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## COMMENTARY - THE MARKET AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS.

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# BACK TO THE THEATERS

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By Luigino Bruni

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Movie theaters are not only businesses but a unique means to build relationships. However, lately a great number of them have had to close down due to the crisis. Unfortunately, they have been replaced by goods that better respond to the demands of today's consumeristic, lonely individuals. Some believe this change is a result of the law of the market. I agree that the market does sell goods against loneliness, and that the demand for such goods was created by the market itself, however, only a sector of the market.

One does not need to read economic and sociological studies to recognize the significant difference between going to a movie theater versus a "home-theater experience"; this difference is especially pronounced when the first is experienced with friends and the second while alone in front of a PC. To go to the movies with friends implies an investment of time. One has to dress up, go to the theater, and discuss which film to see with others. Often the final selection differs from one's personal preference (thanks to friends, I have discovered many splendid movies that I would not have otherwise seen). Friends talk to each other before, during and, most importantly, after the film. Thus, the movie, which on its own is a simple consumer good, brings people together and becomes a relational good; such goods are produced or consumed together as a shared experience. The shared emotions elicited during certain scenes can be so enjoyable that one will go again to the movies with other friends (hoping to experience the same mutual feelings again). In fact, two and a half centuries ago, Adam Smith wrote that shared emotions are one of the major sources of people's happiness. When one watches a movie alone at home or on the TV, there are hardly any shared emotions and relational goods involved; seeing *Amarcord* in a theater is completely different from seeing it on a PC. These two experiences represent two very different categories of goods, which, unfortunately, are considered by the market to be equivalent.

Let's explore this topic further. In the recent past, people had to interact with others if they wanted to "consume" certain goods (like art, culture, celebrations, music, religion, sports, politics, games, schools, therapy, etc.). Thus, people were inextricably linked to relational goods. Music was enjoyed in concert halls or ballrooms, sport in stadiums and movies in crowded movie theaters. Today, the market allows us to separate the relational aspect from many goods, leaving only the individual component. For example, I can listen to my iPod alone on my run in the park. Although I pass many other lonely runners, I don't actually meet anyone. Later, if I feel like doing so, I can hang out with friends. The same is applied to films, politics (rallies were replaced by monologues on TV) and even universities (there are people who enroll in online programs and get their degree without interacting with anyone). Human interaction has been removed from a great many products. The 'me and you' relationship has been replaced by 'me and a product' and 'you and a product'. A possible 'us' is always postponed for the future.

This is the kind of humanism that the capitalist market (not just any market), individuals and the freedom of choice have brought about. These Western and Christian-rooted values set people free from many obligatory relationships; the required "spheres" of life that their loved ones have no part in. However, one should read through research about the well-being of humans before evaluating the market's influence on people and trying to reform it. Over the last few decades, the consumption of relation-free goods has radically increased. Due to market competition and technological progress, consumer goods cost less today than ever before, as far as money and, more importantly, time are concerned.

It is easier and cheaper than ever to watch a movie at home; one doesn't even need to get out of bed! On the other hand, going to the movies or exercising with friends doesn't cost less than a hundred years ago, and investing in friends and family

requires pretty much the same sacrifice (time, resources, love, ...) as a thousand years ago. Besides, investing in friendship is risky because you may get hurt if your friends do not reciprocate. A very simple economic law teaches us that if we drastically reduce the price of a (consumer) good and keep the other constant (relational good), the latter will become much more “expensive” than the former. In other words, as the market separates products from relationships (in the name of freedom), the cost of relational goods continues to increase. “Days ago,” a friend told me, “I asked my Dad to come see my wife singing in a chorus. I rang the bell and he said he’d changed his mind. I didn’t insist. It was raining and I knew that dressing up and leaving was much more “costly” than watching a movie on the living room couch.” He then added, “but he probably regretted his decision the next day.” What can be done about all this? Not much, but we should definitely support social goods by taxing consumer goods (we should particularly promote relational goods since a lack of personal ties makes people unhappy). We can also make use of education to bring about change.

Schools should educate their students about consumption and differences between types of goods; they must teach students how to distinguish consumer goods, which are here today and gone tomorrow, from relational goods, which are real investments for a good life. Furthermore, technology should serve to improve human relationships. For example, social groups and parishes can easily set a private “movie theater” with an inexpensive video projector and revive the magic and the joy of shared experiences. We must promote community building; the loss of community has impoverished us all.

*Translated by Cristian Sebok*