CHAPTER TWO

A NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT?
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The idea that achieving ever-higher levels of consumption of products and services is a vacuous goal has been with us from the onset of industrialization. These ideas often have taken the form of comparing the attractive life of the much poorer, preindustrial artisan to that of the more endowed industrial assembly-line worker. Many alternative approaches to life within a capitalist system have been proposed since the advent of capitalism, some more successful than others. One such approach, referred to by its adherents as voluntary simplicity, has been steadily gaining in popularity. This chapter examines this living strategy with regard to its sociological significance as a possible counterbalance to mainstream capitalist society.

Since the 1960s, criticism of consumerism has been common among the followers of counterculture movements, voiced largely in reaction to the postwar boom in consumer spending. These counterculture adherents sought a lifestyle that consumed and produced little, at least in terms of marketable objects, and sought to derive satisfaction, meaning, and a sense of purpose from contemplation, communion with nature, bonding, mood-altering substances, sex, and inexpensive products. Over the years, many members of Western societies embraced an attenuated version of the values and mores of the counterculture. In fact, one survey suggests that North American attitudes to materialism are changing. For example, 83 percent of those surveyed believe that the United States consumes too much, and 88 percent believe that protecting the environment will require major changes in the way we live.

Some scholars postulate that a shift in values in relation to the material aspects of life emerges as societies move from a modern to a postmodern era. Under this paradigm:

[m]odernized nations become postmodern as diminishing returns from economic growth, bureaucratization, and state intervention and unprecedented levels of affluence and welfare state security give rise to new constellations of values: postmaterialist emphases on the quality of life, self-expression, participation, and continued declines in traditional social norms.
This change is effected through 'intergenerational value replacement' in which individuals born into the high levels of material security of developed democratic capitalism emphasize (nonmaterial) subjective well-being: socialization during formative years produces deeply ingrained postmaterialist value orientations.

In a survey conducted by researchers Ronald Inglehart and Paul Abramson, the percentage of respondents with clear postmaterialist values doubled from 9 percent in 1972 to 18 percent in 1991, while those with clear materialist values dropped by more than half, from 35 percent to 16 percent. (Those with mixed commitments moved more slowly, from 55 percent to 65 percent.) Trends were similar for most Western European countries.

Personal consumption, however, continued to grow, most dramatically during the 1980s. Consumer debt rose from approximately $350 billion in 1980 to $1,231 trillion in 1997, and personal consumption expenditures jumped from $3,009.7 to $4,471.1 trillion (real dollars) between 1980 and 1994. Meanwhile, the personal savings rate of Americans fell from 7.9 percent in 1980 to 4.2 percent in 1990 and has remained near this level ever since. As one commentator notes, during the 1980s:

Laissez-faire economic policies and newly internationalized stock and bond markets created an easy-money euphoria among the well to do, which translated into a 'get it while you can' binge in the middle echelons of the consumer society.... not since the Roaring Twenties had conspicuous consumption been so lauded. Over the decade, personal debt matched national debt in soaring to new heights, as consumers filled their houses and garages with third cars, motor boats, home entertainment centers, and whirlpool baths.

Still, the search for alternatives to a consumerist-oriented lifestyle has survived such periods of intensive conspicuous consumption and continues to attract people, such as those involved in the voluntary simplicity approach. Voluntary simplicity refers to the decision to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services and to cultivate nonmaterialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning, out of free will rather than out of coercion by poverty, government austerity programs, or imprisonment. It has been described by one of its main proponents, author Duane Elgin, as 'a manner of living that is outwardly more simple and inwardly more rich.... a deliberate choice to live with less in the belief that more of life will be returned to us in the process.'

As I already have suggested, criticism of consumerism and the quest for alternatives is as old as capitalism itself. However, the issue is increasingly relevant to our lives. The collapse of non-capitalist economic systems has led many to assume that capitalism is the superior system and therefore to refrain
critically examining its goals, even though capitalism does harbor serious
defects. Recent developments in former communist countries as they grapple
with the free market raise numerous concerns. Many in the East and West find
that capitalism does not address spiritual concerns — the quest for transcendental
connections and meanings — they believe are important to all. Furthermore,
as many societies with rapidly rising populations now seek affluence as their
primary domestic goal, they face environmental, psychological, and other issues
raised by consumerism on a scale not previously considered. For instance, the
undesirable side effects of intensive consumerism that used to be of concern
chiefly to highly industrialized societies now are faced by hundreds of millions
of people in Asian countries and in other places where rapid economic develop-
ment has occurred recently. Finally, the transition from consumption based
on the satisfaction of perceived basic needs (secure shelter, food, clothing) to
consumerism (the preoccupation with gaining ever higher levels of consumption,
including a considerable measure of conspicuous consumption of status goods)
seems to be more pronounced as societies become wealthier. Hence, a reex-
amination of this aspect of mature capitalism is particularly timely. Indeed, the
current environment of increasing and expansive affluence might be particularly
 hospitable to moderate forms of voluntary simplicity.

This examination proceeds first by providing a description of voluntary
simplicity, exploring its different manifestations and its relationship to compe-
titiveness as the need and urge to gain higher levels of income is curbed. It
then considers whether higher income, and the greater consumption it enables,
produces higher contentment. This is a crucial issue because it makes a world
of difference to the sustainability of voluntary simplicity if it is perceived as
generating deprivations and hence requires strong motivational forces in order
to spread and persevere, or if consumerism is found to be an obsessive and poss-
sibly addictive habit, in which case voluntary simplicity would be liberating and
much more self-propelling and sustaining. An application of eminent psycholo-
gist Abraham Maslow’s theory of human needs is particularly relevant here in
answering the question and in determining the future of voluntary simplicity
as a major cultural factor. This theory is further reinforced by examining the
'consumption' of a subcategory of goods whose supply and demand are not
governed by the condition of scarcity in the postmodern era. The chapter closes
with a discussion of the societal consequences of voluntary simplicity.

One rather moderate form of voluntary simplicity is practiced by economi-
cally well-off people who voluntarily give up some consumer goods they could
readily afford but basically maintain their consumption-oriented lifestyle. For
example, they ‘dress down’ in one way or another, or drive old cars.

These trends are reflected in the stylistic return during the 1990s to classic,
'simple' design and natural looks, which, while they may appear simpler, often
are just as costly, as Pilar Viladas writes: ‘In architecture and design today, less is
more again. Houses, rooms and furnishings are less ornate, less complicated and
less ostentatious than they were 10 years ago. Rather than putting their money on display, people seem to be investing in a quieter brand of luxury, based on comfort and quality.\textsuperscript{13}

While this tendency, referred to as 'downshifting,' is moderate in scope, and perhaps because it is moderate, it is not limited to the very wealthy. Some professionals and other members of the middle class are replacing elaborate dinner parties with simple meals, pot-luck dinners, take-out food, or social events built around desserts only. Some lawyers are reported to have cut back on the billing-hours race that drives many of their colleagues to work late hours and on weekends to gain increased income and a higher year-end bonus and to incur the favor of the firms for which they work.\textsuperscript{14} Some businesses have encouraged limited degrees of voluntary simplicity. For instance, many workplaces have established 'casual dress' Fridays. In some workplaces, especially on the West coast, employees may dress down any workday.

It has been estimated that 'by 2000, about 15 percent of Americans will have scaled back their lives in one way or another.'\textsuperscript{15} The most common recent changes have included reducing work hours, switching to lower-paying jobs, and quitting work to stay at home,\textsuperscript{16} changes that may, but do not necessarily correlate with downshifting. In fact, as one 1996 poll found, '48 percent of Americans [had] done at least one of the following [between 1991 and 1996]: 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?'\textsuperscript{17} Another survey reports that 'one in three adults say they would accept a smaller paycheck in exchange for having a simpler lifestyle.'\textsuperscript{18}

In addition, there are people who have given up high-paying, high-stress jobs to live on less — often much less — income. In one case, a couple quit their jobs as high-paid executives in the telecommunications industry and now live on their savings, expending about $25,000 per year and using their time writing and performing volunteer work.\textsuperscript{19}

Ideas associated with voluntary simplicity are widely held, although not necessarily reflected in actual behavior. In 1989 a majority of working Americans rated 'a happy family life' as a much more important indicator of success than 'earning a lot of money' — by a notably wide margin of 62 percent to 10 percent.\textsuperscript{20}

In addition, numerous women and some men prefer part-time jobs or jobs that allow them to work at home, even if better-paying full-time jobs are open to them, because they are willing to reconcile themselves with earning a lower income in order to dedicate more time to their children and be at home when their children are there.\textsuperscript{21} People who switch to new careers that are more personally meaningful but less lucrative also fall into this category. For instance, a 1997 source reports that 'a growing wave of engineers, military officers, lawyers, and business people ... are switching careers and becoming teachers.'\textsuperscript{22} Such
career changers have significantly redefined their attitudes toward work. They ask themselves, as psychologist Barry Schwartz has put it, a crucial question: 'Why have so many of us allowed ourselves to be put in a position where we spend half our waking lives doing what we don't want to do in a place we don't want to be?'

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

People who adjust their lifestyles only or mainly because of economic pressures (having lost their main or second job, or for any other reason) do not qualify as voluntary simplifiers on the grounds that their shift is not voluntary. It can be argued that some poor people freely choose not to earn more and keep their consumption level meager. Many advocates of voluntary simplicity, however, take great pains to distinguish this way of life from one of poverty, stressing that while poverty is the life of the powerless, voluntary simplicity is empowering. As Elgin states, 'Poverty is involuntary whereas simplicity is consciously chosen. Poverty is repressive; simplicity is liberating. Poverty generates a sense of helplessness, passivity, and despair; simplicity fosters personal empowerment, creativity, and a sense of ever present opportunity.'

The discussion here, however, focuses on people who had an affluent lifestyle and chose to give it up, for reasons that will become evident toward the end of the discussion.

Finally, holistic simplifiers adjust their whole life patterns according to the ethos of voluntary simplicity. Often many move from affluent suburbs or gentrified parts of major cities to smaller towns, the countryside, farms, and less affluent or less urbanized parts of the country — the Pacific Northwest is especially popular — with the explicit goal of leading a 'simpler' life, although proponents of the voluntary simplicity philosophy are quick to point out that it is a viable living strategy in any environment. A small, loosely connected social movement, sometimes called the 'simple living movement,' has developed — complete with its own how-to books, multiple-step programs, and newsletters, although many have embarked on a life of voluntary simplicity independently, and some reports suggest that many who 'experiment with simplicity of living said they did not view themselves as part of a social movement.'

The true simplifiers differ from the downshifters and even strong simplifiers not only in the scope of change in their conduct but also in that it is motivated
by a coherently articulated philosophy. Elgin’s 1981 book *Voluntary Simplicity* which draws on the traditions of the Quakers, the Puritans, transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and various world religions to provide a philosophical basis for living a simple life continues to be a major source of inspiration among voluntary simplicity’s proponents.\(^{26}\) Indeed, many note that the simplicity movement as a whole is much in debt to many of the world’s major religions and philosophical traditions. As social historian David Shi has noted:

The great spiritual teachers of the East Zarathustra, Buddha, Lao–tse, and Confucius – all stressed that material self–control was essential to the good life.... By far, however, the most important historical influence on American simplicity has been the combined heritage of Greco–Roman culture and Judeo–Christian ethics. Most Greek and Roman philosophers were emphatic in their praise of simple living, as were the Hebrew prophets and Jesus.\(^{27}\)

These simplicity–oriented philosophies often are explicitly anticonsumerist. Elgin, for example, calls for ‘dramatic changes in the overall levels and patterns of consumption in developed nations,’ adding that ‘this will require dramatic changes in the consumerist messages we give ourselves through the mass media.’\(^{28}\) In 1997 the Public Broadcasting Corporation broadcast a special called *Affluenza*. Voluntary simplicity was said to provide a treatment for an ‘epidemic’ whose symptoms are ‘shopping fever, a rash of personal debt, chronic stress, overwork and exhaustion of natural resources.’ It promised a follow–up on ‘better living for less.’ The Center for a New American Dream publishes a quarterly report on the same issues simply called *Enough!* The message that reducing wasteful consumerist practices is essential has been voiced on an international level as well, as witnessed by statements such as the following issued at the United Nations’ 1992 Rio Conference on the Environment: ‘To achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, states should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption.'\(^{29}\)

While one can readily profile the various kinds of simplifiers, there are no reliable measurements that enable us to establish the number of each of the three kinds of simplifiers or to determine whether their ranks are growing. One recent publication, though, estimates that nearly one out of four adult Americans, for a total of 44 million, is a ‘Cultural Creative,’ who ranks voluntary simplicity high among his or her values.\(^{30}\)

**Social Implications of Voluntary Simplicity**

The question of whether voluntary simplicity can greatly expand its reach depends to a significant extent on the question of whether voluntary simplicity
constitutes a sacrifice that people must be constantly motivated to make or is in itself a major source of satisfaction, and hence self-motivating.

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

In contrast, critics argue that the cult of consumer goods (of objects) stands between people and contentment, and prevents people from experiencing authentic expressions of affection and appreciation by others. Western popular culture is replete with narratives about fathers (in earlier days), and recently of mothers as well, who slaved to bring home consumer goods — but, far from being appreciated by their children and spouses, found often only late in life, that their families would have preferred if the breadwinners had spent more time with them and showed them affection and appreciation (or expressed their feelings directly, through attention and attendance, hugs and pats on the back, rather than mediate that expression by working hard and long to buy things). Playwright Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* is a telling example of this genre. Miller’s work remains relevant today, as evidenced by the popular response to Neil Simon’s *Proposals*, a remake of his story.

Social science findings (which admittedly may have many well-known limitations and do not all correlate on this topic) in *toto* seem to support the notion that income does not significantly affect contentment, with the important exception of the poor. For instance, Frank M. Andrews and Stephen B. Withey found that the level of one’s socioeconomic status had meager effects on one’s ‘sense of well-being’ and no significant effect on ‘satisfaction with life—as—a—whole’.*31* And Jonathan Freedman discovered that levels of reported happiness did not vary greatly among the members of different economic classes, with the exception of the very poor, who tended to be less happy than others.*32*

Researchers David G. Myers and Ed Diener find that among the poor in poor countries — those who cannot afford life’s necessities — satisfaction with income ‘is a moderate predictor’ of subjective well-being.*33* They also report, though, that ‘once people are able to afford life’s necessities, increasing levels of affluence matter surprisingly little.’*34* Diener and R. J. Larsen found ‘a mere +.12 correlation between income and happiness’ and uncovered no long-term effect of increases or decreases in income on happiness.*35*

A survey of the people on Forbes’s wealthiest Americans list finds that those individuals were not significantly happier than other Americans and that, in fact, 37 percent reported being less happy than the average American, a statistic Myers and Diener also report.*36* Even as personal income in the United States
has climbed from roughly $4,000 (in 1990 dollars) in 1930 to approximately $16,000 (in 1990 dollars) in the early 1990s, the percentage of people describing themselves as ‘very happy’ generally has hovered in the low- to mid-30s.\(^{37}\)

Researcher Angus Campbell reports that in 20 years’ surveys ‘the proportion of ‘very happy’ people is higher as we move from low- to high-income levels; but he is careful to note that this is a ‘very stable relationship, but by no means an exclusive one. Even among the most affluent, there are a large majority who describe themselves as less than very happy and a sizable minority of the least affluent claim that they are very happy.\(^{38}\) As he summarizes, ‘Happiness is far from the exclusive domain of the well-to-do.’\(^{39}\)

Studies of the country’s well-being show that economic growth does not significantly affect happiness (though at any given time the people of poor countries are generally less happy than those of wealthy ones). As Worldwatch Institute researcher Alan Durning states, ‘People living in the nineties are on average four-and-a-half times richer than their great-grandparents were at the turn of the century, but they are not four-and-a-half times happier. Psychological evidence shows that the relationship between consumption and personal happiness is weak.’\(^{40}\) In addition, it has been reported that while per-capita disposable (after-tax) income in inflation-adjusted dollars almost exactly doubled between 1960 and 1990, 32 percent of Americans reported that they were ‘very happy’ in 1993, almost the same proportion as did in 1957 (35 percent). Although economic growth slowed since the mid-1970s, Americans’ reported happiness was remarkably stable (nearly always between 30 and 35 percent) across both high-growth and low-growth periods. Moreover, in the same period, from the late 1950 to the early 1990s, rates of depression, violent crime, divorce, and teen suicide have all risen dramatically.\(^{41}\)

Recent psychological studies have made even stronger claims: that the more concerned people are with their financial well-being, the less likely they are to be happy. One group of researchers found that ‘[h]ighly central financial success aspirations ... were associated with less self-actualization, less vitality, more depression, and more anxiety.’\(^{42}\) Another scholar, Robert Lane, pointed out that:

...most studies agree that a satisfying family life is the most important contributor to well-being.... [T]he joys of friendship often rank second. Indeed, according to one study, an individual’s number of friends is a better predictor of his well-being than is the size of his income. Satisfying work and leisure often rank third or fourth but, strangely, neither is closely related to actual income.\(^{43}\)

Increases in individual income briefly boost happiness, but the additional happiness is not sustainable because the higher income level becomes the standard against which people measure their future achievements.\(^{44}\)
These and other such findings raise the following question: If higher levels of income do not buy happiness, why do people work hard to gain higher income? The answer is complex. High income in consumer-based capitalist societies 'buys' prestige; others find purpose and meaning and contentment in the income-producing work per se. There is, however, also good reason to suggest that the combination of artificial fanning of needs and other cultural pressures, manifest through such vehicles as the aggressive American marketing industry, maintains people in consumer-based roles when these are not truly or deeply satisfying. As social historian Robert Bellah has stated, '[t]hat happiness is to be attained through limitless material acquisition is denied by every religion and philosophy known to man but is preached incessantly by every American television set.'

Voluntary simplicity works because consuming less, once one's basic creature-comfort needs are taken care of, is not a source of deprivation, so long as one is freed from the culture of consumerism and the artificial 'needs' it induces. Voluntary simplicity represents a new culture, one that respects work (even if it generates only low or moderate income) and appreciates conservation and modesty rather than conspicuous or lavish consumption, but does not advocate a life of sacrifice or service (and in this sense is rather different from ascetic religious orders or some socialist expressions, as in kibbutzim). Voluntary simplicity suggests that there is a declining marginal satisfaction in the pursuit of ever-higher levels of consumption. And it points to sources of satisfaction in deliberately and voluntarily avoiding the quest for ever-growing levels of affluence and consumption and making one's personal and social project the pursuit of other purposes. These purposes are not specifically defined other than that they are not materialistic. Indeed, just as some people intrinsically find satisfaction in work and savings rather than in purchasing power, so some voluntary simplicity followers find satisfaction in the very fact that they choose (and have not been forced to choose) a simpler lifestyle and are proud of their choice. Moreover, as they learn to cultivate other pursuits, simplifiers gain more satisfaction out of lifelong learning, public life, volunteering, community participation, sports, cultural activities, and observing or communing with nature.

In each of these areas, some simplifiers slip back into consumerism, promoted by marketers. Thus, those engaged in sports may feel they 'need' a large variety of expensive, ever-changing, fashionable clothing and equipment to enjoy their sport of choice. But a considerable number of members of the affluent classes in affluent societies — especially, it seems, societies that have been well off for a while — find that they can keep consumerism under control and truly learn to cultivate lower-cost sources of contentment and meaning. They enjoy touch football, a well-worn pair of sneakers, doing their own home repairs and cooking, or take pride in their beat-up car.

The obsessive nature of some consumerism is evident in that people who seek to curb it often find doing so difficult. Many people purchase things they
later realize they neither need nor desire, or stop shopping only after they have exhausted all their sources of credit. (This reference is not to the poor but to those who have several credit cards and who constantly ‘max’ them out.) In short, the conversion of a large number of people to voluntary simplicity requires taking into account the fact that constant consumption cannot simply be stopped, that transitional help may be required, and that conversion is best achieved when consumerism is replaced with other sources of satisfaction and meaning.

Abraham Maslow, The Haves and The Have-Not's, and Simplicity

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

The rise of voluntary simplicity in advanced stages of capitalism, and for the privileged members of these societies, can be assessed in light of a psychological theory of Abraham Maslow, detailed especially in his work Towards a Psychology of Being. There he suggested that ‘the basic motivations supply ready-made an hierarchy of values which are related to each other as higher needs and lower needs, stronger and weaker, more vital and more dispensable,’ and ordered ‘in an integrated hierarchy ... that is, they rest one upon another.’ At the base of the hierarchy are basic creature comforts, such as the need for food, shelter, and clothing. Higher up are the need for love and esteem. Self-expression crowns the hierarchy. Although there are some connections; these needs are disassociated from the classical Freudian concept of ‘instincts.’

Maslow theorized that people seek to satisfy lower needs before they turn to higher ones, and that:

healthy people have sufficiently gratified their basic needs for safety, belongingness, love, respect and self-esteem so that they are motivated primarily by trends to self-actualization (defined as ongoing actualization of potentials, capacities and talents, as fulfillment of mission [or call, fate, destiny, or vocation], as a fuller knowledge of, and acceptance of, the person’s own intrinsic nature, as an unceasing trend toward unity, integration or synergy within the person).}

Maslow’s theory does not, however, postulate that basic needs are superseded by higher pursuits. As he states, ‘[g]rowth is seen then not only as progres-
sive gratification of basic needs to the point where they 'disappear,' but also in the specific growth motivations over and above these basic needs. We are thereby helped also to realize that basic needs and self-actualization do not contradict each other any more than do childhood and maturity." The primary issue relevant here is whether or not people continue to invest themselves heavily in the quest for 'creature comforts' long after they are quite richly endowed in such goods, and if in the process other needs, such as emotional interaction and care for others, are ignored or undervalued.

Maslow's thesis is compatible with the suggestion that voluntary simplicity may appeal to people after their basic needs are well satisfied. Once they feel secure that these needs will be attended to in the future, they are objectively ready to focus on their higher, 'self-actualizing' needs — even if their consumeristic tendencies blind them to the fact that they are read to shift upward, so to speak. Voluntary simplicity is thus a choice a successful corporate lawyer, not a homeless person, faces; Singapore, not Rwanda. Indeed, to urge the poor or near poor to draw satisfaction from consuming less is to ignore the profound connection between the hierarchy of human needs and consumption. Consumption becomes an obsession that can be overcome only after basic creature-comfort needs are sated.

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

People who are well socialized into the capitalist system often believe that they need income to buy things they 'need' (or that without additional income they 'cannot make ends meet'). But examinations of the purchases of those who are not poor or near poor shows that they buy numerous items not needed for survival but needed to meet status needs. This is the sociological role of Nike sneakers, leather jackets, fur coats, jewelry, fancy watches, expensive cars, and numerous other such goods, all items that are highly visible to people who are not members of one's community, who do not know one personally. These goods allow people to display the size of their income and wealth without attaching their accountant's statement to their lapels.

In such a culture, if people choose a job or career pattern that is not income-maximizing but is voluntarily simplistic, they have no established means of signaling that they choose such a course rather than having been forced into it and that they have not failed by the mores of the capitalist society. There are no lapel pins stating 'I could have but preferred not to.' Voluntary simplicity responds to this need for status recognition without expensive conspicuous consumption by choosing lower-cost but visible consumer goods that enable
Voluntary simplicity achieves this by using select consumer goods that are clearly associated with a simpler life pattern and are as visible as the traditional status symbols and/or cannot be afforded by those who reduced consumption merely because their income fell. Which specific consumption items signal voluntary simplicity vs. coerced simplicity change over time and from one sub-culture to another. Some refer to this practice as ‘conspicuous non-consumption.’

In this way, voluntary simplifiers can satisfy what Maslow considers another basic human need, that of gaining the appreciation of others; without using a high — and ever escalating — level of consumption as their principle means of gaining positive feedback.

This idea is of considerable import when voluntary simplicity is examined not merely as an empirical phenomenon, as a pattern for social science to observe and dissect, but also as a set of values that has advocates and that may be judged in terms of the moral appropriateness of those values. As I see it, voluntary simplicity advocates addressing those who are in the higher reaches of income, those who are privileged but who are fixated on the creature-comfort level; it may help them free themselves from the artificial fanning of these basic needs and assist them in moving to higher levels of satisfaction. The same advocacy addressed to the poor or near poor (or disadvantaged groups or the ‘have-not’ countries) might correctly be seen as an attempt to deny them the satisfaction of basic human needs. Consumerism, not consumption, is the target for voluntary simplicity.

Oddly, a major development brought about by technological innovations makes it more likely that voluntary simplicity may be expanded and that the less privileged and have-nots may gain in the process. In considering this development, I first discuss the nature of non-scarce objects and then turn to their implications for the reallocation of wealth.

Voluntary Simplicity in the Cyber Age

Developed societies, it has been argued for decades, are moving from economies that rely heavily on the industrial sector to economies that increasingly draw on the information industry. The scope of this transition and its implications are often compared to those societies that experienced as they moved from farming to manufacturing. It should be noted that there is a measure of overblown rhetoric in such generalizations. Computers are, for instance, classified as a major item of the rising knowledge industry rather than of traditional manufacturing. However, once a specific computer is programmed and designed, a prototype tested and debugged, the routine fastening of millions of chip boards into millions of boxes to make personal computers is not significantly different
from, say, the manufacturing of toasters. And while publishers of books are now often classified as part of the knowledge industry and computers are widely used to manufacture books, books are still objects that are made, shipped, and sold like other non-knowledge industry products. Acknowledging these examples of overblown claims is not to deny that a major transformation is taking place, only that its growth and scope are much slower and less dramatic than was originally expected. Indeed, given this slower rate of change, societies are able to face the ramifications in a more orderly manner.

The main significance of the rise of the cyber-age is that the resulting shrinking of scarcity enhances the possibility for the expansion of voluntary simplicity. This important point is surprisingly rarely noted. Unlike the consumer objects that dominated the manufacturing age — cars, washers, bikes, televisions, houses (and computers) — many knowledge 'objects' can be consumed, possessed, and still be had by numerous others — that is shared at minimal loss or cost. Hence, in this basic sense, knowledge defies scarcity thus reducing scarcity, a major driving principle behind industrial capitalist economies. Compare, for instance, a Porsche to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (or a minivan to a folk song). If an affluent citizen buys a particular Porsche (or any other of the billions of traditional consumer objects), this Porsche — and the resources that were invested in making it — is unavailable to any others (if one disregards friends and family). Once the Porsche is 'consumed,' little of value remains. By contrast, the Ninth (and a rising number of other such objects of knowledge) can be copied millions of times, enjoyed by millions at one and the same time, and is still available in its full, original glory.

Perhaps there is a measure of snobbism in showing a preference for the Ninth over a Porsche. But this is hardly the issue here; the same advantage is found when one compares an obscene rap song to a Volkswagen Beetle, or a pornographic image on the Internet to a low-income housing project. The criterion at issue is the difference between the resources that go into making each item and the extent to which it can be copied, consumed, and still be 'possessed' and shared.

True, even knowledge-related objects have some minimal costs, because they need some non-knowledge 'carrier'; they have some limited material base, a disk, a tape, or some paper, and most require an instrument — a radio, for instance — to access them. However, typically the costs of these material carriers are minimal compared to those of most consumer goods. While many perishable goods (consumer objects such as food or gasoline) are low in cost per item, one needs to buy many of them repeatedly to keep consuming them. In contrast, 'knowledge' objects such as cassette tapes or laser discs can be enjoyed numerous times and are not 'consumed' (eaten up, so to speak). In that sense, knowledge objects have the miraculous quality of the bush Moses saw at Mount Sinai: It burned but was not consumed.
VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

What is said for music also holds for books and art. Shakespeare in a 99cent paperback edition is no less Shakespeare than in an expensive leather-bound edition, and above all, millions can read Shakespeare — his writings are still available, undiminished, for millions of others. Millions of students can read Kafka’s short stories, solve geographical puzzles, and study Plato, without any diminution of these items. That is, these sources of satiation are governed by laws that are the mirror opposite of those laws of economics that govern oil, steel, and other traditional consumer objects from cellular phones to lasers.

Numerous games (although not all) are based on symbolic patterns and hence, like knowledge objects, are learned but not consumed, with minimal costs. Children play checkers (and other games) with discarded bottle caps. Chess played by inmates, using figures made of stale bread, is not less enjoyable than a game played with raze, ivory hand-carved pieces. (One may gain a secondary satisfaction from the aesthetic beauty or expense of the set, but these satisfactions have nothing to do with the game of chess per se.)

Similarly, bonding, love, intimacy, friendship, contemplation, communion with nature, certain forms of exercise (yoga, for example, as distinct from step aerobics), all can free one, to a large extent, from key laws of capitalist economies. In effect, these relationship-based sources of satisfaction are superior from this viewpoint to knowledge objects, because in the kind of relationships just enumerated, when one gives more, one often receives more, and thus both sides (or, in larger social entities such as communities, all sides) are ‘enriched’ by the same ‘transactions.’ Thus when two individuals are getting to know one another as persons and become ‘invested’ in one another during the ritual known as dating, often both are richer for it. (This important point is often overlooked by those who coined the term ‘social capital’ to claim that relations are akin to transactions.) Similarly, parents who are more involved with their children often (although by no means always) find that their children are more involved with them, and both draw more satisfaction from the relationship. Excesses are far from unknown — for example, when some parents attempt to draw most of their satisfaction from their children, or in sharply asymmetrical relations in which one side exploits the other’s dedication or love. Nonetheless, mutual ‘enrichment’ seems much more common.

The various sources of nonmaterialist satisfaction listed here were celebrated by counterculture movements. However, voluntary simplicity differs from these counterculture movements in that voluntary simplicity, even by those highly dedicated to it, seeks to combine a reasonable level of work and consumption to attend to creature-comfort needs with satisfaction from higher sources. The counterculture movements of the past tried to minimize work and consumption, denying attention to basic needs, and hence became unsustainable. To put it more charitably, they provided an extreme, pathblazing version for the voluntary simplicity ideology that followed. While much more moderate than the lifestyle advocated by the counterculture, the voluntary simplicity approach, because it
fosters satisfaction from knowledge rather than consumer objects, reduces the need to work and shop. As a result, it frees time and other scarce resources for further cultivation of nonmaterialistic sources of satisfaction, from acquiring music appreciation to visiting museums, from slowing down to enjoy nature to relearning the reading of challenging books or watching classic films.

None of the specific sources of nonmaterialistic satisfaction are necessarily tied to voluntary simplicity. One can engage in a voluntarily simple life without enjoying music or nature, being a loving person or a consumed chess player, an Internet buff or a domino aficionado. However, voluntary simplicity does point to the quest for some sources of satisfaction other than the consumption of goods and services. This statement is based on the elementary assumption that people prefer higher levels of satisfaction over lower ones; hence if higher satisfaction is not derived from ever-higher levels of consumption, their ‘excess’ quest, that which is not invested in the unnecessary pursuit of creature comforts, seeks to be invested elsewhere. It follows that while the specific activities that serve as the sources of nonmaterialist satisfaction will vary, some such must be cultivated or voluntary simplicity may not be sustainable.

A Voluntarily Simplistic Society

The shift to voluntary simplicity has significant consequences for society at large, above and beyond the lives of the individuals who are involved. A promising way to think about these effects is to ask what the societal consequences would be if more and more members of society, possibly an overwhelming majority, engaged in one kind or another of voluntary simplicity. These consequences are quite self-evident for environmental concerns; however, they are much less self-evident for social justice and thus warrant further attention.

The more comprehensively voluntary simplicity is embraced as a lifestyle by a given population, the greater the potential for realizing a fundamental element of social justice, that of basic socioeconomic equality. Before this claim is justified, a few words are needed on the meaning of the term ‘equality,’ a complex and much-contested notion.

While conservatives tend to favor limiting equality to legal and political statutes, those who are more politically left and liberal favor various degrees of redistribution of wealth in ways that would enhance socioeconomic equality. Members of the left–liberal camp differ significantly in the extent of equality they seek. Some favor far-reaching, if not total, socioeconomic equality in which all persons would share alike in whatever assets, income, and consumption are available, an idea championed by the early kibbutz movements. Others limit their quest for equality to ensuring that all members of society will at least have their basic creature comforts equally provided, a position championed by many liberals. The following discussion focuses on this quest for socioeconomic and
not just legal and political equality, focusing on equality at the basic, creature-comfort level rather than comprehensive overall equality. (The debate about whether or not holistic equality is virtuous, and if it entails undercutting both liberty and the level of economic performance on which the provision of creature comforts depends, is an important subject. However, it need not be addressed until basic socioeconomic equality is achieved, and so far this has proven to be an elusive goal.)

If one seeks to advance basic socioeconomic equality, one must identify sources that will propel the desired change. Social science findings and recent historical experience leave little doubt that ideological arguments (such as pointing to the injustices of inequalities, fanning guilt, introducing various other liberal and socialist arguments that favor greater economic equality), organizing labor unions and left-leaning political parties, and introducing various items of legislation (such as estate taxes and progressive income tax) have thus far not effected the desired result — namely, significant wealth redistribution — in democratic societies. The most that can said for them is that they helped prevent inequality from growing bigger. Additionally, in recent years, many of the measures, arguments, and organizations that championed these limited, rather ineffectual efforts to advance equality could not be sustained, or were successful only after they had been greatly scaled back. Moreover, for these and other reasons that need not be explored here, economic inequalities seem to have increased in many parts of the world. The former communist countries, including the Soviet Union, where once a sacrifice of liberties was associated with a minimal but usually reliable provision of subsistence needs, have moved to a socioeconomic system that tolerates, indeed is built on, a much higher level of inequality, one in which millions have no reliable source of creature comforts. Numerous other countries that had measures of socialist policies, from India to Mexico, have been moving in the same direction. And in many Western countries social safety nets are under attack, being shredded in some countries and merely lowered in others. When all is said and done, it seems clear that if basic socioeconomic equality is to be significantly advanced, it will need some new or additional force.

Voluntary simplicity, if more widely embraced, might well be the best new way to foster the societal conditions under which the limited reallocation of wealth needed to ensure the basic needs of all could become politically possible. The reason is as basic and simple as it is essential: To the extent that the privileged (those whose basic creature comforts are well sated and who are engaging in conspicuous consumption) will find value, meaning, and satisfaction in other pursuits, ones that are not labor or capital intensive, they can be expected to be more willing to give up some consumer goods and some income. These ‘freed’ resources, in turn, can be shifted to those whose basic needs have not been sated, without undue political resistance or backlash.
Enhancing basic equality in a society in which voluntary simplicity is desired is rather different from doing so in a society in which the same cause is served by coercive measures. First, the economically privileged are often those who are in power, who command political skills, or who can afford to buy support. Hence, to force them to yield significant parts of their wealth often has proven impractical, whether it is just or theoretically correct or not. Second, even if the privileged can somehow be made to yield a significant part of their wealth, such forced concessions leave in their wake strong feelings of resentment that often have led the wealthy to nullify or circumvent programs such as progressive income taxes and inheritance taxes, or to support political parties or regimes that oppose wealth reallocation.

Finally, the record shows that when people are strongly and positively motivated by nonconsumerist values and sources of satisfaction, they are less inclined to exceed their basic consumption needs and more willing to share their ‘excess’ resources. Voluntary simplicity provides a culturally fashioned expression for such inclinations and helps enforce them, and it provides a socially approved and supported lifestyle that is both psychologically sustainable and compatible with basic socioeconomic equality.

A variety of public policies, especially in Holland but also in France and Germany, seek to transfer some wealth and income from the privileged to those who do not have the resources needed to meet their basic needs has been introduced recently. A major category of such policies are those that concern the distribution of labor, especially in countries in which unemployment is high, by curbing overtime, shortening the work week, and allowing more part-time work.

Another batch of policies seeks to ensure that all members of society will have sufficient income to satisfy at least some of their basic needs, approaching the matter from the income rather than the work side. These include increases in the minimum wage, the introduction of the earned income tax credit, attempts at establishing universal health insurance, and housing allowances for the deserving poor.

In short, if voluntary simplicity is more and more extensively embraced as a combined result of changes in culture and public policies by those whose basic creature comforts have been sated, it might provide the foundations for a society that accommodates basic socioeconomic equality much more readily than societies in which conspicuous consumption is rampant.
(ENDNOTES)
1 See Frank Musgrove, Ecstasy and Holiness: Counter Culture and the Open Society (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), pp. 17–18, 40–41, 198. Musgrove notes the paradox that although the counterculture is 'marked by frugality and low consumption,' it arises specifically in wealthy societies, p.17.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 12–15.
17 John Martellaro, ‘More People Opting for a Simpler Lifestyle,’ The Plain Dealer (Kansas City), February 10, 1996, 1E.
18 ‘Boomers Would Pay To Simplify’ USA Today, November 7, 1997, 1A.
24 Elgin, Voluntary Simplicity, p.34.
25 Ibid., 51.
28 Duane Elgin, Voluntary Simplicity, 201.


Data culled by Myers and Diener, ibid., from various sources.


Ibid.


Robert E. Lane, ‘Does Money Buy Happiness?’ *Public Interest* (Fall 1993), p58.

Ibid., 56–65.


Ibid., p25.

Ibid., 26–27.


For instance, note the changes in the Labour Party in the United Kingdom and the Democratic Party in United States in the mid–1990s.