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REIMAGINING THE GOOD LIFE BEYOND CONSUMER CULTURE

A revolution in consciousness

Lately in the wreck of a Californian ship, one of the passengers fastened a belt about him with 200 pounds of gold in it with which he was found afterwards at the bottom. Now, as he was sinking, had he the gold? Or had the gold him?

– John Ruskin

1. Introduction

In the most developed regions of the world today, decades of unprecedented economic growth have all but solved the economic problem of how to attain the necessities of life and, indeed, have resulted in most people living lives of relative luxury and comfort. Although a degree of poverty remains in these regions, exacerbated in some places by the global financial crisis, on the whole ordinary people are materially wealthy when considered in the context of all known history or when compared with the poorest billions on the planet today, who still struggle for a bare subsistence. As Clive Hamilton (2003: *xv*) puts it, ‘Most Westerners today are prosperous beyond the dreams of their grandparents’. The houses of typical families are bigger than ever, and they are each filled with untold numbers of consumer products, such as multiple TVs, stereos, computers, mobile phones, racks of unused clothes, washing machines, fridges, dishwashers, dryers, vacuum cleaners, kitchen gadgets, etc. These products often overflow into garages or hired storage rooms to create spaces full of accumulated ‘stuff’ – or else they conveniently disappear into a growing stream of waste that ends up in landfill. Houses are often centrally heated and air-

conditioned, with spare rooms and two or more cars parked outside. Average wages are well above subsistence levels, meaning that most people have spare income to spend on comforts and luxuries such as alcohol, take-away food, going to the movies, fashionable clothes or furniture, books, taking the occasional holiday, etc. People generally have access to a variety of public services, including free primary and secondary education. On top of all this, democratic political systems are firmly, albeit imperfectly, established, the water is clean, and almost nobody goes hungry.

All this is indicative of vast material wealth, which it will not be suggested is a bad thing, in and of itself. But it is a prosperity which has proven extremely easy to take for granted, leaving many in the global middle class still feeling deprived despite their plenty (see generally, Hamilton and Denniss, 2005). It is also clear that universalising Western-style lifestyles would be ecologically catastrophic (Smith and Positano, 2010), which calls the legitimacy of those lifestyles deeply into question. Equally challenging to the consumer way of life is the growing body of social research indicating that affluence cannot be relied on as a path to happiness (Alexander, 2012). In other words, it seems that huge increases in material wealth have stopped contributing significantly to individual and social wellbeing in affluent societies, and indeed are beginning to undermine the ecological foundations of wellbeing (Kubiszewski *et al.*, 2013). It is troubling, therefore, to see that even the richest nations are still focused primarily on maximising GDP. As Thoreau (1982: 261) would say, '[We] labor under a mistake'.

Is it possible that the majority of people living in the most affluent societies today have reached a stage in their economic development where the process of getting richer is now causing the very problems that they seem to think getting richer will solve? There are indeed grounds for thinking that this is so. Consumer culture, which every day is being globalised further, is failing to fulfil its promise of a better life. It has even begun taking away many of the things upon which wellbeing depends, such as community life, a work/life balance, spiritual and aesthetic experience, and a healthy natural environment (Lane, 2000). All this makes it hard to avoid the confronting questions: Is more consumption and production really the solution to these problems? Or is there, as Ted Trainer (2010) puts it, a 'Simpler Way'?

This chapter examines the simpler way known as 'voluntary simplicity', which can be preliminarily understood as a way of life in which people choose to restrain or reduce their material consumption, while at the same time seeking a higher quality of life. By addressing issues of definition, justification, and practice, this chapter aims to sketch an outline of this post-consumerist

movement by bringing together many of its central elements. There is a desperate need for alternative practices and narratives of consumption beyond those prevalent in the most developed regions of the world today, and it will be argued that voluntary simplicity provides an alternative that is both coherent and attractive. The chapter concludes by considering some objections that can be levelled against voluntary simplicity.

1.1. *Structure and simplicity*

Before beginning the substantive analysis there is one important objection that needs to be anticipated at once, to avoid misunderstanding the nature of the present examination. Often people accuse advocates of voluntary simplicity of failing to appreciate structural issues that function to ‘lock’ many people into high consumption lifestyles. The criticism is that practising voluntary simplicity is difficult or impossible within the constraints of growth-based economies, such that ‘lifestyle’ responses to environmental and social justice issues are misguided and ineffective. It would follow that the real changes needed have less to do with our consumption practices, and more to do with our political and economic structures that make sustainable consumption so very hard. So far as it goes, that criticism is extremely powerful, which is to say, it is clear that mere ‘lifestyle’ responses to the overlapping crises facing the world today will not resolve those crises. Too many simplicity theorists give the impression that lifestyle change is enough, and for this they are justifiably reproached for being naïve.

Nevertheless, I contend that until there is a culture that embraces the ethos of voluntary simplicity at the personal or household level, there will never be sufficient social forces to induce the necessary structural changes that can support sustainable living. As it turns out, this is a point that is often lost on those hard-nosed critics who emphasise the importance of ‘structure’. While I accept, without reservation, that justice and sustainability demand deep structural changes and that lifestyle responses alone are an inadequate strategy for societal transformation, the nuanced position I take is that it is nevertheless critical that a post-consumerist culture emerges to create the social conditions for the necessary structural change to take root. I do not discuss structural issues at length in this chapter, but the sub-text of this chapter (defended elsewhere, e.g., Alexander, 2011; Alexander, 2013) is that the structural changes required will seem most coherent when seen through the lens of voluntary simplicity. In short, before we can

expect the necessary structural changes – whether produced from the ‘top down’ or driven ‘from below’ – there needs to be a cultural revolution in attitudes toward Western-style consumption practices, and I maintain that voluntary simplicity is the most coherent lens through which to frame that necessary revolution. Until we reimagine the good life beyond consumer culture, it will be unclear why moving away from a consumer-based culture and a growth-based economy is a good idea. As Aristotle (1981) once wrote: ‘A person who is going to make a fruitful inquiry into the question of the best political [or economic] arrangement, must first set out clearly what the most choiceworthy life is. For if that is unclear, the best political [and economic] arrangement must also be unclear.’ This chapter seeks to outline why, especially at this moment in history, voluntary simplicity is a ‘choiceworthy’ life.

1.2. Defining voluntary simplicity

Voluntary simplicity is an oppositional living strategy that rejects the high-consumption, materialistic lifestyles of consumer cultures and affirms what is often just called ‘the simple life’ or ‘downshifting’. Sometimes called ‘the quiet revolution’, this approach to life involves providing for material needs as simply and directly as possible, minimising expenditure on consumer goods and services, and directing progressively more time and energy toward pursuing non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning. This generally means accepting a lower income and a lower level of consumption, in exchange for more time and freedom to pursue other life goals, such as community or social engagements, more time with family, artistic or intellectual projects, more fulfilling employment, political participation, sustainable living, spiritual exploration, reading, contemplation, relaxation, pleasure-seeking, love, and so on – none of which need to rely on money, or much money. Various defended by its advocates on personal, social, humanitarian, and ecological grounds (discussed below), voluntary simplicity is predicated on the assumption that human beings can live meaningful, free, happy, and infinitely diverse lives, while consuming no more than a sustainable and equitable share of nature. That, at least, is the challenging ideal which seems to motivate and guide many of its advocates and practitioners (see generally, Alexander, 2009).

According to this philosophy of living, personal and social progress is measured not by the conspicuous display of wealth or status, but by increases in the qualitative richness of daily living, the cultivation of relationships, and the development of social,

intellectual, aesthetic, and/or spiritual potentials. As Duane Elgin (1982) has famously defined it, voluntary simplicity is ‘a manner of living that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich, ... a deliberate choice to live with less in the belief that more life will be returned to us in the process’. According to the most prominent historian of the Simplicity Movement, David Shi (2007), the primary attributes of the simple life include: thoughtful frugality; a suspicion of luxuries; a reverence and respect for nature; a desire for self-sufficiency; a commitment to conscientious rather than conspicuous consumption; a privileging of creativity and contemplation over possessions; an aesthetic preference for minimalism and functionality; and a sense of responsibility for the just uses of the world’s resources. More concisely, Shi (2007: 131) defines voluntary simplicity as ‘enlightened material restraint’.

Advocates are quick to point out, however, that voluntary simplicity does not mean living in poverty, becoming an ascetic monk, or indiscriminately renouncing all the advantages of science and technology. It does not involve regressing to a primitive state or becoming a self-righteous puritan. And it is not some escapist fad reserved for saints, hippies, or eccentric outsiders. Rather, advocates of simplicity insist that by examining afresh our relationships with money, material possessions, the planet, ourselves, and each other, ‘the simple life’ of voluntary simplicity is about discovering the freedom and contentment that comes with knowing how much consumption is truly ‘enough’. Arguably, this is a theme that has something to say to everyone, especially those in consumer societies today who are every day bombarded with thousands of cultural and institutional messages insisting that ‘more is always better’. Voluntary simplicity is a philosophy of living that advocates a counter-cultural position based on notions of sufficiency, frugality, moderation, restraint, localism, and mindfulness.

The notion of living simply, of course, is not new (see Alexander and McLeod, 2014). The virtues of moderation and enlightened material restraint have been integral to almost all ancient wisdom and spiritual traditions throughout history, with prominent advocates including Lao Tzu, Confucius, Buddha, Diogenes, the Stoics, Jesus, Mohammad, St Francis, the Quakers, John Ruskin, William Morris, the New England Transcendentalists (especially Thoreau), the European Bohemians, Tolstoy, Gandhi, Lenin, Richard Gregg, Helen and Scott Nearing, and many of the indigenous peoples around the world. But in postmodernity, where consumption seems to be glorified and luxury admired as never before, voluntary simplicity arguably acquires a special significance.

2. Misconceptions about Voluntary Simplicity

So as not to be misunderstood, it may be worthwhile spending a few moments clarifying some points made in preceding sections by distinguishing voluntary simplicity from what it is not.

2.1. *Glorification of poverty?*

Voluntary simplicity can be misinterpreted sometimes as glorifying or romanticising poverty, a myth encouraged perhaps by the fact that some of the more extreme proponents of simplicity – e.g., Diogenes, St Francis, Gandhi, etc. – did indeed live lives of staggering material renunciation. Such extremism can be alienating if it is considered to be a defining or necessary feature of the simple life, which it is not. There is also a risk that advocates of simplicity will be understood to be downplaying the plight of those in the world who genuinely live lives oppressed by material deprivation. It is of the utmost importance, then, to be perfectly clear on this point: voluntary simplicity does not mean poverty. Poverty, in its various dimensions, is debilitating and humiliating. Voluntary simplicity, on the other hand, can be understood as an empowering expression of freedom; a choice to live with fewer market commodities in the belief that a better life, and a better world, will result. It is about the importance of understanding and attaining material *sufficiency*, while at the same time creating a life rich in its non-material dimensions.

2.2. *Necessarily agrarian? Just for hippies?*

Living simply does not necessarily imply leaving the city to live in the country; nor does it mean becoming a hippie or joining a commune. Although some may find that an agrarian existence is a very good and natural way to live, it will not be attractive (or available) to everyone; nor will living in a hippie commune. Indeed, learning how to live more simply and sustainably in an increasingly urbanised world is surely one of the greatest challenges of our age, especially since legal and political institutions and social infrastructure make urban simple living, especially, much more difficult than it needs to be. For now, suffice it to note that voluntary simplicity is not synonymous with the ‘back-to-the-land’ movement or the counter-cultures that arose in the 1960s and 70s. It should be added, however, that those movements do share some common ideals with voluntary simplicity, such as anti-consumerism, self-

sufficiency, the celebration of life, a deep respect for nature, and non-violent resistance to unjust features of society.

2.3. Primitive, regressive, anti-technology?

Voluntary simplicity, furthermore, does not mean indiscriminately renouncing all the advantages of science and technology. It does not mean living in a cave, giving up all the benefits of electricity, or rejecting modern medicine. But it does question the assumption that science and technology are always the most reliable paths to health, happiness, and sustainability. It is certainly better to accept rather than reject the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and industry of humankind offer – provided, of course, that they are genuine advantages. But often with such ‘modern improvements’, as Thoreau (1982: 306) warned, there is ‘an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance’. Voluntary simplicity, then, involves taking a thoughtfully sceptical stance in relation to technology, rejecting those aspects that seem to cost more than they come to, all things considered. Clearly, this is far from being primitive or regressive. Just perhaps our modern technocratic societies will one day come to see that there is a sophistication and elegance to the clothesline, the bicycle, and the water tank that the dryer, the automobile, and the desalination plant decidedly lack. On a similar note, perhaps it will one day be widely accepted that there is a certain primitiveness to technological gimmicks, or that a blind faith in science can itself be ‘anti-progress’. In the words of the great Leonardo da Vinci: ‘Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication’ (see Deger and Gibson, 2007: 262).

3. Justifying Voluntary Simplicity

With the definitional overview complete, it is now time to consider what reasons or incentives there might be for choosing a life of voluntary simplicity. The following discussion is divided into four (somewhat overlapping) sections – personal, communitarian, humanitarian, and ecological.

3.1. Personal

Money provides power in the market – power to purchase and consume desired commodities, whether goods or services. Consumption, by satisfying market preferences, is supposed to lead

to wellbeing. In essence, this is the economic foundation of consumer culture. Its fundamental prescription is that people should seek wellbeing in higher incomes and more consumption. The problem, however, is that the pursuit of income and consumption can easily distract people from what is best in their lives, functioning to lock people into a 'work-and-spend' cycle that has no end and attains no lasting satisfaction (see, e.g., Robinson, 2007). Many simplicity theorists argue that if people in affluent societies are prepared to rethink their relationships with money and possessions, they just might be able to free up more time and energy for the pursuit of what truly inspires them and makes them happy, whatever that may be. As Richard Gregg (2009: 112) put it, living simply means 'an ordering and guiding of our energy and desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure a greater abundance of life in other directions'. In this way voluntary simplicity can be seen to offer enhanced meaning and satisfaction in people's lives. The message, in more technical terms, is that lowering 'standard of living' (measured by income/consumption) can actually lead to increased 'quality of life' (measured by subjective wellbeing). It is important to emphasise, however, that this is not just about living a happier or more pleasurable life; it can also be about living more deeply and meaningfully in some existentialist, even spiritual, sense.

I begin with the personal incentives for living simply not because they are the most important, necessarily, but because I believe that if the Simplicity Movement is to expand, it must be shown that living simply does not tend to generate any significant sense of deprivation, but actually frees people from an insidiously addictive consumerism and an unhealthy relation with money and possessions. Rather than dedicating one's life to the pursuit of ever-higher levels of income and consumption, those who live simply are more likely to have a balanced working life or even work part-time, and they are more likely to seek fulfilling employment and accept a modest income, rather than get too hung about securing the highest income possible. With less time devoted to acquiring expensive commodities, 'voluntary simplifiers' (as they are sometimes called) tend to have more time to spend with friends and family, and more time to spend pursuing their private passions or civic duties. The point here is that disciplined and enlightened moderation with respect to one's material life does not tend to give rise to any sense of deprivation or sacrifice, but ultimately gives rise to a happiness, a contentment, and even a freedom significantly greater than that which is ordinarily known in the 'work-and-spend' cycle of consumer culture. In short, many people are drawn to voluntary

simplicity because they want to escape the vapidness of the rat race and live more with less (see generally, Alexander and Ussher, 2012).

3.2. *Communitarian*

There are also social or communitarian incentives for embracing a life of voluntary simplicity. For example, when an individual embraces voluntary simplicity by working less, this may well benefit the individual (e.g., by creating more leisure and reducing stress). But those individual benefits will often have flow-on effects that benefit others too, such as creating more time and energy for family and friends, or more time and energy to enjoy one's civic or neighbourly responsibilities. As Cafaro and Gambrel (2009: 11) maintain, 'simplicity can help us develop social unions that enrich our lives. By fostering contentment with our status and possessions and reducing levels of dissatisfaction, simplicity can help minimise social tension and build up social capital.'

Social critics argue that community engagement is often pushed to the side by the demands of a high-consumption life. David Myers (2000) coined the term 'social recession' to describe essentially this phenomenon. A society might be booming economically, but dedicating too much attention to consumption and the acquisition of wealth, to the detriment of family and community life, can lead to an individualistic society of frantic, agitated, and alienated egos. Mark Burch (2000: 65) sums up this point exactly: 'The brutally "simple" fact is that if the quality of our family and community relationships has suffered, it's because we've chosen to do something else with our time.' What these and other thinkers propose is that affluent societies would be better off if they spent less time accumulating and consuming, and more time cultivating family and community relationships and increasing their civic engagements. The simple act of sharing something with neighbours rather than each having their own is a good example. Which community is richer: The one where each has their own? Or the community that has less but shares?

3.3. *Humanitarian*

Although there are indeed many personal and communitarian incentives for adopting voluntary simplicity, it would be an impoverished ethics that sought to justify itself solely in relation to personal or community self-interest. For that reason, it is important to recognise that there are also broader *humanitarian* reasons for

adopting voluntary simplicity. In a world where extreme poverty exists amidst such plenty, living simply can be understood as a personal response to the highly skewed distributions of wealth in the world, a response that seeks as far as possible not to be implicated in a system of distribution perceived by many to be grossly unjust. In a similar vein, living simply is also understood to be an act of sharing, an act of human solidarity, by trying to resist high levels of consumption that cannot be shared by all.

We live in a world of limited resources. There is only so much stuff to go around, and with the global population expected to exceed nine billion around the middle of this century, competition over resources can be expected to intensify greatly. One obvious way to share with others, then, is simply to take less – to try to take only what one needs to live a dignified life, and no more. Taking less may not be easy, of course, especially in cultures that celebrate extravagance. But it is hard to imagine how the problems of poverty will ever be solved if the materially rich and materially comfortable continue seeking ever-higher levels of consumption. Furthermore, economic growth and the so-called ‘trickle down effect’ is not a solution upon which we should rely for humanitarian relief (Woodward and Simms, 2006). Challenging though it may be to admit, a necessary part of the solution to poverty involves those in the global consumer class showing some enlightened, compassionate restraint in relation to their material lives. As Gandhi once said, ‘Live simply so that others may simply live’.

3.4. *Ecological*

As well as personal, communitarian, and humanitarian reasons for living simply, there are, of course, also *environmental* reasons. It has long been recognised that consumption and ecological impact are closely linked, and from this correlation it follows that reducing consumption can be an effective means of reducing ecological impact. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that simpler living, in the sense of reduced and more efficient consumption, is not just to be desired but is necessary to save our planet from (further) grave ecological harm (Trainer, 2010). This is especially so in the most developed nations, where lifestyles of reduced consumption, supported by structural change (as noted above), will be a necessary part of any transition to a sustainable future. This has been acknowledged in several of the leading international policy documents on the environment which have emerged in recent decades. Agenda 21, for example – the main policy document to emerge from the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 – argued that ‘the major

cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in the industrialised countries'. This document called for the following actions:

- a) To promote patterns of consumption and production that reduce environmental stress and will meet the basic needs of humanity.
- b) To develop a better understanding of the role of consumption and how to bring about more sustainable consumption patterns.

In more recent years, this message has been widely affirmed. When the World Summit convened in Johannesburg in 2002, 'changing consumption and production patterns' was identified as one of three 'overarching objectives' for sustainable development. What these and other reports imply is that fundamental lifestyle change with respect to private consumption is one of the main preconditions to ecological sustainability. But as yet, the international and political responses to sustainability issues have been grossly inadequate – which again highlights the importance of driving change from the personal, household, and community levels (Hopkins, 2008; Trainer, 2010). That could be considered the 'political' dimension of voluntary simplicity, an issue discussed elsewhere (see Alexander, 2011; Alexander, 2013).

4. Practising Voluntary Simplicity

It is all very well to theorise about the simple life – to debate definitions and evaluate justifications – but theory is empty if it is not grounded upon practice. Accordingly, the following sections seek to enrich the preceding theoretical discussions by providing a brief exposition of how the idea of voluntary simplicity is actually *lived* by participants in the movement.

4.1. A non-universalist disclaimer

Any discussion of the practice of simplicity ought to begin by acknowledging that there is not one way to live simply. There is no Doctrine or Code of Simplicity to follow, as such; there is no Method or Equation of Simplicity into which we can plug the facts of our lives and be told how to live. That is precisely what the idea cannot

do. Voluntary simplicity, it could be said, is more about questions than answers, in the sense that practising simplicity calls for creative interpretation and personalised application. It is not for ‘experts’, therefore, or for anyone, to prescribe universal rules on how to live simply. We each live unique lives and we each find ourselves in different situations, with different capabilities, and different responsibilities. Accordingly, the practice of simplicity by one person, in one situation, may very well involve different things to a different person, in a different situation. Furthermore, simple living is not so much a destination as it is an ongoing creative process. But, as I have implied, I do not think that this practical indeterminacy is an objection to the idea.

With that non-universalist disclaimer noted, a few general remarks will now be made on what a simple life might look like in practice and how one might begin to live it (see also, Alexander, Trainer, and Ussher, 2012).

4.2. *Money*

Although practising simplicity is much more than just being frugal with money and consuming less – it is also a state of mind – in a market economy spending wisely plays a central role. In *Your Money or Your Life*, Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin (1999) provide elaborate financial exercises for readers to undertake which seek to provoke reflection on the real value of money and the real cost of things. Such exercises may sound mundane and a bit pointless – most people believe themselves to be careful, rational spenders – but if they are carried out with precision the results may well surprise, and perhaps even shock. One might find that seemingly little purchases add up to an inordinate amount over a whole year, which may raise new and important questions about whether the money might have been better spent elsewhere, not at all, or exchanged for more time by working less. Then consider how much would be spent in each category over 10 years. The aim of this exercise is not to create tightwads, as such, but smart consumers who are conscious of the time/life/ecological cost of their purchases. After all, as Thoreau (1982: 286) would insist, ‘The cost of a thing is the amount of... life which is required to be exchanged for it’. When exploring voluntary simplicity in this light, one might well find that some reductions and changes to spending habits, rather than inducing any sense of deprivation, will instead be life-affirming.

When it comes to spending money in accordance with the ethos of voluntary simplicity, it is also important to bear in mind Vicki Robin’s profound democratic insight: that how we spend our money

is how we vote on what exists in the world. Purchasing something sends a message, consciously or unconsciously, to the marketplace, affirming the product, its ecological impact, its process of manufacture, etc. Simple living, therefore, involves shopping as conscientiously as possible, directing one's monetary 'votes' into socially and ecologically responsible avenues and boycotting irresponsible avenues. A tension can arise here, of course, because shopping conscientiously or 'ethically' tends to be, but is not always, more expensive (a point deserving of more analysis than can be offered here). If it is true, however, that market expenditure is a vote on what exists in the world then it would seem that the global consumer-class has the potential to become a non-violent revolutionary class and change the world, partly through changing its spending habits. *Simplicity is the new spectre haunting capitalism*. Never before have so many people had the option of casting off the chains of consumer culture, stepping out of the rat race, and living (and spending) in opposition to the existing order of things. Money is power, and with this power comes responsibility.

4.3. *Housing*

As noted in the last chapter, housing is typically life's greatest single expense, so those living simply must think especially carefully about where they live and why, and how much of their lives they are prepared to spend seeking a 'nicer' place to live. Exactly what kind of shelter does one need to live well and to be free? Obviously, we must answer this question for ourselves – at least, within the constraints of our own socio-economic context – but again the words of Thoreau (1982: 290) might give us a moment's pause: 'Most people appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbours have'. The 'McMansions' which are so prevalent in the suburbs of North America and increasingly elsewhere are extremely resource-intensive and very expensive. In opposition to that trend, participants in the Simplicity Movement are exploring alternative ways to accommodate themselves and their families, by embracing smaller, much more modest and energy-efficient homes. In particular, some are exploring co-housing arrangements, 'green design', and other forms of low-impact development, including eco-villages. More radical participants are building their own straw bale or mud houses, making shacks out of abandoned or second-hand materials, or converting shipping containers into homes.

4.4. *Clothing*

The historic purpose of clothing, as Thoreau pointed out, was to keep us warm and, in time, for reasons of modesty. Today its dominant purpose seems to be fashion and the conspicuous display of wealth and status. People can, of course, spend thousands and thousands of dollars on clothing, if they wish. But those who live simply tend to ‘dress down’, wearing functional, often second-hand clothing. Such clothing can be generally obtained at a minimal expense. Dressing down, it should be noted, does not necessarily imply giving up ‘style’ or puritanically denying self-expression through what one wears. But it does seem to imply rejecting high fashion (and all its stands for) in favour of some ‘alternative’ aesthetic. In this way, dressing down can be understood to be an outward statement of simplicity; an effort, however small, to express aesthetically one’s opposition to consumer culture. Hundreds of billions of dollars are spent each year in the fashion industry. Just imagine if even half of that money were redirected toward green energy or humanitarian initiatives. We would lose so little and gain so much. Again, how we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world.

4.5. *Food*

Eating locally, eating organically, eating out in moderation, eating less or no meat, eating simply, lightly, and creatively, and, as far as possible, growing one’s own fruit and vegetables – these are some of the key characteristics to food production and consumption in the lives of many simplifiers. Given some thought and a little discipline, some people are discovering that a nutritious, environmentally sensitive diet can be obtained at a surprisingly low cost. Although this short description points to the main characteristics of food production and consumption within the Simplicity Movement, there are, of course, a great many complexities with it, including issues of property rights and access to land, which cannot be addressed presently (see Alexander, 2011).

4.6. *Work*

Rethinking attitudes to work is central to the way many participants in the Simplicity Movement approach simple living. Charles Siegel (2008: 8) poses the critical question: ‘Should we take advantage of our increasing productivity to consume more or to have more free

time?’ If people keep raising their material standard of living every time they come into more money – through a pay rise, for example, or through some new technology which increases productivity per hour – working hours will never decrease and may even rise. Indeed, many Westerners, especially North Americans, Britons, and Australians, are working longer hours today than they were in the 1970s, despite being considerably more productive (Robinson, 2007). Generally speaking, they have directed all their wealth and productivity gains into consuming more and have not taken any of those gains in terms of increased free time. But why, one might ask, should people always be working for more consumer products and services and not sometimes be content with less? Why should people not accept a lower material standard of living (e.g., old clothes, smaller house, no car, no luxury travel, etc.) and work half as much? Who can say what wonders such a cultural style might not bring! Thoreau’s opinion on working hours seems to exemplify the perspective held by many participants in the Simplicity Movement (Thoreau, 1982: 636):

Those slight labors which afford me a livelihood, and by which it is allowed that I am to some extent serviceable to my contemporaries, are as yet commonly a pleasure to me, and I am not often reminded that they are a necessity. So far I am successful. But I foresee that if my wants should be much increased, the labor required to supply them would become a drudgery. ... I wish to suggest that a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well.

The basic idea here is that if people can embrace simple living and stop the upward creep of material desire, they can take some or all of their pay rises or productivity gains, not in terms of more consumption, but in terms of more free time. And this raises the questions: Are we forced by the ‘curse of labour’ to work so much? Or are we freer than we think we are? The Simplicity Movement is an example of a social movement where people are enjoying the benefits of exchanging money and consumption for more free time.

5. Criticisms of Voluntary Simplicity

The Simplicity Movement has not been free from criticism. Three of the more prominent criticisms will now be considered.

5.1. *A leisure expansion movement*

The Simplicity Movement is sometimes described, occasionally even by its advocates (Segal, 1999: 13), as a leisure expansion movement. The criticism sometimes implicit in this description is that voluntary simplicity is a self-centred, narrowly hedonistic philosophy of life available only to a privileged few. While voluntary simplicity by its very nature is indeed ‘an ethic professed and practiced primarily by those free to choose their standard of living’ (Shi, 2007: 7), the broad-based affluence in the developed world today means that the choice of voluntary simplicity is available *to some degree* to the vast majority of people. Put otherwise, downshifting does not just mean selling the Porsche and buying a Prius, or retiring at 40 and living off the income of investment properties. It can be practised by all those who have a degree of discretionary income. Furthermore, the simple life is not just about improving one’s own life through leisure expansion. The Simplicity Movement may indeed be a leisure expansion movement *for some*, which, as I argued above, in itself is no grounds for criticism; in fact, trading income/consumption for more free time is one of the most important cultural shifts needed in the developed world today. But to characterise the Simplicity Movement *merely* as a leisure expansion movement is to betray an ignorance of the diverse motivations people actually have for adopting voluntary simplicity, which often include environmentalism and social justice (Alexander and Ussher, 2012). Bearing those ethically-based motivations in mind, the fact that simple living can also be described as a form of ‘alternative hedonism’ seems to provide, not grounds for criticism, but further support for the Simplicity Movement.

5.2. *Consumption as meaning and identity*

A more sophisticated critique of voluntary simplicity arises out of theories of consumption that recognise that commodities have come to play a role in our lives that go well beyond their material functionality (see Miller, 2008). These theories hold that commodities also function symbolically as social artefacts through which people express and create their identities and in which people seek not just satisfaction but meaning and social acceptance. ‘Stuff is not just stuff’, as Tim Jackson (2009) puts it, implying that what we own (especially in modern consumer societies) can be understood as part of the ‘extended self’. This understanding of consumption raises important questions about voluntary simplicity, because if consumption is needed not just for material provision but

also for social acceptance, the social expression of one's identity, and the creation of meaning in life, then what exactly are advocates of voluntary simplicity asking people to give up? What would reducing consumption actually mean if, as Mary Douglas (2006 [1976]: 243) put it, 'An individual's main objective in consumption is to help create the social universe and to find in it a creditable place'. The symbolic function of consumption does seem to present a challenge to the idea of voluntary simplicity, but the challenge is not as forceful as it may first appear. Psychologist Philip Cushman (1990) has argued that the 'extended self' created through consumption is actually an 'empty self', one that is constantly in need of being 'filled up' with consumer artefacts. Although consumption may indeed be a medium through which individuals in modern societies increasingly seek to find meaning, there is a great deal of evidence (supplemented by strong intuitions, perhaps) which suggests that seeking meaning in consumption is not fulfilling its promise of a happy and meaningful life (Alexander, 2012). Furthermore, anti-consumerist movements in their various forms have never advocated *renouncing* meaning but, on the contrary, they have always sought to *create* and *enhance* meaning through opposition to mainstream consumption habits. As Jackson contends, 'the insight that a certain amount of consumer behaviour is dedicated to an (ultimately flawed) pursuit of meaning opens up the tantalising possibility of devising some other, more successful, less ecologically damaging strategy for creating and maintaining personal and cultural meaning'. In the Simplicity Movement, it could be argued, that 'tantalising possibility' is becoming a reality.

5.3. *Escapist or apolitical*

Finally, for present purposes, the Simplicity Movement has been criticised also for being 'escapist' or 'apolitical', a criticism that, it cannot be denied, has some weight. Leading sociologist on voluntary simplicity Mary Grigsby (2004: 12) notes that participants in the Simplicity Movement 'don't generally talk about policy initiatives, instead focusing on the individual as the primary mechanism for change'. While the individual may well be the primary mechanism for change, many in the Simplicity Movement do not seem to recognise that, if change is what is truly sought, much more attention must be dedicated to political engagement. That is to say, reformative efforts must not be limited to personal transformation, but must also employ 'grassroots' or 'bottom up' forces to reshape structures and institutions (Alexander, 2013; Trainer, 2010). This is especially so given the many difficulties and forms of resistance

people face when seeking to practise simplicity within political, legal, and economic structures that seem to be inherently opposed to reducing the levels and impacts of market consumption. It would be wrong to suggest that voluntary simplicity is an impossible living strategy, but the pro-growth structures of advanced capitalist societies certainly make living simply much more difficult than it needs to be, and this is inhibiting the expansion and impact of the movement. Accordingly, to the extent that the Simplicity Movement currently seeks to escape that structure rather than transform it, it properly deserves criticism. It should be noted, however, that this is not a criticism that touches on anything necessary or intrinsic to the Simplicity Movement. It just makes the point that historically the movement has been lacking in political consciousness. Fortunately, there are emerging signs of the movement's politicisation (Alexander and Ussher, 2012), although obviously much more action is needed.

In order to socially reconstruct political, legal, and economic structures, the movement will need to expand and organise at the social level, and this will require, to begin with, more individuals making personal commitments to live in opposition to the Western-style consumerist ideal and create for themselves, as far as possible, an alternative conception of the good life. Having increasing numbers of individuals confronting the dominant culture by reimagining the good life is necessary for creating fertile conditions for a politics of simplicity, but it will not be sufficient to bring about significant structural change in the absence of collective action. Politicising the movement will need to involve networking with others who are doing the same. But a large part of the problem at present is that the movement's collective action agenda is unorganised and underdeveloped. As Grigsby notes, 'the ideas of voluntary simplicity need to be developed to link their complaints and demands to clearly articulated and plausible policies that can be carried into existing political structures to bring about institutional change'. There are also simplicity theorists who embrace less conventional politics, such as Ted Trainer's eco-anarchism (2010), David Holmgren's permaculture strategy (2013), and Saral Sarkar's eco-socialism (1999). This is not the place to examine the political significance of simple living or the various strategies for bringing about structural change (see Alexander and Rutherford, 2014), but it should be clear that, to confront the overlapping crises we face today, a politics without an ethical foundation in simple living will fail to resolve those crises.

6. Conclusion

There is something painfully obvious about the need for most individuals and households in consumer cultures to consume less, differently, and more efficiently. This chapter has suggested, however, that this challenge need not sound so depressing. On the contrary, participants in the Voluntary Simplicity Movement see reimagining the consumerist ideal not as a matter of sacrifice or deprivation, but as a coherent path to genuine wealth and freedom. As Lao-Tzu once said, ‘Those who know they have enough are rich’.

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