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the Good Life beyond Consumer Culture

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The Voluntary Simplicity Movement: Reimagining the Good Life beyond Consumer Culture

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Abstract: Voluntary simplicity - otherwise known as 'downshifting' or just 'simple living' - is an anti-consumerist way of life that opposes the high consumption lifestyles prevalent in consumer societies today and voluntarily embraces 'a simpler life' of reduced consumption. As a practical matter, this living strategy characteristically involves providing for material needs as simply and directly as possible, minimizing expenditure on consumer goods and services, and generally seeking non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning. Various defended by its advocates on personal, social, humanitarian, and ecological grounds, voluntary simplicity is predicated on the assumption that human beings can live meaningful, free, happy, and infinitely diverse lives, while consuming no more than an equitable share of nature. That, at least, is the challenging ideal which seems to motivate and guide many of its advocates and practitioners. This paper examines the nature of the Voluntary Simplicity Movement, including its various definitions, justifications, and practices.

Keywords: Voluntary Simplicity, Simple Living, Downshifting, Consumption, Anti-Consumerism, Consumer Culture

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**

Introduction

IN THE MOST developed regions of the world today, such as North America, Western Europe, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, etc., decades of unprecedented economic growth have all but solved the economic problem of how to secure the necessities of life and, indeed, have resulted in most people living lives of relative luxury and comfort.¹ Though a small residue of poverty remains in these regions, on the whole ordinary people are materially wealthy when considered in the context of all known history or when compared with the 2.5 billion people who today struggle for a bare subsistence.² As Clive Hamilton puts it, 'Most Westerners today are prosperous beyond the dreams of their grandparents'³ – a point that should be moderated in light of the Global Financial Crisis but which remains valid as

¹ See generally, Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-Control and Well-Being in the United States and Britain since 1950* (2006); Richard Easterlin, *Growth Triumphant: The Twenty-First Century in Historical Perspective* (1996).

² See World Bank, 'World Development Indicators: Poverty Data,' (2008) 11 <<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/WDI08supplement1216.pdf>> at 5 September 2010.

³ Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish* (2003) xi.

a general statement. The houses of typical families are bigger than ever,⁴ 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. – products that often overflow into garages or hired storage rooms to create spaces full of accumulated ‘stuff.’⁵ Houses are often centrally heated and air-conditioned, with spare rooms and two or more cars parked outside.⁶ Average wages are well above subsistence levels,⁷ meaning that almost everyone has spare income to spend on comforts and luxuries such as alcohol, take-away food, going to the movies, fashionable clothes or furniture, books, taking holidays, 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 established, the water is clean, and almost nobody goes hungry.⁸

All this is indicative of unprecedented material wealth, which it will not be suggested is a bad thing, necessarily. 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.⁹ Material wealth has reached unprecedented levels and yet there is growing body of social research which indicates that many people in affluent societies today are no more satisfied with their lives than people were in the 1950s and ‘60s.¹⁰ In other words, it seems that huge increases in material wealth have stopped contributing significantly to individual and social well-being affluent societies.¹¹ It is troubling, therefore, to see that even the richest nations

⁴ See, e.g., Alex Wilson and Jessica Boehland, ‘Small is Beautiful: U.S. House Size, Resource Use, and the Environment’ (2005) 9(1/2) *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 277 (reporting that average living area per person in new houses in the U.S. increased by a factor of three since 1950s).

⁵ In the United States, for example, the storage industry has increased 40-fold since the 1960s, from virtually nothing to \$12 billion annually, making it now larger than the US music industry. See John de Graaf et al, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (2nd ed, 2005) 32.

⁶ Hamilton, above n 3, xi.

⁷ In February 2010, for example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that the average, full-time salary in Australia was over \$67,000. See < <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mf/6302.0> > at 10 August 2010).

⁸ Again, this is not to deny that residual poverty remains an extremely important issue even in advanced capitalist societies; rather, the claim is that affluence, not poverty, is now the dominant societal characteristic.

⁹ Despite living in one of the richest nations in the world, when Australians were asked in a nation-wide survey about whether they thought they could ‘afford to buy everything they really needed,’ nearly two-thirds said ‘no.’ See Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough* (2005) 4.

¹⁰ See generally, Ed Diener, Daniel Kahneman and John Helliwell (eds), *International Differences in Well-Being* (2010) (developing this thesis and acknowledging and discussing the most recent critics of it); Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger* (2009); Richard Layard, Guy Mayraz and Stephen Nickell, ‘The Marginal Utility of Income’ (2008) 92 *J. of Pub. Econ.* 1846; Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (2005); Ronald Inglehart, ‘The Diminishing Utility of Economic Growth’ (1996) 10(4) *Critical Review* 509.

¹¹ The best explanation for this phenomenon seems to be that beyond the satisfaction of ‘basic needs’ (a concept that is admittedly problematic, but still useful), further increases in income are a poor substitute for non-materialist ‘goods,’ such as friendship, community engagement, meaningful employment, leisure, creative activity, etc. See generally, Rafael Di Tella and Robert McCulloch, ‘Happiness Adaptation to Income Beyond “Basic Needs”’ in Ed Diener, Daniel Kahneman and John Helliwell (eds), *International Differences in Well-Being* (2010) 217.

are still focused primarily on maximizing wealth, maximizing GDP per capita.¹² As Henry David Thoreau would say, '[We] labor under a mistake.'¹³

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 globalized further,¹⁴ is failing to fulfil its promise of a better life.¹⁵ It has even begun taking away many of the things upon which well-being depends, such as community life,¹⁶ a work/life balance,¹⁷ spiritual and aesthetic experience,¹⁸ and a healthy natural environment.¹⁹ 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 puts it, a 'Simpler Way'?²⁰

This paper considers the definition, justification, and practices of the way of life embraced by participants in the Voluntary Simplicity Movement. It aims to present a coherent picture of this lifestyle by bringing together many of its central elements, while acknowledging that any such endeavour will leave many questions and controversies unresolved. But although there is much room for analyses of voluntary simplicity more specific and narrowly defined than the analysis offered below, it is suggested that the following attempt to stand back and make a statement of the overall coherency of voluntary simplicity is worthwhile given the desperate need for alternative practices (and narratives) of consumption beyond those prevalent in the most developed regions of the world today. The paper concludes by considering some objections that can be levelled against voluntary simplicity as a lifestyle and a movement.

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.'²¹ Sometimes called 'the quiet revolution,'²² this approach to life involves providing for material needs as simply and directly as possible, minimizing expenditure on consumer goods and services, and directing progressively more time and energy towards

¹² See generally, Stephen Purdey, *Economic Growth, the Environment and International Relations: The Growth Paradigm* (2010); Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, *Mis-Measuring Our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up* (2010).

¹³ Henry David Thoreau, 'Walden' in Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 261.

¹⁴ See Hellmuth Lange and Lars Meier, *The New Middle Classes: Globalizing Lifestyles, Consumerism and Environmental Concern* (2009).

¹⁵ See Tim Kasser and Allen Kanner (eds), *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World* (2003).

¹⁶ See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000).

¹⁷ John De Graaf (ed), *Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America* (2003).

¹⁸ David Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (2000).

¹⁹ See generally, Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being* (2005).

²⁰ See Ted Trainer, 'The Simpler Way,' <<http://ssis.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/>> at 10 October 2010.

²¹ See, e.g., Charles Wagner, *The Simple Life* (1901); Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (1st ed, 1998). The term voluntary simplicity was coined by Richard Gregg, an American lawyer and committed follower of Gandhi. See Richard Gregg, 'The Value of Voluntary Simplicity,' in Samuel Alexander (ed), *Voluntary Simplicity: The Poetic Alternative to Consumer Culture* (2009) 111-126.

²² Duane Elgin, *Promise Ahead: A Vision of Hope and Action for Humanity's Future* (1st ed, 2000) Ch. 4.

pursuing non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ That, at least, is the challenging ideal which seems to motivate and guide many of its advocates and practitioners.²⁶

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.²⁷ As Duane Elgin 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.’²⁸ According to the most prominent historian of the Simplicity Movement, David Shi, 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.²⁹ More concisely, Shi defines voluntary simplicity as ‘enlightened material restraint.’³⁰

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 suggest 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.’³¹ Arguably, this is a theme that has something to say to everyone, especially those in consumer societies today who are every

²³ See Amitai Etzioni, ‘Voluntary Simplicity: A New Social Movement?’ in William Halal and Kenneth Taylor, *Twenty-First Century Economics: Perspectives of Socioeconomics for a Changing World* (1999).

²⁴ See Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, ‘The DownshifTERS,’ in Samuel Alexander (ed), *Voluntary Simplicity*, above n 21, 219-234.

²⁵ See Joshua Gambrel and Philip Cafaro, ‘The Virtue of Simplicity’ (2009) 23(1) *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 85.

²⁶ See generally, Cecile Andrews and Wanda Urbanska (eds), *Less is More: Embracing Simplicity for a Healthy Planet, a Caring Economy and Lasting Happiness* (2009).

²⁷ See Jerome Segal, *Graceful Simplicity: Toward a Philosophy and Politics of the Alternative American Dream* (1st ed, 1999).

²⁸ Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (Rev. ed, 1993).

²⁹ David Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (2nd ed, 2007) 3.

³⁰ *Ibid* 131.

³¹ See Alan Durning, *How Much is Enough?: The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth* (1992).

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, and simplicity.³²

The notion of living simply, of course, is not new.³³ 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 Henry Thoreau), the European Bohemians, Tolstoy, Gandhi, Lenin, Richard Gregg, Helen and Scott Nearing, and many of the Indigenous peoples around the world.³⁴ But in postmodernity, where consumption seems to be glorified and luxury admired as never before, voluntary simplicity arguably acquires a special significance.

Misconceptions about Voluntary Simplicity

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

A Glorification of Poverty?

Voluntary simplicity can be misinterpreted sometimes as glorifying or romanticizing 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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*,³⁷ while, at the same time, creating a life rich in its non-material dimensions.³⁸

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

³² See Thomas Princen, *The Logic of Sufficiency* (2005); Gambrel and Cafaro, above n 25.

³³ See generally, Goldian Vanenbroeck (ed), *Less is More: An Anthology of Ancient and Modern Voices Raised in Praise of Simplicity* (1991).

³⁴ For a sampling of the historical literature, see Vanenbroeck (ed), above n 33.

³⁵ See Segal, above n 27, 20.

³⁶ On the difficulty of defining poverty, see Segal, above n 27, 21.

³⁷ See Thomas Princen, *The Logic of Sufficiency* (2005).

³⁸ See Segal, above n 27, 22.

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 urbanized 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.³⁹

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 warned, there is ‘an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance.’⁴⁰ Voluntary simplicity, then, involves taking a thoughtfully sceptical stance in relation to technology and science, rejecting those aspects which 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.’⁴¹

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, social / communitarian, humanitarian, and ecological.

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

³⁹ See Hélène Cherrier, ‘Anti-Consumption Discourses and Consumer-Resistant Identities’ (2009) 62(2) *Journal of Business Research* 181.

⁴⁰ Thoreau, above n 13, 306.

⁴¹ See Steve Deger and Leslie Gibson (eds), *The Book of Positive Quotations* (2nd ed, 2007) 262.

lead to well-being. In essence, this is the economic foundation of consumer culture.⁴² Its fundamental prescription is that people should seek well-being in higher incomes and more consumption.⁴³ The problem, however, as Juliet Schor and others have argued, 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.⁴⁴ 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 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.’⁴⁵ 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 well-being).⁴⁶ It is important to emphasize, 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.⁴⁷

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 sense of deprivation, but actually frees people from an insidiously addictive consumerism and an unhealthy relation with money and possessions.⁴⁸ 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,⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ With less time devoted to acquiring expensive commodities, ‘simple lovers’ (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.⁵¹ 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

⁴² For a critical discussion of the economic theory underpinning consumer culture, see Neva Goodwin, Frank Ackerman and David Kiron (eds), *The Consumer Society* (1997) 149-228.

⁴³ The prophet of consumerism, Victor Lebow, once stated: ‘Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption a way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction and our ego satisfaction in consumption. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing rate,’ quoted in Vance Packard, *The Waste Makers* (1963) 11.

⁴⁴ See Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (Rev. ed, 1993). See also, Tim Kasser and Allen Kanner (eds), *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World* (2003).

⁴⁵ Gregg, above n 21, 112.

⁴⁶ See Philip Cafaro, ‘Less is More’ (2001) 14(1) *Global Bioethics* 45.

⁴⁷ On the spiritual significance of simplicity, see Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (1st ed, 1976).

⁴⁸ Etzioni, above n 23.

⁴⁹ Hamilton and Denniss, above n 9, 156 (reporting that 29 per cent of downshifters surveyed practise voluntary simplicity by reducing their working hours).

⁵⁰ *Ibid* (reporting that 19 percent of downshifters practise voluntary simplicity by changing careers).

⁵¹ *Ibid* 153 (reporting that 35 percent of downshifters do so because they want to spend more time with family).

the ‘work-and-spend’ cycle of consumer culture.⁵² In short, many people are drawn to voluntary simplicity because they want to escape the vapidity of the rat race and live more with less.⁵³

Social/Communitarian

There are also social or communitarian incentives for embracing a life of voluntary simplicity.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ As Cafaro and Gambrel suggest, ‘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 minimize social tension and build up social capital.’⁵⁶

Social critics argue that community engagement is often pushed to the side by the demands of a high-consumption life.⁵⁷ David Myers coined the term ‘social recession’ to describe essentially this phenomenon.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ Mark Burch 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.’⁶⁰ What Burch, Myers, Putnam, Cafaro, Gambrel, and many others 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.⁶¹ 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?

⁵² Ibid (reporting that 90 per cent of downshiffters are happier with their changed lifestyle, despite having reduced income).

⁵³ See Hélène Cherrier, ‘Drifting away from Excessive Consumption: A New Social Movement based on Identity Construction’ (2002) 29 *Advances in Consumer Research* 245.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., Suzanne Miller and Jennifer Paxton, ‘Community and Connectivity: Examining the Motives Underlying the Adoption of a Lifestyle of Voluntary simplicity’ (2006) 33 *Advances in Consumer Research* 289.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Cahit Guven, ‘Are Happier People Better Citizens?’ (2009) available at <http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1422493> at 10 October 2010 (providing evidence that happier people tend to create more social capital, are more likely to vote, volunteer, and participate in public activities).

⁵⁶ Gambrel and Cafaro, above n 25, 11.

⁵⁷ See de Graaf et al, above n 5, 63-71.

⁵⁸ See Myers, above n 18.

⁵⁹ See Putnam, above n 16; Robert Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (2000). See also, Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Land, *The Unmanageable Consumer* (2nd ed, 2006) 10 (describing the “Fordist Deal” – the trade-off in which workers obtain greater material enjoyment in exchange for alienation and loss of autonomy in the workplace).

⁶⁰ Mark Burch, *Stepping Lightly: Simplicity for People and the Planet* (2000) 65 (emphasis omitted).

⁶¹ See Michelle Nelson, Mark Rademacher and Hye-Jin Paek, ‘Downshifting Consumer = Upshifting Citizen?’ (2007) 611 *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 141.

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 recognize that there are also broader *humanitarian* reasons for adopting voluntary simplicity.⁶² In a world where extreme poverty exists amidst such plenty, living simply can be understood as a lifestyle 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.⁶³ In a similar vein, living simply can also be 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 scarce 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.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ Furthermore, economic growth and the so-called ‘trickle down effect’ is not a solution upon which we should rely for humanitarian relief.⁶⁶ 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.’⁶⁷

Ecological

As well as personal, communitarian, and humanitarian reasons for living simply, there are, of course, also *environmental* reasons. It has long been recognized that consumption and ecological impact are correlated,⁶⁸ and from this correlation it follows that reducing consumption can be an effective means for 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

⁶² See Deirdre Shaw and Terry Newholm, ‘Voluntary Simplicity and the Ethics of Consumption’ (2002) 19(2) *Psychology and Marketing* 167.

⁶³ See Daniel Fireside (ed), *The Wealth Inequality Reader* (3rd ed, 2009).

⁶⁴ See Jim Merkel, *Radical Simplicity* (2003) Chaps. 1 and 3.

⁶⁵ See Hamilton and Denniss, above n 9, 192 (arguing that ‘To solve the problem of poverty, real deprivation, we must first solve the problem of affluence, imagined deprivation’).

⁶⁶ See David Woodward and Andrew Simms, ‘Growth Isn’t Working: The Unbalanced Distribution of Benefits and Costs from Economic Growth’ (2006) <<http://www.neweconomics.org/>> at 15 October 2010.

⁶⁷ On Gandhi’s conception of simplicity, see Mahatma Gandhi, ‘The Quest for Simplicity: My Idea of Swaraj,’ in Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (eds), *The Post-Development Reader* (1997) 306-7.

⁶⁸ See generally, Paul Ehrlich and Anne Ehrlich, *The Population Explosion* (1990) (discussing the ‘I = PAT’ identity, which holds that environmental impact (I) is a product of population (P), affluence (A), and technology (T)).

harm.⁶⁹ This is especially so in the most developed nations, where lifestyles of reduced consumption will be a necessary part of any transition to a sustainable future.⁷⁰ 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 industrialized countries.’⁷¹ This document called for the following actions:

1. To promote patterns of consumption and production that reduce environmental stress and will meet the basic needs of humanity.
2. To develop a better understanding of the role of consumption and how to bring about more sustainable consumption patterns.⁷²

In more recent years, this message has been widely affirmed. When the World Summit convened in Johannesburg in 2002, ‘changing consumption and production patterns’⁷³ was identified as one of three ‘overarching objectives’ for sustainable development. What these and other reports imply is that fundamental lifestyle changes with respect to private consumption are one of the main preconditions to ecological sustainability.⁷⁴

Practising Voluntary Simplicity

It is all very well to theorize 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 an exposition of how the idea of voluntary simplicity is actually *lived* by participants in the movement.⁷⁵

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

⁶⁹ To clarify, what is needed in terms of consumption is not just ‘less of the same,’ but ‘less, different, and more efficient.’

⁷⁰ But see, Hana Librova, ‘The Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle: Simple or Complicated?’ (2008) 44(6) *Czech Sociological Review* 1111 (arguing that there is nothing very ‘simple,’ in the sense of ‘easy,’ about living sustainably in consumer cultures).

⁷¹ See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, ‘Agenda 21,’ Sect. 4.3, <<http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/>> at 10 October 2010.

⁷² *Ibid.*, Sect. 4.7.

⁷³ United Nations, ‘World Summit on Sustainable Development’ (2002) <<http://www.un-documents.net/jburgdec.htm>> at 10 November 2010.

⁷⁴ There is also a growing recognition that ecological and humanitarian issues are closely linked. See Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being* (2005) 2 (acknowledging that ‘the degradation of ecosystems services is already a significant barrier to achieving the Millennium Development Goals’).

⁷⁵ This discussion of the practice of simplicity is based, in part, upon my personal explorations of the simple life in recent years, which I have described in more detail in Samuel Alexander, ‘Deconstructing the Shed: Where I Live and What I Live For,’ *Concord Saunterer* (2011, forthcoming).

could be said, is more about questions than answers, in the sense that practising simplicity calls for creative interpretation and personalized 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.

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.⁷⁶ In *Your Money or Your Life*, Dominguez and Robin 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.⁷⁷ Such exercises may sound mundane and a bit pointless – everybody assumes they are careful, rational spenders – but if it is 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 ten 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 would insist, ‘The cost of a thing is the amount of... life which is required to be exchanged for it.’⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ A tension can arise

⁷⁶ This depends on consumers being ‘informed,’ which depends, in part, upon good labelling of commodities. See James Salzman, ‘Sustainable Consumption and the Law’ (1997) 27 *Environmental Law* 1243.

⁷⁷ Joseph Dominguez and Vicki Robin, *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming your Relationship with Money and Achieving Financial Independence* (New ed, 1999).

⁷⁸ Thoreau, above n 13, 286.

⁷⁹ The idea of ‘voting with your money,’ however, would be more accurately attributed to John Ruskin. See Van-enbroeck (ed), above n 33, 63.

⁸⁰ This is not meant to suggest that ‘market mechanisms,’ in themselves, will be an adequate path to ecological protection or social justice. Nor is this an argument for what might be called ‘green consumerism’ (i.e. consumerism by another name). The point is that in a market society, expenditure is one way, among others, for individuals to

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).⁸¹ 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, simply by changing its spending habits.⁸² *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.⁸³

Housing

Housing (whether purchasing, building, or renting) is typically life’s greatest single expense, so simple livers 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 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.’⁸⁴ The ‘McMansions’ which are so prevalent in the suburbs of North America and increasingly elsewhere are extremely resource-intensive and very expensive.⁸⁵ 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 and ‘transition initiatives.’⁸⁶ More radical participants are building their own straw-bail houses, making shacks out of abandoned or second-hand materials, or converting shipping containers into homes.⁸⁷

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,

‘vote on what exists in the world.’ See generally, Daniel Finn, *The Moral Ecology of Markets: Assessing Claims about Markets and Justice* (2006).

⁸¹ See David Bosshart, *Cheap? The Real Cost of Living in a Low Price, Low Wage World* (2006).

⁸² Michele Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action* (2010) (providing a theoretically sophisticated, empirically rich examination of the increasingly important phenomenon of politically and ethically motivated market expenditure).

⁸³ See Clive Barnett et al, ‘The Political Ethics of Consumerism’ (2005) 15(2) *Consumer Policy Review* 45.

⁸⁴ Thoreau, above n 13, 290.

⁸⁵ See Wilson and Boehland, above n 4.

⁸⁶ Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience* (2008).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

often second-hand clothing.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹ 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 and every year in the fashion industry.⁹⁰ Just imagine if even half of that money was 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.

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 simple lovers.⁹¹ 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.⁹² 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, the discussion of which must be deferred for a future occasion.

Work

Rethinking attitudes to work is central to the way many participants in the Simplicity Movement approach simple living.⁹³ Charles Siegel poses the critical question: ‘Should we take advantage of our increasing productivity to consume more or to have more free time?’⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ Generally speaking, they have directed all their wealth and productivity gains into consuming more

⁸⁸ See Hamilton and Denniss, above n 9, 166.

⁸⁹ See, e.g., Kate Soper, ‘Alternative Hedonism, Cultural Theory and the Role of Aesthetic Revisioning’ (2008) 22(5) *Cultural Studies* 567.

⁹⁰ See OECD, ‘A New World Map in Textiles and Clothing’ (2002) available at <<http://www.oecd.org>> at 15 October 2010 (reporting that in 2002 the global textile and clothing industries amounted to \$350 billion).

⁹¹ Motivations for ‘eating simply and locally’ are diverse, and the reasoning, at times, complex. Two important considerations are reducing ‘food miles’ and increasing ‘food security.’ See generally, Alison Blay-Palmer, *Food Fears: From Industrial to Sustainable Food Systems* (2008).

⁹² See Elise McDonough, *Sustainable Food: How to Buy Right and Spend Less* (2009). See also, www.slowfood.com. Slow Food is a global, grassroots organization with over 100,000 supporters in 150 countries who are linking the pleasure of good food with a commitment to their community and the environment.

⁹³ See Hamilton and Denniss, above n 9, Chap. 10.

⁹⁴ See Charles Siegel, *The Politics of Simple Living* (2008) 8.

⁹⁵ See generally, John De Graaf (ed), *Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America* (2003); Hamilton and Denniss, above n 9, Chap. 6.

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:

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.⁹⁶

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.

Criticisms of Voluntary Simplicity

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

A Leisure Expansion Movement

The Simplicity Movement is sometimes described, occasionally even by its advocates, as a leisure expansion movement.⁹⁷ 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,'⁹⁸ 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, down-shifting 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 practiced by all those who have a degree of discretionary income.⁹⁹ 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

⁹⁶ Henry David Thoreau, 'Life without Principle,' in Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 636.

⁹⁷ Segal, above n 27, 13.

⁹⁸ Shi, above n 29, 7.

⁹⁹ See Michael Maniates, 'In Search of Consumptive Resistance: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement,' in Thomas Princen et al (eds), *Confronting Consumption* (2002) 221 (arguing that simplicity is 'not the domain of the rich').

the developed world today.¹⁰⁰ But to characterize 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.¹⁰¹ Bearing those ethically-based motivations in mind, the fact that simple living can also be described as a form of ‘alternative hedonism’¹⁰² seems to provide, not grounds for criticism, but further support for the Simplicity Movement.

Consumption as Meaning and Identity

A more sophisticated critique of voluntary simplicity arises out of theories of consumption which recognize that commodities have come to play a role in our lives that go well beyond their material functionality. 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.¹⁰³ ‘Stuff is not just stuff,’¹⁰⁴ as Tim Jackson puts it, implying that what we own (especially in modern consumer societies) can be understood as part of the ‘extended self.’¹⁰⁵ 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 put it, ‘An individual’s main objective in consumption is to help create the social universe and to find in it a creditable place.’¹⁰⁶ 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 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.¹⁰⁷ Although consumption may indeed be a medium through which individuals in modern societies increasingly seek to find meaning, there is 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.¹⁰⁸ 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.¹⁰⁹ As Jackson contends,

¹⁰⁰ New Economics Foundation, *21 Hours: Why a 21-Hour Work Week can Help Us All Flourish in the 21st Century* (2010) <www.neweconomics.org> at 10 November 2010.

¹⁰¹ See Dennis and Hamilton, above n 9, 157 (discussing their Australian survey which reports on the diversity of motivations downshiffters have for adopting voluntary simplicity lifestyles).

¹⁰² Soper, above n 89.

¹⁰³ See Helga Dittmar, *The Social Psychology of Material Possessions: To Have is To Be* (1992).

¹⁰⁴ Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (2009) 63.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Mary Douglas, ‘Relative Poverty, Relative Communication’ [1976], in Jackson (ed), *Sustainable Consumption* (2005) 243.

¹⁰⁷ Philip Cushman, ‘Why the Self is Empty,’ 45(5) *American Psychologist* 599.

¹⁰⁸ See Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (2002); Tim Kasser and Allen Kanner (eds), *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World* (2003).

¹⁰⁹ See Hélène Cherrier, ‘Anti-Consumption Discourses and Consumer-Resistant Identities’ (2009) 62(2) *Journal of Business Research* 181; Rajesh Iyer and James Muncy, ‘Purpose and Object of Anti-Consumption’ (2009) 62(2) *Journal of Business Research* 160.

‘the insight that a certain amount of consumer behaviour is dedicated to an (ultimately flawed) pursuit of meaning opens up the tantalizing possibility of devising some other, more successful, less ecologically damaging strategy for creating and maintaining personal and cultural meaning.’¹¹⁰ In the Simplicity Movement, it could be argued, that ‘tantalizing possibility’ is becoming a reality.

Escapist / Apolitical

Finally, for present purposes, the Simplicity Movement has been criticized also for being ‘escapist’ or ‘apolitical,’ a criticism that, it cannot be denied, has some weight.¹¹¹ Leading sociologist on voluntary simplicity, Mary Grigsby, 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.’¹¹² While the individual may well be the primary mechanism for change, many in the Simplicity Movement do not seem to recognize 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 ‘grass-roots’ or ‘bottom up’ forces to reshape ‘top-down’ politics. 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.¹¹³ 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.¹¹⁴ 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 politicization, although much more action is needed.¹¹⁵

In order to socially reconstruct political, legal, and economic structures, the movement will need to expand and organize 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

¹¹⁰ Tim Jackson (ed), *Sustainable Consumption* (2005) 20.

¹¹¹ See Maniates, above n 99, 199.

¹¹² Mary Grigsby, *Buying Time and Getting By: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement* (2004) 12.

¹¹³ As Michael Jacobson puts it, ‘Our country is set up to oppose voluntary simplicity.’ See Michael Jacobson, *Marketing Madness* (1995), as quoted in de Graaf et al, *Affluenza*, above n 5, 221.

¹¹⁴ See Christer Sanne, ‘Willing Consumers—Or Locked-In? Policies for a Sustainable Consumption’ (2002)

2002(42) *Ecological Economics* 273.

¹¹⁵ See The Simplicity Forum, <www.thesimplicityforum.org> at 10 October 2010 (a forum of leaders in the Simplicity Movement dedicated to organizing the ‘invisible constituency’ of simple lovers and actively working towards ‘changing both the culture and the policies that drive overwork and overconsumption’) (emphasis added). See also, www.simplicityinstitute.org (dedicated to research and policy analysis on sustainable consumption) as well as Mary Grigsby, ‘Extending the Movement,’ in Samuel Alexander (ed), *Voluntary Simplicity: The Poetic Alternative to Consumer Culture*, above n 21, at 283 (outlining ways that the Simplicity Movement could extend into the mainstream and become a more significant oppositional force).

re-imagining 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. Politicizing the movement will need to involve ‘simple livers’ or ‘down-shifters’ networking with others who are doing the same, so that when opportunities arise the Simplicity Movement can be quickly and efficiently mobilized to support or introduce policy initiatives that advance the movement’s aims.¹¹⁶ This may, at times, need to involve linking up with other movements (e.g. Environmental Movement) when objectives coincide. But a large part of the problem at present is that the movement’s policy agenda is under-developed. 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.’¹¹⁷ I have made a preliminary attempt at such a policy analysis and statement elsewhere.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

There is something painfully obvious about the need for individuals in consumer cultures to consume less, differently, and more efficiently. This paper 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. After all, as Lao Tzu once said, ‘Those who know they have enough are rich.’¹¹⁹

If there is one contemporary manifestation of voluntary simplicity to be held up above all the rest, I would suggest that it can be found in the so-called ‘Transition Initiatives,’ a concept and fast emerging movement associated primarily with Rob Hopkins (although the movement, in accordance with its own philosophy, has taken on a life of its own).¹²⁰ These Transition Initiatives, like many radical narratives of sustainability, are endeavouring to create a *different type of society* from the grassroots up, not simply ‘greening’ the existing society from the top down.¹²¹ It is a movement that expresses all that is best in the philosophy of living described in this paper, and it is one that we are likely to hear a great deal more of in coming decades. In our deeply troubled and challenging times, in which views of optimism are not easily held, perhaps the greatest value of the Transition Initiatives lies in the fact that they are a source of genuine hope that another world is indeed possible. And hope, as Isabelle Stengers has written, may just be the difference between *probability* and *possibility*.¹²²

¹¹⁶ Online networking provides a cheap and accessible tool for organizing collective action. See Hannah Lownsbrough, ‘The Progressive Potential of Online Organizing’ *Renewal* (2010) 18(3/4) 74.

¹¹⁷ Grigsby, above n 112, 186.

¹¹⁸ In my doctoral thesis I explored the politics of voluntary simplicity in some detail. See Samuel Alexander, ‘Property beyond Growth: Toward a Politics of Voluntary Simplicity’ (2011, forthcoming). For an electronic copy, please send an email to s.alexander@simplicityinstitute.org.

¹¹⁹ See Vanenbroeck (ed), above n 33, 116.

¹²⁰ See Hopkins, above n 86.

¹²¹ See, e.g., John Barry, ‘Towards a Concrete Utopian Model of Green Political Economy’ (2006) 35 *Post-Autistic Economics Review* 5-25; John Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics: Nature, Virtue, and Progress* (1999).

¹²² See Mary Zournazi, *Hope: New Philosophies for Change* (2002) 245.

About the Author

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Samuel Alexander is a lecturer in Consumerism and Sustainability at the Office for Environmental Programs, University of Melbourne, Australia. His doctoral thesis, "Property beyond Growth: Toward a Politics of Voluntary Simplicity," explores how the laws of property in advanced capitalist societies could be restructured to transition toward what Herman Daly calls a steady-state economy. Developing interdisciplinary perspectives on issues of property law, degrowth economics, consumption, and sustainability, Alexander variously argues that legal, political, and economic structures will not reflect an ethics of simplicity and sufficiency until such an ethics is embraced at the socio-cultural level. He is also the founder of the Life Poets' Simplicity Collective (www.simplicitycollective), a grass-roots network of imaginations dedicated to advancing the Voluntary Simplicity Movement in Melbourne and beyond. Alexander is also a founder and Co-Director of the Simplicity Institute (www.simplicityinstitute.org), a progressive think-tank dedicated to research and policy analysis on sustainable consumption.