psychical pressure of life in our times causes frustrations that border on shock phenomena - so leading psychologists report. And, finally, the polemologists (those who study the question of war and peace) join in by pointing out that the wealthy nations, e.g. the U.S.A. and the western European countries, have become the have-nots; for they have the greatest needs when it comes to the provision of raw materials and energy. It is because of their great economic growth that these countries cannot do without massive imports of raw materials and energy. Such a state of affairs brings about military tension and can lead to the use of force; for the second world war was also started by the have-nots of *that* time (i.e. Germany, Japan, and Italy) when those nations, poor in raw materials, set out in quest of what then was called *Lebensraum*, space to live. Thus geographical and political boundaries can be threatened as well as geological, biological, and psychological boundaries.

The signals sent to us by the watchmen at the borders are clear and cannot be ignored. When we consider them together and in the light of one another, their message is even more emphatic. But what are we to do with these distress signals? Are we to take them as conclusive proof that we have gone too far in our technological and economic expansion and are overdeveloped in this area?

Not necessarily, for there are also many voices – of politicians as well as industrial leaders and various scientists – who draw exact opposite conclusions from these signals. It is their thesis that precisely our technology and economic system must be regarded as insufficiently developed. They argue that it is only through an even more advanced technology and a more precisely directed and controlled economic growth that we will be able to push these [2] threatening limits into the future. If the technology of our production and consumption pollutes the environment, they maintain, then it must be possible to develop a technology directed toward the *elimination* of pollution. And if the growing prosperity that we've supported with technology uses up raw materials and energy reserves, then the same technology can see to the development of a new kind of production that uses substitute materials. If there is no more iron in the ground, we can start producing plastic raw materials; and if oil reserves are exhausted, we must see to it that nuclear energy takes over its role. And if man himself, finally, is under increasing psychical pressure, then expanding psychiatric institutions and refining their techniques will enable us to lessen this pressure too. Thus the distress signals from the borders can indeed be translated one by one into the opposite of a warning against economic and technological development; instead they become incentives spurring us on to even greater achievements in these same economic and technological fields. The technological-economic trot then becomes a direct gallop aimed at avoiding a collision with the boundaries that loom up before us.

At this point I begin to doubt whether the dilemma placed before us is the correct one. Is this really the choice we have to make? Is this the only proper interpretation of these signals from the boundaries? Do we encounter these difficulties only at the end of a long development, or do these signals mean that certain things were wrong from the outset? This hesitation and doubt grows when we immerse ourselves in the history of the development of western culture since the early years of the Industrial Revolution. This Industrial Revolution, which started a century and a half ago in the west and still has not come to a complete end, can be regarded in part as an unmistakable expression of a living faith, i.e. *the faith that things would get better and better through the advance of modern technology within the framework of a growing free market production.*

Without this deep faith in the intensely redemptive power of technological-economic progress, the Industrial Revolution is and remains a phenomenon that cannot be explained. I think, for example, of the leading American industrialist Carnegie, who wrote a book around the turn of the century which he entitled *The Gospel of Wealth*. In this book he says that we must understand that "obedience" to the laws of industrial progress guarantees us the joy of a new life in which poverty and oppression disappear and happiness returns to the earth. If such a faith is dominant and becomes generally accepted - and it has become accepted to a [3] considerable extent - then there is no longer any barrier in allowing economics and technology to provide the leadership, not just in some areas of life but in principle in all of them. Because of this faith, economics and technology, as saviours and pioneers leading the way to a new era, assume the role of infallible guides.

Here we touch on a manifestation of a possible overdevelopment of technology and the money-based economy in western society that is deeper than the one we saw earlier. Signals from the borders, i.e. from geologists, biologists, psychiatrists, and polemologists, can indeed be interpreted in two different ways. But if it turns out that *the driving force of a faith* is embedded within the forward march of technology and the economic system, and that this faith is still operative in part today, then we must admit that the danger of an overdevelopment of both technology and the economic system was present from the outset. Their expansion was accompanied by an expectation of happiness that relativized anything that might raise objections against them.

Now, if you were to ask whether all of this also manifests itself in practice, I could simply answer that technology and an economic system based on monetary values have been granted the leading role in virtually all areas of life. But can this also be shown through concrete examples?

I will try to give a few. And although I hope to wind up talking about radio and television, I would like to start with two other areas of life, namely sports and sexuality. As far as sports is concerned, we know that money plays an ever more important role in it, and that many people regard professional team sports (in which participants are paid) as an important step beyond (unpaid) amateur sports. But this is certainly not the only symptom of the dominance of technology and the money-based economy that I could mention. Sports is becoming less and less a question of the pleasure which people derive from competing against each other and more and more a question of a deadly serious struggle against records written down on paper. Technology makes its presence felt in sports through the ever-growing role of the coach who winds up his athletes like so many clocks that are then released to do what they are trained to do. The money-based economy shows itself in the even more important role of the managers who peddle the product that the coaches and athletes come up with. Without such coaches and managers, sports as we know it could not exist. Sports has become a matter of developing the best technology, and at the same time it has been degraded to the level of a [4] product to be sold.

Is this an isolated development? Of course not. To turn to something completely different, these forces are also at work in the sexual life of western man. Sexuality is also dominated by commerce, and the porno shops and sex magazines tell us boldly what must change in our thinking about sex. Furthermore, everyone is supposed to be aware of what the newest handbooks on sexual techniques have to say. Sexuality is being drawn farther and farther from the deepening of a personal relationship between a man and a woman and is becoming more and more a question of satisfying immediate and largely impersonal needs. In short, it is

becoming a consumer good. And each consumer product needs its own sales campaign and its own operating techniques.

I must admit that the commercializing and technologizing of sexuality and sports seem to be far removed from the questions which I discussed earlier, i.e. the danger of the continuing pollution of the environment, the possible exhaustion of raw materials, and so forth. But all the same, I hope that you and I now see certain connections between all these problems. Let me try to sum the matter up as follows. When closely related phenomena appear at the same time in such diverse areas of life as sports and sexuality, phenomena that draw both these areas of life into the sphere of pure technology and money-making, then there is more going on than meets the eye. Then we must indeed raise the question whether all of our community and social life is perhaps suffering from an overestimation of the importance of technical and economic considerations. If so, a faith that numbs us and enslaves us is at work.

That same faith can also lead us to take these distress signals and turn their meaning inside out, through our refusal to realize that we are running wild in our economic growth and our drive toward technological control of everything. We, as over-rational western people, will have to learn anew that our deepest motives are anything but rational, and that one faith or another leads and directs us, whether we like it or not.

As far as the warning signals are concerned, I am personally inclined to regard them first and foremost as an appeal to self, as an appeal to break with the pagan overestimation of the felicitous effect of our own technological and economic know-how. A lesser, more human kind of technology, coupled with the awareness that we already have enough in economic terms (and perhaps too much), might be able to bring about more *shalom* for ourselves, for the plants and animals around us, for the poor [5] people in the developing countries, and for the frustrated people who turn to overworked psychiatrists, than the quest for still more technology and even more prosperity could ever give us.

Finally, I would like to raise the question what all these changes in our time mean for radio and television. How can we make responsible use of these media? It seems to me that the burden of answering this question cannot simply be passed on to the makers of radio and television programs. All of us, as listeners and viewers, must share this responsibility to some extent.

There is at least one conclusion implied in what I have said, namely, that if even such areas of life as sports and sexuality have fallen to an increasing degree under the influence of a powerful technology and money-based economic system, then we must not expect such pressures to be absent from the field of radio and television. To begin with, the pressure is there in commercial radio and television. For example, just ask someone in a position to know what plans are being made for the exploitation of cable television. It is entirely possible that within a decade western European television will follow the American example in financing television programs. In America, the same commercial firms that put out the biggest newspapers also control more than twenty-five percent of all television stations, and non-commercial television accounts for less than one-third of all television production.<sup>2</sup>

But there is more to the problem, for the influence of technology and the money-based economy penetrates ever further. Just as sports and sexuality are reduced to the status of consumer goods, a similar degradation takes place in radio and television. From our

---

<sup>2</sup> See Robert Cirino *Power to Persuade – Mass Media and the News*, 1974.

technologically and economically oriented culture comes a never abating pressure on program makers to address themselves only to the *consumer* in man, to the viewer and listener concerned only with the direct and immediate satisfaction of his own appetites. And this pressure is brought to bear on the program makers by way of the lever of the new technical norm that has become the sacred cow of virtually the entire radio and television business, i.e. the figures on the size and density of the listening or viewing audience. If the audience for your program is smaller than it should or could be, then the judgement about your production has already been made. Your "production"! Even the terms used are those of the economic process. Radio and television broadcasts should give voice to the breath of a culture, but in our society they have become technological-economic objects subject to continual change. They are first produced by [6] program makers who pay careful attention to the figures on the size and density of the audience and are then consumed by the public in small pieces that can be swallowed and digested without difficulty.

Radio and television workers who labour under such pressures find themselves in an extremely difficult position. Yet these pressures must be resisted as much as possible. Can this be done? I believe that the answer is still yes. In any event, the prospect of doing so is greater in a genuine broadcast association such as the Christian Radio Association of the Netherlands (N.C.R.V.) than in broadcasting companies that have members in name but in reality do not rise above the level of hard-nosed commercial enterprises. Therefore we as listeners and viewers must realize that what is broadcast is our business too. We must not forget that the questions bound up with radio and television are more important than who has the best quiz program. The real issue is whether radio and television will degenerate to the status of a cheap and uniform soft drug, or whether it will continue to serve as a sounding board for a living and variegated culture in which people have a message for their neighbours, a message that is sometimes encouraging but can also be prickly and unwelcome. If the latter possibility is eliminated, radio and television will immediately lose their human character, for giving a response is really the secret of all truly human life, ever since the Lord called us into being through his Word. [7]