

The Post Affluent Society

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Abstract Discomfort about the overarching goal of capitalist economies, and the idea that achieving ever higher levels of consumption of products and services is a vacuous goal, has been with us since the onset of industrialization. This contribution looks at the phenomenon and foundations of voluntary simplicity. Its psychological implications and consequences for societies are discussed.

Keywords: consumption, consumerism, voluntary simplicity, capitalism

INTRODUCTION

Discomfort about the overarching goal of capitalist economies, and the idea that achieving ever higher levels of consumption of products and services is a vacuous goal, has been with us since the onset of industrialization (Shi 2003). Criticism of consumerism was common among followers of countercultures. They sought a lifestyle that consumed and produced little, at least in terms of marketable objects, and sought to derive satisfaction, meaning, and a sense of purpose from contemplation, communion with nature, bonding with one another, et cetera (Musgrove 1974). A significant number of members of Western societies embraced a much-attenuated version of the values and mores of the counterculture. Inglehart found that “the values of Western publics have been shifting from an overwhelming emphasis on material well-being and physical security toward greater emphasis on the quality of life” (Abramson and Inglehart 1995: 19).

Personal consumption, however, continued to grow (Lebergott 1993). Still, the search for alternatives to consumerism as the goal of capitalism continues to intrigue people. I focus here on one such alternative, referred to as “voluntary simplicity” (Paehlke 1989, Schor 1991). “Voluntary simplicity”

refers to people choosing – out of free will – to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning.

The criticism of consumerism and the quest for alternatives are as old as capitalism itself. However, the issue needs revisiting for several reasons. The collapse of non-capitalist economic systems has led many to assume that capitalism is the superior system and therefore, to refrain from critically examining its goals. But capitalism has defects of its own (Handy 1998). Furthermore, as so many societies with rapidly rising populations now seek affluence as their primary domestic goal, the environmental, psychological and other issues raised by consumerism are being faced on a scale not previously considered. For instance, the undesirable side effects of intensive consumerism that once primarily concerned highly industrialized societies are now faced in a number of other countries. Finally, the transition from consumption tied to satisfaction of what are perceived as basic needs (secure shelter, food, clothing and so on) to consumerism (the preoccupation with gaining ever higher levels of consumption, including a considerable measure of conspicuous consumption of status goods), seems to be more pronounced as societies become wealthier. Hence, a re-examination of the goals and lifestyles of mature capitalist societies is particularly timely. Indeed, this may well be an environment particularly hospitable for voluntary simplicity.

This examination proceeds first by providing a description of voluntary simplicity, exploring its different manifestations and its effects on competitiveness should the need and urge to gain ever higher levels of income be curbed. It then considers whether greater income, and the additional consumption it enables, produces greater contentment. This is a crucial issue because it makes a world of difference to the sustainability of voluntary simplicity if it is deprivational (and hence requires strong motivational forces if it is to spread and persevere), or if consumerism is found to be obsessive and maybe even addictive. In the latter case, voluntary simplicity would be liberating and might become self-propelling and sustaining.

The answer to the preceding question, and hence to the future of voluntary simplicity as a major cultural factor, we shall see, is found in an application of Maslow's theory of human needs. It finds further reinforcement by examining the "consumption" of a growing *sub*-category of goods whose supply and demand is not governed by the condition of scarcity in the post-modern era. The essay closes with a discussion of the societal consequences of voluntary simplicity.

I. VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

Voluntary simplicity is observable in different levels of intensity. It ranges from rather moderate levels (in which people downshift their consumptive rich lifestyle, but not necessarily into a low gear), to strong simplification (in which people significantly restructure their lives), to holistic simplification.

Downshifters

One quite moderate form of voluntary simplicity is practiced by economically well-off and secure people who voluntarily give up some consumer goods (often considered luxuries) they could readily afford, while basically maintaining their rather rich and consumption-oriented lifestyle. For example, they “dress down” in one way or another: wearing jeans and inexpensive loafers, t-shirts, and driving beat-up cars.

Bruce Springsteen is reported to dress in worn boots, faded jeans, and a battered leather jacket and is said to drive a Ford (Dawidoff 1997). The CEOs of the main Internet companies, including Bill Gates, the multibillionaire CEO of Microsoft; Eric Schmidt, the CEO of Novel; Scott Cook, the CEO of Intuit, appear annually at the posh World Economic Forum without ties and wearing unadorned sweaters.¹ David and Ellen Siminoff are reported to be the power couple of Silicon Valley. He directs the investment of billions. She is a Vice President at Yahoo! They rarely attend charity parties, preferring to stay at home. She likes to wear khakis and T shirts. Richer than most power couples, they “take pride in their relatively modest tastes and inconspicuous consumption” (Swisher 1999). They drive the least expensive luxury cars on the market (a Lexus and a Mercedes). They make do without a second vacation home or private planes (Swisher 1999). Often this pattern is inconsistent and limited in scope, in that a person adhering to the norms of voluntary simplicity in some areas does not do so in many others.

Downshifting is not limited to the very wealthy (Schor 1998). Some professionals and other members of the middle class are replacing elaborate dinner parties with simple meals, pot-luck dinners, take-out food, or social events built around desserts only. Some lawyers are reported to have cut back on the billing-hours race that drives many of their colleagues to work late hours and on weekends in the quest to reach ever higher levels of income and to incur the favor of the firms for which they work (Jensen 1996). In 1995, it was found that 28 percent of a national sample of Americans (and 10 percent

¹ Personal observation 1997, 1998 and 1999.

of the executives and professionals sampled) (Merck Family Fund 1997) reported having “downshifted”, or voluntarily made life changes resulting in a lower income to reflect a change in their priorities, in the preceding five years. The most common changes were reducing work hours and switching to lower-paying jobs.

Strong Simplifiers

This group includes people who have given up high-paying, high-status jobs as lawyers, business people, investment bankers, and so on, to live on less income. Strong simplifiers also include a large number of employees who voluntarily choose to retire before they are required to do so, choosing less income and lower pension payouts in order to have more leisure.

Ideas associated with voluntary simplicity are ideologically compelling, if not necessarily reflected in actual behavior. In 1989, a majority of working Americans rated “a happy family life” as a much more important indicator of success than “earning a lot of money” – by an unusually wide margin of 62 percent to 10 percent (Henkoff 1989). Eighty percent of respondents to another poll said that they would not sacrifice most family time to be rich (Samuelson 1998). And a 1999 survey conducted by Gallup and PaineWebber found that despite rising incomes, workers tended to desire more free time as opposed to more money, as evidenced by a 35 percent increase in vacation spending (Johnston 2000). Simplifiers include people who switch to new careers that are more personally meaningful but less lucrative.

People who voluntarily and significantly curtail their incomes tend to be stronger simplifiers than those who only moderate their lifestyle, because a significant reduction of income often leads to a much more encompassing “simplification” of lifestyle than selective downshifting. While it is possible for both an affluent person to cease working altogether and still lead an affluent lifestyle, and for someone who does not reduce his or her income to cut spending drastically, one must expect that as a rule those who significantly curtail their income will simplify more than those who only moderate their consumption. Once people reduce their income, unless they have large savings, a new inheritance or some other such non-work related income, they obviously de facto commit themselves to adjusting their consumption.

People who adjust their lifestyle only or mainly because of economic pressures (having lost their main or second job, or for any other reason) do

not qualify as voluntary simplifiers on the simple grounds that their shift is not voluntary. One can argue that some poor people freely choose not to earn more and keep their consumption level meager. To what extent such a choice is truly voluntary and how widespread this phenomena is are questions not addressed here. This discussion focuses on people who had an affluent lifestyle and chose to give it up, for reasons explored below.

In contrast, people who could earn more but are motivated by pressures such as time squeeze to reduce their income and consumption do qualify, because they could have responded to the said pressure in means other than simplifying (for instance, hiring more help) (Schor 1991). Moreover, there seems to be some pent-up demand for voluntary simplicity among people who report they would prefer to embrace such a lifestyle but feel that they cannot do so. A *Gallup Poll Monthly* reports that 45 percent of Americans feel they have too little time for friends and other personal relationships, and 54 percent feel they have too little time to spend with their children (Saad 1995).

The Simple Living Movement

The most dedicated, holistic simplifiers adjust their whole life patterns according to the ethos of voluntary simplicity. They often move from affluent suburbs or gentrified parts of major cities to smaller towns, the countryside, farms and less affluent or less urbanized parts of the country with the explicit goal of leading a "simpler" life. A small, loosely connected social movement, sometimes called the "simple living" movement, has developed, complete with its own how-to books, nine-step programs, and newsletters.

This group differs from the downshifters and even strong simplifiers not only in the scope of change in their conduct but also in that it is motivated by a coherently articulated philosophy. One source of inspiration is *Voluntary Simplicity* (Elgin 1993), which draws on the traditions of the Quakers, the Puritans, transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau, and various world religions to provide philosophical underpinnings to living a simple life. This philosophy is often explicitly anti-consumerist. Elgin, for example, calls for "dramatic changes in the overall levels and patterns of consumption in developed nations", adding that "this will require dramatic changes in the consumerist messages we give ourselves through the mass media" (Elgin 1981: 201). While one can readily profile the various kinds of simplifiers, there are no reliable measurements that enable one to establish the number of simplifiers (Ray 1997).

A Comparative Note

Voluntary simplicity is not a phenomena limited to contemporary American society. Indeed, while there seems to be no relevant comparative quantitative data, voluntary simplicity seems to be somewhat more widespread in Western Europe, especially on the continent, than in the United States. (Britain in this sense is somewhere between Western Europe and the United States). Many Europeans seem to be more inclined than Americans to sacrifice some income for more leisure time, longer vacations, and visits to spas, coffee shops, and pubs. This is reflected in these countries' labor laws (which in turn reflect not merely power politics but are also an expression of widely held values), which provide for extensive paid vacation times, early closing hours for shops, closing of shops on Sundays and parts of Saturdays, subsidies allowing thousands to hang on to student life for many years, as well as extensive support for cultural activities (Schor 1991: 81-2). The aggregate result is that Western European societies produce less and consume less per capita than American society in terms of typical consumer goods and services, but have more time for leisure and educational and cultural activities that are more compatible with voluntary simplicity than American society.

By contrast, consumerism is powerful and gaining in many developing countries and in former communist societies where consumerism is a much more recent phenomenon. There are strong differences in the extent to which voluntary simplicity is embraced in various societies, affected by myriad of economic, cultural and social factors not explored here. A few hypotheses stand out. I turn to explore those next.

II. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The answer to the question of whether voluntary simplicity can be sustained and greatly expanded depends to a significant extent on whether voluntary simplicity constitutes a sacrifice that people must be constantly motivated to make, or is in and of itself a major source of satisfaction, and thus self-motivating. To examine this issue the discussion next examines to what extent the opposite of voluntary simplicity – ever-higher levels of income and consumption – are a source of contentment. It then expands the answer by drawing on Maslow's observations about the hierarchy of needs.

Income and Contentment

Consumerism is justified largely in terms of the notion that the more goods and services a person uses, the more satisfied a person will be. Early economists thought that people had a fixed set of needs, and they worried about what would motivate people to work and save once their income allowed them to satisfy their needs. Subsequently, however, it was widely recognized that people's needs can be artificially enhanced through advertising and social pressures, and hence they are said to have if not unlimited, at least very expandable consumerist needs.

In contrast, critics have argued that the cult of consumer goods has become a fetish that stands between people and contentment, one that prevents people from experiencing authentic expressions of affection and appreciation by others. Western popular culture is replete with narratives about fathers (in early ages), and recently of mothers as well, who slaved to bring home consumer goods – but far from being appreciated by their children and spouses found, often only late in their life, that their families would have preferred another lifestyle. It seems that many families might well have welcomed it if the “bread” winners would have spent more time with them and granted them affection and appreciation – or expressed their affection and appreciation directly, through presence and attention, and symbolic gestures such as hugs – rather than expressing such feelings by working long and hard and providing their families with monies or goods. Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* is a telling example of this genre. In 1997, Neil Simon was still belaboring this story in his play *Proposals*.

Social science findings, which do not all run in the same direction and have other well-known limitations, *in toto* seem to lend support to the notion that higher income does not significantly raise people's contentment, with the important exception of the poor (Andrews and Withey 1976, Freedman 1978, Myers and Diener 1995). A longitudinal study of the correlation between income and happiness (Diener *et al.* 1993) demonstrate two things: First, that at low incomes the amount of income *does* correlate strongly with happiness, but this correlation levels off soon after a comfortable level of income is attained. Second, that during the decade that passed between the interviews, the individuals' incomes rose dramatically, but the levels of happiness did not. Sen (1999) showed that people who live in poorer countries often have a better quality of life than those who live in more affluent societies. He joined others who questioned whether the GDP was a sound measurement of well-being and suggested the need for a much more encompassing measure. Psychological studies make even stronger claims: that the *more* concerned people are

with their financial well-being, the *less* likely they are to be happy (Kasser and Ryan 1993). Frank (1999) argues “money fails to satisfy in an era of excess”.

If higher levels of income do not buy happiness, why do people work hard to gain higher income? The answer is complex. In part, high income in capitalistic consumerist societies “buys” prestige; others find purpose and meaning and contentment in the income-producing work *per se*. There is, however, also good reason to suggest that the combination of artificial fanning of needs and cultural pressures maintain people in consumerist roles when these are not truly or deeply satisfying.

Voluntary simplicity seems to work because consuming less, once one’s basic creature-comfort needs are taken care of, is not a source of deprivation, so long as one is freed from the culture of consumerism. Voluntary simplicity represents a new culture, one that respects work *per se* (even if it generates only low or moderate income) and appreciates modest rather than conspicuous or lavish consumption. But it does not advocate a life of sacrifice or service. Voluntary simplicity builds on the understanding that there is a declining marginal satisfaction in the pursuit of ever higher levels of consumption, and points to sources of satisfaction in deliberately and willingly avoiding the quest for ever higher levels of affluence and consumption. These purposes are not specifically defined, other than that they are not materialistic.

An area that needs further study is the tendency of consumerism, when restrained, to leave a psychological vacuum that needs to be filled (Scitovsky 1992, Schwartz 1994). Those who try to wean themselves off consumerism often need support, mainly in the form of approval of significant others and membership in voluntary simplicity groups and subcultures. For instance, they may need to learn gradually to replace shopping with other activities that are more satisfying and meaningful. The fact that many in affluent societies have not yet embraced voluntary simplicity may not be due to the fact that it is not intrinsically satisfying but because obsessive consumption cannot be stopped cold, and transitional help may be required. Conversion is most likely to be achieved when consumerism is replaced with other sources of satisfaction and meaning.

Maslow, the Haves and the Have Nots, and Voluntary Simplicity

Thus far the essay explored how difficult it is to sustain voluntary simplicity, given that it is common to assume that a high level of materialistic consumption is the main source of satisfaction driving people to work in capitalist societies. The evidence, while not all of one kind, tends to suggest

that higher income does not lead to higher levels of satisfaction. Indeed, there is reason to suggest that the continued psychological investment in ever-higher levels of consumption has an addictive quality. People seek to purchase and amass ever more goods whether they need them (in any sense of the term) or not. It follows that voluntary simplicity, far from being a source of stress, is a source of profound satisfaction. This point is further supported by examining the implications of Maslow's theory for these points.

The rise of voluntary simplicity in advanced (or late) stages of capitalism, and for the privileged members of these societies, is explainable by the psychological theory of Maslow (1986),² who suggests that human needs are organized in a hierarchy. At the base of the hierarchy are basic creature comforts, such as the need for food, shelter and clothing. Higher up are the need for love and esteem. The hierarchy is crowned with self-expression. Maslow theorized that people seek to satisfy lower needs before they turn to higher ones, although he does not deal with the question of the extent to which lower needs have to be satiated before people move to deal with higher-level needs, or the extent to which they can become fixated on lower-level needs.³

Some have suggested that Maslow's theory has been disproved because people seek to satisfy their needs not in the sequence he stipulated or even all at once. This may well be the case, but the only issue relevant here is if people continue to heavily invest themselves in the quest for "creature comforts" long after they are quite richly endowed in such goods. And if in the process their non-material needs are neglected (even if they are not completely ignored). Western culture leaves little doubt that Maslow's thesis, if formulated in this way, is a valid one.

Maslow's thesis is compatible with the suggestion that voluntary simplicity may appeal to people after their basic needs are well and securely satisfied. Voluntary simplicity is thus a choice a successful corporate lawyer, not a homeless person, faces; Singapore, not Rwanda. Indeed, to urge the poor or near poor to draw satisfaction from consuming less is to ignore the profound connection between the hierarchy of human needs and consumption. It becomes an obsession that can be overcome only after basic creature comfort needs are well and securely sated.

This point is of considerable import when voluntary simplicity is examined not merely as an empirical phenomenon, but also as a set of values that has advocates and that may be judged in terms of the values' moral

² I should note that Maslow's writings are rather opaque and discursive. What follows is an interpretation of Maslow rather than a direct derivation.

³ Maslow does not draw a distinction between pro-social self-expression, for example arts, and anti-social, for instance abuse of narcotics.

appropriateness. The advocacy of voluntary simplicity addresses those who are in the higher reaches of income, those who are privileged but who are fixated on the creature-comfort level; it may help them free themselves from the artificial fanning of these basic needs and assist them in moving to higher levels of satisfaction. The same advocacy addressed to the poor or near poor (or disadvantaged groups or the “have not” countries) might correctly be seen as an attempt to deny them the satisfaction of basic human needs. Consumerism, not consumption, is the target for voluntary simplicity.

Consumerism has one often observed feature that is particularly relevant here. Consumerism sustains itself, in part, because it is visible. People who are “successful” in traditional capitalist terms need to signal their achievements in ways that are readily visible to others in order to gain their appreciation, approval, and respect. They do so by displaying their income by buying themselves (or, in earlier days, their wives) expensive status goods, as Vance Packard demonstrated several decades ago.

People who are well socialized into the capitalistic system often believe that they need income to buy things they “need”. But examinations of the purchases of those who are not poor or near poor shows purchases of numerous items not needed in a strict sense of the term, but needed to meet status requirements (“could not show my face”). This is the sociological role of Nike sneakers, leather jackets, fur coats, jewelry, fancy watches, expensive cars, gimmicky cell phones, and other such goods – all items that are highly visible to people who are not members of one’s community, whom one does not know personally. These goods allow people to display the size of their income and wealth without attaching their accountant’s statement or IRS returns to their lapels. There are no lapel pins stating “I could have, but preferred not to”.

This is achieved by using select consumer goods that are clearly associated with a simpler life pattern and are as visible as the traditional status symbols *and/or* cannot be afforded by those who reduced consumption merely because their income fell. For instance, those who dress down as part of their voluntary simplicity often wear some expensive items (a costly blazer with jeans and sneakers) or stylistic and far from inexpensive dress-down items (designer jeans), as if to broadcast their voluntary choice of this lifestyle. (Which specific consumption items signal voluntary simplicity versus coerced simplicity changes over time and from one sub-culture to another). In this way, voluntary simplifiers can satisfy what Maslow considers another basic human need, that of gaining the appreciation of others, without using a high – and ever escalating – level of consumption as their principle means of gaining positive feedback.

III. SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

The shift to voluntary simplicity has significant consequences for society at large, above and beyond the lives of the individuals that are involved. A promising way to think about them is to ask what the societal consequences would be if more and more members of a society, possibly an overwhelming majority, were to embrace voluntary simplicity. These consequences are quite self-evident for the environment and hence need to be only briefly indicated; they are much less self-evident for social justice and thus warrant further attention.

Voluntary Simplicity and Stewardship Toward the Environment

First of all, voluntary simplifiers use fewer resources than individuals engaged in conspicuous consumption. In addition, voluntary simplifiers are more likely than others to recycle, build compost heaps, and engage in other civic activities that favor the environment (Milbrath 1989, Durning 1992, Elgin 1993). The converse correlation holds as well. As people become more environmentally conscious and committed, they are more likely to find voluntary simplicity to be a lifestyle and ideology compatible with their environmental concerns.

Voluntary Simplicity and Equality

The more broadly and deeply voluntary simplicity is embraced as a lifestyle by a given population, the greater the potential for realization of a basic element of socio-economic equality. While conservatives tend to favor limiting equality to legal and political statutes, those who are politically left and liberal favor various degrees of redistribution of wealth in ways that would enhance socio-economic equality. Various members of the left-liberal camp differ significantly in the extent of equality they seek. Some favor far-reaching, if not total, socio-economic equality in which all persons would share alike in whatever assets, income, and consumption are available, an idea championed by the early Kibbutz movements. Others limit their quest for equality to ensuring that all members of society will, at least, have their basic creature comforts equally provided, a position championed by many liberals. The following discussion focuses on this quest for socio-economic, and not just legal and political equality. At the same time it is limited to creature comfort equality rather than on a more comprehensive equality.

If one seeks to advance basic socio-economic equality, one must identify forces that will propel the desired change. Social science findings and recent

historical experiences leave little doubt that espousing ideological arguments (such as pointing to the injustices of inequalities, fanning guilt, and introducing various other liberal and socialist arguments that favor greater economic equality, organizing labor unions and left-leaning political parties, as well as introducing various items of legislation) did not have the desired result. Surprisingly little wealth redistribution occurred in democratic societies. The most that can be said in favor of these measures is that in the past they helped prevent inequality from growing bigger (Pechman 1987: 6).

Moreover, in recent years, many of the measures, arguments, and organizations that championed these limited, rather ineffective efforts to advance equality could not be sustained, or have been successful only after they greatly scaled back their demands as far as socio-economic equality is concerned. Worse from the viewpoint of advocates of equality, for various reasons that need not be explored here, economic *inequalities* have increased in many parts of the world. The former communist countries, where a sacrifice of liberties was once associated with a meager but usually reliable provision of creature comforts, have acquired a socio-economic system that tolerates a much higher level of inequality, and one in which millions have no reliable source of these comforts. Numerous other countries, which had measures of socialist policies, from India to Mexico, have been moving in the same direction. And in many Western countries social safety nets are under attack.

Voluntary simplicity, if more widely embraced, might well be the most promising new source to help create the societal conditions under which the limited reallocation of wealth needed to ensure the basic needs of all could become politically possible. The reason is as basic and simple as it is essential: To the extent that the privileged (those whose basic creature comforts are well sated and who are engaging in conspicuous consumption) can find value, meaning and satisfaction in other pursuits that are not labor or capital intensive, could be expected to be more willing to give up some consumer goods and income than they would be otherwise. The “freed” resources, in turn, could then be shifted to those whose basic needs have not been sated, without undue political resistance or backlash.

The merits of enhancing basic equality in a society in which voluntary simplicity is spreading differ significantly in several ways from those that are based on some measure of coercion. First, those who are economically privileged are often those who are in power, who command political skills, and who can afford to buy political support. Hence, to force them to yield significant parts of their wealth has often proven impractical, whether or not it is just or theoretically correct.

Second, even if the privileged can somehow be made to yield significant portions of their wealth, such forced concessions leave in their wake strong feelings of resentment. These have often led those wealthy enough to act, to nullify or circumvent programs such as progressive income taxes and inheritance taxes, or to support political parties or regimes that oppose wealth reallocation.

The preceding analysis suggests that when people are strongly and positively motivated by non-consumerist values and sources of satisfaction, they are less inclined to consume beyond that needed to satisfy their basic needs and are more willing to share their "excess" resources. Voluntary simplicity provides a culturally fashioned expression for such inclinations and helps to enforce them, and it provides a socially approved and supported lifestyle that is both psychologically sustainable and compatible with basic socio-economic equality.

In short, if voluntary simplicity is more and more extensively embraced by those whose basic creature comforts have been sated, it might provide the foundations for a society that accommodates basic socio-economic equality much more readily than societies in which conspicuous consumption is rampant.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Frank Lovett for his help with the research for this paper, and David Karp and Barbara Fusco for their editorial comments. I am particularly indebted to comments by Edward F. Diener and David G. Myers.

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