



“Summary of article by Duane Elgin: Living More Simply and Civilizational Revitalization” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 363-366

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Many critics of consumerism advocate voluntary simplicity as an alternative way of life. This selection examines the relevance of simplicity to consumption and work, and considers the material and cultural requirements for a revitalized, simplified civilization.

Simplicity that is adopted voluntarily has a very different meaning than simplicity that is forced upon people by poverty. Although a majority of the human race lives in involuntary material simplicity, this discussion focuses on the voluntary choices available to those who live in relative abundance, in part because much of the solution to poverty lies in the choices made by those who are not poor.

To simplify our consumption, we must avoid the opposite extremes of poverty and excess. Living with either too little or too much diminishes our capacity to realize our potential. Finding the right balance requires us to distinguish between our needs and our wants, satisfying the former but not the latter. "*We need* transportation. We may *want* a new Mercedes." (147) This balanced approach to consumption stands in stark contrast to the view that more consumption always increases happiness. "However, when we equate our identity with that which we consume ... we become possessed by our possessions." (149)

It is transformative to withdraw voluntarily from the rat race. It is a radical simplification to affirm that happiness cannot be purchased, and to accept our bodies as they are – without the latest clothing styles or cosmetics. Voluntary simplicity does not embody austerity and self-denial; rather, it is an aesthetic process in which each person considers whether his or her consumption fits with grace and integrity into the practical art of daily life.

Lower consumption, some fear, may lead to high unemployment. However, the world is full of purposeful, satisfying jobs waiting to be done in areas such as urban renewal, environmental restoration, education, child care, and health care. In fact, the overwhelming emphasis placed on individual consumption today results in the neglect of the kind of work that promotes public welfare. A simple, needs-oriented economy will be better able to address these urgent concerns.

Satisfying, meaningful work will make a great contribution to our individual and collective well-being, for it is through work that we develop skills, relate to others, and contribute to society. Simplicity will affect the institutional context as well as the purpose of work. Today, many people work within massive bureaucracies in both the private and public sectors. Simplicity

implies a change toward more human-sized workplaces, and redesigned organizations of a more comprehensible scale and manageable complexity. This will encourage involvement and personal responsibility, combating alienation and boredom.

AN INTEGRATED PATH FOR LIVING

Voluntary simplicity is neither remote nor unapproachable; for the fortunate minority of the world who live in relative affluence, all that is required is a conscious choice. As people begin to participate in the world in a life-sensing and life-serving manner, a self-reinforcing spiral of growth unfolds. Living more consciously leads to less identification with possessions and allows greater simplicity. A simpler, less divided and distracted life also allows for greater consciousness of individuals' ultimate purposes. Voluntary simplicity fosters both a refinement of the social and material aspects of life, and a development of the spiritual side of existence as well.

To support the evolving consciousness and promise of simpler living, both material and cultural changes will be needed. The material changes that will support an industrial society moving in a more ecological direction include:

- * Widespread energy conservation and moves toward a "soft energy path" that emphasizes solar and renewable energy sources;
- * Contraction in wasteful industries and those oriented to conspicuous consumption, combined with an expansion of the environmental industry and cultural and information-based economic activity;
- * Taxes on the wealthy, and on luxury goods, gasoline, alcohol, and cigarettes, with revenues used to provide public services and tax cuts for environmentally desirable activities;
- * Massive investments in cleaning up pollution and developing industries that minimize pollution and maximize recycling;
- * Rapid growth in crafts, hobbies, and do-it-yourself activities; and
- * Increased civic involvement through both voluntary and mandatory programs, perhaps including a year or more of national service for young people.

BREAKING THE CULTURAL HYPNOSIS OF CONSUMERISM

Changing consumption levels and patterns will require a new consciousness among millions of people, requiring dramatic changes in the consumerist messages we receive, particularly through television. The average American sees more than 25,000 commercials each year; most people watch four hours of television a day, and get most of their news from the television. Commercial television aggressively promotes high-consumption lifestyles. Television stations make their profits by delivering the largest possible audience of potential customers to corporate advertisers. Hence, they deliberately ignore the views and values of both the poor and the frugal, who spend little by necessity or by choice. By programming television for commercial success, TV broadcasters are also programming our society for ecological failure.

To revitalize our civilization, three major changes are needed in how we use television: ecologically oriented advertising to balance the onslaught of consumerist messages and encourage environmental awareness of the impacts of consumption; entertainment programming that explores ecological concerns, alternative ways of living, and innovative role models; and expanded documentaries and investigative reports describing the global challenges we now face. At present, television ensures that we are entertainment rich and knowledge poor. Yet, television discourages discussion of its role in society; "the last taboo topic on television is television itself." (206)

A revitalized, conscious democracy requires more active communication and participation, perhaps through regular "electronic town meetings" that could allow televised dialogues and rapid feedback. This should not be a vehicle for micromanagement of government, but rather a means for citizens to become involved and discover their widely shared priorities. Just as some grassroots movements have helped to renew the commitment to democracy, we now need a citizen-based "communication rights" movement that seeks fair, ecologically responsible uses of the mass media.

Just as the individual expression of voluntary simplicity is to be found in the intention of living with balance, so, too, with its social expression. A revitalizing civilization will be characterized by greater balance between material excess and material impoverishment, between huge cities and small communities, between massive corporations and smaller companies, between highly specialized work roles and more generalized work roles, and so on. The challenge is to apply our compassion, ingenuity, and tolerance in finding a middle path through life. (217-218)