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# Listening to the Quiet Revolution: The Implications of Voluntary Simplicity for a Sustainable Society

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# Listening to the Quiet Revolution: The Implications of Voluntary Simplicity for a Sustainable Society

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In partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts degree in environmental analysis

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# Acknowledgements

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Sincerely,

Katie Barton

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# Introduction

As an environmental analysis major, I've come to understand that our planet is in terrible crisis. Among toxic waste, habitat loss, species extinction, destructive agricultural practices, fossil water depletion, and climate change, the human race is pushing the earth past its capacity to support us—and probably to support anything resembling life as it has been for the past 10,000 years. In a 2009 article featured in *Nature*, scientists conclude that we have already exceeded the boundaries of a “safe operating space for humanity” in the realms of biodiversity loss, climate change, and alteration of the nitrogen cycle.<sup>1</sup> We're living on borrowed time, and our sick planet is inexorably going to come crashing down on itself and on us sometime in the foreseeable future.

I've also learned that this society's insatiable level of consumption is incompatible with a healthy planet. Every consumer good—from flowers to cell phones to houses—creates an environmental footprint at all stages from resource extraction to disposal. The reality is that Americans and those who consume at similar levels are responsible for a grossly disproportionate share of the earth's environmental woes: the wealthiest 25 percent of the world's population consumes about 85 percent of the planet's resources and produces about 90 percent of its waste.<sup>2</sup> This over-consumption contributes immensely to global resource use, which is currently exceeding the earth's

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<sup>1</sup>Johan Rockström, et al., “A Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Nature* 461.7263 (2009): 472.

<sup>2</sup> Mohamad Mahathir, “Statement to the U.N. Conference on Environment & Development,” in *Green Planet Blues: Environmental Politics from Stockholm to Kyoto*, ed. Ken Conca and Geoffrey D. Dabelko (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 325. Print.

carrying capacity by approximately a quarter.<sup>3</sup> In order to avoid a climate disaster, global greenhouse gas emissions will need to peak soon and fall. Because of their disproportionate contribution, the over-consuming developed nations will need to drastically reduce emissions, perhaps by as much as 80-90 percent.<sup>4</sup>

The bridging of the concepts of over-consumption and ecological crisis has led me to a sort of desperation that has guided my quest for something better. I'm disillusioned with the idea that reforming our growth-based system will gain us any environmental ground. The mainstream environmental movement's focus on small consumer choices, such as electric cars, CFL light bulbs, solar panels, buying organic, and green certifications—what *Voluntary Simplicity*'s Duane Elgin terms “green lipstick on our unsustainable lives”<sup>5</sup>—seems dishearteningly modest when a fundamental reevaluation our destructive culture of consumption is necessary for the survival of life itself.

If we reflect on the mainstream environmental movement—the group of people I would think would be most disturbed by developed countries' gross over-consumption—it is clear that it completely fails to adequately address the issue of consumption. As environmental writer Michael Maniates explains, the movement is caught up in the idea of “sustainable development,” and “remains blind to deep questions of ‘consumption.’”<sup>6</sup> Sustainable development—meeting the needs of the present without compromising those

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<sup>3</sup> Jorgen S. Norgard, “Avoiding Rebound through a Steady-State Economy,” in *Energy Efficiency and Sustainable Consumption: The Rebound Effect*, ed. Steve Sorrell and Horace Herring (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 210. Print. Energy, Climate and the Environment Series.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Sorrell and Horace Herring, “Introduction,” in *Energy Efficiency and Sustainable Consumption: The Rebound Effect*, ed. Steve Sorrell and Horace Herring (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2. Print. Energy, Climate and the Environment Series.

<sup>5</sup> Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 8. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Maniates, “In Search of Consumptive Resistance: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement,” in *Confronting Consumption*, ed. Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 203. Print.

of future generations—has a few crucial flaws: it assumes present and future needs to be expanding, and it seeks to meet these needs through increasingly efficient technology.<sup>7</sup> Rather than move environmentalism forward, the sustainable development lens actually hinders its role in questioning the norms of society. As Maniates concludes, “The movement’s ability to recognize and respond to the core threats to the environment has been compromised because it cannot engage an ethos of frugality.”<sup>8</sup>

Besides failing to grapple with deep questions of consumption, the sustainable development framework advances the bizarre, complacently optimistic faith that human ingenuity will produce the miraculously efficient technology to save us from our ecological predicament. Biologist David Orr refutes this conviction: “The same kind of thinking that got us into this situation is not likely to get us out. And it is difficult, as Wes Jackson notes, to find any technology that did not—directly or indirectly—speed the flow of carbon into the atmosphere or move soil seaward.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in terms of environmental impact, more efficient technology will probably backfire and lead to increased consumption. As detailed in the book *Energy Efficiency and Sustainable Consumption: The Rebound Effect*, a range of economic mechanisms, grouped as “rebound effects,” efficiency measures are countered by increases in personal and societal consumption.<sup>10</sup> It doesn’t matter how much GDP we squeeze out of each unit of energy.<sup>11</sup> What matters is absolute energy consumption, which will only decrease with a conscientious change of mindset.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>9</sup> David W. Orr, “Hope in Hard Times,” *Conservation Biology* 18.2 (2004): 296.

<sup>10</sup> Sorrell and Herring, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>11</sup> Norgard, “Avoiding Rebound,” 210.

Still, the wonders of modern technology offer a temptingly easy solution for those who wish to avoid societal transition. It would not be infeasible, even with current technology, to geoengineer the planet back to an altered equilibrium, thereby compensating for anthropogenic environmental destruction without changing the culture that causes it. We could conceivably pump sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere, which would dampen the greenhouse effect but change the chemical composition of the atmosphere so as to render the sky a pasty shade of white. Yet if we continue to treat the earth as our plaything, we will only destroy it in a different way in the future. And I don't know about anyone else, but it would break me to have to explain to my children what the world was like when the sky was blue.

Even if sustainable development could meet the needs of human society through efficient technology, it does not treat the planet with adequate respect. Of course, this is contradictory, as the needs of humans are inextricably connected with those of the earth. Certain environmental theorists, while acknowledging that environmental issues exist, contend that economic principles and technological advances will allow society to continue on its current course. Environmental economist Alan Gilpin writes,

The tone of this book is essentially cornucopian; that a rising standard of living for all is within reach, that many of the Earth's resources are as yet unexploited, and that most environmental problems are amenable to solution... A declining standard of living in the West... [is not a prerequisite] for the material success of the developing world.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Alan Gilpin, *Environmental Economics: A Critical Overview* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000), xi. Print.

I do not deny the economic sensibility of Gilpin's argument. Increasing prices will counter the increasing scarcity of certain resources, and it is not out of the question that the onward march of technological innovation will allow us to exploit inexpensive, untapped resources that we could not have imagined only decades before. With a few adjustments, "business as usual" may continue on in the foreseeable future.

However, I have a deep moral objection to Gilpin's point of view. What of wild nature will be left after humans have sucked the earth dry in the pursuit of a prosperous society? I have an extraordinary love for the earth, and I reject the Judeo-Christian tradition that it exists for the sole purpose of human exploitation. In sum, I don't think humans are the only species with an intrinsic right to exist. It is important to note that this belief is not anti-human—the exploitation of the earth is also the story of the exploitation of fellow humans; thus, the quest for a healthy environment is also the quest for a just human society.

Besides being philosophically anthropocentric, many economic arguments ignore the grave realities of environmental crisis that are already upon us. An economic cost-benefit analysis can only consider human capabilities, not those of the environment. Gilpin concludes, "Positive and expensive measures against greenhouse gases are probably not needed for thirty years."<sup>13</sup> The same tone runs through what economist Faye Duchin summarizes as the most common questions asked about pollution: "How much would it cost to clean up? How much would it cost to adapt to certain environmental changes (like an irreversible change in climate) instead of cleaning up? What would be the financial costs (and benefits) of limiting carbon dioxide emissions

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

from human activities to specific target amounts?”<sup>14</sup> Reducing levels of consumption, and by extension, reducing levels of greenhouse gas emissions, cannot be a question of economic costs and benefits if we hope to save any vestige of our living planet.

Certainly, humans—or rather, the affluent and able of us—will adapt to climate change when conditions force us to do so. But we’re not the only ones living on this planet.

Humans’ modern way of life is tampering with interconnected climatic feedback loops on a planetary scale, and the consequences will devastate the biosphere for centuries after humans have “adapted.” Other species aren’t very much bothered with how much climate change will cost in dollars. They just won’t survive—they already aren’t surviving.<sup>15</sup>

Opposite the spectrum from the complacent humanists and cornucopians are those passionate defeatists who believe changes to be counterproductive to environmentalism. These people see an inverse relationship between the prosperity of human society and that of the environment. Any compromises and lifestyle choices that prolong society’s survival are, they say, a detriment to the environment. To these people I say: show me your perfect solution. We don’t have the chips to bargain for an ideal situation for the planet. Civilization will march on, and the longer it does so at the current rate of consumption, the more it will transform our environment until we have no nature left. As environmentalists, we can only influence what will remain of nature within the context of human society.

So why don’t we just stop consuming so much? With so much at stake, would it really be so crushing to have a lower “standard of living”—as measured by material

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<sup>14</sup> Faye Duchin and Glenn-Marie Lange, *The Future of the Environment: Ecological Economics and Technological Change*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), v. Print.

<sup>15</sup> Rockström, et al., 472-75.

goods—rather than fussing so much about “sustaining” our current lifestyle? Why doesn’t the move to a post-consumer society form a central tenet of the American environmental movement? The idea of lowered consumption hardly makes it to the environmental bargaining table. Mainstream ideology seems to say, “Why should we consider consuming less when it would ruin our economy and lower our standard of living? Who wants to be poor?”

I had the notion that what American culture tells us to overlook is exactly where we should be looking; that maybe the holiness of the consumer lifestyle was worth re-evaluating. I decided that I would dedicate my life, in some form, to the fight against this culture of mindless consumption. In a way, I chose the simple path forward: I *know* over-consumption is a severe detriment to our environment, and I see it all around me. Since I understand no culture better than my own, I feel I have the expertise to move toward a solution. On the other hand, consumption is deeply rooted in American culture values, and power structures. Any solution with adequate force would have to be in strong opposition to our current way of life.

My arrival at my current paradigm of thought was a years-long process of questioning the social realities of consumer culture. When I was a senior in high school, my environmental science teacher gave us an unusual homework assignment: she wanted us to watch TV for an hour, but she wasn’t interested in the programming. No—she wanted us to look at the commercials. We were instructed to write down the products advertised, the gist of the commercial, and how the advertisement was intended to make us *feel*. I used to think that channels had commercial breaks from programs, but fulfilling this assignment helped me realize that TV is actually all about the commercials—the

programming is just a ruse to keep viewers primed to absorb more advertising. I don't remember any of the ads in particular from that night. There was probably the usual lineup of commercials for laundry soap, shampoo, makeup, big box stores, and cars. I do remember what I interpreted as the feelings these commercials advertised: essentially, each product claimed it would make one a better, sexier, happier person. The assignment showed me how ads play off our emotions, and I started looking under the surface of every commercial, billboard, and print ad I saw. It was all the same game with our emotions. Essentially, it was all a lie.

All around me, I started to see other lies about material goods—not only the lies advertisements upheld, but also those our society had accepted into its very essence. These lies have become such a part of our culture that we require no more convincing to assume they are true. Take the physical television, for example. Nearly everyone in the US has one—97.6 percent of households did in 2011.<sup>16</sup> Televisions are supposed to keep us relaxed, entertained, and informed. The average American over 15 reported spending nearly three hours per day watching television in 2013.<sup>17</sup> Yet if people really like watching so much TV, why is it that so many people—two out of five adults between 1992 and 1999—report watching too much TV? In truth, feelings of relaxation during screen time, followed by feelings of dissatisfaction and regret after the TV is off, are parallel in many ways to the high and low feelings addicts experience.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Brian Stelter, "Television Ownership Drops in U.S., Nielsen Reports," *The New York Times*, 3 May 2011. Web (26 Sept. 2014).

<sup>17</sup> "American Time Use Survey Summary," *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 18 June 2014. Web (26 Sept. 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Television Addiction Is No Mere Metaphor," *Scientific American* Feb. 2002, 74.

In American culture, cars are a symbol of freedom and individuality.<sup>19</sup> They supposedly free us to speedily travel wherever we like, near or far. However, if this means we always travel longer distances, winding through a sprawling concrete empire of freeways and parking lots, isn't that a net loss of time? I've found I am always happier walking or biking, enjoying the sights I would have missed rushing by in a car. The extra time it takes me to get somewhere on my bike is not time lost, but rather time taken back for exercise and leisure. Moreover, I don't know my neighbors because the only times I see them, we are passing each other in our cars. I have come to see cars as trapping, mesmerizing agents of sedentariness that alienate us from our communities.

The latest models of smartphones supposedly give us the world at our fingertips. They have internet, email, texting, calendars, GPS, games, and all sorts of apps one can use at any moment, anywhere. But what ever happened to completely engaging with those physically around us, both friends and strangers—to listening to their voices and appreciating them as human beings? Furthermore, are we as a society losing our ability to read maps and guide ourselves to a destination?

Knick-knacks and trinkets are supposed to help us reflect on past experiences and people with whom we've shared them. Book collections and clothes are supposed to help us define our ideals and our style. However, I've found my *stuff* to be a burden— besides time spent cleaning and organizing, I have spent countless hours at home contemplating all my possessions, wondering which ones actually add value to my life and what to do with the ones that don't. If we think about it, each of our possessions takes up a tiny part

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<sup>19</sup> Sarah Pralle, "'I'm Changing the Climate, Ask Me How!': The Politics of the Anti-SUV Campaign," *Political Science Quarterly* 121.3 (2006): 397.

of our lives. When I receive gifts now, I wonder what I will think of them in a few years, after their novelty has worn off.

All this is not to say that certain possessions don't have sentimental value, that modern technology doesn't make our lives more comfortable, or that I don't owe my health to modern medicine. I'm not making the naïve and deluded claim that my life would be better as a nomad of prehistory. I'm simply making the case that, not even considering the severe environmental costs of over-consumption, material goods deprive us of certain authentic experiences. Like simplicity author Mark Burch, I wonder "if true wellness might lie somewhere *between* the rigors of a hunting and gathering lifestyle and breathing the canned air in the glass-walled cells of our highrise urban prisons."<sup>20</sup>

Our culture largely overlooks the serious social drawbacks of material possessions. In fact, the "American Dream"—that ideal of social mobility and opportunity we hold so dear—revolves around consumption. The American Dream originated in the 1920s as a "producer-inspired vision that included a single-family detached house in the suburbs, an automobile, a radio (and later, a television), and various household appliances."<sup>21</sup> Pervading this vision is undeniably a strong sense that an increased capacity to purchase material goods is respectable and beneficial. Yet in truth, the United States as a whole has surpassed the point at which increasing wealth makes us happier.<sup>22</sup> For example, since 1957, personal consumption has roughly

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<sup>20</sup> Mark A. Burch, *Simplicity: Notes, Stories, and Exercises for Developing Unimaginable Wealth* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 1995), 12. Print.

<sup>21</sup> David Kiron, "Consumption in the Affluent Society: Overview Essay," in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman, and David Kiron (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997), 37–42. Print. *Frontier Issues in Economic Thought*.

<sup>22</sup> Bill McKibben, *Deep economy: The wealth of communities and the durable future* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 41–42. Print.

doubled, but the same proportion of people (about 30%) report they are “very happy.”<sup>23</sup> Still, American culture in a broad sense continues to uphold the ideal of material wealth that I have personally rejected.

In my research of a way of life that might involve lower consumption, I discovered that millions of Americans are already deeply committed to living more simply, and their lifestyle is called, among other related terms, voluntary simplicity. Essentially, voluntary simplicity is the ideology that “we can work less, want less, and spend less, and be happier in the process.”<sup>24</sup> Voluntary simplifiers reject the ideal of consumerism: the notion that the acquisition of more material goods will make our lives better. Instead, they work less and focus on truly fulfilling experiences, such as relationships with family and friends, creating things, and the cultivation of holistic health. The goal of voluntary simplicity is not self-denial or austerity—on the contrary, voluntary simplifiers believe they are genuinely happier living with less.

Voluntary simplicity has been termed the “quiet revolution.”<sup>25</sup> It is at once mainstream and ripe with subversive potential. In its ordinariness, it escapes the notice of much of society, but millions of Americans practice it every day. Voluntary simplicity is not a unified movement. Anyone anywhere can be a voluntary simplifier, and the philosophy means something different to every follower. Nor is it necessarily an environmental movement—although most voluntary simplifiers have environmental

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<sup>23</sup> Burch, *Simplicity*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Linda Breen Pierce, *Choosing Simplicity: Real People Finding Peace and Fulfillment in a Complex World* (Carmel, CA: Gallagher Press, 2000), qtd. in Michael Maniates, “In Search of Consumptive Resistance: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement,” in *Confronting Consumption*, ed. Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 199. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Elgin, Duane, *Promise Ahead: A Vision of Hope and Action for Humanity’s Future* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 71.

values, many simply find their lifestyle to be more emotionally fulfilling than one involving conventional levels of consumption.

Still, as an environmentalist, I find a great degree of sensibility in the voluntary simplicity lifestyle. It presents a vision of a cooperative society that consumes less, is truly happier, and exists in balance with the environment. Voluntary simplicity's scope goes beyond lifestyle changes—ultimately, it means a move beyond consumerism and an abandonment of the growth-oriented economy. Could this be the answer? I asked myself. Could the developed world's adoption of voluntary simplicity be the solution to the environmental crisis? This thesis is an exploration of the implications of voluntary simplicity for the environmental movement and a sustainable society. Many other works give philosophical and lifestyle advice for people who may be interested in voluntary simplicity. While a treatment of the movement's philosophy is crucial to understanding the movement, this thesis is not a life manual for the lost soul. Rather, it is an attempt to gauge how voluntary simplicity fits into environmentalism. I conclude that voluntary simplicity will be only a part of humanity's answer to the ecological crisis, but I do find it has an important role to play in changing society's imagination of well-being.

The first half of this thesis is an attempt to understand the voluntary simplicity movement—where did it come from, who are its adherents, and what are their motivations? Chapter 1 covers the rich history of simplicity in the United States, illustrating in part why voluntary simplicity has such a strong presence here. Chapter 2 defines voluntary simplifiers as a philosophically-motivated group of ordinary—although class-privileged—Americans. Chapter 3 is a deeper exploration of the diverse philosophy of voluntary simplicity, as well as of the social theories that explain voluntary

simplifiers' gravitation toward this philosophy. In the second half of this thesis, I will explain the prospects for and limitations of voluntary simplicity. Chapter 4 details how voluntary simplicity fits into the larger movement for economic de-growth, while chapter 5 explores the challenges voluntary simplicity must address in moving forward.

I hope that readers will come away with a broad and deep understanding of voluntary simplicity, and that maybe some will even be inspired to question consumerism by adopting voluntary simplicity in their own way. I also wish to highlight for environmentalists the need to collaborate with other social movements to confront over-consumption and the power structures that reinforce it. From an environmental perspective, a study of voluntary simplicity is useful in that it illustrates the fulfillment that can come from a truly ecologically sustainable lifestyle. Voluntary simplicity is also proof of the consumptive unrest already brewing in American society. Thus, this thesis is a narrative of hope in the face of the planet's uncertain future.

# Chapter 1:

## The History of Simplicity in the United States

Consumption is an integral part of contemporary American culture, and the voluntary simplicity movement is revolutionary in its direct opposition to this paradigm of excess. Yet, looking back on the major historical roots of our society and culture, from ancient wisdom and Judeo-Christian tradition to the greatest ideals of the colonial United States, one finds a strong tradition of simplicity. Waves of the simple lifestyle have come and gone throughout American history, and the ideal of simplicity has endured even as our nation has become ever more materialistic. Thus, the voluntary simplicity movement is every bit as “American” as the consumer lifestyle.

Along with other cultural factors, this history of simplicity may be part of the reason the movement has taken root most strongly in the United States. Maniates notes that voluntary simplicity is a peculiarly American movement:

Although offshoots of the movement thrive in some corners of Western Europe, especially in the United Kingdom, and its core tenets are preached and practiced in much of Asia, notably among those in India and Sri Lanka deeply influenced by Gandhian ideals, the United States remains the site of some of the most broadly felt and keenly expressed yearnings for simplicity in the world.<sup>26</sup>

While it is a world leader in levels of consumption, the United States is also home to the strongest wave of voluntary simplicity.

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<sup>26</sup> Maniates, “In Search of Consumptive Resistance,” 212.

The ideal of simplicity that feeds into American culture is much older our nation. Always fueled in part by its dialectic opposite, the philosophy of simplicity is “as old as capitalism itself.”<sup>27</sup> In *The Simple Life*, David Shi notes that simple living is “by no means distinctively American. The primacy of the spiritual or intellectual life has been a central emphasis of most of the world’s major religions and philosophies.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, ancient philosophical traditions from around the world have contributed to the modern simplicity ethic. The Eastern teachings of Zarathustra, Buddha, Lao-Tse, and Confucius, which emphasize material self-control, especially influenced Henry David Thoreau and the counterculture of the 1960s. However, according to Shi, “The most important historical influence on American simplicity has been the combined heritage of Greco-Roman culture and Judeo-Christian ethics.”<sup>29</sup>

Moral skepticism toward captivation by material wealth can be traced back to Ancient Greek wisdom. Socrates advocated a “golden mean between poverty and wealth” and considered virtue, not wealth, the measure of a person’s merit.<sup>30</sup> The more extremes teachings of his student Plato would also have a lasting influence—especially the idea, in the words of Alan Kahan, that “the soul ranks above the body, and money beneath both.”<sup>31</sup> Plato’s student Aristotle distinguished between the honorable making of money to satisfy needs and the detrimental accumulation of money as an end in itself.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Amitai Etzioni, “Voluntary Simplicity: A New Social Movement?” in *21st Century Economics: Perspectives of Socioeconomics for a Changing World*, ed. William E. Halal and Kenneth B. Taylor (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 109. Print.

<sup>28</sup> David Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4. Print.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Alan Kahan, *Mind vs. Money: The War between Intellectuals and Capitalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 34. Print.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 36.

From the Greek classicists, this powerful amalgam of ideas passed into Roman philosophy and informed Christian thought and that of many Western intellectuals.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, the virtue of a life of moderation appears throughout the Old Testament and the Gospel. The Socratic ideal of a middle road between sufficiency and excess appears in Proverbs: “Give me neither poverty nor wealth, but only enough.”<sup>34</sup> Jesus was a radical in his rejection of material culture, teaching that undue esteem for material wealth opposed devotion to humankind and God. As he told his followers, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”<sup>35</sup> The New Testament comments further on materialism: “If a man has enough to live on, and yet when he sees his brother in need shuts up his heart against him, how can it be said that the divine love dwells in him?”<sup>36</sup> To the secular classical wisdom of “mind over matter,” Judeo-Christian tradition added religious piety as a means of distancing oneself from concerns about material goods.

Drawing on the philosophy of virtuous simplicity, simple living movements surfaced many times in the early United States. David Shi defines “the simple life” as a “shifting cluster of ideas” that elevates the ideal over the material. These ideas include the rejection of luxury, a respect for nature and preference for rural living, a desire for

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 29-38.

<sup>34</sup> Proverbs 30:8.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 6:19-21.

<sup>36</sup> John 3:17.

personal self-reliance, a nostalgia for the past and skepticism toward modernity, conscientious rather than conspicuous consumption, and an aesthetic of plainness.<sup>37</sup>

The tension between piety and increasing material prosperity played out in some of the first European settlements in America: the Puritan colonies of New England. The Puritan ethic of temperate living emphasized that a reduction in material desires would afford more time for worship and community service. Calvinist doctrine blurred the distinction between faith and work, holding that people could serve the Lord by working hard in the practical vocation they were “called” to perform.<sup>38</sup> Following the work of philosopher Max Weber, some scholars have equated Calvinism with the foundation of capitalist spirit. However, Shi cautions against such a simplistic distortion of Weber’s ideas, noting that the result of Calvinist tendencies was actually the opposite of its emphasis on frugality: “the single-minded Protestant emphasis on frugality meant that the scrupulous would accumulate more and more wealth, thus unintentionally furthering the rise of modern capitalism.”<sup>39</sup> This irony proved to be the undoing of the rigid Puritan social order, and as the colonial settlements prospered, the work component of the Calvinist ethic overshadowed the faith component, and a spirit of secular entrepreneurialism took hold.<sup>40</sup>

The Quaker ethic, which emphasized keeping the heart free from material attachment, called for simple living from an egalitarian, humanitarian perspective: extravagance by the few was assumed to result in poverty for the masses.<sup>41</sup> Although the Quakers eventually faced the same material temptations as the Puritans, the ethic

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<sup>37</sup> Shi, *Simple Life*, 3-4.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9, 27.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

survived because leaders were able to dismiss the more apathetic members and reform the group into a disciplined minority.<sup>42</sup>

Later, more secular philosophies built on the ancient idea of improving oneself and society by cultivating intellectual virtue. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, republican intellectuals envisioned an ideal society as primarily agrarian and grounded in the values of hard work, frugality, simplicity, enlightened thinking, and public good. In many ways, republican idealism was a secular expression of Protestant values, except that it aimed for social change by the elite rather than social control of the masses.<sup>43</sup> Following a more mystical thread were the transcendentalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most famously Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Transcendentalists looked to nature for inspiration and championed the romantic idea that true happiness stemmed from the cultivation of inner truth and virtue, which elevated people above material desires.<sup>44</sup>

The United States is materially the most prosperous country in the world, but it is also steeped in idealism, not a small part of which points to the virtue of living simply while cultivating the mind and spirit. David Shi comments, “From colonial days, the image of America as a spiritual commonwealth and a republic of virtue has survived alongside the more tantalizing vision of America as a cornucopia of economic opportunities and consumer delights.”<sup>45</sup> This vision gave rise to multiple simple living movements in our nation’s early days, and Shi predicts that the American spirit of simple living will survive, even as material prosperity increases and many people remain enchanted with a life of abundance. In his words, “Undoubtedly, the simple life will

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 126-127.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 277.

persist both as an enduring myth and as an actual way of living.”<sup>46</sup> In the United States, simplicity as a set of values and a cultural movement has a long history and is here to stay.

Thus far, surveys of public opinion confirm Shi’s argument that Americans are enmeshed in two contradictory sets of values: one set centered on freedom and material prosperity, and a more meaningful set centered on family, community, and responsibility.<sup>47</sup> This second set of values is in line with historical philosophies and manifestations of simplicity in the United States—the idealistic movements upholding the belief that nonmaterial things are the true sources of fulfillment. A 1995 study funded by the Merck Family Fund found that criticism of American materialism was widespread—82% of respondents agreed that most people buy and consume far more than they need.<sup>48</sup> However, people are limited by the dualities present in American culture:

Most people express strong ambivalence about making changes in their own lives and in our society. They want to have financial security and live in material comfort, but their deepest aspirations are non-material ones. People also struggle to reconcile their condemnation of other Americans’ choices on consumption with their core belief in the freedom to live as we choose.<sup>49</sup>

While American culture arguably favors materialism, it is also tinted with a deep regard for simplicity and morality. Even those Americans who are caught up in consumer culture feel a pull toward these values.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>47</sup> Merck Family Fund, The Harwood Group, *Yearning for Balance: Views of Americans on consumption, materialism and the environment*, (Takoma Park, MD: Merck Family Fund, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

With this in mind, it is no surprise that, in the context of the growing material living standards that arose in the wake of World War II, simplicity-oriented thinkers fought back. Though the counterculture of the 1960s espoused strong anti-materialist sentiments, it contributed more philosophically than practically to the contemporary simplicity movement. The “hippies” were mostly affluent, well-educated, young whites who felt alienated by the Vietnam War and the consumer culture of their parents.<sup>50</sup> They embraced a “new consciousness” affirming human dignity and the preciousness of life, and they demonstrated their commitment to social change through activism for causes such as civil rights and the environment.<sup>51</sup> In search of liberation, thousands moved to the countryside in the “back-to-the-land” movement. However, the vast majority of their utopian communities collapsed within a few years at most. Shi writes, “In their disgust for the modern work ethic, they tended to exchange the materialist hedonism of the consumer culture for the sexual and sensory hedonism of the counter culture.” In short, “nothing got done.”<sup>52</sup>

The more concrete beginnings of the voluntary simplicity movement were in the 1970s, a decade of national environmental awakening. The zealous hippies and their divisive rebelliousness faded back into the mainstream, but their countercultural values found a practical place in the emerging environmental movement, which was characterized by a spirit of unity in the fight for humanity’s common future.<sup>53</sup> 1970 saw both the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the celebration of the first Earth Day on April 22, testaments to the nation’s growing

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<sup>50</sup> Shi, *Simple Life*, 251.

<sup>51</sup> Elgin, Duane, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1981), 28. Print.

<sup>52</sup> Shi, *Simple Life*, 258.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

environmental conscience. As the growing environmental crisis came to light, the public became more cognizant of the costs of a high standard of living.

In conjunction with the public's growing environmental awareness, academic minds were beginning to question the legitimacy of infinite economic growth. Kenneth Boulding's 1966 article "The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth" called for an economic system recognizing the finiteness of the earth's resources: "The closed economy of the future might similarly be called the 'spaceman' economy, in which the earth has become a single spaceship, without unlimited reservoirs of anything, either for extraction or for pollution, and in which, therefore, man must find his place in a cyclical ecological system." Boulding argued that the spaceman economy would entail meeting needs with a minimum amount of production and consumption.

Barry Commoner echoed Boulding's appeal for an ecologically sound economy in *The Closing Circle* (1971). Commoner urgently warned that human technologies were causing an environmental crisis so grave that it threatened our very survival. He called for the recognition of humans' fundamental dependence on environmental systems and examined "whether a conventional 'market place' economy is fundamentally incompatible with the integrity of the environment."<sup>54</sup> The controversial new economics of finite resources were in line with the lifestyle of reduced consumption practiced by followers of the voluntary simplicity movement.

The Arab oil embargo of 1973-74 and the subsequent energy crisis produced a national ethic of conservation that reinforced the ideal of simple living. Suddenly, the moderation promoted by the nascent simple living movement became a serious objective of American capitalist society. The public—so accustomed to media that cultivated

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<sup>54</sup> Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 254. Print.

desire—was bombarded by advertisements sponsored by oil companies and public utilities, urging them to reduce their spending, heating, and driving.<sup>55</sup> Natural resources had been shown to be finite, and experts believed that there were permanent limits to growth of the American economy and standard of living. On top of this, stagflation and economic hardship in the 1970s led some consumers to adjust their lifestyles away from conspicuous consumption and toward simplicity.<sup>56</sup> Society experienced a shift in values in favor of conservation—one poll in 1976 found that about half of those surveyed believed Americans “must cut back” on production and consumption.<sup>57</sup> While this national mood of using less was in part due to the economic crunch, it also resonated philosophically with the countercultural sentiments of the 1960s.

Eventually, a combination of factors channeled into a wave of simple lifestyle practices. The Watergate scandal and the war in Vietnam had shattered many young people’s faith in leadership and the possibility for sweeping social and institutional change. From public activism, they turned inward in search of practical ways of implementing the new consciousness in their everyday lives. Around the nation, millions of people began consuming less as an expression of resource conservation and autonomy in the face of a dehumanizing economy.<sup>58</sup> In its comprehensive study of American attitudes in the mid-1970s, the Stanford Research Institute concluded, “an increasing segment of the U.S. population is voluntarily taking up a simpler way of life.” The study estimated that as many as five million adults were committed to simple living, and that

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<sup>55</sup> Shi, *Simple Life*, 264.

<sup>56</sup> Avraham Shama, “Coping with Stagflation: Voluntary Simplicity,” *Journal of Marketing* 45.3 (1981): 120–134.

<sup>57</sup> Dorothy Leonard-Barton, “Voluntary Simplicity Lifestyles and Energy Conservation,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 8.3 (1981): 244.

<sup>58</sup> Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 28-29.

twice as many upheld some values of simplicity.<sup>59</sup> This estimate is roughly in line with Elgin’s claim that as of 1980, less than 10 percent of the U.S. population (226 million at the time<sup>60</sup>) was experimenting with simplicity.<sup>61</sup> It was not a back-to-the-land movement—most of the simplifiers lived in larger cities and suburbs and were not interested in “dropping out.” They were young, white, well-educated, and affluent.<sup>62</sup> Over the course of the 1970s, the grassroots voluntary simplicity movement took shape, but as Elgin notes, it went largely unnoticed by the rest of society.<sup>63</sup>

Two books came out in the late 1970s and early 1980s that galvanized the voluntary simplicity movement. The first was *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973), E.F. Schumacher’s sweeping criticism of modern economic principles. Schumacher rejected the economic system founded individual greed and limitless growth, calling instead for wisdom, which he believes translates into an economics of permanence: “Nothing makes economic sense unless its continuance for a long time can be projected without running into absurdities.” Furthermore, permanence and wisdom were incompatible with an economics of greed: “The cultivation and expansion of needs is the antithesis of wisdom... Every increase of needs tends to increase one’s dependence on outside forces over which one cannot have control... Only by a reduction of needs can one promote a genuine reduction in those tensions which are the ultimate causes of strife and war.” *Small Is Beautiful* provided a theoretical backing to the unease voluntary simplifiers felt regarding the mindless rat race of work and spend. For people looking to

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<sup>59</sup> Shi, *Simple Life*, 268.

<sup>60</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Census History Staff, “1980 Fast Facts.” *US Census Bureau*. Web (31 Oct. 2014).

<sup>61</sup> Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. 30.

<sup>62</sup> Shi, *Simple Life*, 268.

<sup>63</sup> Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 29.

consume more morally and deliberately, Schumacher lent hope that the reduction of individual needs and increase of independence were in line with the deconstruction of oppressive economic power structures.

The second book was *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that Is Outwardly Simple and Inwardly Rich* (1981), Duane Elgin's deeply philosophical manual on the modern simplicity movement. Elgin popularized the term "voluntary simplicity,"—which pacifist Richard Gregg had coined in 1936—as a characterization of the modern simplicity movement.<sup>64</sup> To live voluntarily, Elgin explains, is to live conscientiously and deliberately, and to live more simply is to unencumber oneself in all aspects of life in order to "[meet] life face to face." In short, voluntary simplicity is "outwardly more simple and inwardly more rich"—a phrase that other authors would widely repeat in describing the voluntary simplicity movement. *Voluntary Simplicity* became a sort of Bible for the voluntary simplicity movement, and it remains a much-cited piece of literature.

After the resource conservation and environmentalism of the 1970s, the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 signaled the survival in American culture of aspirations for the abundant life and the philosophy of "more is better." The Reagans brought conspicuous opulence to the White House, and Reagan's policies emphasized deregulation, boundless economic growth, and a rising standard of living. The 1980s were a decade of unprecedented conspicuous consumption, but at the same time, more people came to hold postmaterialist values. These values are characteristic of individuals born into a high level of material security, and they include concerns for subjective quality of life, self-expression, and participation. Between 1972 and 1991, the number of Americans with

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<sup>64</sup> Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 31.

clear postmaterialist values doubled from 9 to 18 percent, respectively.<sup>65</sup> Once again, the nation was philosophically invested in nonmaterial well-being but became enmeshed in its diametric opposite, consumption. In the face of the material extravagance of the 1980s, those oriented toward simpler living remained a strong—if largely overlooked—minority.<sup>66</sup>

Several events in the 1990s contributed to a distinct resurgence in simplicity. In June of 1992, leaders and representatives from 172 nations met in Rio de Janeiro for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. At the time, the conference was unprecedented in size and scope.<sup>67</sup> The essential policy document the conference produced, Agenda 21, critiqued excessive consumption: “The major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in the industrialized countries.” To address this issue, Agenda 21 called for actions to (a) “Promote patterns of consumption and production that reduce environmental stress and will meet the basic needs of humanity” and (b) “Develop a better understanding of the role of consumption and how to bring about more sustainable consumption patterns.”<sup>68</sup> World leaders’ official commitment to the environment paralleled the renewed environmentalism of the decade.

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<sup>65</sup> Etzioni, “Voluntary Simplicity,” 108.

<sup>66</sup> Shi, *Simple Life*, 276.

<sup>67</sup> “UN Conference on Environment and Development (1992).” *United Nations*, n.p., 23 May 1997. Web (22 Oct. 2014).

<sup>68</sup> Samuel Alexander, “The voluntary simplicity movement: Reimagining the good life beyond consumer culture,” *International Journal Of Environmental, Cultural, Economic And Social Sustainability* 7.3 (2011): 139.

The environmentalism of the 1990s was also deeply rooted in socio-economic forces in the wake of Reaganomics. The decade was a time of rapidly increasing consumption and technological progress that permeated deeply and transformed people's everyday interactions. In the early 1990s, the recession produced disillusionments with the cycle of work-and-spend: many workers were laid off, and those who kept their jobs were responsible for more tasks. Then, as the economy "kicked into high gear," employers demanded employees spend more time at work.<sup>69</sup> On top of this, as Maniates notes, "the proliferation of personal computers, home fax machines, pocket pagers, and the overall rise in 'home offices' meant that Americans were spending more time *on* the job as well, even when they were not... in the office. The result: overwork, stress, information overload, and growing doubts about the benefits of running the 'rat race.'"<sup>70</sup> These technological and social changes were accompanied by media- and culture-driven messages to consume more and more.<sup>71</sup> Increasing levels of work and consumption did not make people happier, leading many to question the consumer lifestyle.

Dissatisfied with a life of inescapable consumption, more and more people turned to simplicity, and the popular press capitalized upon the epidemic of consumption. Whereas previous guides to simplicity had been tinged with Christian morality and turned out by small publishers, the simplicity self-help books of the later 1990s were secular and published by major companies. They differed markedly in that they "shift the focus to an appeal to people's feelings of overwhelming stress, and their desire to find meaning in

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<sup>69</sup> Maniates, "In Search of Consumptive Resistance," 217.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Stephen Zavestoski, "The social-psychological bases of anticonsumption attitudes," *Psychology & Marketing* 19.2 (2002): 151.

their consumption-driven, hectic lives.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, simplicity came into its own as a distinct philosophy that could on its own improve people’s quality of life.

Among the self-help books published, Cecile Andrews’s *Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life* (1997) was a strong catalyst for voluntary simplicity, becoming one of the movement’s core literary resources.<sup>73</sup> According to Maniates, “Andrews’s book has done more than any other recent publication to amplify and focus America’s inquiry into simplicity and downshifting.”<sup>74</sup> Calling her book a “conversation,” Andrews invites readers to reflect deeply and independently. The emptiness of ceaseless striving for bigger and better, she says, calls for “a whole new way of looking at life.” She envisions a life of conscientiousness, generosity, and vivacity—a vision she believes people are finding in the philosophy of voluntary simplicity. Andrews’s idea of voluntary simplicity is all-encompassing, from an individual’s unique interpretation of simplicity to a political movement that transforms the societal institutions reinforcing a life of consumption. In order to fulfill the movement’s potential, Andrews calls for “simplicity circles,” small group meetings where community members support each other, discuss readings, and address challenging questions.<sup>75</sup> A few years after the book’s original publication, Andrews created the “Simplicity Circles Project,” an online resource for and database of simplicity circles, as well as a testament to the growing importance of online community of voluntary simplicity.<sup>76</sup>

The internet came to be a crucial platform for voluntary simplicity in the 2000s and 2010s. This followed a general trend of rapidly increasing internet use over the past

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>73</sup> Maniates, “In Search of Consumptive Resistance,” 200.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>75</sup> Cecile Andrews, *The Circle of Simplicity* (New York, HarperCollins 1997), xiii-xxi. Print.

<sup>76</sup> Maniates, “In Search of Consumptive Resistance,” 224.

two decades: in 2013, 74 percent of US households reported internet use.<sup>77</sup> Among 35-44 year-olds, an age group very strongly represented in voluntary simplicity, 83 percent of householders used the internet.<sup>78, 79</sup> Such widespread internet use has facilitated an enormous number of online discussions of sustainability and “green living,” within which voluntary simplicity is only one thread.<sup>80</sup> In 2014, a Google search of “voluntary simplicity” receives a whopping 379,000 results, including countless personal blogs and forums such as The Simplicity Collective, Choosing Voluntary Simplicity, Thoughts on Voluntary Simplicity, Living Small, and Becoming Minimalist. At such sites, bloggers share inspiration and personal stories, and comment forums provide a way for readers to gain understanding and receive support for their own efforts at voluntary simplicity. These functions echo those of the community-based simplicity circles Andrews advocates. Clearly, the internet has become one of the strongest drivers of conversations on voluntary simplicity, but further research is necessary to determine how this has influenced the face-to-face voluntary simplicity community.

The trajectory of simplicity in the United States has followed a long history, from ancient wisdom, to early American thinkers, to the voluntary simplifiers who abandon the “rat race” of work and consumption in order to pursue something better. It seems voluntary simplicity might be quite mainstream, after all. Framing voluntary simplicity as American, without compromising its opposition to over-consumption, would benefit the movement. The longing for a simple life is a deep yearning in many Americans, and

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<sup>77</sup> Thom File and Camille Ryan, *Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2013*, United States Census Bureau, 2014. Web (2 Dec. 2014).

<sup>78</sup> Linda Breen Pierce, “The Pierce Simplicity Study: Notes from Linda Breen Pierce,” *Gallagher Press*, n.d. Web (8 Nov. 2014).

<sup>79</sup> File and Ryan, *Computer and Internet Use*.

<sup>80</sup> Helen Merrick, “Promoting sustainability and simple living online and off-line: An Australian case study,” *First Monday* 17.12 (2012).

if voluntary simplicity can channel this ideal, its potential grows stronger. In the next chapter, I will explore voluntary simplifiers in an attempt to profile who exactly acts on the American thirst for simplicity, and why.

## Chapter 2:

### What Does Voluntary Simplicity Look Like?

This thesis focuses on the voluntary simplicity movement, a group of people who opt for reduced consumption for deep philosophical reasons. The lifestyle changes of voluntary simplifiers are the farthest reaching within the larger simplicity movement, and for the purposes of clarity—especially considering the media attention various forms of simplicity have garnered—it is helpful to outline the different forms of simplicity. Gaining an understanding of the voluntary simplicity movement, its adherents, and their values is challenging because what one author calls “voluntary simplicity” might actually be a shallower kind of simplicity relative to how I define voluntary simplicity in this thesis. Furthermore, the lack of cohesion of the voluntary simplicity movement makes it difficult to cleanly divide simplifiers into different groups, and there are no reliable ways to measure how many people adhere to the various forms of simplicity.<sup>81</sup>

Although interest in simplifiers is always growing, there has been a general lack of interest in studying them—20<sup>th</sup> century marketers focused on groups that were economically viable, not those who were intentionally consuming less.<sup>82</sup> Still, since the late 1970s, at least a dozen authors—each with a nuanced approach—have divided the simplicity movement into more cohesive subgroups. These studies resulted in the delineation of many groups with unique names and characteristics, with little effort to align the terms. To remedy the redundancy and confusion, McDonald *et al.* analyzed the

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<sup>81</sup> Etzioni, “Voluntary Simplicity,” 113.

<sup>82</sup> Margaret Craig-Lees and Constance Hill, “Understanding Voluntary Simplifiers,” *Psychology and Marketing* 19.2 (2002): 189.

literature on simplicity and identified three groups into which other authors' definitions generally fit: non-voluntary simplifiers, who do not identify with the movement; beginner voluntary simplifiers, who undertake some features of voluntary simplicity but do not fully embrace it; and voluntary simplifiers, who freely choose a lifestyle of reduced consumption and cultivation of non-material satisfaction.<sup>83</sup> Thus, many pieces of literature independently point to three distinct varieties of what might be called "simplicity."

Particularly useful are the three terms sociologist Amitai Etzioni uses in his essay "Voluntary Simplicity: A New Social Movement?": downshiffters, strong simplifiers, and holistic simplifiers. There are shortfalls to Etzioni's classification, notably that it assumes that prior to making lifestyle changes, all downshiffters were wealthy—or at least middle class—but the data indicate that simplifiers come from across the income spectrum.<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, I find it an appropriate framework.

"Downshiffters" are the most moderate group, whom Etzioni characterizes as "economically well-off people who voluntarily give up some consumer goods they could readily afford but basically maintain their consumption-oriented lifestyle."<sup>85</sup> Essentially, Etzioni's definition of downshifting is a trend in favor of comfort over opulence—downshiffters might dress down at work, drive old cars, or opt out of lavish social events.<sup>86</sup> Downshifting is part of an aesthetic of simplicity that accompanied 15 years of

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<sup>83</sup> Seonaidh McDonald, et al., "Toward Sustainable Consumption: Researching Voluntary Simplifiers," *Psychology and Marketing* 23.6 (2006): 523.

<sup>84</sup> C. Hamilton and E. Mail, "Downshifting in Australia: A sea-change in the pursuit of happiness," The Australia Institute, Discussion Paper Number 50 (2003): 19.

<sup>85</sup> Etzioni, "Voluntary Simplicity," 110.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

steady economic prosperity between the mid-90s and late 2000s.<sup>87</sup> One example of the contradictions inherent in the downshifting lifestyle are magazines like *Real Simple*, which professes to “make life more simple” while bombarding readers with advertisements.<sup>88</sup> Downshifter might do things that are literally simple in that they require less effort, but they don’t focus on simplicity in a basic or spiritual sense. In sum, downshifter practice moderation as a consumer choice, without taking a deeper look at consumerist values. Since Etzioni’s downshifter only address consumption in “a very superficial way,” McDonald *et al.* place them in the category of non-voluntary simplifiers.<sup>89</sup>

The second group Etzioni identifies is “strong simplifiers,” those whose downshifting is accompanied by a significant reduction in income that forces them to make a stronger commitment to simplicity than downshifter. As of the 1990s, at least a moderate form of this trend was relatively widespread: according to one 1996 poll, 48 percent of Americans had “cut back their hours at work, declined or didn’t seek a promotion, lowered their expectations for what they need out of life, reduced their commitments or moved to a community with a less hectic way of life.”<sup>90</sup> Other trends associated with strong simplifying include switching to lower-paying but more meaningful careers and quitting work to stay home. One of the most important reasons cited for these changes is a commitment to spending more time with family.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ron Ashkenas, “Has the Recession Made Your Life Simpler?” *Harvard Business Review*, 12 Jan. 2010. Web (3 Nov. 2014).

<sup>88</sup> Hamilton and Mail 7

<sup>89</sup> McDonald *et al.* 523.

<sup>90</sup> John Marterello, “More People Opting for a Simpler Lifestyle,” *The Plain Dealer* (Kansas City), 10 Feb. 1996, qtd. in Etzioni, “Voluntary Simplicity,” 110.

<sup>91</sup> Etzioni, “Voluntary Simplicity,” 110-11.

What Etzioni calls “strong simplifiers” share many of the same characteristics as those to whom Juliet Schor refers as “downshifters” in her popular 1998 book *The Overspent American*. As a cause of the downshifting movement, Schor points to the same trend of materialist values in the 1990s, when “consumerism was beginning to worry people.”<sup>92</sup> According to Schor’s survey data, between 1990 and 1996, 19 percent of Americans made a voluntary lifestyle change that entailed making significantly less money, and 85 percent were happy about the change; another 12 percent had involuntary experienced such a lifestyle change, and 24 percent considered it a “blessing in disguise.” Combined, says Schor, “just about one-fifth of the adult American population is happily living on less.”<sup>93</sup> Schor’s data point to wanting “more time, less stress, and more balance in my life,” “to spend more time caring for my children,” and “a more meaningful life” as some of the most important reasons for downshifting. Like many other authors on the simplifying movement, Schor mentions Shi’s *The Simple Life* and historical simplifiers in the United States, but says that modern downshifters are different because they are “not dropping out of society, few are living communally, and most are not ideologically motivated.”<sup>94</sup>

McDonald *et al.* place Etzioni’s “strong simplifiers” and Schor’s “downshifters” in the category of “beginner voluntary simplifiers.” This group is different from what I will define as “voluntary simplifiers” in the next pages in that its members have not transcended their relationship with consumer culture in a fundamental way. In short, they still enjoy having money and possessions. As Schor puts it, “Downshifters have experienced a change in which time and quality of life became relatively more important

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<sup>92</sup> Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 113.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 115

than money. They would prefer more of both, but forced to choose, they make a lifestyle change that increases their time and reduces their earnings.”<sup>95</sup> In economic terms, beginner voluntary simplicity is a question of utility: adherents find time and leisure to better satisfy their wants than money and possessions earned from working.

Etzioni is careful to point out that those who adjust their lifestyles solely or primarily because of economic pressures are not part of the simplicity movement, because their shift is not voluntary. Nonetheless, simplifying trends associated with the Great Recession in the late 2000s received their fair share of media hullabaloo and are worth mentioning. According a survey by the Department of Labor and a New York Times/CBS poll in 2010, Americans were spending less time shopping and more time engaging in low-cost experiences with friends and family. These activities included “‘organizational, civic and religious’ pursuits; home-based hobbies like gardening and cooking; family sports such as hiking; and cultural endeavors like going to museums and movies.”<sup>96</sup> Between 2002 and 2008, attendance at cultural events was down, but during the recession—when retailers were hurting—it went up again.

Although the general trend was an involuntary shift due to income loss, there were some markers of a more voluntary change: some of those surveyed cited experience abroad as a reason for spending less and doing more<sup>97</sup>. Additionally, the savings rate increased notably from 1 percent in 2007 to 4 percent in 2009, suggesting that those with money were also acting differently.<sup>98</sup> It is reasonable to assume that the Great Recession supported some shift in values away from consumerism, but further research is necessary

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>96</sup> Ashkenas, “Has the Recession Made Your Life Simpler?”

<sup>97</sup> Damien Cave, “In Recession, Americans Doing More, Buying Less,” *The New York Times*, 3 Jan. 2010. Web (3 Nov. 2014).

<sup>98</sup> Ashkenas, “Has the Recession Made Your Life Simpler?”

to determine how deep and permanent this change was, and how it will contribute in the long run to the wave of “beginner voluntary simplifiers.”

The third type of simplifiers Etzioni identifies are “holistic simplifiers,” whose lifestyle changes are major and motivated by a coherent philosophy that is strongly anticonsumerist.<sup>99</sup> Elgin calls the lifestyle and philosophy “voluntary simplicity.” His book *Voluntary Simplicity*, while not as strictly academic as some other sources, is particularly useful because the respondents from whom he draws conclusions all adhere to the philosophy that goes deeper than the motivations of beginner voluntary simplifiers. This philosophy is key to the promise voluntary simplifiers hold for a future sustainable society. In Elgin’s words, “They are persons who stand with a foot in two worlds—with one foot in an unraveling industrial civilization and another foot in a newly arising post-industrial civilization. These are the ‘in-betweeners’—people who are bridging two worlds and making the transition from one dominant way of living to another.”<sup>100</sup> Unlike downshifTERS, which remain rooted in consumer culture, voluntary simplifiers have a mindset that points toward a post-consumer culture.

Several authors have completed surveys of voluntary simplifiers to better profile this specific group of simplifiers. Drawing concrete conclusions from the results is difficult, as voluntary simplicity is a wide spectrum that is uniquely defined by each practitioner. Furthermore, the groups of respondents are self-selecting—there is no way to take a random sample of voluntary simplifiers. Nonetheless, these surveys provide useful insight into what voluntary simplicity looks like in real life, and future academic surveys will be indispensable to better understanding the voluntary simplicity movement.

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<sup>99</sup> Etzioni, “Voluntary Simplicity,” 112-113.

<sup>100</sup> Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 22.

I will look at three surveys, the first of which was conducted by Duane Elgin and Arnold Mitchell in the late 1970s. The pair attached a questionnaire to their article “Voluntary Simplicity,” which appeared in the *Co-Evolution Quarterly* in 1977, and they received over 420 completed questionnaires.<sup>101</sup> The second survey, the Pierce Simplicity Study, was conducted primarily on the web by Linda Breen Pierce between 1996 and 1998. Pierce received 211 completed surveys.<sup>102</sup> Third, the Huneke survey involved posting a questionnaire on several online simplicity forums in the summer of 2003. Huneke includes the results from 113 respondents.<sup>103</sup>

The respondents to both the Pierce and Huneke surveys were overwhelmingly female—70 percent in the Pierce study and 73.5 percent in the Huneke survey. These results suggest that there may be more female than male voluntary simplifiers, although it is also possible that there is a significant sampling error—women may simply be more inclined to participate in online forums or respond to the surveys. The other results of the surveys should be viewed with these data in mind—the opinions expressed disproportionately represent those of female voluntary simplifiers. These ideas may differ from those of men or the movement as a whole.

Respondents came from all across the US and from all different age groups. Elgin and Mitchell report receiving surveys from 42 states. Respondents were ages 17 to 67, the average age being around 30, and 75 percent being under the age of 35. On average, respondents had been practicing simplicity for six years.<sup>104</sup> Respondents to

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<sup>101</sup> Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, rev. ed. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1993), 61. Print.

<sup>102</sup> Linda Breen Pierce, “The Pierce Simplicity Study.”

<sup>103</sup> Mary E. Huneke, “The face of the un□consumer: An empirical examination of the practice of voluntary simplicity in the United States,” *Psychology & Marketing* 22.7 (2005): 534.

<sup>104</sup> Elgin, Duane. *Voluntary Simplicity*, rev. ed., 61.

Pierce's survey came from 40 states. The most represented age groups in Pierce's study were people in their 30s (37 percent) and 40s (32 percent).<sup>105</sup> Huneke's respondents were from 31 different states, with the most represented states being Washington, California, New York, and Michigan. Huneke found respondents "were roughly evenly divided among three age groups, 25–34 (21.2 percent), 35–44 (28.3 percent), and 45–54 (28.3 percent)."<sup>106</sup> Half of Huneke's respondents had been practicing simplicity for over five years.<sup>107</sup> We can draw several conclusions from this data. First, voluntary simplicity is not a regional phenomenon. Although it has a strong west coast presence, especially in Seattle—the movement's "ground zero"<sup>108</sup>—voluntary simplicity is practiced throughout the US. Second, it is not strongly youthful or old—voluntary simplifiers can be of any age, though people in their 30s and 40s are most strongly represented. Third, it is not a temporary lifestyle choice—voluntary simplicity is a long-term way of life.

The studies differed in their estimations of the economic characteristics of voluntary simplifiers. Elgin reports, "overall income levels tended to be somewhat lower than that of the general U.S. population."<sup>109</sup> Similarly, 66 percent of Pierce's respondents were living on \$50,000 or less per year prior to simplifying.<sup>110</sup> Huneke's results indicate more affluence—only around 34 percent of respondents were living on \$45,000 per year or less prior to simplifying.<sup>111</sup> Huneke also reports that respondents "were more likely than the average American to have household incomes over \$100,000 before becoming

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<sup>105</sup> Pierce, "The Pierce Simplicity Study."

<sup>106</sup> Huneke, "The face of the un-consumer," 534.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Maniates, "In Search of Consumptive Resistance," 213.

<sup>109</sup> Elgin *Voluntary Simplicity*, rev. ed., 61.

<sup>110</sup> Pierce, "The Pierce Simplicity Study."

<sup>111</sup> Huneke, "The face of the un-consumer," 536.

voluntary simplifiers.”<sup>112</sup> Thus, based on these surveys, it is unclear whether voluntary simplifiers are on average more or less affluent than the general American population. However, it is fair to say that, contrary to some claims by the popular press, the movement is not reserved for the economic elite.

Voluntary simplifiers are almost all white, notably well-educated, and from privileged backgrounds. In Elgin and Mitchell’s survey, “nearly all respondents were white,” 93 percent grew up in middle- or upper-class homes, and around 70 percent had completed college.<sup>113</sup> Of those who responded to Pierce’s study, 73 percent had at least an undergraduate degree,<sup>114</sup> and 95 percent were white.<sup>115</sup> Respondents to Huneke’s survey were similar—more than 65 percent had at least an undergraduate degree.<sup>116</sup> These results indicate that voluntary simplifiers are, in Elgin’s words, “not likely to come from those groups who grew up with poverty and discrimination.”<sup>117</sup>

The surveys also confirm the claim that voluntary simplicity is practiced in all types of urban and rural settings. The breakdown of Elgin and Mitchell’s respondents was: 56 percent in cities and suburbs, 13 percent in smaller towns, and 32 percent in rural areas.<sup>118</sup> In Pierce’s study, 68 percent of respondents lived in cities and suburbs, 15 percent in small towns, and 17 percent in rural areas.<sup>119</sup> Thus, in contrast to the counterculture of the 1960s, voluntary simplifiers aren’t dropping out of society or radically changing location. As Elgin writes, “Instead of a ‘back to the land’ movement, it is much more accurate to describe this as a ‘make the most of wherever you are’

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Elgin *Voluntary Simplicity*, rev.ed., 61.

<sup>114</sup> Pierce, “The Pierce Simplicity Study.”

<sup>115</sup> Huneke, “The face of the un-consumer,” 535.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, rev.ed., 62.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 61

<sup>119</sup> Pierce, “The Pierce Simplicity Survey.”

movement.”<sup>120</sup> Voluntary simplifiers are undertaking lifestyle changes in all sorts of communities.

Respondents cited a variety of reasons for transitioning to voluntary simplicity. In Huneke’s survey, participants cited concern for the environment (23 percent), a desire to shift time and energy (19 percent), eliminating stress (17 percent), anticonsumption attitudes (17 percent), intrinsic values and religious beliefs (14 percent), and a frugal upbringing (10 percent).<sup>121</sup> In Pierce’s study, the most common reasons cited were personal or spiritual growth (27 percent), stress (26 percent), worries over money or debt (23 percent), desire for autonomy (21 percent), and a desire for more time with family (20 percent). Environmental concern was a motivating factor for only 13 percent of respondents, but 82 percent of respondents expressed moderate or strong interest in the earth and its resources.<sup>122</sup> Thus, general concerns related to self-interest and time use were the most important motivators of voluntary simplifiers. Although many voluntary simplifiers hold environmental values, concern for the environment was a main motivating factor for a minority of respondents.

This finding is key: voluntary simplicity is not a movement of altruism or self-sacrifice. Therefore, as many adherents have found, despite entailing fewer material possessions, voluntary simplicity can be in other ways superior to a lifestyle of consumption. This may mean that in contrast to downshifting and other shallow forms of simplicity, voluntary simplicity offers not only a lower ecological footprint, but also deeper satisfaction.

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<sup>120</sup> Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 20.

<sup>121</sup> Huneke, “The face of the un-consumer,” 535.

<sup>122</sup> Pierce, “The Pierce Simplicity Survey.”

The next chapter more closely details the all-encompassing philosophy that distinguishes voluntary simplicity from downshifting. This philosophy rejects consumer culture and offers voluntary simplifiers an opportunity to redefine themselves in the context of living with less. I apply the social theories presented by several authors in order to better understand how the philosophy of voluntary simplicity fits into the motivations of its adherents.

## Chapter 3:

# Theory and Philosophy

Voluntary simplicity's focus on an alternative philosophy is key to the promise it heralds of a post-consumer society. Elgin emphasizes the idea of voluntary simplicity as a worldview in opposition to that of the industrial era. According to Elgin, the industrial-era view focuses on money and material goods as sources of happiness and identity. It favors the exploitation of nature, competition, selfishness, and personal autonomy. In contrast, the "ecological-era view"—one conjured by the harmonious and purposeful voluntary simplifiers—emphasizes conservation, frugality, creativity, balance, cooperation, fairness, responsibility, and connectedness of the individual with the whole of the planet and humankind.<sup>123</sup> In order to fully realize the ecological benefits of reduced consumption, it is necessary to completely overhaul material culture. This is where voluntary simplicity offers hope beyond that of downshifting. Voluntary simplicity shifts the focus of society from one based on competition and an endless search for more, to one based on deeper fulfillment through less.

Elgin outlines five values that characterize the lives of voluntary simplifiers. These are: (1) material simplicity: owning fewer possessions, consuming quantitatively less, and altering consumption patterns in favor of durable or hand-crafted products instead of mass-produced ones; (2) human scale: a preference for living and working environments that are small, decentralized, and community-oriented rather than enormous and anonymous; (3) self-determination: an intention to be less dependent on

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<sup>123</sup> Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, rev. ed. 38-39.

large, complex institutions, which may manifest itself as a trend toward growing and making one's own or doing without, and away from excessive specialization and division of labor; (4) ecological awareness: feeling an intimate connection with nature and favoring resource conservation, the reduction of pollution, and the preservation of the environment, as well as compassionate concern for other human beings; and (5) personal growth: an interest in cultivating physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health.<sup>124</sup> In keeping with these values, voluntary simplifiers may restructure their time so that they work less and have more time for cultivating relationships, do-it-yourself projects, and lower-impact living. Thus, the values support each other in a complete philosophy that favors slowing down, which facilitates increasingly localized acquisition of goods—with the ultimate local being the home and the self.

Each author on voluntary simplicity constructs a nuanced definition of the movement, with many authors drawing on Elgin's principles. Leonard-Barton and Rogers define voluntary simplicity as a spectrum of autonomy:

We define voluntary simplicity as the degree to which an individual consciously chooses a way of life intended to maximize the individual's control over his/her own life... Individuals relatively high in voluntary simplicity seek to minimize their dependency on institutions they cannot control (such as government, oil companies, and large agribusiness food companies) and to maximize their harmony with nature. Voluntary simplicity is a matter of degree; individuals vary on this concept from a

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 32-35.

Manhattan business executive to a commune resident in Taos, New Mexico.”<sup>125</sup>

Since voluntary simplicity constitutes such a broad spectrum, it is hard to define in strict terms. Leonard-Barton and Rogers’s definition does share characteristics with that of Elgin, namely its emphasis on individuality and independence.

Voluntary simplicity is also about living life to the fullest. Cecile Andrews finds the philosophy to resonate strongly with one of Henry David Thoreau’s most famous lines: “I went to the woods because I wished to... not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” Andrews writes, “This is the core of voluntary simplicity. We are trying to find a way to live that helps us become fully alive. We are trying to discover and remove the things that are deadening, that cause us to escape to drugs and to shopping and to television, all the things that numb us and put us to sleep.”<sup>126</sup> Andrews characterizes voluntary simplifiers as those who “slow down and enjoy life again” by reducing their rushing, working, and spending. Most are concerned about the environment and are searching for more time and more meaning in their lives.<sup>127</sup>

While environmental values are important to many voluntary simplifiers, they are not universal. Maniates relates the personal story of his attendance of the wildly popular 1998 simplicity conference “No Purchase Necessary” in LA:

Another surprise was the lukewarm response to speakers from the major environmental groups, and from the Sierra Club in particular. Folks in the room were not unsympathetic to environmental concerns, but as the day

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<sup>125</sup> Dorothy Leonard-Barton and Everett M. Rogers, “Voluntary simplicity,” *Advances in Consumer Research* 7.1 (1980): 28.

<sup>126</sup> Andrews, *Circle of Simplicity*, 27.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

wore on it became clear that simplicity, for them, was not about saving the planet, although limiting environmental degradation was certainly a side effect of frugality that should not go ignored. Nor, in many cases, did their curiosity about or practice of simplicity glow from any deep connection to nature... Representatives of the major environmental groups were like fish out of water.<sup>128</sup>

Clearly, environmental groups are missing the idea that voluntary simplicity is not a life of sacrifice for the sake of the environment, but rather a personal search for a more fulfilling lifestyle.

As Maniates's observations illustrate, mainstream environmental groups' one-dimensional framing of voluntary simplicity is limiting and problematic. These groups tend to view voluntary simplicity as an outgrowth of the spiritual clarity that results from spending time in nature. Maniates explains:

Without perhaps quite realizing it, mainstream environmentalism ends up locating voluntary simplicity to the affluent margins of society who consider themselves 'environmental' but not actively political—if you are a white, economically comfortable, ecotouring suburbanite... and you want to save the world in 12 easy steps, simple living may be for you. Others need not apply.<sup>129</sup>

The problem with this point of view is the serious problem that generally affects the mainstream environmental movement: by focusing on people who enjoy the privilege of access to natural spaces and the economic ability to consume more expensive,

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<sup>128</sup> Maniates, "In Search of Consumptive Resistance," 215-216.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 211-12.

“sustainable” products, it completely ignores an entire, less-privileged subset of society that actually has the potential to be a powerful environmental voice. Voluntary simplicity is not a lifestyle reserved for wealthy greenies. Everyone can undertake voluntary simplicity in his or her life in some way—if only through a philosophical rejection of material culture—and its misrepresentation as a lifestyle for the affluent detracts from its appeal.

Maniates finds that while a reduced environmental impact is one goal and an inevitable byproduct of voluntary simplicity, overstress and personal lifestyle choices are more important than environmental considerations as drivers of voluntary simplicity. “The most consistently voiced reason for interest in voluntary simplicity was the felt need to ‘get my life back’... *The* enduring theme of the meeting was that as currently organized, work and shopping—production and consumption, in other words—are not organized to meet the full range of human needs.”<sup>130</sup> Voluntary simplicity responds to these pressures as a means of taking control of one’s own life and participating in a collective struggle to transform institutions that facilitate consumer culture.<sup>131</sup> In sum, Maniates argues that voluntary simplicity is a response to the stressful culture of work and spend, rather than a quest for spiritual awakening or ecological harmony. Zavestoski’s perspective on the role of environmental values further develops this idea: he finds that while many respondents were aware of the “burden of their consumption habits on the environment... It was not until they experienced a crisis of being that these

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

individuals began to explore alternatives to consumption.”<sup>132</sup> Environmental concern alone may not be a driving factor for the majority of voluntary simplifiers. Any attempts to increase the popularity of voluntary simplicity must keep in mind that a plea for the environment will not be as strong a motivator as the selfish promise of a happier life.

According to Etzioni, the voluntary simplicity movement is a reflection of the United States’s shift to postmodern values in the last half-century. He draws on the psychological theory of Abraham Maslow in arguing that voluntary simplicity should be viewed with a hierarchy of human needs in mind. At the bottom level are basic “creature comforts,” such as food, shelter, and clothing. The next level comprises the need for love and esteem, and self-expression is at the top of the hierarchy. People need to satisfy their basic needs before they move to higher levels on the pyramid. At that point, basic needs are not superseded by higher needs, but rather added above them. Thus, voluntary simplicity is characteristic of well-off members of advanced capitalist societies whose creature comforts have already been satisfied through material consumption.

Zavestoski echoes this sentiment and divides Maslow’s conception of “self-expression” into self-efficacy and authenticity. According to Zavestoski, labor and production in a capitalist economy fail to meet people’s needs of self-creation, and they turn instead to consumption for fulfillment. However, consumption can only meet the needs of self-esteem (prestige through symbolic status consumption) and self-efficacy (meeting goals through consumption). Consumption is not a valid means of creating an “authentic self”—that is, being true to one’s identity and values. Zavestoski concludes

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<sup>132</sup> Stephen Zavestoski, "Environmental concern and anti-consumerism in the selfconcept: Do they share the same basis?," *Exploring Sustainable Consumption: Environmental Policy and the Social Sciences* 1 (2001): 3-17.

that people are drawn toward anticonsumption attitudes due to a failure to realize their authentic selves through consumption.<sup>133</sup>

The hierarchy of human needs has several implications for voluntary simplicity. First, the prevalence of consumerism within affluent societies may reveal the pursuit of creature comforts long after they have been satisfied, in combination with the neglect of higher needs for social relationships. Voluntary simplicity may be a way of redirecting the pursuits of the privileged, of helping them un-fixate on material creature comforts and move on to higher levels of satisfaction. Second, the steady presence of the voluntary simplicity movement over the course of 40 years may be due to its successful balancing of the hierarchy of needs. Unlike the more extreme counterculture of the 1960s, voluntary simplicity “seeks to combine reasonable levels of work and consumption to attend to creature comforts with satisfaction from higher sources.”<sup>134</sup> Its future success will depend on the continued balance of hierarchical needs.

While illuminating, Etzioni’s characterization certainly raises questions of classism and cultural centrism. The very use of a hierarchical model to describe human needs suggests that affluent people in affluent societies (in general, white people in the United States and Western Europe) are culturally more evolved—on a national scale, compared to the poor within their countries, and on a global scale, compared to the citizens of developing countries. Mary Grigsby echoes this sentiment, writing that there is “a danger in adopting [Etzioni’s] logic because it sets up an assumed experiential superiority for the affluent and attributes to them a higher level of needs and understanding of what is best for human well-being, which also happens to be better for

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<sup>133</sup> Zavestoski, “Social-psychological bases,” 151.

<sup>134</sup> Etzioni, “Voluntary Simplicity,” 122.

the environment, thus establishing once again the superiority of the relatively privileged.”<sup>135</sup> One must remember that the longing for higher satisfaction is present in all human beings, as evidenced by the development of art, music, dancing, religion, literature, and social relationships in cultures around the world. When studying voluntary simplicity on a global scale, a perspective of cultural relativism and an awareness of structural biases toward affluence are essential. Nonetheless, the matters of consumption and environmental degradation are already related to a history of resource exploitation by affluent people and developed countries at the expense of poor people and developing countries. Thus, questions of classism and cultural centrism should not altogether hinder an academic exploration of voluntary simplicity as part of a path to ultimately achieve a more equal and just global society.

Huneke counters Etzioni in arguing that since many voluntary simplifiers are actually not affluent, the application of Maslow’s hierarchy to the affluent is flawed. She writes, “Clearly, many simplifiers are coming from the ranks of those whose basic needs are less well satisfied.”<sup>136</sup> The simplicity surveys mentioned in the last chapter confirm this idea— although voluntary simplifiers are well educated and more likely to be affluent than the average American, voluntary simplicity is not reserved to the affluent. Huneke continues, “Those who have become simplifiers without having reached more than a midlevel of household income may have recognized, without having to reach a high level of affluence, that they had needs that could not be met through consumption.”<sup>137</sup> This opens up an entire field of necessary research on voluntary

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<sup>135</sup> Mary Grigsby, *Buying Time and Getting By: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 64. Print.

<sup>136</sup> Huneke, “The face of the un-consumer,” 544.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

simplicity: As Huneke asks, what combination of individual nature and cultural factors determines the point at which individuals decide they have fulfilled basic needs?<sup>138</sup> Like Etzioni mentions, answering this question will be helpful to a broad-scale effort to channel people's needs away from material goods and toward higher gratification that carries a lower environmental impact.

Grigsby goes even farther in her criticism of Etzioni and Maslow, arguing that a human desire for deeper satisfaction does not fully encompass the motivations of voluntary simplicity. As she illustrates, voluntary simplicity is not a transcendence of culture, but rather a manifestation of it. Social identity construction is a crucial part of voluntary simplicity:

People adopting voluntary simplicity are not simply responding to fulfilling the sort of natural progression theorized by Maslow from one level of need fulfillment to the next. How needs are fulfilled, and what human needs are defined to be beyond the most basic requirements of food, clothing, and shelter are socially and culturally constructed. People adopting voluntary simplicity are engaged in a cultural struggle to redefine what the values of society should be, and these values and the practices they advocate clearly serve their identity needs and material interests.”<sup>139</sup>

Perhaps Etzioni's reasoning falls short in that it overemphasizes the individual and underemphasizes the cultural forces that shape individuals' motivations. Huneke mentions the possibility that cultural forces may influence individuals' transition to

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Grigsby, *Buying Time and Getting By*, 64.

voluntary simplicity, and Grigsby builds an argument that culture is essential to the process.

According to Grigsby, voluntary simplifiers call their construction of a moral identity “getting a life.”<sup>140</sup> Voluntary simplifiers are disillusioned with waged work and affluence. They take issue with many aspects of the prevalent culture, especially its emphasis on domination and competition, consumption as a measure of worth, traditional gender roles, and environmental destruction. They view most members of their social group—people who are white, Western, and middle class—as greedy over-consumers, and they are uncomfortable with this label.<sup>141</sup> In response, they construct a moral identity as simple livers, which is essentially “a struggle to define themselves as worthwhile and good people. Resisting participation in conspicuous consumption enables them to feel they are living in keeping with their ecological and social values.”<sup>142</sup> Adopting voluntary simplicity is a feasible way to distance themselves from the dominant culture: “Voluntary simplicity allows them to adopt changes that are possible for them to make and to feel that by doing this they are acting as cultural change agents and good and moral people.”<sup>143</sup> Rather than abandoning middle class status, voluntary simplifiers seek to redefine the meaning of middle class.

The middle-class moral identity is indicative of another principle of voluntary simplicity: it is not poverty or an idealization of poverty. Voluntary simplicity authors are careful to distance the movement from this light. As Elgin writes,

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 54-79.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 86.

Poverty is involuntary and debilitating, whereas simplicity is voluntary and enabling. Poverty is mean and degrading to the human spirit, whereas a life of conscious simplicity can have both a beauty and a functional integrity that elevates the human spirit. Involuntary poverty generates a sense of helplessness, passivity, and despair, whereas purposeful simplicity fosters a sense of personal empowerment, creative engagement, and opportunity.<sup>144</sup>

The difference between voluntary simplicity and poverty is that voluntary simplicity is a conscientious choice. Poverty—that is, forced simplicity—is by every measure painful and devastating.

Undertaking simplicity as a choice rather than a necessity hinges on the fact that voluntary simplifiers can opt out at any point. As Craig-Lees and Hill detail, this is due to their education and middle class status: “Voluntary simplifiers have access to resources such as wealth, education, and unique skills that could be traded for high income.”<sup>145</sup> Grigsby defines these factors as “cultural capital”—voluntary simplifiers have the resources and know-how to navigate the economic system and shape their activities to fit their desires.<sup>146</sup> The poor lack this cultural capital and are unable to participate in voluntary simplicity’s middle-class moral identity, which rests upon a self-righteousness that comes from rejecting material goods. The poor cannot reject excess material goods, because they are out of reach.

As this chapter has illustrated, the voluntary simplicity philosophy of living better with less is an inspiring contrast to the standard mantra that more material goods will

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<sup>144</sup> Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 19.

<sup>145</sup> Craig-Lees and Hill, “Understanding Voluntary Simplifiers,” 189.

<sup>146</sup> Grigsby, *Buying Time and Getting By*, 59.

make us happier. This philosophy stems from a range of individual and cultural motivations, and it certainly has its limitations. In the next chapter, I will explain how, despite its shortcomings, the philosophy of voluntary simplicity can help guide our society's transition to an economy that is based on well-being rather than growth.

## Chapter 4:

# Voluntary Simplicity and the De-Growth Movement

As I explain in the introduction, the current state of affairs demands we completely re-imagine the goals of our society and the system in which we interact day-to-day, in theory to achieve those goals: the economy. The growth-oriented economy and the over-consumption it facilitates are overtaxing the planet's resources without increasing the overall satisfaction of those who over-consume. In short, our current model isn't environmentally or socially sound. A surface reading of voluntary simplicity seems to offer an ideal solution. If expanded, the movement could facilitate a way of life that is easier on the planet and actually makes us happier. Consumption would be different: conscientious, emphasizing do-it-yourself and handmade goods, less corporate, as local as possible, and lower overall. A sense of balance and harmony with the earth would help people keep ecological impacts in mind, and communities would thrive as people spent more time cultivating human relationships. Is this world possible?

The short answer is that voluntary simplicity alone cannot bring about this way of life. The movement faces many fundamental obstacles, as I will discuss in the next chapter. Furthermore, voluntary simplicity cannot be the complete solution, simply because it will not appeal to everyone. As economists Sorman and Giampietro explain, the move to any completely different economic configuration, which they call a "metabolic pattern," will be met with resistance by some: "An abandonment of the metabolic pattern established with industrialization... will require huge changes in lifestyles of a huge number of people having different everyday habits and practices. This

ultimately means that changes that will result acceptable to some may result unthinkable for others.”<sup>147</sup> This digs at the core of voluntary simplicity: it is voluntary and self-defined. Just as there are many—voluntary simplifiers and others—who deviate from the current societal norm, there will be many who resist change toward a different way of life. Some members of the opposition to a new societal framework will be people who are content with the current system, and others will merely be wary of change. Voluntary simplicity cannot garner universal support.

Nevertheless, voluntary simplicity has the potential to play a key role in the larger movement toward a truly sustainable economy. On this topic, there are two significant dialogues underway in economic and social circles, which focus, respectively, on de-growth and a steady-state economy. American ecological economist Herman Daly first developed the concept of the steady-state economy (SSE) in the early 1970s, and the movement is associated mainly with North American thinkers. It implies a dynamic economic equilibrium involving “stabilizing the economy in the short run (...approximately one decade) around a slightly varying level of capital stock, non growing human labour (population) level as well as an almost constant rate of throughput and the production of socially valuable goods and services under a given technological framework.”<sup>148</sup> Another principle of the steady-state economy is technological progress to increase the ratio of GDP per unit of economic throughput.<sup>149</sup> The primary agent of change toward a steady-state economy according to Daly’s principles would be top-down

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<sup>147</sup> Alevgul H. Sorman and Mario Giampietro, "The energetic metabolism of societies and the degrowth paradigm: Analyzing biophysical constraints and realities," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 38 (2013): 92.

<sup>148</sup> Joan Martínez-Alier, et al., "Sustainable de-growth: Mapping the context, criticisms and future prospects of an emergent paradigm," *Ecological Economics* 69.9 (2010): 1743.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid

institutional reform.<sup>150</sup>

De-growth, with its emphasis on bottom-up, grassroots-level changes, is more relevant to a discussion of voluntary simplicity.<sup>151</sup> De-growth, which is a literal translation of the French *decroissance*, is primarily inspired by the 1970s work of the Romanian-American economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen. It has recently received renewed attention, especially in France, Italy, and Spain.<sup>152</sup> De-growth advocates “an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long-term.”<sup>153</sup> Georgescu-Roegen fiercely rejected Daly’s steady-state economy, arguing, in economist Christian Kerschner’s words, that “rich industrialised countries have evidently surpassed sustainable limits already, and de-growth is therefore essential.”<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, Georgescu-Roegen refuted the concept of sustainable development within a growth-oriented economy: “Georgescu-Roegen... championed the idea that the term sustainable growth is an oxymoron; the term sustainable development, he argued, can only make sense if development is associated with no growth in the scale of the economy.”<sup>155</sup> Other modern ecological economists echo the sentiment that de-growth is necessary in terms of planetary limits. For example, Sorman and Giampietro (2010) write, “Unless we find some magic silver bullet, the energy consumption of humankind

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<sup>150</sup> Christian Kerschner, “Economic de-growth vs. steady-state economy.” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 18.6 (2010): 549.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 544.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> G. Kallis and F. Schneider, “Well-being and ecological sustainability beyond growth d-GROWTH; collaborative project,” ICTA, Autonomous University of Barcelona (2008): 3, qtd. in Kerschner, “Economic de-growth,” 544.

<sup>154</sup> Kerschner, “Economic de-growth,” 548.

<sup>155</sup> Martínez-Alier, et al., “Sustainable de-growth,” 1743.

will have to degrow.”<sup>156</sup>

Traditionally, the de-growth and steady-state economy camps have been at philosophical odds. However, certain scholars have recently argued that the two ideas go hand in hand. Kerschner (2010) points out that the de-growth movement should not reject the steady-state economy, reasoning instead that wealthy countries should de-grow in transitioning to a steady-state economy: “In order for the [steady-state economy] to be equitable not only on a national... but also on an international basis, the rich North will need to de-grow in order to allow for some more economic... growth... in the poor South.”<sup>157</sup> Thus, it is possible that de-growth can be adopted selectively on a country-by-country basis to facilitate a global, socially equitable steady-state economy.

In many ways, voluntary simplicity fits within a larger societal framework of de-growth. Unlike the steady-state economy model, de-growth and voluntary simplicity both mostly circumvent technological solutions in favor of reduced levels of consumption. Voluntary simplicity targets per-capita consumption, while de-growth focuses on the total consumption pattern of a society. There are additional parallels between the two ideologies. In the words of de-growth scholar Serge Latouche, a de-growth society is “built on quality rather than on quantity, on cooperation rather than on competition [...] humanity liberated from economism for which social justice is the objective. [...] The motto of de-growth aims primarily at pointing the insane objective of growth for growth.”<sup>158</sup> Like voluntary simplicity, de-growth advocates mindfulness—stepping back from growth-oriented society to reassess end goals. The ideals of quality

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<sup>156</sup> Sorman and Giampietro, “The energetic metabolism of societies,” 92.

<sup>157</sup> Kerschner, “Economic de-growth,” 548.

<sup>158</sup> S. Latouche, “Pour une société de décroissance,” *Le monde diplomatique* (2003), 18, *qtd.* in Martinez-Alier et al., “Sustainable de-growth,” 1742.

over quantity and cooperation over competition are common to both philosophies. Moreover, like voluntary simplicity, the roots of de-growth point to gratification as a goal in itself: Georgescu-Roegen insisted enjoyment of life should be the real output of an economy.<sup>159</sup> Finally, neither voluntary simplicity nor de-growth is recessive. As Latouche explains, “De-growth is not negative growth, a concept that would be contradictory and absurd, meaning stepping forward while going backward.”<sup>160</sup> Similarly, voluntary simplicity is not a return to a primitive way of life, but rather growth in a different direction—one that is personal and deeply fulfilling rather than material.

Voluntary simplicity advocates a restructuring of time as the means of achieving this fulfillment, and this concept is crucial to its relationship to de-growth. As I explain in chapters 2 and 3, individuals who pursue voluntary simplicity often trade money for time by working less in order to spend more time on hobbies or with family. They compensate for lost income by spending some time to produce goods themselves, as well as by reducing consumption overall. As Cattaneo and Gavaldà conclude in their study of a squatter community that essentially practices voluntary simplicity, this revolution in time is key to the de-growth narrative. *Oikonomia*, or the art of living well, is simplified in the voluntarily simple squatter settlements: “Time is the central *oikonomic* end; in capitalism it is sold to the labour market. In rural [rural-urban] squats it is employed directly for the satisfaction of needs. Its recuperation and freely consented collective management should be a basic principle for a degrowth society.”<sup>161</sup> In capitalism, time is devoted to work for monetary compensation, which in turn goes toward paying in the

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<sup>159</sup> Claudio Cattaneo and Marc Gavaldà, “The experience of rural squats in Collserola, Barcelona: what kind of degrowth?,” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 18.6 (2010): 581.

<sup>160</sup> Latouche, “Pour une société de décroissance.”

<sup>161</sup> Cattaneo and Gavaldà, “The experience of rural squats,” 588.

market for a service that fulfills a desire. For example, instead of baking goods or carving wood ourselves, we generally go to work and use our wage to pay someone else to bake a pie or make a toy, generally on an increased scale. Voluntary simplicity eliminates part of both of the middle steps, waged labor and market exchanges, allowing time to go directly toward satisfaction of needs through do-it-yourself labor. This is the ultimate form of localization. The result is lower energy consumption, since, as D'Alisa and Cattaneo explain, "The expansion of marketization implies a more intensive use of energy."<sup>162</sup> Thus, in a sort of positive feedback loop, voluntary simplicity and de-growth will both feed and be fed by a revolution in time use. Such a revolution will only be possible through top-down structural changes to the functioning of the economy and society.

In order to equitably facilitate the de-growth of energy consumption through household-based production, it is necessary to consider the gender divide between paid and unpaid labor. As people bring more work back from the market and into the home, the work burden falls disproportionately to women. Policies addressing this gender gap are indispensable for the voluntary simplicity and de-growth movements:

"An increased visibility of unpaid work can help the policy-maker to develop policies in favour of it, and thus also decrease the energy demand of the society and its consequent environmental impacts. In a period of crisis, in fact, the household overhead (unpaid work) increases, exacerbating the burden for women and resulting in a loss of wellbeing for them, as well as the whole household... We believe that addressing the

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<sup>162</sup> Giacomo D'Alisa and Claudio Cattaneo, "Household work and energy consumption: a degrowth perspective. Catalonia's case study," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 38 (2013): 72.

issue of unpaid work is fundamental in order to achieve degrowth in energy consumption as well as in monetary economic activities and in paid working time.”<sup>163</sup>

The issue of women’s unpaid labor is, of course, nothing new: globally, women are responsible for more tasks in the home. However, since on average, they do not work outside of the home as men, their home labor goes unrecognized. For example, in Catalonia, Spain, women spend 16 percent of their time in unpaid labor and 8 percent in paid labor, while men spend 6 percent of their time in unpaid labor and 14 percent in paid labor.<sup>164</sup> Thus, men spend more time on the job, but women spend more total time working. Without advances in gender equality coupled with economic policy initiatives recognizing women’s unpaid labor, the time-use changes associated with voluntary simplicity and de-growth will mean a regression for women’s rights.

In terms of time use and life philosophy, voluntary simplicity is an individual-scale microcosm of the movement toward de-growth that our society must undertake in some form. A study of the motivations of voluntary simplicity also lends insight into how the de-growth movement might achieve more widespread appeal. Some ecological economists opine that the SSE and de-growth are not currently viable because of a lack of moral awareness in society. Kerschner writes, “The SSE and the de-growth economy respectively are socio-politically utopian at the present state of affairs. This is of course true no matter how we define the SSE or economic de-growth. They are not ideas that people would voluntarily vote for, unless there was what Daly... calls ‘moral growth’.”<sup>165</sup> Kerschner seems to believe that a transition to an SSE or de-growth economy would have

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>165</sup> Kerschner, “Economic de-growth,” 549.

to be an altruistic choice. That is, they necessarily represent a sacrifice in the public mind. Overcoming this barrier through societal “moral growth” would be a significant deviation from the selfish course of human action that all of history shows us. Thus, if moral growth is a prerequisite for de-growth, de-growth becomes nearly impossible. However, voluntary simplicity tells us otherwise. As chapter 2 notes, members of the voluntary simplicity movement have altruistic environmental values, but are more strongly motivated by stress, a desire to spend time differently, and a lack of satisfaction with their current lives. These are selfish motivations! If voluntary simplicity is any indication of the prospects for deeper personal fulfillment that a de-growth society offers, de-growth becomes favorable over the current growth-oriented economy. This type of re-framing of de-growth will be essential to its success.

Indeed, one of the most important roles for voluntary simplicity will be challenging the idea that a growth economy is the only thing that can make us happy. The variety of free-market capitalism currently practiced is too often accepted as the best option in powerful policy circles: “[the economists] Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi... highlighted the use of GDP as a misleading indicator of wellbeing, and warned policy makers about implementing policy based on this presumption. However, giving up the compulsory up-thrust of economic growth as the primary objective of national government is regarded as heresy.”<sup>166</sup> One of the most significant barriers to societal economic change is the fact that those who challenge the free-market, growth-oriented economy are disdained for being anti-progress. This has to change: alternative economic models must be a powerful presence at high-stakes economic discussions. The more visible voluntary simplicity becomes, the more potential it will have for deconstructing

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<sup>166</sup> D’Alisa and Cattaneo, “Household work,” 76.

the norm of the growth economy.

The move away from the growth economy will not just entail policy changes—it represents a significant deviation in the mindset that guides the economy. Above all, de-growth requires that we change the way we think about the economy:

It is not simple to capture the meaning of sustainable de-growth in a nutshell. Such explicit opposition to the motto of sustained growth does not imply an exact opposition to economic growth. It advocates instead a fundamental change of key references such as the collective imagination... and the array of analysis, propositions and principles guiding the economy.<sup>167</sup>

Currently, although many people may feel discontent with the work-and-spend lifestyle, society as a whole cannot imagine any other way of functioning economically. A more visible voluntary simplicity movement has the simple power to show people that something other than the attainment of wealth should guide our lives and our economic organization. Voluntary simplicity has the power to change the collective imagination of society as a whole in favor of de-growth.

Furthermore, for the de-growth movement to be a success, it must be an all-encompassing values shift. Sorman and Giampietro point out that the achievement of de-growth without a values shift would be futile: “A voluntary reduction of energy consumption in some activity can be compensated by an involuntary increase in energy consumption that the society can now afford in some other activities.”<sup>168</sup> If de-growth is only a change in how the economy functions, its progress in terms of reducing energy and

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<sup>167</sup> Martínez-Alier, et al., "Sustainable de-growth," 1742.

<sup>168</sup> Sorman and Giampietro, "The energetic metabolism of societies," 91.

resource demands will be at least partially nullified by the rebound effect in alternative forms of consumption. Thus, de-growth must entail abandoning the “more is better” mindset. Voluntary simplicity’s philosophy of fulfillment through less and quality over quantity could be one factor that drives the de-growth values shift.

In conclusion, voluntary simplicity will not appeal to everyone, but it should be part of a dynamic societal conversation driving a shift to de-growth. There are simply too many economic and social structures in place for voluntary simplicity to become a majority movement. As Tim Jackson explains in *Prosperity without Growth*:

It’s clear that changing the social logic of consumption cannot simply be relegated to the realm of individual choice. In spite of a growing desire for change, it’s almost impossible for people to simply *choose* sustainable lifestyles, however much they’d like to. Even highly-motivated individuals experience conflict as they attempt to escape consumerism. And the chances of extending this behavior across society are negligible without changes in the social structure.<sup>169</sup>

The structures rewarding competition and consumption make voluntary simplicity an uphill battle for its adherents. It is unreasonable to expect society to transition to a voluntarily simple way of life in the short term.

Nonetheless, the move away from a growth-oriented economy and way of life will be a dynamic process. The de-growth movement must not limit its focus to achieving a sustainable economy: “Degrowth should not be the sole or even the primary objective but the outcome of a general transition towards a social and political

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<sup>169</sup> Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without growth: Economics for a finite planet*, (New York: Earthscan, 2011), 149.

organization, where autonomy, freedom from wage labour, and collective-decision-making are key.”<sup>170</sup> De-growth must be part of a conversation—an analysis of real-life, small-scale sustainable practices—to which the voluntary simplicity movement can add invaluable insight. Society’s current economic activities are exceeding the biological limits of the planet, and the time for change is now. Sorman and Giampietro nicely encapsulate the transition process society must inevitably undergo:

In spite of all the difficulties that we may face, the debate on the approaching “tragedy of change” is undeniably upon us and it is unavoidable that humankind will have to go through it in the next decades. The term “tragedy of change”... ultimately refers to a key issue of sustainability. In order to be able to engage in new styles or ways of living (the proposed change) we must be able to sacrifice old styles and giving up an important fraction of the accustomed standards we are used to. This will require a very delicate discussion and deliberation over what the society wants to give away in relation to what the society wants to retain. This operation cannot be carried out using analytical tools or personal beliefs, since viable and desirable futures still do not exist. They will have to be created by the interaction of human beings.<sup>171</sup>

It will be impossible for top-down measures alone to guide the direction of society. As Sorman and Giampietro note, no government can decide for us what we will keep and what we must sacrifice as a society. Voluntary simplicity offers deep insight into the question of how we might live in the future and how we must change our lives to get

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<sup>170</sup> Cattaneo and Gavelda, “The experience of rurban squats,” 588.

<sup>171</sup> Sorman and Giampietro, “The energetic metabolism of societies,” 92.

there. Additionally, voluntary simplicity is evidence that the dynamic grassroots movement for societal change is already underway.

Society's transition to a sustainable society will take two forms, each of which is futile without the other. The first is grassroots-level change inspired by individuals and communities. This is where voluntary simplicity has the most potential to make an impact—in changing society's collective mindset. The second necessary component is top-down policy changes that strike at the economic structures enforcing the current paradigm. In order to fulfill its potential as a driver of the second type of change, voluntary simplicity will have to face the social class dynamics that currently limit its scope. This is the focus of chapter 5.

## Chapter 5:

### Responding to Criticism of Voluntary Simplicity

Voluntary simplicity has garnered a diverse spectrum of positive and negative attention. There are those idealists and environmentalists who romanticize the joys of the simple life, and there are realists and capitalists who paint voluntary simplifiers as a bunch of absurd new-age hippies. Maniates dryly sums up the dilemma of the voluntary simplicity movement: “Simplicity is teetering between a self-absorbed subculture looking to effect social change by, say, using soap more sparingly, and a nascent social movement capable of fostering lasting change in how work, play, and consumption are organized in industrial society.”<sup>172</sup> Untapped potential for widespread change brews under the surface of this way of life that has inspired many people. However, voluntary simplicity certainly has its flaws.

One of the primary criticisms of voluntary simplicity is that individuals’ simple steps are far from sufficient to solve the environmental crisis. One more vocal critic along this line of thought is Derrick Jensen, co-founder of the environmental movement Deep Green Resistance. Jensen writes, “Would any sane person think dumpster diving would have stopped Hitler, or that composting would have ended slavery or brought about the eight-hour workday [?]. . . Then why now, with all the world at stake, do so many people retreat into these entirely personal ‘solutions’?”<sup>173</sup> He goes on to point out that individual consumption is only about a quarter of total consumption, while municipal

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<sup>172</sup> Maniates, “In search of consumptive resistance,” 202.

<sup>173</sup> Derrick Jensen, “Forget Shorter Showers,” *Orion Magazine*, July/ August 2009. Web (26 Nov. 2014).

waste accounts for only three percent of total waste. The vast majority of consumption and waste is by industry, agribusiness, corporations, the government, and the military. Thus, even if every single citizen took up a simpler way of life, the impact on climate change and environmental destruction would be negligible.<sup>174</sup> Jensen frames voluntary simplicity as an ineffective and even cowardly attempt at solving immense environmental issues—a way of life that realistically only begets a self-righteous ease of conscience for its practitioners.

The philosophical wing of voluntary simplicity would take issue with this cynicism. Elgin writes, “The character of a society is the cumulative result of the countless small actions taken day in and day out, by millions of persons. Small changes that may seem unimportant in isolation are of transformative significance when adopted by an entire society.”<sup>175</sup> Elgin’s words of encouragement ring of the much-quoted mantra commonly attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Certainly, no change ever takes place without anyone taking responsibility for setting it in motion. Still, this leaves the question unanswered: does the act of voluntary simplicity by itself represent effective social change?

I believe it does, for several reasons. As I’ve explained, voluntary simplicity is about more than changing light bulbs or dressing down on Fridays. It is a way of viewing life that is entirely different than the lens of industrialized consumerism. Elgin himself makes this distinction between voluntary simplicity and less committed acts of green

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid

<sup>175</sup> Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 26.

consumption: “Small steps alone will not be sufficient.”<sup>176</sup> He expounds the potential depth of voluntary simplicity as a way of life:

Conscious simplicity... represents a deep, graceful, and sophisticated transformation in our ways of living—the work we do, the transportation we use, the homes and neighborhoods in which we live, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, and much more. A sophisticated and graceful simplicity seeks to heal our relationship with the Earth, with one another, and with the sacred universe.”<sup>177</sup>

Saving the environment will require radical changes in how our society functions and interacts with the planet on a fundamental level. Voluntary simplicity is one example of such change. Furthermore, it originates within the current system. The transformative capacity of voluntary simplicity rests on its accessibility from our current position.

If we are to achieve transformational change voluntarily—which is the only viable way—we must change the minds of those who can only imagine life in the current system. Seeing as society is made up of individuals, this change begins in the mind of the individual. Part of the prime importance of transforming one’s own life is decolonizing the mind from the growth mentality—of re-learning the concepts of contentment and sufficiency. As Burch notes:

Voluntary simplicity [is] an *act of self-defence* against the mind-polluting effects of over-consumption. To live in North American society is to be, in one way or another, under attack. We are flooded every day with countless ‘messages’ ... most of which have to do with consuming things

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 9.

or services. The language of our economic system is the language of discontent.<sup>178</sup>

Voluntary simplicity is about taking decision-making power back from industrial culture and trying to make independent judgments of how life should be.

Voluntary simplicity must aid society as a whole to move beyond the consumer mindset. As noted in chapter 5, a large part of the movement's significance will be as a beacon of conscientious thought. It is unreasonable to expect everyone to undertake voluntary simplicity—or, in the event that everyone did, to expect it to make a meaningful difference for the environment. Rather, voluntary simplicity must serve as a counterexample for those who cannot imagine fulfillment through means other than goods consumption—those who will resist most fiercely the transition to a different way of life. Voluntary simplicity will be one of many bright ideas that point the way to a truly sustainable way of life.

Besides the argument against personal small steps, critics often disparage voluntary simplicity for being apolitical. Jensen argues that personal solutions “incorrectly [assign] blame to the individual” for a problem that is systematic.<sup>179</sup> He believes it is dangerous to pretend living simply is a revolutionary act, in that it detracts from the countercultural energy that would be better put towards true political and social change—that is, deconstructing the industrial economy.<sup>180</sup> The efficacy of Jensen's argument—as he notes—depends on whether individual voluntary simplifiers view their way of life a political act or not. If people decide to become voluntary simplifiers simply because they feel like it, there is no harm. In some respects, any individual changes in

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<sup>178</sup> Burch, *Simplicity*, 13.

<sup>179</sup> Jensen, Derrick. “Forget Shorter Showers.”

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

favor of a lower ecological footprint are positive. The real issue arises when people who are politically or environmentally motivated see voluntary simplicity as an effective form of resistance, thereby misdirecting their attention and energy away from more consequential action.

This may not be the case for most voluntary simplifiers. As I've illustrated, the majority of people who take up voluntary simplicity are not altruistically motivated. They desire more time with family, less stress, less debt, and spiritual growth. Although most hold a general concern for the environment, less than a quarter of voluntary simplifiers are motivated primarily by environmental considerations, and fewer than that are primarily motivated by anticonsumption attitudes.<sup>181</sup> Thus, an individual with a foundation of political ardor who exhausts his or her potential for activism by instead following voluntary simplicity seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

Clearly, however, voluntary simplicity is a political escape for some adherents. It is in these cases that the movement's prospects are discouraging—according to its skeptics, it turns political potential into consumer-oriented trivialities. In the words of Maniates, voluntary simplicity is “unpromisingly rooted in an apolitical and consumerist response to social ills.”<sup>182</sup> On the same note, Jensen adds, “It accepts capitalism's redefinition of us from citizens to consumers.”<sup>183</sup> Voluntary simplicity is a consumer movement in that it encourages limits to consumption. On the other hand, in a way, it transcends consumerism and reclaims human dignity. Simplicity blogger Leo Baubata explains that questioning the act of buying changes us from consumers to people. He contends the question of how to buy green is a trap: “When we allow ourselves to be

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<sup>181</sup> Huneke, “The face of the un-consumer,” 535.

<sup>182</sup> Maniates, “In search of consumptive resistance,” 199.

<sup>183</sup> Jensen, “Forget Shorter Showers.”

branded with [the label of consumer]... we've given in to the consumerist mindset. We've allowed the debate to be framed around buying: should we buy organic or local?... What's the best way to spend our money on products? ... How can we effect change in society by making ethical or conscious buying choices?" He proposes a new line of thought: "What about the question of whether we should be buying or not?... If we stop thinking of ourselves as consumers, and start calling ourselves 'people,' then we open up the question."<sup>184</sup> If we think of ourselves as humans rather than restricting ourselves to being consumers, we uncover the possibility of being creators, restoring our link to the natural world, and improving environmental conditions rather than mitigating their destruction. From this perspective, voluntary simplicity is an ideology of being an ecologically positive force.

However, even as "people" rather than "consumers," voluntary simplifiers may hold a narrow perspective on what constitutes resistance. Jensen argues that the focus on consumption suggests that individuals are to blame for systematic problems, which shifts the focus away from political actions that would work toward changing these systems. Through consumptive resistance, he says, "We reduce our potential forms of resistance to consuming and not consuming. Citizens have a much wider range of available resistance tactics, including voting, not voting, running for office, pamphleting, boycotting, organizing, lobbying, protesting, and, when a government becomes destructive... we have the right to alter or abolish it."<sup>185</sup> On the contrary, it seems that on the whole, the voluntary simplicity movement actively avoids blaming individuals for systemic

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<sup>184</sup> Leo Babauta, "We Are Not Consumers," *mnmlist*, N.p., 11 May 2010. Web (26 Nov. 2014).

<sup>185</sup> Jensen, "Forget shorter showers."

issues.<sup>186</sup> Thus, the lack of diverse resistance tactics is not a result of individuals believing they are responsible for industrial civilization. Rather, the apolitical nature of the movement points to the apolitical motivations of its adherents, as stated earlier. Nonetheless, there remains a dearth of political action, and if it is to reach its full potential as a force of societal transformation, the voluntary simplicity movement must look beyond individuals to the societal structures that support consumption.

Cecile Andrews touches upon the need for political activism in her book, *Circle of Simplicity* (1997). The simplicity circle is a gathering space for community members involved in voluntary simplicity—a place to share ideas and build a more cohesive movement. However, in practice, the circles appear to be ravaged by gendered power struggles. In 1998-1999, Mary Grigsby qualitatively researched voluntary simplicity circles in Seattle, which she documents in *Buying Time and Getting By*. She argues that when members join the voluntary simplicity movement, they bring with them the gendered constructions of power that they learned from mainstream culture. Although they claim to reject these practices, males in the circles subtly dominate the group and subordinate female members, who either leave or become less invested.<sup>187</sup> The resolution of these issues will require deep reflection and active attempts to avoid the trends that lead to male appropriation of power and the undermining of simplicity circles.

Along the same line as its lack of political action, members of the voluntary simplicity movement generally do not actively seek to recruit other members. In a way, this is a positive trend, as an individual who arrives personally and independently at

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<sup>186</sup> Grigsby, *Buying Time and Getting By*, 44.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

voluntary simplicity will likely be more committed to it. A man interviewed for Elgin's *Voluntary Simplicity* neatly sums up the danger of an over-hyped movement:

This is a country of media hype, and [simple living] is good copy. The media is likely to pick up on it... and create a movement. I hope they won't. The changes we're talking about are fundamental and take lots of time... If it is made into a movement, it could burn itself out. I hope it spreads slowly. This way the changes will be more pervasive. Voluntary simplicity is the kind of thing that people need to discover for themselves.<sup>188</sup>

Another of Elgin's interviewees builds on the importance of individuality: "Voluntary simplicity is an individual thing... It has to be something that springs from the heart because it was always there, not something you can be talked into by persuasive people, or something that is brought on by financial necessity... [We do this] because our souls find a need for it." Voluntary simplicity is a gradual, conscientious change. A bandwagon voluntary simplicity movement could backfire, leading to a surge in consumption, as well as negative feelings about the viability of voluntary simplicity.

Nonetheless, there are different ways of fostering voluntary simplicity. Spreading voluntary simplicity through media hype and persuasive recruiting is different than making the movement more visible through deliberate, carefully considered outreach. According to Grigsby, while many women in the movement are not inclined to recruit other members, men are more motivated to do so.<sup>189</sup> Although this is part of the gendered power dynamics that the voluntary simplicity movement must actively address,

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<sup>188</sup> Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 33.

<sup>189</sup> Grigsby, *Buying Time and Getting By*, 97.

it does reflect the fact that there is some support for expansion from within the movement. In the future, this potential could be tapped as part of a thoughtful recruitment effort. The individual nature of voluntary simplicity does not justify an abandonment of any push for more widespread change, and voluntary simplicity must reconcile the dilemma presented by the need for both authentic change and a wider support base.

Finally, the most important limitation of the voluntary simplicity movement is its failure to address the power structures that enforce social class. Although the popular press often sensationalizes the voluntary simplicity movement as a self-righteous group of economic elitists, it is—as noted in chapter 2—very middle class.<sup>190</sup> Voluntary simplifiers are not part of the economic elite, but they do possess cultural capital—namely, that most are white and well educated.<sup>191</sup> Strictly speaking, there is nothing wrong with this type of cultural elitism within the movement. If Americans consume far more per capita than the average global citizen, and if a movement involving a reduction of this consumption appeals to a significant demographic of Americans, then that movement is a positive development.

Where voluntary simplifiers hit an elitist roadblock is in refusing to confront the power structures that confer them their cultural capital. Without deconstructing the systematic functions that privilege the middle class over the working poor, the voluntary simplicity movement is self-limiting. While claiming to reject mainstream capitalist ideology, middle class adherents still depend on the privilege this economic arrangement confers them. Grigsby explains, “The criteria for establishing a voluntary simplicity

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<sup>190</sup> Etzioni, “Voluntary Simplicity,” 221.

<sup>191</sup> Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 61.

moral identity invite people to reject conspicuous consumption and some values of upper-middle-class status on the one hand, but enable well-educated, middle-class people to remain, in some significant ways, connected to their social and cultural capital and class privilege on the other.”<sup>192</sup> As explained in chapter 3, the voluntary simplicity “moral identity” is distinctly middle-class, and rather than tackle the inequality that produces class, voluntary simplifiers use changes in time use and consumption practices to re-frame being middle-class as a positive value. In this way, they sidestep the structural changes in resource distribution that could potentially threaten their class advantage.<sup>193</sup> While voluntary simplicity likely isn’t a strong outlet for political activism, it does seem to be an outlet for feelings of guilt associated with elevated social class. Rather than actively engage to deconstruct class-oriented power structures, voluntary simplifiers take the easy—and faint-hearted—way out.

One significant way voluntary simplifiers rely on class privilege is in the economic and workplace arrangements that allow for their lifestyle. For example, many voluntary simplifiers aim for what Dominguez and Robin call “financial independence” in their seminal work, *Your Money or Your Life*. This means reducing consumption, saving, and investing enough until they have reached a comfortable balance and can live primarily off their investments.<sup>194</sup> While this may make them feel self-sufficient, “they are still dependent on the economy aimed at profit and growth for their investment income.”<sup>195</sup> Additionally, voluntary simplifiers use their cultural capital to achieve workplace benefits such as flextime, job sharing, benefits for part-time work, and

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<sup>192</sup> Grigsby, *Buying Time and Getting By*, 87.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

decentralized work groups—arrangements that simply aren't available to the working poor.<sup>196</sup> Hence, as much as they might like to believe otherwise, voluntary simplifiers are still heavily entrenched in the growth-oriented economic system that promotes class inequality.

The problem with voluntary simplicity is not that it will cause the poor to suffer more, but that without the involvement of all social classes, society cannot achieve the widespread changes necessary. Maniates expresses the implausible idea that voluntary simplicity will by itself crush the economy in a frightening way:

The U.S. economy is driven by consumer demand, which the simplicity movement hopes to throttle. Fulfillment of this hope would lead to production cutbacks, plant closings, and job loss, at especially great cost to the working poor... In practice, [simplicity] would, absent significant policy change, balance a greater measure of middle-class tranquility on the backs of the bottom 20 percent of American households.<sup>197</sup>

Although voluntary simplicity is a growing movement, for reasons cited in chapter 4, it is very unlikely it will become a majority movement. Furthermore, the move to a de-growth economy will be gradual and fueled by many dynamic processes, not just voluntary simplicity. Still, Maniates's concern evidences other problems with voluntary simplicity, namely the fact that it ignores the needs of the working poor. In order to achieve the revolution in time necessary to change the consumption practices of developed countries, we will need to address the needs of all social classes, not just well educated white people. This means engaging in political action and collective

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<sup>196</sup> Maniates, *In Search of Consumptive Resistance*, 225.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

bargaining, and it highlights the real test of the voluntary simplicity movement. If voluntary simplifiers are truly committed to change, they must face the reality of their privilege and act to dismantle it.

## Conclusion

Voluntary simplicity may not be the be-all, end-all solution to the ecological crisis, but the environmental movement still has a lot to learn from it. As the latter chapters of this thesis emphasize, the problem of over-consumption—and of environmental degradation more generally—is inextricably connected to issues of race, gender, and class inequality. The environmental crisis is just part of the wider narrative of oppression. In the words of Mark A. Burch, “Environmental degradation, militarism, economic injustice, political unrest, social decay and a host of other issues seem to keep looping back on themselves in a single tangled mass.”<sup>198</sup> Long overdue in the environmental movement is a more widespread recognition of the interconnectedness of all struggles against the entrenched power structures that enforce both inequality and environmental destruction. This interconnectedness also means that academically, solving the environmental crisis will require a dialogue among all disciplines—business, economics, science, politics, *and* social science.

While it reflects many of the challenges the environmental movement as a whole faces, voluntary simplicity is still a strong purveyor of hope. First, hope that there is something better—that ordinary people really can escape the senseless consumption that is ruining the environment without making us happy. Someday, our society might operate on the principles of cooperation, ecological awareness, and true well-being that voluntary simplicity offers. Second, there is hope for unrest. One needn’t look far at all for the foundation of consumptive resistance in American culture. The same national philosophy of individualism that facilitates a life of material excess also ties back to the

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<sup>198</sup> Burch, *Simplicity*, 9.

recurring narrative of personal autonomy and ideological fulfillment through simple living. Troubled by this cultural paradox, Americans are not as satisfied with the consumerist lifestyle as it might seem. Some opt for voluntary simplicity, while others feel overworked and unfulfilled and lament the excessive materialism of our culture.

The environmental movement needs to recognize and use this ripe potential to its advantage. Doing so will require a new approach to framing environmentalism. As voluntary simplifiers evidence, choosing more ecologically responsible lifestyles should not be viewed as a sacrifice for the sake of humanity or the planet. Voluntary simplifiers undertake their lifestyles because they feel unhappy with a life of consumerism and are searching for something more satisfying, not because they are morally superior. Far from a detriment to its success, the selfishness of voluntary simplicity adds to its appeal. As simplicity writer Lawrence Buell asserts, a counter-consumerist movement should be a form of “alternative hedonism” that counters the pleasures of material consumption through those of a different type of consumption.<sup>199</sup> The environmental movement should take note. For all that is at stake, environmentalism’s current appeal to altruism is not achieving enough.

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<sup>199</sup> Lawrence Buell, “Does Thoreau Have a Future? Reimagining Voluntary Simplicity for the Twenty-First Century,” in *Ecologies of Human Flourishing*, ed. Donald K. Swearer and Susan Lloyd McGarry (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 20. Print.

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