

‘Self-Sufficiency in a ‘Time of Plenty’: Mass Consumerism and Freedom in 1970s Australia’¹

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This article examines the notion of post-industrial self-sufficiency in Australia in the early 1970s. Against the backdrop of more than twenty years of economic prosperity from which the majority of Australians had benefited, an increasingly dissatisfied minority voluntarily chose to ‘opt out’ of mainstream society to live a life of intentional poverty. Despite their material affluence, those who were drawn to self-sufficiency did not feel free under the constraints of mass consumerism. Their solution would be to reunite the dual spheres of production and consumption to regain control over their lives by providing as much of their needs as possible themselves. Thus, to understand the complexities of the movement (and the failings of the consumerist ideal) this paper contends that one needs to view post-industrial self-sufficiency as much a product of post-war consumer capitalism as a reaction against it.

Keywords: Consumer Capitalism; Consumption; Freedom; Mass Consumerism; Production; Self-Sufficiency

There is a better life. It’s away in the country with plenty of fresh air, sunshine, home-grown fruit and vegetables, and home-baked bread. It’s sitting by the open fire in winter eating the food you preserved in summer, eggs from your own chickens, milk from your own cows or goats. For some it’s the satisfaction of building their own life, and maybe their own house, without having to rely on a boss, or pay a lot of money to tradesmen, fishermen, canning factories, butchers, clothing makers or bakeries (*Earth Garden*, no.1, 1972: 2-3).

In the aftermath of the 1930’s depression and World War II, governments across the western world turned to mass production and mass consumption to improve the standard of living of their citizens, consumerism (consumer capitalism) became the most successful ideology of the second half of the twentieth century (McLeod, 2007). By the beginning of the 1970s, Australia had been witness to twenty years of unparalleled economic growth and prosperity. Most citizens reaped the material benefits.

But the ‘long boom’ was not to last forever. Australia was not immune to the international ‘oil crisis’ that began to drive up inflation and in turn, pushed up prices, the pain of which almost all Australians felt every time they turned up to the petrol pump or

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to the supermarket checkout. However, the problems were far from confined to rising prices and unemployment. A complex set of circumstances collided that, for some, revealed cracks in the consumerist ideal.

For many, consumerism (a lifestyle preoccupied with consumer goods and their acquisition) had simply failed to live up to its promises. Around the world, an increasing number of angry citizens began to call governments to account, by taking problems into their own hands, forming or joining socio-political movements which drove a reassessment of the meaning of democratic, civil and social rights and a questioning of the values of materialism and conventional economics (Davies et.al, 1977; Wilson, 1977: x). While some sought to find ways to make the consumer market work more efficiently and equitably, others actively pressured governments to be more responsive to the needs of their citizens.

During the 1970s the consumer, feminist and anti-war movements built upon the momentum, popularity, and publicity they had gained in the 1960s and an increasing number of citizens became concerned with the environmental impact of industrialisation, commercialisation and mass consumption (Cairns, 1972; Greer, 1970; McLeod, 2007). Calls for freedom of information legislation, government accountability and transparency and human rights law can all be traced to this period, as can animal rights and anti-nuclear/nuclear disarmament campaigns (Singer, 1975; Caldicott, 1978).

While governments strengthened consumer legislation in an attempt to readdress the balance of power between buyers and sellers (McLeod, 2007), some consumers searched for alternatives to mainstream production and consumption. Biodynamic, organic and permaculture farming practices gained popularity by providing alternatives to the increasing industrialisation of agriculture and animal husbandry (factory farming) (Mollison and Holmgren, 1978). Naturopathy, herbalism and homeopathy provided consumers with an alternative to conventional western medicine and conventional drug treatments.

While the majority of informed consumer/citizens were happy to lobby governments or buy their way into alternative, more ethical, forms of consumption, others believed that the problem stemmed from the very essence of mainstream society itself. Some turned to earlier traditions of arts and crafts, gardening for food production and various forms of food preservation to reduce reliance on the consumer market and to supplement incomes. Others longed to drop out of the 'mainstream' entirely. The publication of *Grass Roots* magazine in 1973 captured the mood:

Today everyone is looking for an alternative to the life that big business forces on us. More people are concerned about the chemicals they consume with their food and the pollution all around them. You don't have to bow to the dragging monotony of set hours, set jobs, set transport and set wages. Throw your clocks away – the time for change has come (no.1, 1973: 2).

Some sought alternatives by forming or joining intentional communities in city or rural locations with varying degrees of success (Cock, 1979; Metcalf, 1986; Versey, 1973). But for a unique few, the desire to be as close as possible to being self-sufficient was the greatest driving force. It is this aspect of resistance against the mainstream that is the subject of this paper.

Post-industrial Self-sufficiency

Against the backdrop of more than twenty years of economic prosperity from which the majority of Australians had benefited (McLeod, 2007), an increasingly dissatisfied minority voluntarily chose to ‘opt out’ of mainstream society to live a life of intentional poverty.

What I am interested in is post-industrial self-sufficiency: that of a person who has gone through the big-city-industrial way of life and has advanced beyond it and wants to go on to something better (Seymour, 1973: 9).

John Seymour’s classic text *Self-Sufficiency*, from which the above quote is drawn, illuminates both the problems of modern society and offers a solution to its ills. The solution, as the title suggests, was to opt out of the system and provide for oneself. This type of lifestyle was not about going back to an idealised past or accepting a lower standard of living. As Seymour explained three years later in his *Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency*, which became the ‘bible’ of the movement, it was about:

going *forward* to a new and better sort of life, a life which is more fun than the over-specialized round of office or factory, a life that brings challenge and the use of daily initiative back to work, and variety, and occasional great success and occasional abysmal failure (Seymour, 1976: 7).

The notion of self-sufficiency is complex and, as Allaby and Bunyard (1980: 32) suggest, could be confined to a discussion on ‘how to grow vegetables and whether to keep goats or ban them from the face of the earth, given their propensity for debarking one’s favourite fruit trees’. Yet, as they have more seriously observed, there are more important issues at play including ‘political structures, man’s future, freedom and environmental degradation’. It is difficult to assess the success or failure of those who sought, and still seek, self-sufficiency. By what criteria are such lifestyles to be judged? After all, many if not most proponents argue that total self-sufficiency is neither desirable nor possible. More enlightening is that self-sufficiency is the search for a new kind of freedom – the freedom from consumer capitalism.

This article suggests that the particular version of self-sufficiency that was pursued from the early 1970s was as much product of the values of modern consumer capitalism as it was a reaction against it. The creation of a mass consumer market in Australia in the post-war period was dependent on a number of interrelated factors. Most importantly, consumers became only willing but able to spend their rising incomes on a growing variety of consumer products. Mass marketing and advertising campaigns, organised on a national basis, helped to facilitate and accelerate the process and to make sure that consumption kept pace with production (McLeod, 2008: 80).

It is no coincidence that the idea of post-industrial self-sufficiency, modern homesteading and ‘new-pioneering’ were taken up with vigour more or less simultaneously in countries like the United States, Britain and Australia, with the reliance on consumer capitalism for the economic well-being of their citizens.

Unlike the immediate post war years, when Australians actively embraced the DIY (do-it-yourself) ethic, out of necessity to overcome labour and material shortages, those who

turned to self-sufficiency in the later period did so not only to assert their independence and individualism, but most importantly to attain freedom from the marketplace (Dingle, 2000; McLeod, 2007; Murphy, 2000). Kevin Grose from Gladstone summed up the predicament eloquently:

For many years I was caught up on the “treadmill” believing that the society of suburbia, 9 to 5, consumer “keep up with the Joneses” lifestyle was the only way to live (*GR*, no.19: 82).

Thus, to understand the complexities of ‘post-industrial self-sufficiency’ the movement needs to be placed against the backdrop of post-war abundance and affluence. In so doing, this article allows an important insight into alternative values than those usually associated with mass consumerism. By illuminating problems that had begun to appear in the consumerist ideal, self-providers looked for alternatives to consumer capitalism’s credo that the good life was to be found in the goods life (Mumford, 1963: 105).

Those who wanted to experience post-industrial self-sufficiency desired to rejoin the spheres of production and consumption which had been separated by modern capitalism. They would do so by being active participants in both realms.

Questioning the ‘artificial nature of separation of the spheres of production and consumption suggested by some theorists’, Varman and Vikas (2007: 118) argue that the ‘lack of empowerment in the domain of production translates into lack of freedom in the sphere of consumption’. Although the participants in my case study – affluent, middle-class Australians – could not be further removed from those in Varman and Vikas’s study – subaltern consumers in the North Indian city of Kanpur – I argue that those who were drawn to self-sufficiency in Australia, and other westernised nations in the 1970s, did so in an effort to reunite the dual spheres of production and consumption. Thus, in this way, post-industrial self-sufficiency can, in part, be understood as a third way between capitalism and socialism (Jacobs, 1997: x).

Though vastly different expressions, the experience of both self-providers and subaltern consumers refute the commonly made assumption that consumer capitalism necessarily offers citizens the opportunity to exercise freedom. According to Varman and Vikas, for subaltern consumers, freedom in the domain of consumption can only come from freedom in the domain of production. This is precisely what was at the heart of the post-industrial expression of self-sufficiency.

The interconnections between production and consumption are central to understanding the philosophy of self-sufficiency. By examining the self-sufficiency movement in relation to mass consumerism we can begin to understand the way both philosophies have been constructed. Self-sufficiency would bring the consumer and producer closer together by cutting out the middleman. By removing the market the citizen would become both producer and consumer. The choice to get what you really want – not just what the majority wanted, or marketers told you or thought you wanted – was tied up in the dual ideologies of production and consumption; to be able to exercise real choice you needed to ‘do-it-yourself’. As Meg and David Miller told the readers of the first issue of the self-sufficiency magazine *Grass Roots* in 1973:

If you want fresh vegetables you have to grow them yourself. To get bread with any flavour you have to bake it yourself. To get a quality

jumper you have to spin and knit it yourself' (reprinted in Miller, 1979: 7).

Varman and Vikas argue that 'Although the linkage between identity and consumption is widely acknowledged, the contentious part is the relationship with freedom'. Those who Varman and Vikas observed had very little freedom, if any at all. They suggest that under capitalism, the notion of freedom for the majority is illusory: the 'separation of production and consumption is itself an elitist privilege only to be exercised by a small minority in the globalised world' arguing that the 'much-touted marriage between capitalism and freedom never took place for a vast majority of the global population' (Varman and Vikas, 2007: 123 & 125). Despite this, my study of affluent consumers who actively sought to opt-out of the mainstream supports Varman and Vikas' contention that the notion of freedom is illusory if consumption and production are separated.

While it is clear that in a sense, Australian self-providers in the 1970s exercised free choice to opt-in or opt-out they nevertheless, and despite their affluence, did not feel free under the constraints of consumer capitalism. For self-providers it is only through reuniting consumption and production that one could be truly free of the confines of the system (although the realities of a self-sufficient lifestyle may have been very different).

Despite the differences, the two studies show that 'disempowerment in the domain of production directly translates into unfreedom for workers in the sphere of consumption' (Varman and Vikas, 2007: 125-126). Self-providers in 1970s Australia had the means to do something about their perceived 'unfreedom' as the ability to 'opt-out' was only possible because of their position as consumers in a privileged elite. Yet, the Australian experience self-sufficiency confirms that, for some, 'loss of control in production cannot be compensated in the domain of consumption' (Varman and Vikas, 2007: 128).

Historical Considerations

Central to understanding the expression of post-industrial self-sufficiency in Australia is acknowledging its historical links to the ideal of the yeoman farmer and bourgeois notions of independence. In her study of food production in Australian cities, Andrea Gaynor (2006: 48) insightfully observes that the key to understanding why it was that people who could afford to buy their own food chose to produce it themselves is through its connection to 'independence'. This disposition, she writes, 'might be traced back at least as far as the Reformation, to the so-called 'Protestant ethic' which Weber identified as the rationalistic and accumulation-oriented "spirit of capitalism"'. This largely middle-class disposition can also be seen in the forces driving suburbanization in the late nineteenth century (Davison, 1978: 137). The suburb, writes Davison in his classic study of 19th century Melbourne, came to symbolise independence, as the 'soul's defence against the metropolis'. It became, he continues, 'the social mechanism by which personal values, expunged from the work-a-day world, established their own domain'.

The values centred on virtues of security, political participation, social status and moral virtues in the form of thrift (Gaynor, 2006: 56). Gaynor suggests, for example, that suburban household food production during the late nineteenth century was an attempt to replicate the 'yeoman ideal'. The yeoman was, after all, his 'own boss, independent of the relations of capitalism (in the ideal, at least), and largely self-sufficient'.

The yeoman ideal, of course, did have some basis in reality. From white settlement, the British Empire ‘was intent on having yeoman farmers in Australia providing England and Europe with Australian primary products’ (Beilin, 1999: 775). Yet the yeoman ideal was largely just that – an ideal which centred on rural work and lifestyle and was, particularly after the financial crash of the 1890s, widely seen as the answer to urban degradation (Davison, 1978: 251). Despite the rural ideal, Australia remained a suburban nation with arcadia more likely to be replicated in suburban backyards than the country.

For a variety of reasons that are out of the scope of this paper, government programs – such as soldier settlement schemes in the interwar period – designed to settle families on relatively small acreages (by Australian standards), have been largely unsuccessful (Gaynor, 2006: 56; Lake, 1987). Utopian communal experiments most of which also had, albeit limited, government support have also been short lived (Metcalf, 1986: 98-99). It is worth mentioning, nevertheless, that despite the notion of independence as being central to the yeoman ideal he was more a small businessman than removed from the market. While he might have been independent of traditional employer/employee relationships he was, for example, rarely independent of the vagaries of external commodity prices and his success or failure largely dependent on them.

The link between the yeoman farmer and the market is an important one. From suburban backyards to schemes to populate the interior, Gaynor (2006: 56) importantly observes, the idealised version of the yeoman was manipulated to enhance participation in the social and economic success of the country. Yet, in the self-sufficiency tracts of the 1970s and 1980s there was no mention of the yeoman farmer. Despite this, the bourgeois orientation towards independence remained. So too did their ‘preference for private, detached houses ... [and] relationships with nature’ (Gaynor, 2006: 14). But gone was the value of social status (indeed it was more than likely to be ridiculed). Gone too was the morality of thrift. More important than this was the overt shift away from the ‘accumulation-oriented spirit of capitalism’ which was a feature of suburbanisation.

It seems that for self-providers, at least, ‘the yeoman dream of five acres and a cow’ was not to be realised in ‘a quarter-acre block and a pen of chooks’ (Davison, 1978: 185; Gaynor, 2006: 55). Self-providers, after all, wanted to get as far away from the city as possible. Davison (1978: 254) notes that the appeal of the country ‘depends up on the growth of cities large and malignant enough to arouse disgust and disillusionment’. Cities, of course, had already achieved this status. But a suburban lifestyle, however rural or arcadian in aspect, would not be enough for some. Self-providers in the later period sought liberation from both spheres: from the city (where work was unproductive and unfulfilling) and from the suburbs (where life was mundane, competitive and consumerist). But, as Vance (1972: 209) has noted: ‘little question exists that arcadia shares most of the fears and forces that shape suburbia ... it was tarred with “togetherness” in the 1950s and must be shunned by those seeking a new [life]’.

In his assessment of country (farm) versus city life, in which he advocated ‘homesteading’ as a serious alternative to the ravages of economic depression, Kains (1935: 4-5) represented a shift. The city dweller and his family, Kains wrote, ‘are ekeing out a narrowing, uneducative, imitative, more or less selfish and purposeless existence; and that his and their “expectation of life” is shortened by tainted air, restricted sunshine and lack of exercise, to say nothing of exposure to disease’. Country life, Kains argued,

offered the solution in much the same way as proponents of suburbanisation had argued in the nineteenth century. It offered the permanence and productivity of land, self-reliance, the ‘responsibility and satisfaction of homeownership against leasehold’ and health and happiness, not to mention the development and formation of character. But, for some, such a life was not possible to achieve when tied to the city.

Even when economic good times returned, the secure suburban life would not again hold the appeal for those seeking self-sufficient independence.

Economics of Self-Sufficiency

It is worth acknowledging, that those proposing alternatives to mainstream suburban lifestyles were, of course, not alone in questioning the values of mass consumption and suburbanization. In the post-war period, social and cultural critics and economists from Vance Packard (1957; 1961) to J.K. Galbraith (c.1958) and, closer to home, Robin Boyd (1960) questioned its dominance with varying impact. Their critiques of mass consumerism contributed to a general debate about conformity at the expense of culture and the suppression of ingenuity, authenticity and creativity. Yet their names do not appear in the pages of the self-sufficiency/homesteading literature.

It is not surprising that it is through economic critiques about the excesses and failures of capitalism that one finds the emergence of the modern homesteading and self-provider ideal. In Australia, for example, nineteenth Century European socialism was translated into Australian working class context and expressed most overtly in utopian communal living experiments (Metcalf, 1986). Two of most influential proponents of self-sufficiency/homesteading, Scott Nearing and Ralph Borsodi (1933) were both driven by their concerns about the excesses of capitalism in the United States. Not surprisingly they were both economists. Nearing, a strident socialist, fought for social justice particularly in the area of child labour law reform and Borsodi’s critique of capitalism offered self-sufficiency as solution to unemployment and poverty.

But the critique of capitalism in the 1970s by self-providers would not be a socialist critique. The form ‘homesteading’ took in the 1970s, was underpinned by the realisation that ‘socialism, or any social-political configuration, could [no longer] transcend ... the inherently alienating character of industrial technology, with the near inevitable stratification of the social order into expert planners and a relatively uninformed citizenry’ (Jacob, 1997: x).

In linking his critique of economics to self-sufficiency, E.F. Schumacher, the author of the widely influential *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (1973), was a notable exception in bridging the gap between academic critiques and the self-sufficiency literature. In his 1976 foreword to John Seymour’s *Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency*, Schumacher described the shift from self-reliance to dependence on the organisation system. Never before, Schumacher lamented, had people been so dependent and less able to do things for themselves. There were serious consequences for being too dependent: ‘What if there is a hold-up, a breakdown, a strike, or unemployment?’. He accepted that the State could no longer be relied upon to provide a safety net; even if it existed people could fall through the cracks. ‘Why can’t they help themselves?’ Schumacher asked. For him the answer was all too obvious: ‘they would not know how

to; they have never done it before and would not even know where to begin (in Seymour, 1976: 6). Some of the answers lay in Seymour's how-to manual.

Ultimately, of course, the answer to the problem of dependence was self-reliance. The method by which to be self-reliant was through practicing and gaining the skills of self-sufficiency. The majority of those promoting the philosophy of self-sufficiency were those who had already made the shift: Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Borsodi, Helen and Scott Nearing, were the oft cited pioneers. Yet, different forces separated the two eras of those who found the solution to the problem of capitalism in going-back-to-the-land. While early proponents such as Borsodi and Nearing were driven by an attack on production, later converts targeted the problem of consumption.

In Australia the emergence of *Earth Garden* and *Grass Roots* played an important role in introducing overseas advocates of self-sufficiency and homesteading to a local audience. Some fifty years after its first printing, *Earth Garden* told its readers that Borsodi's *Flight from the City* was as relevant in 1973 as he had ever been. It 'describes ... not merely a key to the good life for those who personally turn to it, [but it is also] the key to the solution of the problems which are tearing America to pieces today' (no.7, December 1973: 6). Indeed, even after twenty years of unprecedented economic prosperity, the alternatives offered in Kains' *5-acres and Independence* still resonated when it too was reprinted for a new audience in 1973. While it was still for those who wanted to go back to the land, the book was no longer for those who couldn't achieve material abundance in cities because of economic depression, but rather for those who had achieved it but found its virtues waning.

Earth Garden and *Grass Roots*, which were first published in 1972 and 1973 respectively, catered to those who wanted such alternatives. Cock (1979: 9) states that such publications were as 'much a part of the movement as a vehicle for it', Metcalf (1986: 49) too confirms this: 'the alternative lifestyle press is a creation of those same participants whom it serves'.

But most importantly, *Earth Garden* and *Grass Roots* spoke of home-grown discontents playing an influential role in serving to reaffirm and strengthen the conviction of participants: 'your magazine is working here to check this consumer monster. Thank you', wrote Anne Homes of St. Ives NSW (GR, No.12, Spring 1977: 4). Frith and Allan Peters, writing from Byabarra in NSW told fellow converts: 'we wouldn't go back to suburbia for anything and your publication inspires us to persevere' (GR, No.12, Spring 1977: 4).

Although the written accounts differ due to geographical and climatic circumstances, the reasons for seeking a 'better life' during the period under examination were universal. While the writers like Borsodi, Kains and the Nearings were more overt in their criticism of capitalism and some more hopeful than others that the system could or should be reformed, what links all of these expressions, regardless of whether the problem be one of production or consumption, is that productive labour remains the key to independence.

The Consumer Monster

Those writing in the 1970s, from John Seymour in the United Kingdom to John Vivian in the United States to Meg and David Miller and Keith and Irene Smith in Australia all

stress their dissatisfaction with mainstream consumerism. In his introduction to his best-selling *Manual of Practical Homesteading* sub-titled: ‘pursuit of a better life’, John Vivian (1975: 1) described his ‘coming of age’:

Louise and I began to see that there was something very wrong with the typical American super-consumer way of life. ... [We] just got fed up with being consumers – commuting to dull city jobs to keep up with payments on a gadget-filled suburban house, flashy cars, and the other nonessentials that symbolize success to most people.

Thus, the universal solution to a troubled urban life was a self-sufficient, often laborious, rural life:

We grow most of our food the natural, organic way without chemicals; we make much of our clothing, pottery, and tools, do all our own carpentry, plumbing and the like, and supply many of our energy needs with firewood and back muscle (Vivian, 1975: 1).

Although the movement had its historical antecedents, the philosophy of self-sufficiency that was pursued with vigour from the 1970s onwards was very much a product of the time and place in which it developed and was as much a reaction against mass consumerism as a product of it. Hackett and Schwartz (1980: 175) suggested that we should understand ‘alternative lifestyles’ like homesteading with its focus on voluntary simplicity ‘as intrinsic to the most “modern” features of the conventional economy ... [thus needing] no special explanation’ and might even ‘be thought of as simply a second-generation suburbanization phenomenon’.

It is almost certainly the case that back-to-the-land movements ... are ironically dependent upon modern highway systems, just as wilderness camping and exploration of “natural” places is ironically dependent upon modern synthetic fabrics and plastic equipment. We describe these dependencies as “ironic” because the definition of a more “natural” existence seems to exclude them. But insofar as they exist, alternative lifestyles might best be thought of as the products of, not the rejection, of mainstream developments; and homesteading.

Andrea Gaynor (2006: 167) identifies a shift in values which occurred during the 1960s and 1970s from an emphasis on materialist values to post-materialist values of self-expression, belonging and intellectual satisfaction. Indeed, it makes some sense to place the self-sufficiency ideal within this context. Yet, the desire to be self-sufficient is also to be understood as independence from the consumer marketplace. It is worth exploring why it was that self-sufficiency was predominantly undertaken in ways that conformed to conventional settlement patterns and its proponents more likely to attack the ‘consumer monster’ than lack of community.

The criticism of consumer capitalism and materialism that it ‘implies individualism and an egocentric concern with self-survival’ can also be levelled at self-sufficiency suggesting the close connection between the two ideas. If it is indeed to be considered a paradox, it would be considered less important than finding an alternative to mass consumerism.

It is, perhaps, important not to overstate the notion of self-sufficiency as a ‘social movement’ with a clearly defined (and identifiable) set of followers. Reflecting in 2007 on the success and longevity of *Earth Garden*, Keith Smith commented: ‘I think we touched a nerve and reached interested people, though we had no concept at all of what our readership was for some time’ (Smith, 2007). Many readers describe stumbling on the magazines, or their overseas counterparts such as *Mother Earth News*, and realising they were not alone. Elaine Meehan, in the Mount Lofty Ranges, was one such reader:

I realized that I’m not some kind of nut or freak, that my way of life is shared by others who are finding that great satisfaction of home grown vegies and of handspun woollen jumpers and rugs. To me, getting back to the land, has been a fresh start and a new hope with lots of satisfaction. My health and that of my family has improved, and one by one the gadgets that I brought with me from the city are disappearing. ... but they are not greatly missed (*GR*, no.6: 2).

Jill Rainer in Tasmania was another:

It’s ridiculous feeling to have a great, unique idea and to discover that thousands of people have thought of it too and have beaten you to the post. ... We got the idea of homesteading, spent just about three months looking for our land, ... then discovered the Last Whole Earth Catalogue, the Mother Earth [News], then Earth Garden (‘Back to the Land’, *EG*, no.4, 1973: 5).

It was difficult to accurately estimate the number of people living, or intending to live, a self-sufficient lifestyle. Williams (1984: 25) contended that there were ‘up to five times more people living as homesteaders than there are living in a communal lifestyle’. Other accounts have suggested that those interested in self-sufficiency are more likely to conform to conventional settlement patterns (Metcalf, 1984; Hackett and Schwartz: 1980). For Vivian (1975: 8) the term “homesteader” ‘best describes the independent, self-reliant individual, no longer a small plot gardener and not yet a full-time farmer’. By its very name ‘self-sufficiency’ suggests the isolated nature of the endeavour. Thus, it is fair to say that only a minority of those moving back to the land were involved in alternative communities and most were individuals and families who bought a small acreage for a subsistence farm (Cock, 1979).

Although representing a very small proportion of actual participants, those who adopted a Nearing-style of self-sufficiency, what Jacob (1997: 57) calls ‘purist’ or ‘total’ self-sufficiency, ‘inject a self consciously political dimension into homesteading, seeing in their routine labor a declaration of independence from corporate America’. While Jacob stressed the likelihood for disappointment, (few can live up to such unrealistic expectations), most proponents were careful to warn prospective devotees that total self-sufficiency was neither desire nor possible (Gordon, 1981: 6; Schumacher, in Seymour, 1976: 6). Even those who were considered closest to the ideal stressed that they were nearly, not totally, self-sufficient (Seymour, 1973a: 13). Thus, it is not so much about the numbers of participants, or the level to which they attained self-sufficiency. Rather, more illuminating is their shared repulsion towards mass consumerism and their chosen method to tackle the problem.

While proponents of self-sufficiency shared a philosophy and similar ideals, they were often – and by their own choosing – physically isolated from one another (by geography and by the home-based nature of their work). Thus, it is probably more helpful to think of it as a philosophy of shared ideals with a common enemy. The proponents, like their counterparts in other westernised countries, were not drawn from a particular demographic but were drawn together by a shared revulsion towards mass consumerism and a desire to be independent and by providing for themselves. It is this aspect of self-sufficiency that is the most striking.

While the editors of *Earth Garden* and *Grass Roots* dictated the magazine's contents to a certain extent, it was very much dependent on reader input. Readers contributed articles and letters which largely focused on self-sufficient, communal and other alternative lifestyles and information sharing and support. But one did not have to be physically connected to feel part of a community of likeminded individuals. Elisabeth and Jerry Williams (2007), who left Melbourne in 1977 to pursue a self-sufficient lifestyle outside Orbost in eastern Victoria, stressed that '*Earth Garden* and *Grass Roots* was our community'.

While some saw the answer lying in communities and communes, and many of these arrangements had self-sufficiency in the form of food production as one of its goals, the majority of people actively seeking post-industrial self-sufficiency were doing so as part of nuclear families in sole households not attached to communities. Despite the obvious economic advantages, and although the idea appealed to John Seymour, his wife Sally (an Australian potter) was less than enthusiastic: 'Oh no – we don't want to start some bloody community!' (Seymour, 1974: 167). For others, like Meg and David Miller who had initially published *Grass Roots* as a communal endeavour, the experiment was unsuccessful due to personality clashes and within a very short time the community dissolved.

Some were even willing to trade some of their independence, albeit temporarily, to be able to pursue their dream of self-sufficiency as sole homesteaders. As 'Dale and Brenda' (*EG*, no.6, September, 1973: 55) of Guildford NSW explained to their fellow readers of *Earth Garden* in 1973:

Unfortunately, to enable us all to attain our goals of self-sufficiency through gardening, craft, artisanship and barter, there is usually the need to slave away in ulcer-country city and town jobs until enough cash has been saved to buy suitable land and other essentials. Pooling money and forming communes and suchlike are not to everyone's taste, so many couples will go it alone, despite the financial hurdle.

But Dale and Brenda were able to reconcile their participation in the 'system' as a (temporary) necessary evil.

Our particular way of realising our ambition has been to play the capitalist game to our own advantage, and cash in on inflation. We scraped together a deposit on our present house and large yard in Sydney's western suburbs two years ago. Ever since, our organic garden has flourished, supplying large quantities of tasty vegetables to us and friends, and keeping us fit on the work. Meanwhile, the

house has doubled in value, helped along by our own renovation work (*EG*, no.6, September, 1973: 55).

It seems incongruous that proponents of self-sufficiency and self-reliance needed to finance their escape by participating in the type of society they wanted to reject, i.e.: in order buy land on which to be self-sufficient, to build their house in which to live and to work the soil in which to grow their own food, they first needed to take part in mainstream society. The problem of financing and continuing the dream was ever present, as Brian Grant (1974: 230) put so well: 'it takes cash, and more cash every day, to start a life where money means less'.

Productive Labour

Most importantly, for those who sought self-reliance, the solution to the problem of mainstream of consumerism was also universal. In order to achieve satisfaction and reward for effort one needed to do productive labour, often hard physical labour.

Proponents argued that they were living out the innate desire to provide for their families. By removing themselves from the mainstream, self-providers needed to produce the necessities of life: food, shelter, clothing etc. But most went further than the austere lifestyles of Thoreau at Walden Ponds (whose self-sufficient experiment lasted 'two years, two months and two days') who survived almost entirely on beans and the Nearings (1989) who lived on a vegetarian diet limited by short growing seasons and the (self-imposed) restriction of four hours of labour per day. As Seymour mocked:

Thoreau ... didn't work very hard at all. He spent a very large part of his time there wondering around in the woods, peering into the depths of his pool, thinking and dreaming and meditating. I think he was a very sensible and enviable young man indeed. But he didn't have a wife and a family to bring up. Personally, I would not be prepared to live ... on beans. Sally certainly wouldn't either, and we would be very hard put to make the children do it (Seymour, 1973a: 12-13).

The desire for greater variety can be explained, perhaps, by the variety that had been available or promised to them in the consumer market: after all, the 'good' or 'better' life 'may be more frugal but need not necessarily be oppressive and austere' (Boddy and Beckett, 1980: 8). Neither was it a denial of affluence and abundance *per se*. Ultimately, it was quality over quantity that was equally important; quality that was lacking in mainstream production systems.

It is concerned with quality rather than quantity; small, simple and personal rather than large, complex and impressive. It is a means to effective production rather than thoughtless consumption; to self-reliance rather than helpless dependence upon experts (Boddy and Beckett, 1980: 7).

Miller (in Smith and Crossley, 1975: 197), too, made her feelings clear: 'You don't have to accept the quality of the food in the shops either, you can grow all your own food quite easily and be much healthier and happier as a result'. Seymour (1973a: 13) explained that by being self-providers he and Sally 'lived for eighteen years on the fat of the land: we have probably eaten and drunk better than most other people in this country: our food has been good, varied, fresh, and of the very best quality'.

For self-providers it was clearly a matter of personal control over, and liberation from, production systems. Schumacher (in Seymour, 1976: 6), in his foreword to Seymour's classic *The Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency* which has become the key text for self-providers, made the connection explicit: 'to grow or make some things by myself, for myself: what fun, what exhilaration, what liberation from any feelings of utter dependence on organizations!'. But he went even further:

What is perhaps even more: what an education of the real person!
To be in touch with the *actual process of creation*. The inborn creativity of people is no mean or accidental thing; neglect or disregard it, and it becomes an inner source of poison.

Freedom from the System

By being active participants in the dual spheres of production and consumption participants were able to get satisfaction out of not contributing to a system they found ultimately unfulfilling and corruptive. Keith and Irene Smith also linked self-sufficiency to personal liberation: 'You can free yourself from the system treadmill, at least a little, by being as nearly self-sufficient as possible' (*EG*, no.2, September 1972: 29). David and Meg Miller, in an article published in *Earth Garden* before they started *Grass Roots*, made the connection clear 'we also know where all our food comes from and how it's grown, and it doesn't pass through two or three capitalist hands before it reaches us ('Black Sheep Cycle', *EG*, no: 4, 1973: 33). A self-sufficient rural lifestyle, for Meg Miller and other self-providers, ultimately offered satisfaction and freedom from 'working so that someone else can make a profit from your labours' (Miller, in Smith and Crossley, 1975: 197).

But in other cases the politics of opting out was made even more explicit:

We're happy knowing that – this year anyway – we're both living on less than Keith paid in tax last year. It makes us feel good when we think about the tax we're not paying and where it's not going – like to corrupt Vietnamese dictators and for F-111s (*EG*, no.2, September 1972: 29).

'We have been very *nearly* self-supporting. ... the tax-eaters have not done very well out of us', wrote John Seymour (1973a: 13). 'We have not contributed much to the development of the atom bomb', he continued, 'nor to the building of *Concorde*'. He and his family, however, could not avoid the system entirely:

When the latter breaks the sound barrier over heads, and scares the wits out of our cows, we have to endure it, but at least we have the satisfaction of knowing that we have not paid for it.

Although the 1970's expression of self-sufficiency (back-to-the-land) had its historical antecedents in Thoreau, Borsodi and Nearing etc, what Versey (1973: 410) describes as a historical continuity of cultural radicalism, their questioning of capitalism focused on the problems of production (rather than consumption). By the early 1970s, self-sufficiency was no longer advocated to improve life of the working class, but attracted those who had already experienced or achieved material abundance.

Although, future Australian Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke (1979) would raise the notion of alternative lifestyles as a possible solution to youth unemployment at the end of

the decade, the early 1970's expression of going-back-to-the-land needs to be examined as self-sufficiency in what Meg and David Miller (1979: 4) called 'a time of plenty'. John Vivian, in his best-selling *Manual of Practical Homesteading* published in 1975, acknowledged the seemingly paradoxical nature of the pursuit and clearly highlighted the differences between the two periods:

And though it will be incomprehensible to our elders who suffered through the Great Depression, and to the poor and discriminated-against who are still fighting for conventional success, we found the affluent "good life" too easy. It lacked the challenge of hard, genuinely creative and productive labor that can provide a deep sense of accomplishment (Vivian, 1975: 3).

The desire to be independent, free and secure was universal amongst those who sought self-reliance. As Helen Nearing, Vivian, Schumacher and others have highlighted, it was the personal satisfaction and challenge of being self-reliant that was the key to freedom. Yet, while earlier proponents sought landownership to ensure independence from a landlord (Davison, 1978), economic depression or from factory employment, by the end of the long economic boom of the post-WWII period, self-providers also sought freedom from the competition and conformity of mass consumerism.

Consumerism's advocates stressed the freewill of consumers to choose amongst an escalating quantity of goods. However, those drawn to self-sufficiency found that freedom to choose amongst what they saw as an increasing array of identical, unnecessary and wasteful goods of declining quality was less and less convincing. Meg and Dave Miller (1976: 11) summed up their attitude thus: 'the happiness ethic that consumerism is constantly selling has, for us, become wishy washy'.

Self-sufficiency appealed to those who wanted to get out of the city, who felt oppressed in the mainstream and those who wanted get away from consumerist, acquisitive, competitive, but ultimately unproductive, lifestyles. 'Perhaps the greatest lure the homesteading experience offers to harassed city and suburb dwellers', wrote Vivian, 'is its independence from the pressures of urban life and the routine of a nine to five job' (Vivian, 1975: 8).

This sentiment was repeated by correspondents to *Grass Roots*, for example, who connected their desire to get away from the 'rat-race', the 'treadmill' and the drudgery and external controls of society. They longed to remove themselves from the 'consumer mad world' and away from the 'consumer monster' by being self-sufficient. Examples of dissatisfaction came from all over the country.

Shirley and Mel Gowing from Tiaro QLD moved 'away from the daily 'drudge' of Melbourne life to go "back to the land"' (GR, no.32, August, 1982: 8). From their thirty acre farm outside Adelaide d'Arcy White's family was 'keen to work towards a more natural lifestyle – one which *we* have more choice, rather than being stuck with the subtle external controls of the society at large' (GR, no.32, August 1982: 11). Alison Moore on Heron Island wrote to *Grass Roots* to tell readers:

we would like to carry out some of our experiments to Tassie and feel this is a good place to gain knowledge on all manner of things, basic living and to rely far less on the commercial world. ... P.S.

We do enjoy our primitive and uncluttered life! (Alison Moore, Heron Island, *GR*, no.20, 1980: 94).

Mary Shannon from Jindivick VIC was pleased to tell readers of *Grass Roots* that ‘we are well on the way to achieving our goal of being a self-contained unit in a consumer-mad world’ (*GR*, no.11: 5). Mrs White was also keen to buy some land to ‘get away from commercialised living’ (*GR*, no.6: 3). It was the connection between getting away from the city with its focus on accumulation and going back to the land that links all these experiences and desires.

From the outset, *Earth Garden* (No: 1, 1972) told readers it was ‘concerned with the back-to-the-earth movement, surviving in the city, living in the country’. Although the various publications catered for both rural and urban alternative lifestyle devotees, it was clear that for those who sort ‘true’ freedom urban self-sufficiency was a compromise or, perhaps at best, a stepping stone to the real thing. As the blurb from the first issue of *Earth Garden* illustrated, the city was something that had to be ‘survived’; the country was where the real living could be done.

But it was not enough just to escape from the city to obtain and experience freedom. Meg Miller (‘Down Home on the Farm’, *GR*, no: 22, 1980: 81) mocked: ‘I’m sure we have all visited country folk who have literally transported their South Yarra lifestyle into the country. What a waste!’. Reflecting on her own experience, she described the change that was needed and the freedom that was possible:

We try to keep our life simple. Compared to the norm we have few household possessions and few labour saving devices. If we have something electrical, it’s a work horse. By owning little, we’ve enjoyed freedom, from house-work, worry, pretence. We’ve also had a minimal financial outlay. By not being a prisoner of your possessions you are more open to changes and modifications in your lifestyle, rather than imposing outmoded ways.

A Different Kind of Freedom

While self-providers were free from the constraints of urban life, nine-to-five work days and the competitiveness of the suburbs, freedom was somewhat vexed. To be successful, workdays would probably be longer, physically harder and their structure more regulated than one, without the experience of farm life, might expect. Indeed, Meg Miller (in Smith and Crossley, 1975: 197) remarked ‘many people who have adopted a rural life style, who have ‘got away from it all’, will quickly and loudly explain that they’ve never been tied down so much before’. Keith and Irene Smith, reflecting on their first ten years, made it clear that the ‘good life’ was not to be mistaken with the ‘easy life’. ‘It is hard work’, they wrote (‘The First Decade’, *EG*, no.33, Feb-Apr 1982: 4) ‘When you’re replacing money with time and sweat of your brow, there’s no such thing as a free lunch or a five-day-a-week cow’.

‘You are really no more free in the self-sufficiency way of life than in any other lifestyle’, wrote Meg and Dave Miller (1976: 11). Describing the lifestyle conundrum they continued:

Animals have to be milked with clockwork regularity, orphan lambs fed as many as six times per day, poultry fed, watered and locked

up, bees regularly checked, moved, and honey extracted and then there are the extra-ordinary high demands a garden elicits if you are able to provide most of your food from it.

In another account, Meg (in Smith and Crossley, 1975: 197) stressed both the responsibility and the reality of the lifestyle when she wrote ‘So, in its own way, living in the country is more structured than any other life style, and you can’t opt out of the structure so easily’. But, adding a caveat, Meg and David Miller were quick to point out ‘yet you do feel ultimately free’. It was the freedom from consumer capitalism that was possible through self-sufficiency:

The freedom you can assume without having the boss lurking in the background, without the monotonous nine-to-five routine and without the heavy financial demands the consumer lifestyle requires (1976: 11).

It certainly was not an easy life, nor was it without its mundane chores. But as Meg Miller (in Smith and Crossley, 1975: 197), as if speaking on behalf of self-providers everywhere, eloquently surmised: ‘You don’t mind doing these things – because you’re in there, hands and feet, not outside it, not separated by layers of plastic, or automatic switched-on instant gratification’.

Conclusions

This paper argues that post-industrial self-sufficiency was, above all else, the search for autonomy from the consumer marketplace. By being self-providers, citizens felt they would be able to re-gain control and give their lives meaning in ways consumerism and materialism would never allow. By growing, cooking and preserving, building, raising animals, producing energy and making and doing, participants were actively searching for an authentic lifestyle: a lifestyle based on creativity, self-help, independence, self-expression and freedom – elements that were, and perhaps always will be, lacking or impossible in the mainstream.

The early 1970’s expression of self-sufficiency was equally about getting away from the Joneses as getting back to the land. For self-providers, consumer capitalism had simply failed to deliver the ‘good life’. As the 1970s came to a close, threat of environmental collapse and the fear that fossil fuels would soon run out also gained prominence as a significant driver behind the search for self-sufficiency. Finding alternatives would, it seemed, become inevitable. ‘We live in a time of change’, Keith and Irene Smith (1978: 4) explained, ‘Soon these fossil fuels will be exhausted. We will be forced to return to the renewable sources of energy. ... We must learn to sort out our needs from our wants to become more self-reliant’.

Within the pages of the self-sufficiency literature that was published into the 1980s and beyond, more attention would also be given to urban self-sufficiency for city dwellers that were unable or unwilling to make the shift to the country. Some writers conceded that one not need to move to the country to be independent. A number of forces such as rising land prices, unemployment and planning restrictions conspired to prevent would be self-providers moving to the land.

Regardless of the warnings of environmental collapse and the evidence of ‘peak oil’ that has become even more transparent over the last thirty years, self-sufficiency has been the

desire of only a minority. Mass consumerism has, without doubt, remained the dominant ideology. Despite the seemingly overwhelming forces preventing the flight from the city in the late twentieth century, one wonders if it had, and still has, more to do with consumer unwillingness to give up the material benefits of consumer capitalism despite the increasingly negative consequences.

Some might suggest that public opinion is again crystallising in favour of more 'environmentally aware' lifestyles. Indeed, concerns about the impact consumer capitalism have again captivated academia, the media and popular culture and such interest has helped to define lifestyle shifts such as 'downshifting', 'downsizing', 'sea change' and, more recently, 'tree change'. Tied up with this have been notions of affluenza and voluntary simplicity (Burnley and Murphy, 2004; Hamilton and Dennis, 2005). Such shifts have been defined widely and vaguely by the desire to improve one's quality of life driven various motivations including: lessening one's environmental footprint, getting away from the drudgery of unfulfilling careers to spend one's time in more satisfying ways, moving from polluted cities or spending more time with family. However, while these drivers have also been influential in decisions made by those seeking self-sufficiency over the past thirty-five years, there is one important difference. 'Sea-changers' and 'downshiffters' are not necessarily motivated by the central tenant of the self-sufficiency ethic: the desire to provide for oneself. Only a minority of those who fit into the category of downshiffters and sea-changers might seek a self-sufficient lifestyle. While all share the somewhat vague desire to improve one's quality of life, those seeking to downshift or embark on a sea change may be motivated, for example, by the yearning to increase their leisure time to play more golf rather than to milk goats and be more likely to buy organic whole-wheat sourdough bread rather than grow their own wheat, grind their own grain and bake the bread themselves. To put it another way, sea-changers and downshiffters may want to have more time to 'stop and smell the roses' but those drawn to a self-sufficient lifestyle are more than likely to spend their time pulling out the roses and growing tomatoes instead.

At least for the immediate future, because there are still other lifestyle 'choices', success at being self-sufficient is ultimately, as Sally Gordon (1981: 6) observed, only for

those people who really love this way of life; who actively enjoy cleaning out a smelly goat shed, or going out to feed the pigs and shut in the chickens in all weathers; who find satisfaction in digging over a rough patch of land or spending hours up a ladder pruning a neglected apple tree.

Perhaps self-sufficiency as a serious alternative to consumer capitalism will only be possible if it is no longer the choice of an enlightened and privileged few, but the necessity for the (immediate) survival of the many. But until then, there will always be some for which a consumerist suburban life will always be an unsatisfactory compromise.

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