10

RADICAL SIMPLICITY AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

Exploring the lifestyle implications of a 'Great Disruption'

The human race has had long experience and a fine tradition in surviving adversity. But now we face the task for which we have little experience, the task of surviving prosperity.

– Alan Gregg

1. Introduction

How would the ordinary middle-class consumer – I should say middle-class citizen – deal with a lifestyle of radical simplicity? By radical simplicity I do not mean poverty, which is involuntary and full of suffering and anxiety, and thus universally undesirable. Rather, I essentially mean a very low but biophysically sufficient material standard of living, a form of life that will be described in more detail below. In this chapter I want to suggest that radical simplicity would not be as bad as it might first seem, provided we were ready for it and wisely negotiated its arrival, both as individuals and as communities. Indeed, I am tempted to suggest that radical simplicity is exactly what consumer cultures need to shake themselves awake from their comfortable slumber; that radical simplicity would be in our own, immediate, self-interests. In this chapter, however, I will only defend the more modest thesis that radical simplicity simply *would not be that bad*. Establishing that thesis should be challenging enough.

Of course, if a radically lower material standard of living were to be imposed upon us suddenly by force of circumstances and

without anticipation and some preparation, I acknowledge that most people would find such a dramatic change terrifying and painful – an existential disaster. Such a response would be quite natural and understandable, for we would have our identities and worldviews shaken beyond recognition. But I will argue that if such dramatic change were to be stoically anticipated and prepared for, it would not be that bad. If this argument is correct, it would seem that the middle class could benefit greatly from anticipating and preparing for radical simplicity, even if it never arrives, which, in our lifetimes or even our children's lifetimes, it may not. Then again, *it may* – for any number of ecological, economic, political, and social reasons – and this possibility, whatever its likelihood, is ultimately my reason for addressing the subject of radical simplicity. It is my assumption that consumer lifestyles have a time limit and that this time limit is fast running out. If the global financial system does not collapse under the weight of its own debt, perhaps induced by rising oil prices or the bursting of financial bubbles, then at some point our trembling ecosystems will collapse, taking industrial civilisation down with them. Either way, consumerism and the growth paradigm that supports it have no future, a diagnosis that I will not attempt to defend here but rather take as given (see previous chapters). When consumerism's time is up, we will all be living more simply, to varying degrees, whether we want to or not.

No one can be sure exactly when time will be up, or how the closing bell will sound, but whether time runs out next year, next decade, or next century, the inevitable demise of consumerism is a subject that deserves our consideration today, because time will *eventually* run out, and probably sooner than most would like to think. It would be best that this event is prepared for, preferably by adjusting the way we live at once, but if that is too much to expect, then at least by adjusting the way we think. It should go without saying, of course, that it would be far better to embrace simplicity by design than have it embrace us through disaster.

1.1. *Of the middle class, addressing the middle class*

It will already be clear that I am writing this chapter from the perspective of an 'insider' – a member of the so-called 'middle class' – a point that I admit with some unease. Despite dedicating most of my energies toward advocating post-consumerist lifestyles of 'voluntary simplicity', and having taken significant measures to practise this lifestyle (so far as one can within the constraints of a consumer society), I am very aware that I remain a member of the middle class, enjoying many of the essential comforts this lifestyle

brings. For example, I have a computer, obviously, and solar-generated electricity to run it; there is a fridge next door, with some food in it, and there is a productive vegetable garden outside, so I am not hungry; and I have sufficient clothes and a roof over my head, so I am warm. Not only that, I have the leisure, health, education, and security to study the world's problems, so without saying anything more about my standard of living, I have said enough already to place myself decidedly in the middle class. While I may barely scrape out a living as a part-time academic, in the global context, I know that I am fabulously wealthy.

I assume because the reader is also in front of a computer or wealthy enough to buy this book, with all the security and privilege that this generally implies, that I am also writing *for* the middle class, broadly defined. There may be some readers who genuinely fall outside this admittedly vague socio-economic category, but only a few, and possibly none. We are, I shall assume, in the soup together; or, as Thoreau (1982: 314) once put it: 'I should not thus unblushingly publish my guilt if I did not know that most of my readers were equally guilty with myself, and that their deeds would look no better in print'. I feel that the subject of this chapter demands these preliminary admissions, since few of us could really claim to have experienced the radical simplicity that this chapter will attempt to describe and understand. Nevertheless, life, being what it is, occasionally requires that we try to understand things that we have never experienced. I believe this is one of those times.

2. The Lifestyle Implications of a 'Great Disruption'

In order to frame the present analysis I want to pose a 'collapse scenario', with the aim of understanding what might become of middle-class consumer lifestyles in the event of what Paul Gilding (2011) calls a 'Great Disruption'. Let me begin by providing some context.

Gilding argues, as many have argued, that '[t]he earth is full' (Gilding, 2011: 1). This presents a massive problem for humanity, especially when we recognise that continued growth remains the dominant economic paradigm globally. Although the global economy already far exceeds the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet (Global Footprint Network, 2012; Meadows *et al.*, 2004), every nation on the planet still seeks continued economic growth. The pursuit of growth, in some form, may be justifiable for the poorest nations on the planet, whose basic needs are not adequately met, but on an already 'full earth', increased resource and energy consumption in the richest nations simply cannot be justified. What

is required, particularly in the richest nations, is an economics of sufficiency (Alexander, 2012a). This would involve the rich nations embracing a phase of planned economic contraction, or 'degrowth', in order to create ecological room for humanity's poorest to prosper as well as leave room for the diversity of life on the planet to flourish (Alexander, 2011a-c; 2012b). This radically unconventional economic strategy is all the more necessary given that there are expected to be nine billion people on the planet within a few decades, all of whom will desire, with every justification, a dignified standard of living. This population expansion, however, will place further demands on an already overburdened biosphere.

Needless to say, the prospects of voluntary degrowth in the rich world are slim to non-existent, and that is why we can expect global capitalism to grow itself into a fatal crisis (Turner, 2012). In this sense growth capitalism resembles a snake that is eating its own tail, one seemingly unaware that it is consuming its own life-support system. Climate change and oil supply issues are arguably the clearest signs that this crisis of malconsumption is already in the process of unfolding, a situation exacerbated by the ongoing global financial crisis, which everyday is threatening to intensify. All this means that drastic changes almost certainly lie ahead of us. Things will change, Gilding (2011: 1) notes, 'Not because we will choose to change out of philosophical or political preference, but because if we don't transform our society and economy, we risk social and economic collapse and descent into chaos'. To put it proverbially, if we do not change direction, we are likely to end up where we are going.

Under the force of its own historical momentum, however, and blinded by its growth fetish, capitalism marches on as if everything were fine. But everything is not fine, to put it mildly, and it is only a matter of time before the so-called beneficiaries of growth capitalism realise that there cannot be a healthy economy without a healthy planet. My own view is that any transition to a just and sustainable economy is unlikely to be smooth, and that if such an economy were ever to emerge, it will probably be sparked not by some revolution in consciousness, but by some crisis or series of crises that essentially force upon humanity a radically alternative, post-consumerist way of living. I believe the revolution in consciousness required to prosper under an economics of sufficiency will arrive en masse, if at all, only *after* a crisis. This, at least, is one path that lies before us, and perhaps it is the best we can hope for.

Since mountains of evidence in support of radical change have not persuaded the rich world to rethink its economic trajectory, it would seem now that the only path left is for us to be persuaded, so

to speak, by a 'Great Disruption' of some form. That is the scenario that will frame the following discussion. This will probably strike some people as rather too dramatic, but I feel it may prove to be a useful analysis even for those optimists who believe that there will be a smooth transition to a sustainable economy.

I do not wish to speculate about what form the Great Disruption might take (e.g., economic, ecological, militaristic, a mixture of these, etc.) or its likelihood. But for those who accept, as I do, that a Great Disruption of some form is certainly *possible*, and potentially imminent, its lifestyle implications should be of considerable interest and concern. And if it turns out that we never see a Great Disruption in our lifetimes, the following analysis might nevertheless bear fruit by bringing into sharper focus our relationship to the material world. My hypothesis is that this sharper focus might give rise to the insight that consumer affluence is much less important than most people in the middle class think it is.

3. Envisioning and Evaluating Radical Simplicity

Suppose, then, that at some stage in the foreseeable future some form of Great Disruption brings vast portions of the global economy to a grinding halt. How might such a destabilising event or series of events affect the lifestyles of the consuming middle class? Assuming it would impose some form of radical simplicity upon large parts of the developed world – which, as noted, is presently the focus – what would this look like and how bad would it be? Those are the main questions I will now consider.[18] Readers are encouraged to adjust the analysis to fit their own circumstances, so far as that might be necessary. I will structure the following discussion by considering, in turn, various aspects of a typical middle-class life and envisioning and evaluating the changes that could be brought about by a Great Disruption.

3.1 *Water*

It makes sense to begin with water, this being one of life's most basic necessities. Accessing seemingly limitless clean water by simply turning on the tap is one of those things that are most easily

[18] The impacts of a 'Great Disruption' on the developing world, or on a rural setting, would raise very different sets of issues. I must leave those analyses for another occasion.

taken for granted in the developed world. This is especially so given that in many places tap water is grossly under-priced, and sometimes not priced at all.[19] If, due to some Great Disruption, the water mains ever stopped functioning, almost all urban centres would at once be thrown into utter chaos, and in the absence of some well-coordinated civil emergency program, many people would die within the week. The consequences would be so grim, in fact, that we must assume that the *first thing* a society in the midst of collapse would do is ensure the functioning of its mains water supply. Governments should be aware of their responsibilities here and be sufficiently prepared to coordinate any necessary repairs or maintenance to the water mains, even in a context of social turmoil. If the government fails, local communities would have to act for themselves and do whatever needed to be done – or else perish.

Let us assume, however, that even in the event of a Great Disruption, the water mains would remain functional, or at most be down for a day or two at a time, which should be manageable for those with a moderate storage of bottled water or a water tank with some water purification tablets. It is easy enough to be prepared in this regard, so it makes sense to be so. It may be that some time after the Great Disruption, depending on its severity, governments would no longer have the capacity to run centralised water services, but by that stage we can imagine that some alternative, localised system of water capture and purification would have been developed. Human beings are a resourceful bunch, a point that too many collapse theorists ignore (but which techno-optimists exaggerate to the point of delusion). It should also be remembered that existing infrastructure, such as roofs and roads, are remarkably good at collecting water, and it would not be hard for vast amounts of water to be captured through these means, provided there was sufficient rainfall. Whether those means could actually supply sufficient amounts of water for a dense urban or suburban settlement, however, is an open question about which I will not presently speculate.

Rather than worrying about the water mains failing, I believe a more useful approach is to consider what would happen if water supplies remained relatively secure but became much scarcer and consequently much more expensive. Suppose, for example, that after some economic crash or sustained climatic aberration, new

[19] Between 2008-9, water in Australia was on average $1.93 per 1,000 litres, and for industry water averaged $0.12 per 1,000 litres. See Australian Bureau of Statistics: http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1301.0~2012~Main%20Features~Water~279 (accessed 7 March 2014).

financial or regulatory constraints meant that most people were only able to draw from the water mains around 50 litres of water per day, per person. To put this figure in some context, average household water consumption in the US is around 370 litres; in Australia it is around 230 litres per day; and in Britain it is about 150 litres. At the other end of the spectrum, institutions like the United Nations and the World Health Organisation hold that 20 litres per person, per day is close to the minimum needed for bare, sanitary subsistence, and that figure is sometimes used as a baseline in refugee camps.

On the basis of these figures it probably follows that having only 50 litres per day would come as a great shock to most people in the developed world, especially those people accustomed to levels of consumption many times higher. Be that as it may, I wish to suggest that life with 50 litres of clean water per day would not actually be that bad, if it were approached thoughtfully and with the right attitude. Indeed, after a period of personal and cultural adjustment, I believe it would quickly become a very tolerable and mostly painless 'new normal'. Naturally, one's attitude and frame of mind when dealing with such a significant reduction in water consumption would be the key factor. If people compared the 'new normal' to how things used to be, they would probably feel terribly impoverished and suffer accordingly; but if people remembered that several billion people in the world today lack secure access to minimally sufficient amounts of clean water, then having 50 litres of clean water per day should suddenly seem like an extraordinary privilege for which people should be immensely grateful; to complain would be a gross perversity. The critical point to note is that the same circumstances of radical simplicity would be experienced in totally different ways, depending on the mind-set that was brought to the experience. Fortunately, that mind-set is within our control, even if the circumstances may not always be.

With a daily supply of only 50 litres, water for drinking would obviously get first priority, and remaining supplies would need to be distributed among things like cooking, washing, cleaning, and sanitation. It might well be that less water could be used in cooking if people were more mindful; clothes might be washed less regularly, which would probably bring some balance to a culture that is arguably excessively concerned with cleanliness; lawns would not be watered and vegetable gardens would be watered from water tanks or greywater systems; and so on and so forth. Innumerable water-saving strategies could well prove that high water consumption is really a product of wastefulness, such that great reductions would not take away from us anything that is actually necessary for a good life. Even if we had to give up showering and bathing in the accustomed fashion, I believe that we would nevertheless be fine. It

may be a requirement of a dignified life to be able to wash oneself regularly – achievable with a bucket of water and some soap – but one could live with dignity without showering or bathing in the accustomed fashion.

This idea of cleaning ourselves with a bucket of water exemplifies, with some clarity and specificity, the challenging thesis I am proposing in this chapter. Radical simplicity with respect to water consumption would be a cultural shock, no doubt, but if it were thoughtfully considered, it should not turn out to be that bad, provided we had minimally sufficient supplies. That is, we could all live full, dignified, and meaningful lives even if we had to bathe with a bucket – and if we thought we could not we would be guilty of either pomposity or a failure of imagination.

3.2 *Sanitation*

Just like if the water mains stopped functioning, urban centres would be thrown into disorder very quickly if our systems dealing with sewerage broke down for any length of time. If suddenly we could not flush the toilet, there would be a significant risk that urban centres would quickly become plagued by waste-borne diseases, so proper sanitation systems can also be considered one of life's basic necessities. But what exactly is a 'proper' sanitation system? Is it a requirement, for example, that one defecates into drinking-quality water, as is customary in the developed world? Surely this practice is amongst our greatest shames and indulgences. In the State of Victoria, Australia, where I live, the government is investing billions of dollars in a desalination plant, apparently *so that* Victorians can continue to defecate in drinking-quality water. One might have thought that it would have been more sensible to begin flushing our toilets with greywater, which would save millions of litres of water *every day*, and cost almost *nothing* (e.g., collect shower water in a bucket), but apparently most people in the developed world would find that an intolerable inconvenience. As if we did not have more important things to be spending our money on! While our river systems degrade, we still seem to think that our bourgeois excrement deserves drinking-quality water, an issue upon which posterity is unlikely to judge us kindly. If we only had 50 litres of drinking water per day, however, I suspect that we would not defecate into any of it, and I am sure our excrement would be just fine. Furthermore, we would discover that the world would not come to end.

While I do not think that our existing sewerage systems are on the brink of breakdown, it may be that in hard (or enlightened)

economic times people would move away from dependence on the centralised sanitation infrastructure for self-interested reasons; that is, people would do so not because they would be required to develop non-centralised systems, such as composting toilets, but because they would become aware of the many benefits of doing so. Not only do composting toilets require almost no water and avoid the energy-intensive processing required by centralised systems, they also retain for household use the nutrients from human excrement all of which are currently wasted under existing methods. The human digestive system is far from perfect, meaning that urine and faeces contain many nutrients – nutrients that are valuable for enriching soils, such as nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, carbon, and calcium. When human excrement is composted properly (by mixing it with additional carbon material, such as paper or sawdust) it does not smell, and over time natural biological processes destroy harmful pathogens, making the end product a safe and nutrient-rich form of manure – or, as it is sometimes called, 'humanure' (Jenkins, 2005). In a collapse scenario we would all be growing more of our own food (discussed below), and this will require improving and maintaining soil quality as cheaply and effectively as possible. In such times, and without discretionary income with which to purchase compost and fertilisers, the composting toilet will become an obvious choice. Far from being a regressive step, this would be a positive advance, and one that we would get used to very quickly.

In polite society today one must not talk about human waste. In the midst of a Great Disruption, however, figuring out how to build a composting toilet may well become dinnertime conversation. My apologies if this discussion has offended the bourgeois sensibility.

3.3 *Food*

Of all our basic needs, food might become the most immediately pressing necessity in the context of a Great Disruption. This is because we currently rely on an incredibly complex line of food production and distribution, which means that the system lacks resilience – that is, lacks the ability to withstand shocks. It lacks resilience because when any one link in the production and distribution chain breaks down, the entire system can stop working. One example of this (as outlined in Ch. 9) can be seen from the impacts of the truckers strike during the year 2000 in the UK. The nation realised very quickly how dependent it was on the industrial food system, because when the truckers were not moving and delivering produce, food was not getting to the supermarkets. Before long supermarket officials were calling members of parliament

advising them that without the lines of transport open to restock the shelves, supermarkets had about three days of food. In the words of one commentator, the nation was only 'nine meals from anarchy' (Simms, 2008). The reader is asked to consider how he or she would do if required to provide food for oneself and one's family in the absence of a functioning industrial food system.

It is unlikely, I should think, that the industrial food system would break down immediately or entirely, so for present purposes, being strictly self-sufficient is a goal that is far too extreme to warrant much analysis, and is probably impossible. Even in a dire collapse scenario, we can expect our households to 'import' various foods in various forms, if not from around the world, then certainly from rural contexts. This, in fact, would be an absolute necessity in urban contexts, because growing space simply does not permit anywhere near strict self-sufficiency. A recent study of Toronto, Canada, for example, concluded that the city could *possibly* produce 10% of its own fruit and vegetables, if available public growing space within the city's boundaries were converted to agriculture (MacRae *et al.*, 2010). This implies that even if urban agriculture were enthusiastically embraced on public land, the city would still need to import (or grow on private urban land) 90% of its fruit and vegetables, to say nothing of its meat, minerals, and other goods. While some cities may be able to do considerably better (e.g., Havana), the Toronto study clearly shows that urbanites around the world are extremely dependent on functioning food production and distribution systems. What if there was a long-term shock to those systems? Or what if high oil prices made industrially produced food much more expensive?

These questions are intended to provoke some self-reflection about how we urbanites feed ourselves. At the very least, in a Great Disruption all households and communities would maximise their own food production – in much the same way 'relief gardens' arose during the Great Depression and 'victory gardens' arose during World War II. Necessity is a great motivator. Increasing urban food production would involve digging up lawns and turning them into productive vegetable gardens, and planting fruit trees (which, one should note, take years to provide substantial supplies) in all available spaces. Nature strips would be cultivated; parks would be turned into small farms; suitable roofs would become productive, and generally all food-producing potential would be quickly realised. As noted in the previous chapter, this is essentially what happened in Cuba when the Soviet Union broke down and suddenly stopped providing the Cubans with significant portions of the oil needed to maintain their industrialised food systems. Almost overnight Cuba became a bastion of organic (non-petroleum based)

food production, including in its urban contexts, and it can be hoped that this response would be immediately replicated whenever and wherever the industrial food system experienced a Great Disruption (see Friedrichs, 2013). When there is risk of hunger, the bourgeois aesthetic that appreciates a flourishing 'English lawn' suddenly seems trivial or even distasteful (literally).

Assuming, however, that considerable portions of urban food consumption would always need to be imported – a challenge that would be lessened to some extent, no doubt, by a great re-ruralisation or 'urban flight' – the issue becomes what kind of diets should be expected in the event of a Great Disruption to the industrial food system. First of all, we should get used to supply shocks to various goods; the luxury of popping down to the supermarket to pick up some [insert desired food product here] might become a thing of the past. Imagine, for example, doing without rice or oranges or coffee for months or years on end. A dreadful thought, perhaps, but we would survive perfectly well without these and other such (non-local) luxuries. Secondly, higher oil prices or economic contraction might make many currently affordable food products unaffordable, with similar affects on ordinary food consumption habits. We simply may not be able to afford many of the products some people take for granted today, even if they were available. Moreover, in tight economic times, take-out food and restaurants might largely disappear.

Again, these eventualities, if they were not anticipated, would probably be experienced as a terrible cultural shock, and many would think we had returned to the dark ages. But the purpose of this chapter is to suggest that such supply or price shocks, provided sufficiently nutritious diets were still available, would not be that bad. We might not eat at restaurants anymore, but simple potluck dinners among friends and neighbours would probably become commonplace again. Furthermore, while having 10,000 products waiting for us in supermarkets might be a desirable convenience, life would be quite tolerable (although very different) if there were only 100 food products available, even if they were two or three or four times as expensive as they are today. In such circumstances, our diets would certainly change, and we would probably eat less and waste less; certainly we would eat less meat. But generally we would be fine, and perhaps even better off. That is the general message this chapter seeks to present for consideration. If we were mentally prepared for it, radical simplicity in the terms outlined above would not be that bad.

But what if the lights suddenly went out?

3.4 *Electricity*

An uninterrupted electricity supply, provided at very affordable prices, sits alongside clean tap water, flush toilets, and supermarkets, as one of the defining characteristics of the affluent lifestyle under consideration in this chapter. Electricity is so central to our conception of the good life that we can barely imagine life without it for any length of time. During those very rare occasions when there is a blackout and the electricity supply is cut off, admittedly we manage well enough, although usually it is only for a few minutes or at most a few hours. Perhaps in the midst of a particularly severe natural disaster – which most of us have not experienced – the electricity is off for a few days or a week. But part of the reason we manage so well is that we assume (with some justification) that it is a temporary glitch in the system and that by the time we have thought about finding the torch the lights are back on. When we imagine life without electricity, we think of tribal Africa. But what if, in the developed world, a Great Disruption were to impact on our accustomed electricity supply in unpredictable ways? Would it be the catastrophe we might first think it would be?

It would probably push the present analysis beyond the realm of credibility to speculate about a *sudden and permanent* breakdown of the electricity supply in the developed world. That is highly unlikely. But if the global economy were to continue deteriorating for one reason or another, the developed nations which rely on continued growth would probably find themselves facing very difficult decisions about how to spend their much more limited funds. It may well be that maintaining the power grid would not receive the financial support it required, and this might lead to disruptions in the electricity supply to degrees people have not known for many generations. In an age when so much business activity is facilitated by computers, regular and prolonged cuts to the electricity supply would certainly create many difficulties, at least at first; and many households would be angered if regular blackouts interrupted the cooking of dinner or the watching of their favourite television shows. But in the greater scheme of things – and when we remember that most people on the planet have no electricity at all – would constant interruptions to our supply really be so bad? Are we so delicate?

I wish to suggest that we are not, although again this depends on the frame of mind one brings to experience. If we persist with the assumption that uninterrupted electricity is our God-given right, then a Great Disruption would feel like the sky was falling in. But if we consider such a disruption possible (however unlikely) and prepare for it, at least mentally, then things would not be as tragic as

we might first suppose. Imagine, for example, that long interruptions of a few days or more became relatively commonplace; and imagine further that electricity became so expensive that the use of every appliance became a considered luxury. Even in these admittedly challenging circumstances, I propose that a strong and resilient attitude would mean that people could easily absorb the shocks, without much trouble.

In practical terms, expensive electricity would immediately make us more conscious of our casual consumption habits. Lights would religiously be turned off as we left the room, and the use of appliances, including the television, would be carefully thought through in economic terms. Instead of putting on the heater, we would put on a woollen sweater. This cultural shift, certainly, would bring no real hardship at all, and certain subcultures within the developed world have already developed these habits out of choice. More radical cultural change, however, is the subject of this chapter – but perhaps more radical changes could also be absorbed without much hardship. Suppose, for example, that households – *your* household – could only draw (or afford) one third as much electricity from the grid, with prolonged blackouts regularly but unpredictably interfering with planning. Yes, we might go to bed earlier during blackouts and rise with the sun, and yes, various business transactions would be delayed at considerable inconvenience. But soon enough drastic reductions in the amount and regularity of electricity would become a 'new normal', which even delicate souls would quickly get used to. Most businesses would adapt (and get by just as they did before electricity was taken for granted), as would affluent societies more generally. Life would go on, albeit very differently.

3.5 *Clothing*

The issue of clothing is an interesting one to consider in the context of a 'collapse scenario', because it brings to the surface the fact that consumption is a context-dependent, social practice. By this I mean that people consume things (especially clothing) not only for what they *do*, but also for what they *mean* or *symbolise* within any particular social context. Clearly, the primary function of clothing is to keep us warm, and its secondary function, at least in our state of society, is to cover nakedness. However, those functions are almost forgotten in an age, such as our own, where clothing's purpose has evolved to become primarily about expressing one's identity or social status. Even the so-called 'alternative' crowds, which explicitly reject 'high fashion', nevertheless are engaged in social positioning

through their embrace of an alternative clothing aesthetic. In the context of a Great Disruption, however, the fashion industry would be amongst the first things to die, and I would like to suggest that this would be no great loss at all.

Consider, for example, if we *never again* had the opportunity or discretionary income to buy new clothing. This could well be experienced as a severe identity crisis for those who have come to define themselves through fashionable clothing. But the reality is that if one were mentally prepared for the possibility, no real harm could come from wearing last season's colours or a sewing patch over the knee (Thoreau, 1982). Indeed, I would suppose that most people could survive a decade or even more quite happily without adding to their existing wardrobes, for it is arguably the case that almost everyone in the developed world has superfluous clothing. In a Great Disruption, wearing fashionable clothing would be amongst the least of our concerns, although a new aesthetic would probably develop in which people would try to make the best of what little they had – call it 'post-fashion-collapse chic'. Human beings are a creative bunch, and 'style' would not disappear so much as evolve in a collapse scenario. Nevertheless, human beings will still typically satisfy their most pressing needs first, and in the midst of a deep economic crisis, for example, looking trendy will be of negligible concern. We would salvage clothing diligently and get very good at sewing and mending, and in terms of keeping us warm and covering nakedness, our clothing requirements would be sufficiently met without much trouble.

As Thoreau (1982: 278) once wrote: 'A man who has at length found something to do will not need a new suit to do it in', adding that 'if my jacket and trousers, my hat and shoes, are fit to worship God in, they will do; will they not?' It is an interesting question to consider, if not in relation to the worship of God, necessarily, then at least in relation to living passionately in circumstances of radical simplicity. Old clothes will do, will they not?

3.6 *Transport*

Global conventional oil production has flattened since 2005 (Miller and Sorrell, 2014), and this has been the primary cause of why oil prices over the last decade have increased several times over (see chapters 7 and 8). As new fields struggle to offset the rapid decline in existing fields; as production costs climb radically; and as the developing world continues to increase its demand on the stagnating supplies of oil, price increases can be expected over the long term. As has been argued elsewhere (Heinberg, 2011; Rubin,

2012; Alexander, 2014), globalised, industrial economies are dependent on cheap oil, and when expenditure on oil rises beyond a certain threshold – which some argue is about 5.5% of GDP (Murphy and Hall, 2011a-b) – then oil-dependent economies struggle, often to the point of recession or even depression. This may well be what we are seeing in the world today, and worse things may lie ahead (Tverberg, 2012). Indeed, expensive oil might be one of the primary drivers of the Great Disruption that is being speculated about in this chapter.

What would be the transport implications of a Great Disruption brought about through expensive oil? First of all, plane travel would become a rare luxury enjoyed only by the privileged few. While many will insist that this would be a great loss, I shall beg to differ. I have no doubt that travelling the world and seeing diverse cultures is a mind-expanding experience, but to think that one cannot have equally mind-expanding experiences in one's own locality betrays a failure of imagination. How presumptuous of people to travel to the other side of the world, one might argue, when we have not even seen – *really* seen – our own backyards; our own locality. Just perhaps, unimagined wonders await those who dare to take a closer look. It may well be that there are cheap, low-carbon, and equally fulfilling travel options that are closer to home than we might first think, if only we were to look at the world in a different way.

A second and arguably more important implication of expensive oil would be the impacts it would have on driving. Not only would petrol be more expensive, but a Great Disruption would mean most people would have considerably less discretionary income, and these issues together would mean that people would simply have to drive much less, or not at all. Public transport, where available, would be used much more regularly, probably pushed to the limits of its capacity and beyond. Cycling or walking would immediately become the default mode of transport (bringing with it various health and environmental benefits), and who knows, perhaps even the horse might return to our streets. When driving was necessary and viable, car-pooling would become the norm. There would be no more driving to the corner store to pick up a pint of milk.

A more complex issue related to transport – one that cannot be explored in any detail here – concerns the relocalisation of economy that expensive oil would induce (Rubin, 2009). Currently many people are 'locked in' to car travel by virtue of the fact that they live far away from where they work; and most businesses rely to various extents on global trade. But production is likely to move far closer to home – perhaps return to the home – as oil prices continue to rise and should economies continue to contract (Holmgren, 2012). This

is likely to bring with it various hardships and insecurities, but for present purposes the point is that it would also 'unlock' people (and businesses) from long-distance travel. When our communities are forced to relearn the arts of self-reliance, car culture will disappear even more quickly than it arose. On the upside, all that time commuting could then be put to more useful or fulfilling pursuits re-engaging our local communities and revitalising our local economies.

3.7 *Technology*

Another defining feature of affluent societies is the advanced technologies that we have at our disposal, which generally are available at very affordable prices. In Australia, for example, the income procured from working less than two hours at the minimum wage can purchase a DVD player; and functioning televisions are often left out on the street simply because they are not of the new flat-screen variety. In a global and historical context, do we realise how rich we are?

In the homes of ordinary middle-class families there is an array of technologies that would have baffled people only a few generations ago. Furthermore, today it is not unusual even for children to have (and to expect) the most advanced technologies, such as iPods, Xboxes, and mobile phones. Computers, microwave ovens, dishwashers, stereos, kitchen gadgets, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, clothes dryers, air-conditioning units – all these things and so much more can be found in the typical homes of what I am calling the middle class. These technologies are so readily available that it might be hard to imagine life without them. But let us try.

Doing without computers is perhaps the hardest to imagine, because modern life is so extremely dependant on them. Let us remember, however, that people survived quite well in the 1950s without computers, so there is no reason to think that life without them would mean returning to the Stone Age. Indeed, so much time is currently spent in front of computers today that their disappearance (or huge limitation of accessibility) could well be a positive advance, forcing people to engage in more face-to-face communication and probably to spend more time outside.

The technologies in computers are so sophisticated that they arguably depend for their production on a functioning industrial economy, so it could be that a Great Disruption makes computers either unavailable or shockingly expensive. The same might apply to many other technologies currently taken for granted. With a little

Stoic resilience, however, I feel we could generally adjust to their absence without much difficulty. I suspect the washing machine might remain an extremely valuable labour-saving device, and our fridges would be one of the last things to go; but life would go on even if these things became rare luxuries; and life would certainly go on if we had to do without mobile phones, microwave ovens, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, etc. In exchange for stereos (wonderful though they are) we would probably enjoy the greater pleasure of live music. It would be a far 'simpler' existence, no doubt, but we would survive well enough if we managed the transition wisely. Once again, being mentally prepared is the first step toward healthy adaptation – a step worth taking, I contend, even if such radical simplicity never arrives in our lifetimes.

Perhaps the most worrying aspect of a life with less technological capability concerns renewable energy systems. Like computers, solar panels and huge wind turbines probably depend for their production on a functioning and globalised industrial economy, so in the event of a Great Disruption we should not assume that the production of renewable energy systems would continue unaffected, however much we would benefit from them. Nuclear energy probably depends to an even greater extent on a functioning industrial economy, so in the event of a 'crash' nuclear energy may not be an option (supposing it was considered desirable).

For want of space I will not open up these cans of worms any further, other than to note that responding to climate change depends on greatly reducing the amount of energy we use and producing what little energy we do use from renewable sources (Trainer, 2013a-b). In the absence of hi-tech renewable energy systems, our alternatives would probably be either living like the Amish or continuing to burn fossil fuels – and we all know which of those alternatives is more likely to be chosen. By now the reader could also guess which of those alternatives I would advocate, but a better path still would be managing to take the best things from an Amish-style existence (adding a strong dose of alternative hedonism, perhaps) while at the same time taking advantage of hi-tech renewable energy systems and other 'appropriate' technologies that are available and affordable.

3.8 *Television and Social Media*

How a culture spends its leisure says a lot about the nature of the society. Currently, most Westerners spend more time watching television than doing anything else, other than sleeping and

working; often several more hours each day are spent on Facebook. One does not have to be a 'high brow' elitist to question whether this is really the best use of our freedom. Technologies like television and Facebook are not good in themselves. Like fire, each of them is either good or bad depending on how much of it there is and how it is used. Should a Great Disruption take these things away from us, I contend that in this respect at least our cultures should be decidedly enriched. Suddenly we would find ourselves having to fill our time in other, less passive ways, but far from being bored, we would discover that there was much important and meaningful work to be done building a new civilisation.

A more complex issue, related to the discussion of computers above, concerns the Internet. As transport gets more difficult and costly, it may be that electronic communication becomes more important than ever, especially with respect to distributing knowledge. Without exploring this issue further, let us hope that we are able to exploit the best of our technologies, while avoiding their seductive pitfalls. As ever, the notion of 'appropriate technology' and 'appropriate use' thereof are critically important.

3.9 *Discretionary Income*

A more general point about the lifestyle implications of a Great Disruption pertains to discretionary income. In developed nations today, average wages are well above subsistence levels, meaning that most people have discretionary income to spend on non-essential goods and services, like alcohol, movie tickets, take-away food, books, magazines, fashionable clothing, the occasional holiday, etc. The huge economic consequences of a Great Disruption, however, would mean that the discretionary income we take for granted today might well disappear completely, or be reduced to extremely minimal levels. No longer would people be able to afford to pay others for 'services' like cleaning, cooking, accounting, repairs, etc. Such work and much more would return to the household. The ordinary person would become a 'jack-of-all-trades', or at least be able to barter various skills for others in an informal economy. Since the existing division of labour in market economies has left most of us with very narrow skill sets, having to do things ourselves would require a great 're-skilling', a culture-shift already underway in the Transition movement (Hopkins, 2008). It seems to be the case that human beings get considerable enjoyment from being self-reliant, for learning life skills and applying them can be a very satisfying process. This means that the inability to pay for services may often come with a significant silver lining.

The same economic forces that would reduce discretionary income for 'services' would also mean that we would have little or no spare income with which to buy non-essential 'goods'. Currently if we find ourselves desperately in need of something, it will probably be available at a reasonably affordable price in a store nearby. In a collapse scenario this luxury will disappear, with supply chains being disrupted and prices (relative to discretionary income) going through the roof. This situation would signify the dawn of the 'salvage economy' and the 'sharing economy', both of which may already be upon us. Should we need something and be unable to purchase it, our options would be: (1) reconsider whether we *really* need it, and perhaps do without it; (2) salvage it; or (3) borrow it from someone in our community (and perhaps lend them something in return). For example, rather than everyone on the street having pruning tools (or some other good), perhaps only one or two people will have them, or perhaps a community tool shed will be set up so that everyone has access to tools even if there were very few tools in the community. This would greatly increase the 'efficiency' of our consumption, because currently many if not most of our purchased goods sit wastefully idle for most of their life. Sharing more of our stuff would not be difficult.

Similarly, it should go without saying that, in a collapse scenario, all luxury spending would essentially disappear completely, also without any real hardship. Someone might regret not being able to afford a new kitchen, to replace the worn carpet, or to holiday in Thailand, but it would be their own fault if they considered this a good reason to despair. Surely the good life consists in something other than merely the consumption of luxury goods? To again draw upon the words of Thoreau (1982: 269): 'Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensible, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind', and on that basis Thoreau (1982: 290) urged people not be like the man who complained of 'hard times because he could not afford to buy him[self] a crown'.

3.10 *Public Services*

In closing the analysis, a few words should be offered about the decline in public services that would no doubt follow from a Great Disruption. I have been assuming that a Great Disruption would have huge economic implications, and it follows that this would affect the ability of governments to provide many public services, at least to the extent we might be accustomed to today. With a much smaller spending capacity (due to a contracting economy),

governments would have to radically rethink their budgets, and this could well have significant implications for ordinary people. Many social provisions – such as unemployment benefits, health benefits or subsidies, investment in public infrastructure or the arts, etc. – might well disappear or be greatly reduced, just when they are needed most. Other public services or provisions would also receive much less financial support, such as fire services, police forces, local councils, environmental protection programmes, etc. This would obviously change the nature of society greatly, and I will not suggest that the changes would necessarily be absorbed without suffering. But it can be argued that dependence on a strong state has been one reason the strength of many communities have been weakened in recent decades; after all, one might feel less obliged to care for one's poor or elderly neighbours if that is considered something that the state should be doing. While I do not want to take that argument too far, in the absence of a strong welfare state communities would have to care for their own again, and this challenge could well revitalise the spirit of neighbourliness and solidarity that has been lost in many consumer cultures today (Lane, 2000). New community organisations and systems would have to be established to deal with crime, consumer waste, infrastructure repairs, or to feed the hungry. We would end up with very different, highly localised and self-governing communities, but all the hardship this transition would bring with it might ultimately be worth it. It just might give us a more direct, authentic, and participatory democracy, and that is probably a necessary step along the path toward creating a sustainable democracy.

Of course, it would be infinitely better if we created a sustainable democracy *in advance* of a Great Disruption.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to describe in some detail what a life of radical simplicity might look like and to suggest that radical simplicity would not be that bad, provided the transition was anticipated and wisely negotiated. Indeed, the subtext of this chapter has been that such a transition would actually be in our own, immediate self-interests, although above I merely tried to provoke consideration over the slightly less ambitious thesis – that radical simplicity simply would not be that bad.

By way of review, the elements of radical simplicity which I have outlined above include: having only 50 litres of clean water per day; using a composting toilet; growing food in every available space and dealing with less variety and more expensive food; consuming

about one third the amount of electricity currently used and dealing with regular blackouts; never buying new clothes; using only public transport or bicycles to get around and never flying; doing without many technologies, such as mobile phones, vacuum cleaners, microwave ovens, stereos, dishwashers, clothes dryers, and possibly also washing machines, computers, and fridges; watching no television and having no time for Facebook; having little or no discretionary income to spend on non-essential goods or services; and, finally, dealing with the absence of many public services that are currently taken for granted. Undoubtedly, if ordinary Western-style 'consumers' suddenly found themselves living a lifestyle of radical simplicity, they would feel greatly impoverished and suffer accordingly. But if people were to accept that the meaning of life does not consist in the consumption of material things, then radical simplicity should be no obstacle to living a happy and fulfilling life. Given that consumption is a social practice, however, it may be extremely difficult to voluntarily embrace radical simplicity in advance of its external imposition, but we now have more than enough reasons to be moving in the direction of voluntary simplicity and trying to drag culture along with us (Alexander, 2009; Alexander and Ussher, 2012).

I can anticipate at least two objections to this analysis, the first coming from the optimists and the second from the pessimists. From the optimistic perspective, people might object that my analysis is predicated on far too gloomy an outlook; that the chances of radical simplicity being imposed upon the developed world by some Great Disruption are so slim that we need not bother ourselves with thought-experiments like mine. This objection assumes that we will always have enough food, water, electricity, technologies, discretionary income, and public services to maintin the existing standard of living. To these optimists I would respond by noting that our planet is struggling to withstand the impacts of one billion 'consumers', and so the idea that this way of life could be globalised to nine or ten billion people over coming decades (which seems to be the goal of 'development') is dangerously unrealistic, even absurd. At some stage our ecosystems will declare their 'limits to growth', and indeed they are already in the process of doing so (Meadows *et al.*, 2004; Turner, 2012). The next few decades are not going to look like the last few decades (Friedrichs, 2013), and if the developed world does not voluntarily move toward a less consumption-orientated way of life, then it would seem reasonable enough to expect that such a way of life will be involuntarily imposed upon us. It is only a question of timing. Moreover, even if radical simplicity never arrives in our lifetimes (or ever), I hope that the analysis above might nevertheless have brought into sharper

focus our relationship to the material world. When we take a second look at our lives (Burch, 2012), we could well discover that affluence is much less important than we might have first thought it was, and that the best things in life really are free.

From the pessimistic perspective, an objection to my analysis could be that a Great Disruption is indeed in store for us, but that the impacts are going to be far more tragic than those I have described. In other words, it might be objected that I have romanticised radical simplicity, and that radical simplicity actually means suffering, plain and simple. This objection, however, is based on a misunderstanding of my project. I understand very well that a Great Disruption could play out in various ways, including the possibility that famine, disease, and violence would lead to widespread poverty and death. In such circumstances, of course, there would be no 'upside of down', and certainly a much darker analysis could have been written. But from the outset I distinguished radical simplicity from poverty and have made no attempt to paint true poverty in rosy colours. Nobody wants to be cold, hungry, and sick. Radical simplicity, however, as I have described it, means a *secure but biophysically minimal material standard of living*, and my purpose has been to defend the thesis that life would not be so bad if we found ourselves without many of the comforts of middle-class life, provided our basic needs were still met.

In the end, the view of the world outlined above arises out of a particular conception of what it means to be human. It poses the question, 'What is it that makes life worth living?' and answers that question by saying, 'Something *other* than the limitless consumption of material things.' Consumption just does not satisfy our universal craving for meaning, and the sooner the world realises this the better it will be for everyone and the planet. If we do not choose to learn this, eventually we will be taught it.

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