



“Summary of article by Alan Durning: A Culture of Permanence?” in *Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society*. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 361-363

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If our grandchildren are to inherit a planet as bounteous and beautiful as we have enjoyed, we in the consumer class must – without surrendering the quest for advanced, clean technology – eat, travel, and use energy and materials more like those on the middle of the world's economic ladder. If we can learn to do so, we might find ourselves happier as well. (149-150)

This paper explores the prospects for a transition to "a culture of permanence – a way of life that can endure through countless generations." (138)

Today's high-income consumers have an ethical obligation to curb their consumption, both to conserve resources for their own descendants and to create a sustainable model for middle-income and poor people to aspire to. However, lowering consumption need not deprive society of the things that really matter. The bulk of the activities that people name as their most rewarding pastimes are infinitely sustainable: religion, conversation, family and community gatherings, artistic and athletic pursuits, education, and appreciation of nature all fit readily into a culture of permanence.

Individual consumers, when informed of the environmental impact of their spending patterns, sometimes make personal efforts to simplify their lives. Several million Americans were said to be experimenting with voluntary simplicity in the 1980s. "For these practitioners, the goal is not ascetic self-denial, but a sort of unadorned grace. Some come to feel, for example, that clotheslines, window shades, and bicycles have a functional elegance that clothes dryers, air conditioners, and automobiles lack." (139) While the Seattle-based New Road Map Foundation promotes the idea of voluntary simplicity, most practitioners of voluntary simplicity move to low consumption on their own. Many find that a less hurried, low-cost lifestyle leaves them free to enjoy daily life, develop their talents, and work for causes they care about.

But, however attractive the image of simple living may appear, the majority of people cannot easily make the transition. We are trapped by inflexible work schedules, mortgages, car payments, college tuition, and the sprawling suburban infrastructure of our lives. Voluntary simplicity movements have appeared only on the fringes of society, without achieving a lasting impact on either the American mainstream or other industrial countries.

On the other hand, while consumerism has only shallow historical and philosophical roots, moderation, sufficiency, and the rejection of materialism are endorsed by all of the world's major

religious and cultural traditions. The Bible, the scripture recognized by a majority of the world's high-income consumers, asks, "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?," and tells us that it is "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Similar views of acquisitiveness, consumption, and materialism can be found in the scriptures and teachings of many other religions.

"Consumerism's roots may be shallow ... but individual action and voluntary simplicity do not appear capable of uprooting it." (145) A combination of personal and political change will be needed. Slow progress in changing attitudes will be punctuated by occasional rapid advances, as seen in the anti-smoking movement in the US and the worldwide effort to ban the use of ivory. The challenge, made urgent by the environmental impacts of consumerism, is to generate organized pressure for more rapid change.

Areas where change is most needed include laws and policies that favor consumption over leisure, and high-impact commodities over low-impact ones; the excesses of advertising and retailing (supported by the cultural dominance of commercial television); the wasteful approaches to providing food, transport, and materials in modern affluent societies; and above all, the aspects of our consumption that are wasted or unwanted in the first place. Few people want to drive long distances to work, throw away vast quantities of packaging, receive junk mail, or live in an ever-expanding suburban sprawl. Despite the ominous scale of the challenge, there are encouraging signs that many people are ready to begin saying, "enough."

The future of humanity depends on whether the richest fifth of the world's people can turn to nonmaterial sources of fulfillment, recreating human-scale settlements, eating wholesome, locally produced food, and making and using objects that endure.

In the final analysis, accepting and living by sufficiency rather than excess offers a return to what is, culturally speaking, the human home: to the ancient order of family, community, good work and good life; to a reverence for skill, creativity, and creation; to a daily cadence slow enough to let us watch the sunset and stroll by the water's edge; to communities worth spending a lifetime in; and to local places pregnant with the memories of generations. (150)