

The Voluntary Simplicity Movement: A Multi-National Survey Analysis in Theoretical Context

Samuel Alexander* and Simon Ussher**

1. INTRODUCTION

The Voluntary Simplicity Movement can be understood broadly as a diverse social movement made up of people who are resisting high consumption lifestyles and who are seeking, in various ways, a lower consumption but higher quality of life alternative.¹ The Simplicity Institute recently launched a multi-national online survey for the purpose of gaining empirical insight into this 'post-consumerist' social movement. Presently 1748 participants in the movement have completed the 50-question survey and to the best of our knowledge that makes it the most extensive sociological examination of the movement available.²

This paper presents a foundational analysis of the survey results. We should note, however, that this research project is ongoing. We have no intention of closing the survey and therefore expect significantly more data to be collected in coming years, including data from new 'simple living' surveys. The survey results will be updated at regular intervals on the Simplicity Institute website (www.simplicityinstitute.org) and, in the event of any significant changes, the updated results may form the basis of further research papers. In coming years, we encourage any readers of this paper to refer to the website to ensure that the underlying data is the most recent and comprehensive available.

2. WHY EXAMINE THE VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY MOVEMENT?

Before turning to the survey and its results, we wish to provide some theoretical context to this research paper by outlining briefly and reflexively why we chose to examine the Voluntary Simplicity Movement (hereafter, the 'Simplicity Movement'). It is our contention, for reasons stated below, that the post-consumerist values and

* Samuel Alexander (primary and corresponding author), Co-Director of the Simplicity Institute. Contact: s.alexander@simplicityinstitute.org.

** Dr. Simon Ussher, Co-Director of the Simplicity Institute.

¹ See generally, Mary Grigsby, *Buying Time and Getting By: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement* (2004); Samuel Alexander (ed), *Voluntary Simplicity: The Poetic Alternative to Consumer Culture* (2009).

² One of the most prominent empirical studies of the movement in recent times has been the 'Pierce Simplicity Study.' See Linda Breen Pierce, *Choosing Simplicity: Real People Finding Peace and Fulfillment in a Complex World* (2000) (based on 211 participants, 40 of which were interviewed personally). Other prominent empirical studies include Grigsby, above n 1; Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough* (2005); Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need* (1999); and Margaret Craig-Lees and Constance Hill, 'Understanding Voluntary Simplifiers' (2002) 19(2) *Psychology & Marketing* 187. For a recent study (which acknowledges the 'lack of empirical studies' in this area), see Prem Chhetri, Robert Stimson, John Western, 'Understanding the Downshifting Phenomenon: A Case of South East Queensland, Australia' (2009) 44(4) *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 345, 346. See also the related empirical studies of 'materialism' in Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (2002); The Harwood Group, *Yearning for Balance* (1995); and the literature review in Tim Jackson, 'Motivating Sustainable Consumption: A Review of Evidence on Consumer Behaviour and Behavioural Change' (2005) Policy Studies Institute. For a very useful online resource, see RESOLVE (directed by Tim Jackson) at <<http://resolve.sustainablelifestyles.ac.uk/about-resolve>> at 5 April 2011.

practices being explored by participants in the Simplicity Movement will be a necessary part of any transition to a just, sustainable, and flourishing human civilization. Although we cannot present here the complete case for why we believe this to be so, our reasoning can be summarized as follows.

2.1. *Ecological Overshoot*

Many credible scientific studies have shown that the human economy is degrading the planet's ecosystems in ways that are unsustainable.³ The Living Planet Report 2010, for example, based on the ecological research of the Global Footprint Network, states that the global economy now exceeds by 50 per cent the regenerative and absorptive capacities of the planet.⁴ The broad scientific consensus, in short, is that human beings are consuming 'natural capital' and diminishing the capacity of Earth to support life as we know it in the future.⁵

While this is hardly news, the full implications of the ecological crisis are rarely acknowledged or understood, at least with respect to what it means for the 'Western-style' consumption practices of the global consumer class.⁶ It is clear enough that human beings need to consume *differently* and produce commodities more *efficiently*.⁷ But few people (and no governments, in the developed world, at least) are prepared to accept that attaining an ecologically sustainable global economy requires the global consumer class to consume *less*.⁸ On the contrary, the mainstream position on sustainability seems to be that economies around the world simply need to adopt 'sustainable development,' which in theory means continuing to pursue economic growth (i.e. increases in GDP per capita) while employing science and technology to produce and consume more cleanly and efficiently.⁹

³ See especially, Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: Synthesis* (2005). For more state-of-the-art environmental research, see Worldwatch Institute, <<http://www.worldwatch.org/research>> at 5 April 2011.

⁴ World Wildlife Fund (WWF), 'Living Planet Report' (2010), <http://www.footprintnetwork.org/press/LPR2010.pdf> at 10 November 2010.

⁵ On natural capital, see Thomas Prugh and Robert Costanza, *Natural Capital and Human Economic Survival* (1995); Mathis Wackernagel, 'National Natural Capital Accounting with the Ecological Footprint Concept' (1999) 29(3) *Ecological Economics* 375.

⁶ We use the phrase 'Western-style' rather than 'Western' to acknowledge that the high consumption, energy intensive lifestyles that originated in the West are practiced today in many regions of the globe, such as the growing consumer classes in nations like China, India, and Brazil. See, e.g., Hellmuth Lange and Lars Meier, *The New Middle Classes: Globalizing Lifestyles, Consumerism and Environmental Concern* (2009). For the purposes of this paper, we will refer to those living such high consumption lifestyles throughout the world as the 'global consumer class.' While this phrase obviously homogenizes a diversity of lifestyles and admits of no precise definition, we feel it nevertheless remains a coherent category of analysis and is sufficiently suggestive of a referent for immediate purposes.

⁷ See generally, Arrow Kenneth et al, 'Are We Consuming Too Much?' (2004) 18(3) *J. of Econ. Perspectives* 147, 168 (concluding that 'the need for vigorous policies to support more efficient consumption and investment choices is unambiguous').

⁸ For one of the most notable exceptions, see the works of Ted Trainer. See especially, Ted Trainer, 'The Simpler Way,' <<http://ssis.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/>> at 10 October 2010; Ted Trainer, 'The Global Perspective: The Way Out' (2010) 5(1) *Transforming Cultures* 185.

⁹ See, e.g., United Nations Development Program, 'Human Development Report' (2007/8) 15 (stating that 'One of the hardest lessons taught by climate change is that the economic model which drives growth, and the profligate consumption in rich nations that goes with it, is ecologically unsustainable. There could be no greater challenge to our assumptions about progress than that of realigning economic activities and consumption with ecological realities'). Typifying conventional responses to the environmental crisis, however, in the

This mainstream vision of how to achieve a sustainable world is coherent in theory, at best, but demonstrably it does not reflect empirical reality. Although many economies around the world are indeed getting better at producing commodities more cleanly and efficiently (a process known as ‘relative decoupling’), overall ecological impact is nevertheless *still increasing*, because every year increasing numbers of commodities are being produced, exchanged, and consumed as a result of growing economies.¹⁰ We might have more fuel-efficient cars, for example, but the rebound effect is that we are also driving more and buying more cars. This is but one example of the ‘Jevons Paradox’ that permeates market societies and beyond¹¹ – a paradox, so-called, because a per unit reduction in the throughput of commodities does not actually lead to reduced ecological impact, since those efficiency improvements are outweighed by the increasing amounts of commodities that are consumed. The obvious implication of this is that technology and efficiency improvements are not going to solve the ecological crisis, as their most optimistic advocates suggest they can – at least, not unless the global consumer class also downshifts to some significant extent from its currently unsustainably high levels of consumption.

To be clear, this is not to downplay in any way the critically important role that techno-efficiency improvements will have to play in any transition to an ecologically sustainable world. We must exploit appropriate technologies in every way we can for the good of our planet and the entire human community. But technology is at best only part of the solution to the ecological crisis (and, we must not forget, it is in many ways also a cause and catalyst). What is needed, first and foremost, is a reduction in the overall ecological impact of the human economy (i.e. ‘absolute decoupling’), and we contend that this depends primarily (though not exclusively) on individuals in the global consumer class *voluntarily consuming less stuff*. Since voluntary simplicity as a way of life generally implies ‘choosing to live on less,’¹² we see the mainstreaming of its ethos into the global consumer class as being an absolutely necessary part of any effective response to the ecological crisis.

2.2. Poverty amidst Plenty

The fact that the global economy is already in significant ecological ‘overshoot’ is even more challenging when we bear in mind that in the poorest parts of the world today great multitudes are living lives oppressed by extreme poverty.¹³ The global challenge, therefore, in terms of humanitarian justice and ecological sustainability, can be stated as follows: The human community must find a way to *raise* the material standards of living of the world’s poorest people – who surely have a right to develop their economic capacities in some form – while at the same time

next paragraph of this report it is stated that ‘it is not too late to cut green-house gas emissions without sacrificing economic growth.’

¹⁰ Reviewing the evidence on decoupling, see Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (2009) Ch 5.

¹¹ See, e.g., John Polimeni et al, *The Myth of Resource Efficiency: The Jevons Paradox* (2008); Stig-Olof Holm and Göran Englund, ‘Increased Ecoefficiency and Gross Rebound Effect: Evidence from USA and Six European countries 1960-2002’ (2009) 68(3) *Ecological Economics* 879.

¹² See generally, Cecile Andrews and Wanda Urbanska (eds), *Less is More: Embracing Simplicity for a Healthy Planet, a Caring Economy and Lasting Happiness* (2009).

¹³ See World Bank, ‘World Development Indicators: Poverty Data,’ (2008) 11 <<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/WDI08supplement1216.pdf>> at 5 September 2010.

reducing humanity's overall ecological footprint.¹⁴ We feel this provides a further and equally compelling justification for the adoption of lifestyles of reduced consumption among the global consumer class. A moral philosopher might be interested in writing a sophisticated argument along these lines, but perhaps Mahatma Gandhi just put it best when he said: 'Live simply so that others may simply live.'¹⁵ If Gandhi were alive today he would surely insist that the entire community of life, not simply the human species, ought to fall into the category of 'others.'¹⁶

2.3. Overpopulation

What exacerbates the ecological and humanitarian crises outlined above is the fact that, according to the United Nations, global human population is expected to exceed nine billion by mid-century.¹⁷ Obviously, this will intensify greatly the already intense competition over access to Earth's limited natural resources and it will put even more pressure on Earth's fragile ecosystems.¹⁸ The problem of an expanding human population, therefore, provides further support for the proposition that any transition to a just and sustainable world will need to involve the global consumer class transitioning away from high consumption lifestyles.

Needless to say, getting the global population under control in some equitable way will also be a *necessary* part of the equation. We have concerns, however, that focusing on overpopulation as the primary cause of the ecological crisis can lead to population being used as a 'scapegoat,' that is, as a means of deflecting attention away from what we see as the more substantial cause of environmental harm – namely, overconsumption by the global consumer class, particularly in the developed nations. Non-coercive measures to stabilize and reduce population worldwide should certainly be taken, such as reproductive education programs, the provision of free contraception, and the elimination of any governmental incentives to procreate, etc.; and the developed nations should do more to assist the developing nations in these matters (as well as taking the matters more seriously themselves). But it is suggested that the developed nations cannot lecture the developing nations about how expanding populations are putting immense strain on Earth's ecosystems *while at the same time indulging in ever-higher levels of consumption*. If the developed nations are serious about reducing global impact on the environment, then before looking overseas it can be argued they must first show the world that they are prepared to step more lightly themselves.

2.4. The Limitless Pursuit of Economic Growth

As well as the ecological, humanitarian, and population problems discussed above, there is also a complex macroeconomic problem that may also depend for its resolution upon more people in the global consumer class embracing lifestyles of

¹⁴ See Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers and Dennis Meadows, *Limits to Growth: The 30-year Update* (2004).

¹⁵ On Gandhi's conception of simplicity, see Mahatma Gandhi, 'The Quest for Simplicity: My Idea of Swaraj,' in Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (eds), *The Post-Development Reader* (1997) 306-7.

¹⁶ See generally, R.C. Sharma, *Gandhian Environmentalism* (2003).

¹⁷ See United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, 'World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision' (2008) <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp2008/pdf/WPP2008_Highlights.pdf> at 10 November 2010.

¹⁸ See generally, Paul Ehrlich and Anne Ehrlich, *The Population Explosion* (1990) (discussing the 'I = PAT' identity, which holds that environmental impact (I) is a product of population (P), affluence (A), and technology (T)).

reduced or restrained consumption. Every nation on the planet currently aims to grow its economy.¹⁹ This goal seems quite justifiable for the poorest nations on the planet, as noted above, where the basic material needs of most inhabitants are inadequately met. And it will become even more pressing, and the humanitarian problem even more severe, as the global population approaches 9 billion in coming decades.²⁰

If it is accepted, however, that the global economy already exceeds the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet and, further, that techno-efficiency improvements are leading to 'relative' but not 'absolute' decoupling of the economy, then this casts considerable doubt on whether economic growth is still an appropriate goal for the richest nations on the planet.²¹ Indeed, there is a vast body of literature on ecological and post-growth economics which argues forcefully that the richest nations should immediately give up the pursuit of growth and move toward a 'steady state' economy – that is, an economy that develops qualitatively but does not grow quantitatively.²² There is also an emerging body of literature on 'degrowth' which argues more radically that, due to the fact of ecological overshoot (among other reasons, such as global population growth), the richest nations will need to move through a period of *planned economic contraction* before seeking to achieve a steady state economy.²³

While we cannot enter into the intricacies of this macro-economic debate here, our position is that eventually, if not today then tomorrow, the economies of our world, starting with the richest ones, are indeed going to have to learn how to stop growing, and to stop growing in a way that is stable and deliberate, not the result of unplanned recession or ecosystemic collapse.²⁴ The great obstacle that lies in the way of a macroeconomics 'beyond growth,' however, is the dominant paradigm of growth economics that quite explicitly treats growth in GDP as the best measure of national progress and politico-economic competency.²⁵ In fact, the growth paradigm is so deeply entrenched in mainstream political discourse in the developed nations (and increasingly elsewhere) that it is hard to imagine any of the major political parties, whether on the Left or the Right, daring to pursue or even seriously consider a post-growth alternative.²⁶ In the developed world, at least, this arguably gives rise to an acute and disturbing contradiction: We must give up the pursuit of growth, but cannot.²⁷

Given the hegemony of growth economics in the political sphere, it arguably follows that any realization of a macroeconomics beyond growth will need to be driven from the grassroots up – driven, we propose, by something resembling the

¹⁹ See, e.g., Stephen Purdey, *Economic Growth, the Environment and International Relations: The Growth Paradigm* (2010).

²⁰ But see, Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (eds), *The Post-Development Reader* (1997) (warning against the imposition of 'Western-style' development on the Third World).

²¹ See Meadows et al, above n 14.

²² See, e.g., Herman Daly, *Steady State Economics* (2nd ed., 1991); Herman Daly, *Beyond Growth* (1996).

²³ See, e.g., Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth* (2009); Giorgos Kallis, 'In Defence of Degrowth' (2011) 70 *Ecological Economics* 873.

²⁴ See Jackson, *Prosperity with Growth*, above n 10. Peter Victor, *Managing with Growth: Slower but Design, not Disaster* (2008).

²⁵ Purdey, above n 19.

²⁶ See Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish* (2003).

²⁷ In response to the objection that reducing global poverty depends on growth in the developed world, see David Woodward and Andrew Simms, 'Growth Isn't Working: The Unbalanced Distribution of Benefits and Costs from Economic Growth' (2006) <<http://www.neweconomics.org/>> at 15 October 2010.

Simplicity Movement.²⁸ In other words, we are of the view that political, legal, and economic structures will never reflect a post-growth ethics of macro-economic sufficiency until a post-consumerist ethics of micro-economic sufficiency is embraced and mainstreamed at the cultural level. We are not, however, making any predications about the likelihood of this cultural shift occurring (other than noting that it is difficult to be optimistic).²⁹ We only state the hypothesis that a macro-economics beyond growth, however warranted it may be in the richest nations today, will never emerge voluntarily in those nations if their inhabitants remain driven by the aim of increasing consumption without apparent limit. The Simplicity Movement, we maintain – or something like it – will almost certainly need to expand, organize, radicalize, and politicize, if a steady-state or degrowth economy is ever to emerge through democratic processes.³⁰ Since we are convinced that some form of macroeconomics beyond growth is urgently needed in the highly developed regions of the world today, the cultural underpinnings of such a transition strike us as being a subject of considerable importance.

2.5. Peak Oil

Even if the developed nations never *choose* to question the growth imperative – which admittedly seems to be a real likelihood – the issue of ‘peak oil’ suggests that the era of growth economics is coming to an end nevertheless.³¹ The Executive Director of the Post-Carbon Institute, Asher Miller, claims that peak oil ‘almost certainly’ occurred in 2008.³² While there is still some debate about the exact date,³³ it is now widely accepted that oil production, if it has not already peaked, will peak sometime in the foreseeable future, and then, after a short plateau, enter terminal decline.³⁴ Since oil *demand* is expected to keep on rising, however, the reduction of oil *supply* will inevitably lead to sharply increasing oil prices. The issue is not that human beings will ever run out of oil, therefore; the issue is that we will soon run out of cheap oil.³⁵

This is hugely significant because oil is not just another commodity – it is the lifeblood of modern industrial civilization. If the price of oil surges, as many predict it will, no one is quite sure what will happen to the global economy that is so dependent on it. Many of the most prominent experts in the field argue that if immediate steps are not taken to mitigate the effects of peak oil, the consequences are likely to be extremely grim.³⁶ The concern is that in the absence of dedicated mitigation efforts, the end of cheap oil may induce the systemic collapse of the

²⁸ This argument is unpacked in Samuel Alexander, *Property beyond Growth: Toward a Politics of Voluntary Simplicity* (2011, forthcoming) Ch 4. An electronic copy can be downloaded from www.simplicityinstitute.org.

²⁹ But see, Ronald Inglehart et al, ‘Changing Values Among Western Publics from 1970 to 2006’ (2008) 31(1/2) *Western European Politics* 130-46 (reporting on the gradual rise in post-materialist values since 1970).

³⁰ Alexander, *Property beyond Growth*, above n 28.

³¹ See, e.g., Kenneth Deffeyes, *When Oil Peaked* (2010); Kenneth Deffeyes, *Hubbert’s Peak: The Impending World Oil Shortage* (New ed., 2008); Robert Hirsch et al, *Peaking of World Oil Production: Impacts, Mitigation, and Risk Management* (2006); Richard Heinberg, *The Party’s Over: Oil, War, and the Fate of Industrial Societies* (2006); Colin Campbell, *The Coming Oil Crisis* (2004).

³² Richard Heinberg and Daniel Lerch (eds), *The Post Carbon Reader* (2008) xiv.

³³ For a discussion, see Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependence to Local Resilience* (2008) Ch. 1.

³⁴ See generally, Heinberg and Lerch, above n 32.

³⁵ Heinberg, *The Party’s Over*, above n 31.

³⁶ See generally, above, n 31.

global economy, which, in turn, could induce the very breakdown of the social order as we know it today.³⁷ This may have all sounded a bit far-fetched once upon a time, but the recent global financial crisis has been a stark reminder of how fragile and interdependent of the global economy actually is. The world seems to be recovering (at least superficially) from the ‘credit crunch,’ but the ‘oil crunch’ may well come to tell a different story.³⁸

Again, the intricacies of this highly complex issue cannot be explored here (and we are not qualified to advise on the geophysics). Our purpose in raising the issue of peak oil is simply to highlight the fact that breaking free from industrial society’s addiction to oil will entail breaking free from high consumption lifestyles that in so many ways depend upon oil. The ‘Transition Initiatives,’ founded by Rob Hopkins, provide the most prominent example of people responding to peak oil at the grassroots level, and in their attempts to re-localize economies and become less oil-dependent those involved are in many ways exemplifying ‘simpler lives’ of reduced consumption.³⁹ This is a strong indication that, if there is to be a voluntary transition to a world beyond cheap oil, it is very likely to be informed by the post-consumerist ethos of voluntary simplicity.

Moreover, as Ted Trainer has argued, renewable energy, even if it is embraced whole-heartedly and on a global scale, will never be able to sustain the expansion of high consumption consumer lifestyles, especially with the global population growing.⁴⁰ If Trainer is correct, and he presents a powerful case, this provides further grounds for thinking that the global consumer class will need to adopt simpler lifestyles of reduced consumption in the foreseeable future. Whether this transition occurs voluntarily or is imposed by force of biophysical limits remains to be seen. It scarcely needs remarking that a voluntary transition would be the desired path.

2.6. Consumer Malaise

Finally, what makes the problems outlined above all the more troubling is the fact that high consumption lifestyles, so often held up as the peak of human development, are in many cases engendering an unexpected discontent or malaise among those who live them.⁴¹ There is in fact a mounting body of sociological and psychological evidence indicating that lives orientated around achieving high levels of consumption often result in such things as time poverty, stress, physical and mental illness, wasteful status competition, loss of community, disconnection from nature, a sense of meaninglessness or alienation in life, and general unhappiness (not to mention ecological degradation).⁴²

This evidence, however, troubling though it is, arguably provides something of a silver lining to the admittedly gloomy problems outlined above. If high consumption lifestyles are not even a trustworthy path to personal wellbeing, this

³⁷ See, e.g., Matthew Simmons, *Twilight in the Desert: The Coming Saudi Oil Shock and the World Economy* (2006).

³⁸ For a discussion of several future scenarios, see David Holmgren, *Future Scenarios: How Communities can Adapt to Peak Oil and Climate Change* (2009).

³⁹ Hopkins, above n 33.

⁴⁰ Ted Trainer, *Renewable Energy cannot Sustain a Consumer Society* (2007).

⁴¹ See generally, Robert Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Societies* (2000); David Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (2000). Gavan McCormack, *The Emptiness of Japanese Affluence* (Revised ed., 2001); Robert Frank, *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess* (1999); Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000); Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger* (2009).

⁴² See especially, Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (2002).

raises the tantalizing possibility that members of the global consumer class could live more fulfilling and meaningful lives by *reducing* their consumption (while at the same time reducing their ecological footprint, reducing their dependence on oil, and leaving more resources for those in greater need).⁴³ Determining whether this possibility is a romantic myth or an emerging empirical reality is another factor that motivated our examination of the Simplicity Movement.

2.7 The Coherency of Voluntary Simplicity as a Holistic Response

When considering the six problems outlined above – especially when considering them together and their interrelatedness – we are driven by force of reason and evidence to conclude as follows: any effective response to the problems outlined above must accept the critical role the global consumer class will have to play in consuming not just differently and more efficiently, but *less*.⁴⁴ Difficult though it will be for some to accept, we do not see how this broad conclusion can be escaped, although we accept that more elaborate arguments (which space precludes us from unpacking here) will be needed to convince some readers.⁴⁵ Our purpose has been to state a position, not comprehensively defend it.

If we are correct, however, that post-consumerist lifestyles of reduced and restrained consumption will indeed be a necessary part of any transition to a just, sustainable, and flourishing human civilization, then gaining some extensive empirical insight into the contemporary Simplicity Movement is a matter of some importance. It is important that we understand who the participants are, how they are living, and what motivates them, as well as what prospects the movement has for expanding into the mainstream and engendering significant social, economic, and political change. Furthermore, by acquiring a better understanding of what *challenges* participants in the contemporary Simplicity Movement face, governments, NGOs, and think-tanks, etc., will be better able to develop appropriate and effective policy proposals for the purpose of transcending high consumption lifestyles and facilitating the transition to lower consumption but higher quality of life alternatives. Primarily for these reasons, we created the online ‘simple living’ survey with the aim of acquiring some of the information needed to answer these important questions.

3. THE ‘SIMPLE LIVING’ SURVEY

3.1. Outline of Content and Method

In the broadest terms, the survey was designed to gain some empirical insight into the lives of people who are choosing to move away from high consumption lifestyles and who are embracing lifestyles of reduced or restrained income and consumption. In its preamble the survey states that it seeks participants who are living a ‘simpler life,’ which is defined as a lifestyle of ‘reduced or restrained income, consumption, and / or working hours.’⁴⁶ We felt this definition was precise enough

⁴³ Tim Jackson, ‘Live Better by Consuming Less? Is There a “Double Dividend” in Sustainable Consumption?’ (2005) 9(1-2) *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 19.

⁴⁴ Contrast this with UNEP, ‘Changing Consumption Patterns’ (1999) 22(4) *Industry and Environment* (Special Issue, Oct-Dec) (stating that ‘Sustainable consumption is not about consuming less, it is about consuming differently, consuming efficiently, and having an improved quality of life’).

⁴⁵ See also, Thomas Princen, *The Logic of Sufficiency* (2005).

⁴⁶ We include voluntarily reduced working hours as one manifestation of ‘simpler living’ because it can generally be understood as a preference for time over income / consumption,

to create a coherent body of participants and yet broad enough to include a diversity of 'simpler' lifestyles. By allowing for some diversity, fewer preconceptions were imposed on the Simplicity Movement by definitional fiat. Parents who had reduced or stopped paid employment to care for children, and students, were asked to fill out the survey only if they considered their simpler lifestyle (as defined above) was a *long-term* way of life. It was also made clear that the survey was not intended for people who were *involuntarily* living simply.

The survey was launched with 50 questions.⁴⁷ The survey begins with demographic questions and moves onto questions of lifestyle, behavior, values, and motivations. There are also questions relating to happiness, income, community, and politics. The survey closes with some open text questions where participants are asked to comment on what they find best about living simply, what challenges they face in doing so, and what steps they think government could take to better support simple living.⁴⁸ The final question just provides a space for further comments.

Once the survey was created, the next task was to get as many participants as possible. We began by seeking promotion of the survey by contacting every website or blog related to simple living, voluntary simplicity, downshifting, etc., on the assumption that many people living simply (according to our definition stated above) would be interested in and likely to browse those online resources. We then contacted academics, educators, and activists who are involved in the Simplicity Movement (or involved in closely related subjects such as sustainable consumption) and asked them to promote the survey to relevant networks. We had a very positive response and soon we had a steady flow of participants.⁴⁹

4. OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

Below we will outline and provide a preliminary analysis of the most significant findings of the survey results as they currently stand. Before doing so, however, we will provide an overview of the results pertaining to, first, demographics, and second, the practice of simplicity. Some of these background points will come as little surprise to those familiar with the Simplicity Movement, but it is nevertheless useful to have an extensive empirical basis now for what may otherwise have been an empirically unverified (or weakly verified) preconception.

a preference which in many ways is central to the Simplicity Movement. See generally, John de Graaf (ed), *Take Back Your Time* (2003).

⁴⁷ The survey, however, is an evolving document. The original questions will not be amended, of course, to ensure comparability of results. But as the focus of our inquiry evolves new questions may be added. Presently the survey sits at 52 questions, meaning that not all participants answered the two additional questions. When it comes to analyzing the additional questions, we will state the number of participants who have answered it.

⁴⁸ It is inevitable in surveys such as this that some will find that the nuances of their personal situation are not always captured by the questions posed or the options provided as answers. We tried to ameliorate this problem by providing several open text boxes throughout the survey to allow for more nuanced responses when we thought there may be a particular need.

⁴⁹ Although a 'control' sample would maximize the usefulness of some of the survey results, the results in themselves remain highly useful and suggestive. We note also that statistics on populations at large are available already in many cases, thus making a control sample unnecessary in such circumstances. For example, our survey inquired into the level of formal education of the participants, and while this is of interest in itself, statistics on the formal education of a nation or region are generally available, which means a control sample, as such, is not always needed to give the survey results some broader social context. At the same time, we hope to conduct a formal control survey in the future.

4.1. Demographics

The participants in the survey came from all around the world, but primarily from the developed regions of the world. Of the first 1748 participants, 748 were from North America, 640 were from Australia, 127 were from the UK; 73 were from Western Europe (excluding the UK); 69 were from New Zealand; 2 were from Japan; and 89 were from 'other' parts of the globe. Since we are primarily interested (at least presently) in how people are living simply in the most developed regions of the world, the analysis below excludes all those participants who answered 'other.' In the future, however, we hope to broaden or refocus the analysis to include those participants. We also excluded participants who stated that voluntary simplicity was not a long-term lifestyle decision for them. We did this because we are interested primarily in voluntary simplicity as a 'way of life,' not a temporary engagement. This means that the analysis below is based on the answers provided by 1615 participants.

In terms of more specific geographic locality, 26% of participants lived in large cities (over 500,001 people); 19% lived in medium sized cities (between 100,000 and 500,000 people); 16% lived in small cities (between 15,001 and 99,999 people); 17% lived in small towns (under 15,000 people); and 22% lived rurally (i.e. non-urban or farm). This dispels the myth that simple living is the reserve of those who live rurally. In an increasingly urbanized world, it is promising to see the Simplicity Movement existing predominantly in cities, for if it only manifested as a predominantly rural lifestyle, it would probably lose any prospect of impacting significantly on mainstream, urbanized culture.

With respect to other demographics, the participants fell into all age brackets, with nothing particularly noteworthy about the distribution. 70% were married or in a de facto relationship; and 70% owned their own home. 41% had no children, 40% had one or two children; and 19% had three or more. In terms of annual household income (converted into US dollars), there was also a significant range. 18% of households lived on less than \$20,000 per annum; 17% of households had an annual income that fell between \$20,001-\$35,000; 28% fell between \$35,001-\$60,000; 25% fell between \$60,000-\$100,000; and 13% were over \$100,000.

Obviously, much more detailed analyses of income could be provided if we isolated the participants into regions of the world and compared their incomes with national medians. For now, however, we just wish to make two brief points. First, when the entire sample is compared to the median household incomes in the various parts of the developed world,⁵⁰ there seems to be nothing overtly 'radical' (in the sense of 'radically low') about these income statistics, generally speaking. While a significant number of participants were in fact living on well below (sometimes radically below) median household incomes, the data also confirms that many participants in the Simplicity Movement remain in the mainstream when it comes to income. How that income is spent, however, is a separate issue, one considered further in later sections.

The second point about income is that 67% of participants acknowledged that they had *reduced* their incomes from what they had been in the past. This confirms that the Simplicity Movement generally represents a movement of people who are moving toward lifestyles of reduced and restrained income and consumption. And while not all participants have downshifted radically in terms of income, downshifting itself is the *trend* that we feel is of the utmost significance (for reasons outlined in Section 2). The objection that the Simplicity Movement is insufficiently radical is certainly one that the movement must address. Perhaps

⁵⁰ See generally, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Median_household_income#cite_note-UK_Parliament_question-8> (where nation-specific statistics and references are cited).

voluntary simplifiers ought to be downshifting further and faster. Perhaps the structure of society makes more radical steps extremely challenging, meaning that governments may need to play a role in facilitating simpler lifestyles. These are extremely important issues to consider.⁵¹ For now, however, suffice it to say that the Simplicity Movement can be understood to be *moving toward* lifestyles of reduced income and consumption and therefore it represents, at the very least, a movement of considerable promise and potential. This transitional lifestyle is also reflected in the fact that participants on average seem to be working notably shorter hours than the social norm, suggesting, among other things, an unusually high preference for time over money.⁵²

In terms of formal education, 51% had completed a tertiary degree and a further 30% had completed a post-graduate degree. Like most of the demographic information outlined above, we could compare these results to national averages to provide a greater sense of social context. If we take only the Australian participants, for example – approximately 77% of whom had a tertiary degree or higher – and compare that figure with the national average of 36%⁵³ – it becomes apparent that participants in the Simplicity Movement have a much higher than usual level of tertiary education; although it is equally clear, of course, that tertiary education is by no means a prerequisite to living simply.

The question of gender illustrated that more women than men completed the survey, however other studies have found no imbalance between the genders or a slight tilt the other way.⁵⁴ Whatever the case may be, there is no reason to think that voluntary simplicity is more relevant to one gender than the other.

4.2. *Some Characteristics of the Practice of Simplicity*

The issue of how participants are actually practicing simplicity is obviously complex and could never be captured completely in a 50-question survey. But the survey results do provide some interesting insights. In terms of participants taking action for the purpose of living more simply, the results show that 38% changed jobs or careers; 48% reduced working hours; 15% moved city or suburb; 21% moved house; 23% moved rurally; and 21% sold or changed their car. Furthermore, when asked whether they took steps to reduce household energy consumption, 48% said they did so ‘at every opportunity;’ 40% did so ‘often’ and 12% did so ‘sometimes;’ with less than 1% saying they did ‘not often’ do so.

The values of frugality (defined as minimizing expenditure) and minimalism (defined as valuing fewer possessions) also proved to be a part of most people’s practice of simple living. For example, 51% said that minimizing expenditure plays a ‘large part’ in their practice of simple living, while 36% said that it plays a ‘moderate part.’ 13% said that it plays only a ‘small part’ or that it was ‘not particularly’ important. In the comments box, however, many people also acknowledged in various ways that ‘it is more about where and what the money is spent on’ that just being frugal, or that they were prepared to spend extra for ‘long-

⁵¹ See generally, Tim Jackson (ed), *Sustainable Consumption* (2005); Thomas Princen et al, *Confronting Consumption* (2002).

⁵² For example, 28.7% of full-time workers in Australia work 50 hours per week or more, whereas only 1% of Australian participants in our survey do so. See Australian Conservation Foundation, *Better than Growth* (2010) 11.

⁵³ See UNESCO Institute for Statistics, *Global Education Digest* (2010) 231 available at <http://www.uis.unesco.org/template/pdf/ged/2010/GED_2010_EN.pdf 231> at 10 April 2011.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., Schor, above n 2, 113 (reporting a gender balance). But see Hamilton and Denniss, above n 2, at 152 (reporting that ‘men are a little more likely to downshift than women’).

lasting quality items.' Others noted that purchasing things like 'land,' 'solar panels,' 'water tanks,' 'tools,' and 'carbon offsets,' while part of living simply for them, were expensive. As one participant put it, 'buying locally and ecologically [is] more important than minimizing expenditure,' a point to which we will return.

In terms of possessions, many also acknowledged that while decluttering life can secure 'the energy to focus on what is important,' its 'the type of possessions' that matters most and the 'attitude' one has toward them, 'not the number.' Several also commented on the pleasure they derived from things they had made, purchased second-hand, or salvaged. It would seem, then, that the 'simple' values of frugality and minimalism resist simplistic interpretation. For example, it is clearly not enough to say that voluntary simplicity 'just means spending less,' even though spending less is often considered an important part of it.

Home food production also plays an important role in living simply. 84% of participants grow some of their own fruit and / or vegetables, with 18% saying they grow more than half of what they eat. This provides some evidence for the conception of the Simplicity Movement as a 'local food' movement, one that values self-sufficiency and self-reliance. It also provides some evidence for the view that the Simplicity Movement operates in many ways 'outside' the formal marketplace. This is ratified by the finding that 36% of participants are involved in barter or 'informal' exchange systems (e.g. food swaps, LETS, etc.). In terms of diet, 10% said they eat a typical diet (e.g. most foods) while 63% said that they emphasized fresh and unprocessed foods. 10% eat fish but are otherwise vegetarian; 13% are vegetarian and 4% are vegan.

When travelling locally (i.e. defined as within 5km), 51% of participants noted that they would bike or walk and 8% would take public transport. 41% would usually drive. This question prompted a large amount of comments to be left, with many people noting that they were often required to drive due to such things as 'harsh winters,' 'rural living,' 'health conditions,' or 'lack of public transport.' Others noted that they drove a 'hybrid car' or that when they drove locally they would plan to do 'everything in one trip,' 'carpool,' or even 'hitch hike.' These comments and others suggest that many participants desire to escape the car culture, but for various reasons find it difficult or impossible to do so.

With respect to clothing, 51% say that living simply 'significantly' affects their clothing choices (e.g. wearing second-hand, homemade, or repaired clothing); 44% say that it affects their choices moderately or mildly; and only 5% say that it doesn't affect their clothing choices at all. As for recycling, 82% say that they do so 'at every opportunity,' with 13% saying that they recycle 'usually.' 4% say that they recycle occasionally and 1% say they 'almost never' recycle. 78% of participants compost.

We can also report on a few miscellaneous points that may be of some interest. 68% of participants are involved in a community organization. While only 4% presently live in an eco-village or co-housing arrangement, 30% said that they would like to and 26% said that they would not. 40% were not sure. When asked how they would describe their connection with nature, 2% said it is 'weak,' with 25% saying their connection is 'moderate' and 50% saying it is 'strong.' 23% chose to describe their connection as 'spiritual'. Staying on the subject of spirituality, but more generally, 52% say that spiritual practice of some sort is a regular part of life.

The survey results also dispel any conception of the Simplicity Movement as a movement of luddites, with 80% stating that advanced technology has a role to play in living simply. Our final background points are that 88% of participants had heard of the terms 'voluntary simplicity' or 'downshifting' and when asked whether 'simple living' was a part of their upbringing, 43% noted that it was.

5. A STATEMENT AND PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE CENTRAL FINDINGS

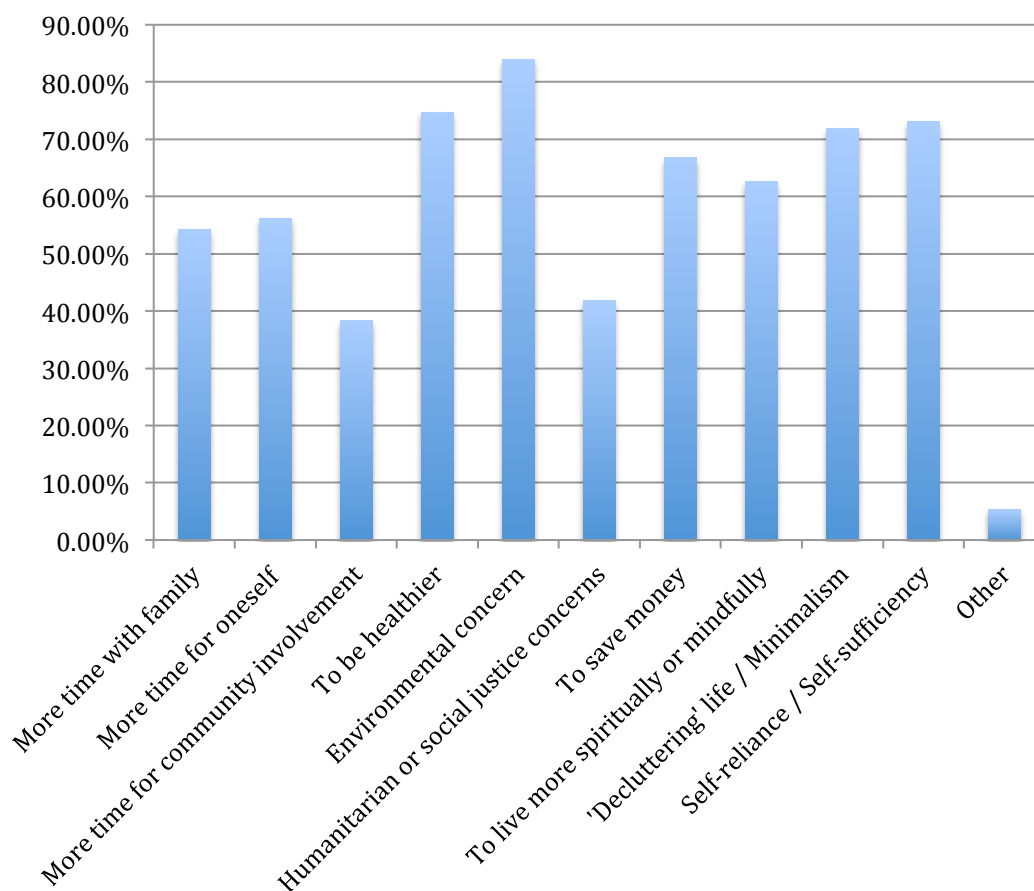
With the background information outlined, we will now state and offer a preliminary analysis of what we consider to be the central findings of the survey. Each of the following points raise issues which could develop into papers in their own right, but for present purposes our task primarily will be one of exposition.

5.1. Diversity of Motivations

The Simplicity Movement is sometimes described, occasionally even by its advocates, as a 'leisure expansion movement.'⁵⁵ The criticism sometimes implicit in this description is that voluntary simplicity is a self-centered, narrowly hedonistic philosophy of life. While it may well be that a life of voluntary simplicity is merely a means to greater leisure *for some*, the results of our survey demonstrate that the Simplicity Movement is comprised of people who are motivated by a diversity of issues – not simply leisure expansion or personal happiness.

Figure 1 (below) illustrates the results regarding what motivates people to live simply. Participants were provided with an array of options (see x axis) – including an 'other' option with a text box available for comments – and were asked to select all that applied to them (with the percentage of participants who selected each motivation noted on the y axis).

Figure 1. Percentage of Participants Listing Specific Motivations For Living Simply



⁵⁵ Jerome Segal, *Graceful Simplicity: Toward a Philosophy and Politics of the Alternative American Dream* (1st ed, 1999) 13.

While this particular inquiry did not seek to evaluate the *relative importance* given to each of these motivations, the broad range of issues motivating participants nevertheless illustrate that the Simplicity Movement cannot be fairly pigeon-holed as a movement driven by a single issue or small range of issues. While many are motivated by the desire for more time (e.g. with family and / or for oneself), it is clear that many are also motivated by more 'outward looking' or 'ethically based' factors (e.g. environmental concern, humanitarian or social justice, and / or community involvement). The participants who answered 'other' to this question on motives provided many more nuanced answers – such as 'more time for music / art,' 'creativity,' 'religion,' 'to share wealth,' 'to pay off debts,' etc. – but essentially all these 'other' comments could have been included in one of the broader categories stated above. A separate question also asked whether participants were motivated by the notion of 'peak oil': 63% said that they were; 21% said that they were not; and 16% said that they were not aware of the issue.⁵⁶

Once it is acknowledged that the Simplicity Movement is motivated by diverse array of issues (including 'ethically based' ones), the fact that simpler lifestyles can also be described as a means to 'leisure expansion' or as a form of 'alternative hedonism' (i.e. low consumption pleasure seeking),⁵⁷ seems to provide not grounds for criticism but further support for the Simplicity Movement.

5.2. *Happiness*

The survey also inquired into whether participants in the Simplicity Movement were happier now that they were living more simply. This question was aimed at participants who had once lived less simply but who had made a transition toward a simpler life, so an option was needed for participants to answer 'not applicable' if they had always lived a simple life. 11% indicated that this was so.

Of those who *were* living more simply than they once had – the remaining 89% of participants – the results overwhelmingly showed that the transition toward a simpler life increased happiness. Overall, 87% reported that they were happier living more simply. More specifically, 45% said they were 'much happier' and 42% said they were 'somewhat happier.' 13% said that they were 'about as happy' as they were previously. Quite remarkably, only an insignificant amount (0.2%) said that they were 'less happy.'

These results are potentially important because they indicate that there is a 'double dividend' that flows from living simply (or even a 'triple' or 'quadruple' dividend, etc.).⁵⁸ That is to say, the results suggest that the arguments for simpler living based on environmental, humanitarian, population, limits to economic growth, and peak oil concerns, etc., are supported also by an argument based on increased happiness. People have a reason to live simply for their own sakes, the evidence suggests, but by doing so, it may be inferred, they are also likely to benefit others and the planet. If this is indeed so, it is extremely good news.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ The question on 'peak oil' is one of the additional questions added a week or so after the launch. 808 participants answered it.

⁵⁷ Kate Soper, 'Alternative Hedonism, Cultural Theory and the Role of Aesthetic Revisioning' (2008) 22(5) *Cultural Studies* 567.

⁵⁸ Tim Jackson, 'Live Better by Consuming Less? Is There a "Double Dividend" in Sustainable Consumption?' (2005) 9(1/2) *J. of Industrial Ecology* 19.

⁵⁹ For further supporting evidence, see Kirk Brown and Tim Kasser, 'Are Psychological and Ecological Well-being Compatible? The Role of Values, Mindfulness, and Lifestyle' (2005) 74(2) *Social Indicators Research* 349; Jeffrey Jacob, Emily Jovic and Merlin Brinkerhoff, 'Personal and Planetary Well-being: Mindfulness Meditation, Pro-environmental Behavior and Personal Quality of Life in a Survey from the Social Justice and Ecological Sustainability

Of course, these results do not ‘prove’ that living simply will make a person happier. But they do show that the overwhelming majority of participants in this extensive study are notably happier for living more simply. And this suggests that simpler living provides a viable and desirable alternative to higher consumption lifestyles – an alternative that those in the global consumer class may find that it is in their interest to explore also. Furthermore, if increasing amounts of people come to see simpler living as being a path to increased personal happiness, and those people actually begin exploring lifestyles of voluntary simplicity en masse, this may well put pressure on governments to do more to support the transition. Should such a cultural shift ever occur, we would surely find ourselves living in a very different world.⁶⁰

One need not subscribe to any Hobbesian conception of human nature to acknowledge that the promise of increased personal happiness may be more effective in changing people’s behavior than moral or ethical arguments based on such things as planetary harm or human suffering in distant countries. This is not to say that the moral or ethical arguments should not be made, of course. It is only to say that if behavior change is what matters – reducing consumption, for example – one might want to focus on the arguments that will be most persuasive, which, in terms of reasons to live more simply, could be that doing so may well increase personal happiness.

5.3. *Voting with Money*

The idea that how a person spends their money is how they vote on what exists in the world is often held up as one of the central tenets of the practice of simplicity, in market societies, at least.⁶¹ Our results seem to confirm this, although they also confirm that there remains room for participants in the Simplicity Movement to take greater efforts to spend their money in socially or ecologically conscientious ways. When asked how often participants directed their expenditure toward organic, local, fair-trade, or ‘green’ products, 31% said ‘almost always’ and 44% said ‘often.’ 21% said they ‘sometimes’ would do so and only 4% said they would ‘not often’ do so. With respect to the specific question of energy consumption, 60% obtain all or some of their energy from renewable sources, with 18% of participants producing some of their own energy at their homes (e.g. solar). A control sample would enhance the meaning of these figures, but we can say, with respect to the question of energy consumption, at least, that participants in the Simplicity Movement seem to use their powers of expenditure to ‘vote for renewable energy’ to a much higher degree than the social norm.⁶² This is in line

Movement’ (2009) 93(2) *Social Indicators Research* 275; Jeffery Jacob and Merlin Brinkerhoff, ‘Mindfulness and Subjective Well-Being in the Sustainability Movement: A Further Elaboration of Multiple Discrepancy Theory’ (1999) 46 *Social Indicators Research* 341; Hamilton and Dennis, above n 2, Ch. 10.

⁶⁰ See Samuel Alexander, ‘Looking Backward from the Year 2099: Ecozoic Reflections on the Future,’ in Center for Earth Jurisprudence (ed), *Continuing the Great Work: A Tribute to Thomas Berry’s Contribution to Earth Jurisprudence* (2011, forthcoming).

⁶¹ See especially, Joseph Dominguez and Vicki Robin, *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming your Relationship with Money and Achieving Financial Independence* (New ed, 1999).

⁶² For data on renewable energy use in Australia, see Australian Bureau of Statistics, at <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features80March%202009> at 10 April 2011 (reporting that 8% of energy used by households in Australia was renewable). Our results show that 16% of Australian participants purchase 100 percent renewable energy; 37% purchase partially renewable energy; and 33% produce some or all of their own renewable energy. Overall, 73% of Australians in our survey obtain at least some of their energy from renewable sources.

with the earlier findings that environmental concern is a leading motivation among participants in the Simplicity Movement.

Arguably the most interesting thing about these results is what they imply about the potential impact the Simplicity Movement could have on the world if it expanded into the mainstream and radicalized. Imagine, for example, if the greater part of an entire nation ‘almost always’ or ‘often’ directed their money toward organic, local, fair-trade, and ‘green’ products. Soon enough the world would look very different. Purchasing something sends a message, consciously or unconsciously, to the marketplace, affirming the product, its social or ecological impact, its process of manufacture, etc. And when the demand for goods increases or decreases the supply tends to increase or decrease proportionately. This implies that the global consumer class, with its vast powers of expenditure, has the potential to become a non-violent revolutionary class and change the world, simply by changing its spending habits.⁶³ Consumer expenditure, it cannot be denied, has enormous transformative power.⁶⁴

As well as ‘voting with their money,’ our research provides some grounds for thinking that participants in the Simplicity Movement are also ‘voting with their time’ in ways that differ from the general population. Research has shown that in North America and Britain, at least, the activity to which people dedicate most of their time (aside from working and sleeping) is watching television.⁶⁵ While people should be generally free to spend their leisure as they see fit, one may nevertheless feel entitled to question whether watching television is the best way to spend the freedoms that the bloody march of history has fought to secure.⁶⁶ Indeed, it seems to be a question that many participants in the Simplicity Movement are asking themselves. 19% say that they watch no television at all, with 12% saying that they watch less than one hour per week and a further 28% saying that they watch between 1 and 4 hours per week. While our research does not indicate how those in the Simplicity Movement *do* spend the time, we think these results are interesting in themselves for showing that there is significant *difference* in leisure activities.⁶⁷

Whenever people talk critically about the amount of time an individual or nation spends watching television, this always seems to raise the specter of ‘elitism’ or provokes knee-jerk accusations of ‘being judgmental.’ While we are wary of this charge, and acknowledge the legitimate concerns it raises, it seems to us that how a culture spends its leisure – its freedom – provides an extremely pertinent insight into the nature of that culture. Accordingly, it should not be deemed a subject ‘off limits’ to critical inquiry.

5.4. *Greatest Obstacles*

One of our leading motivations in conducting the ‘simple living’ survey under analysis was to gain some empirical insight into what were the greatest obstacles people faced when trying to live simply. We feel such information will be critically

⁶³ See, e.g., Michele Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action* (2010).

⁶⁴ This thesis, of course, is a double-edged sword, since there are just as many reasons to think that the power of money is going to do everything within its power to *maintain* the status quo, not subvert it. See, e.g., Joo-Cheong Tham, *Money and Politics: The Democracy We Can't Afford* (2010).

⁶⁵ See Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (2005) 86 (noting that the typical Briton and American watch television for roughly 25 hours per week).

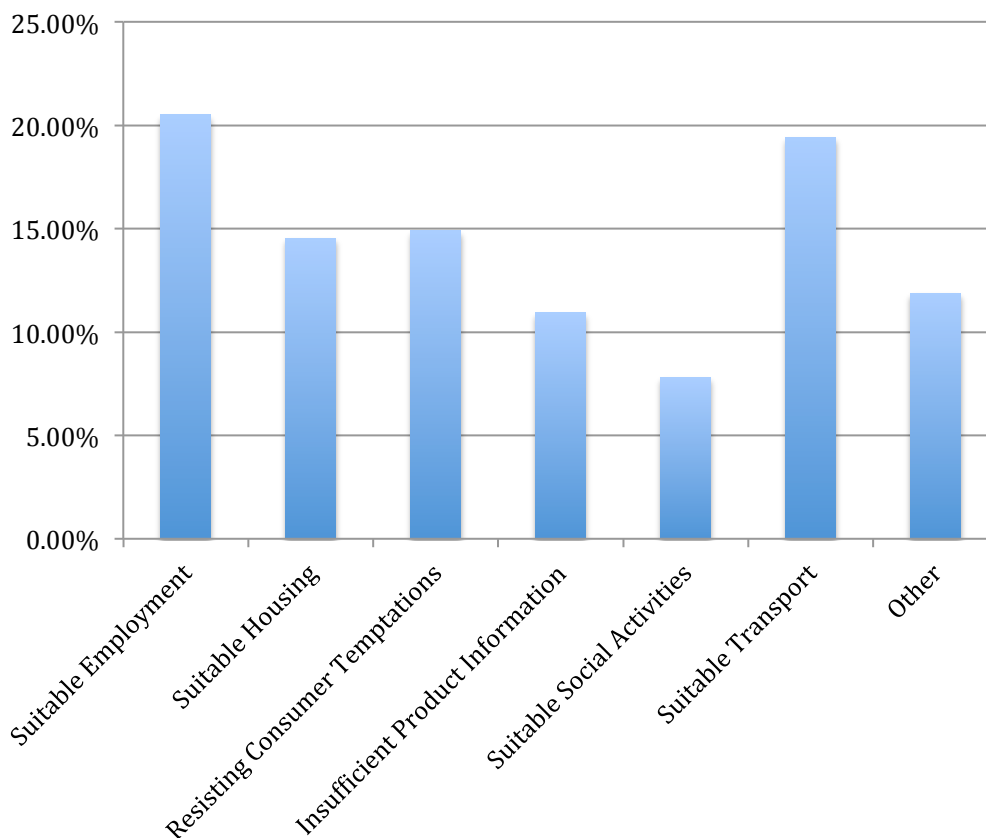
⁶⁶ See Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (2001) 158-177.

⁶⁷ As noted above, however, 68% of participants are involved in a community organization of some sort, suggesting that at least some of their time is dedicated to such activities.

important should policy makers ever decide they will try to reduce overall national consumption practices by promoting and facilitating the emergence of 'simpler' lifestyles.

Participants were asked what was the *greatest* obstacle they faced in trying to live simply, and Figure 2 (below) illustrates the results.

Figure 2. Greatest Obstacle to Living Simply vs Percentage of Participants



Those who selected 'other' left comments highlighting a wide variety of other obstacles. We will not try to list them comprehensively here, but some of the recurring points included having family members (e.g. spouse) with a different worldview; health or disability issues; paying for education; and the expense of 'green' consumer products (e.g. solar panels, organic food, etc.). Since only 12% answered 'other,' however, it can be inferred that the six obstacles suggested by the survey quite accurately expose some of the greatest challenges people face living simply. This finding in itself should provide some guidance to policy makers who wish to lessen the obstacles people face when trying to live more simply.

For example, many people reported that they find 'the lack of information needed to buy responsibly' as their greatest challenge to living simply, and this suggests that a politics of simple living would involve increasing the mandatory information on product labels. To provide a second example, the fact that many people find 'resisting consumer temptations' a great obstacle suggests that a politics of simple living might involve taking steps to reduce people's exposure to advertising. We will not, however, try to unpack the details of a politics of simple living here; nor do we suggest that devising policies to help people overcome the obstacles to simple living will be 'simple.' Indeed, it may well be that background structural issues (tax policies, state subsidies, public investment, banking systems,

property law, international law, etc.) need to be reformed before the structure of society could facilitate the expansion of the Simplicity Movement.⁶⁸ But the information provided by participants about their greatest obstacles to simply living certainly provides a good place to start thinking about the question of what a politics of simple living would look like.⁶⁹

One point that deserves further comment is the issue of finding employment that suits one's values and lifestyles requirements. As seen from Figure 2, more participants highlighted this as their greatest obstacle to simple living than any other. Exactly how this obstacle can be overcome raises some extremely complex issues that, again, cannot be explored in any detail here. But there is one aspect to the problem that is particularly important; namely, how to address the structural biases in modern capitalist societies that function systematically to promote overwork.⁷⁰ For present purposes a few words will have to suffice to outline this problem, explain its relation to the Simplicity Movement, and outline the prospects of a policy solution.

Economic theory posits that actors in an economy should be free to maximize their happiness (or 'utility') by selling as much or as little of their time (or 'labor power') as they want.⁷¹ Currently, however, there are structural biases in advanced capitalist societies that function to promote overwork (i.e. working hours that are not 'optimal' or 'utility maximizing'), such as laws that treat the 40-hour work week as 'standard' or which exclude part-time workers from many of the non-pecuniary benefits enjoyed by those who work full-time.⁷² The effect of these structural biases is essentially to force or coerce many people to work longer hours than they want or need to, which gives rise to cultures that tend to over-consume resources and under-consume leisure.⁷³ This might lead to higher GDP per capita, but at the cost of quality of life and planetary health.⁷⁴

The problem of structural biases promoting overwork is one that our survey suggests participants in the Simplicity Movement are confronting in significant numbers. 56% report that if they could, they would reduce their current paid working hours and accept a proportionate reduction in income. This is not, however, a problem faced only by participants in the Simplicity Movement. It is a problem endemic to many modern market societies and may be a significant structural barrier inhibiting the expansion of the Simplicity Movement.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ See Alexander, *Property beyond Growth*, above n 28.

⁶⁹ Politicizing voluntary simplicity might strike some as paradoxical, in the sense that anything mandated by law does not sound very 'voluntary.' But the argument is not that simplicity of living should be *imposed* on people, but that simplicity, rather than consumerism, should be systematically privileged, supported, and encouraged when making decisions about how to structure a society (especially over-consuming societies).

⁷⁰ See generally, John de Graaf (ed), *Take Back Your Time* (2003).

⁷¹ See generally, Jean Kimmel and Emily Hoffman, *The Economics of Work and Family* (2002); Tim Robinson, *Work, Leisure, and the Environment: The Vicious Circle of Overwork and Overconsumption* (2009).

⁷² See Lyle Grant, 'Sustainability: From Excess to Aesthetics' (2010) 19 *Behavior and Social Issues* 5 (noting that 'one impediment to reducing working hours is that employment in industrialized countries is mainly offered on a full-time 40-hour/week basis or not at all).

⁷³ Robinson, above n 71.

⁷⁴ Anders Hayden, *Sharing the Work, Sparing the Planet: Work Time, Consumption, and Ecology* (1999).

⁷⁵ For example, as noted above, 28.7% of full-time workers in Australia work 50 hours per week or more. Of these workers, 46% claimed they would prefer to work fewer hours, accepting a drop in pay. See Australian Conservation Foundation, *Better than Growth* (2010) 11.

One way to respond to this issue would be to introduce a shorter 'standard' work week (such as the 35-hour work week that exists in France);⁷⁶ another option would be to ensure that part-time workers enjoy the same non-pecuniary benefits that full-time workers receive (on a pro-rata basis). We feel these are policy reforms that deserve serious attention. Perhaps more importantly still, however, is the policy response that has taken hold in Holland in the form of the *Hours Adjustment Act 2000*. This path-breaking act allows employees to reduce their hours to part-time simply by asking their employers. As explained by leading work reductionist, John de Graaf:

Unless there is a clear hardship for the firm – something shown in less than 5% of cases – the employer must grant the reduction in hours. Workers keep the same hourly salary, full health-care, and pro-rata additional benefits like vacation time and pensions. This law, in the most concrete terms, allows workers to trade money for time, without losing their jobs or healthcare. As a result, more than a third of Dutch employees work part-time, the highest ration in the world.⁷⁷

Some may object that industrial relations policies such as this will not maximize GDP per capita. But that is to miss the point. The point of an economy, arguably, is to efficiently promote quality of life for all, and if a smaller economy promotes quality of life by providing increased leisure but less income and consumption for its participants, then a smaller economy is the most economically rational option to choose. In a word, this is the rationality of degrowth.⁷⁸ In many ways, it would also seem to be implicit to a politics of simple living.

5.5. *An Emerging Group Consciousness and Political Sensibility*

For present purposes, the final empirical insight to report on that we feel is of some significance – that we feel might be of the most significance – concerns what seems to be an emerging 'group consciousness' and political sensibility among participants in the Simplicity Movement. Often in the literature on voluntary simplicity the movement is criticized for being 'escapist' or 'apolitical,' a criticism that arguably has some weight, so far as it is true. Mary Grisby, for example, one of the more prominent sociologists on voluntary simplicity, reports that in her experience participants in the Simplicity Movement 'don't generally talk about policy initiatives, instead focusing on the individual as the primary mechanism for change.'⁷⁹ In line with the conventional view, this characterizes the Simplicity Movement as a movement of people who are seeking to 'escape' the system at a personal level, rather than 'transform' it at a collective level.

Our results put this conventional view into question. To begin with, 69% of participants state that they conceive of themselves as part of a 'simple living' movement.⁸⁰ This is significant because before a social movement can ever act collectively for a social or political purpose – that is, before it can organize and mobilize to advance some collective aims – the participants arguably have to

⁷⁶ New Economics Foundation, *21 Hours: Why a 21-Hour Work Week can Help Us All Flourish in the 21st Century* (2010) <www.neweconomics.org> at 10 December 2010.

⁷⁷ John de Graaf, 'Political Prescriptions,' in Alexander (ed), *Voluntary Simplicity*, above n 1, 274.

⁷⁸ See, e.g., Serge Latouche, 'Why Less Should Be So Much More: Degrowth Economics' (2004) *Le Monde diplomatique* <www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/25/126.html> at 15 November 2010.

⁷⁹ Grigsby, above n 1, 12.

⁸⁰ This was the second question added shortly after the initial launch. 1066 participants answered this question.

conceive of themselves as being part of a collective enterprise with collective power, and not simply as isolated and unrelated individuals. There is still a significant body of participants who seem to conceive of voluntary simplicity primarily as an 'individualized' way of life and less as a social movement. But from the fact that more than two thirds now see themselves as part of a social movement, it would seem that the Simplicity Movement has acquired the 'group consciousness' that it is often thought to lack (or historically did lack). Much social movement theory suggests that the emergence of group consciousness is an important and necessary phase in the maturation of a social movement into a more potent social and political force.⁸¹ Whether that proves to be true of the Simplicity Movement remains to be seen.

Perhaps more significant still, however, are the results showing, first, that 89% of participants state that they would vote for a political party that was dedicated to promoting simple living, and second, that 94% feel that local and/or national governments currently do not do enough to support simple living. These figures suggest that the Simplicity Movement is an unmobilized constituency whose political preferences potentially could be influential if an avenue opened up for their expression on the political scene. Influence would also depend on the overall size of the movement, of course, but at least two studies show that the numbers might be far higher than one might first have thought. With respect to the United States, for example, The Merck Family Fund estimates on the basis of their study that approximately 28 per cent of U.S. citizens are downshifting to some extent.⁸² Furthermore, a study conducted by Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss concludes that 23 per cent of Australian citizens are downshifting to some extent;⁸³ and in another study, but with respect to Britain, Clive Hamilton discovered that 25 percent of people aged between 30-59 are downshifting.⁸⁴ If we extrapolate (crudely) and say that all the developed nations are downshifting to a similar degree – even if we make the conservative estimate that merely 20 per cent are downshifting overall – then in the developed world of roughly one billion people, *there are approximately 200,000 million participants in the global Simplicity Movement.*

Obviously there will be a wide diversity of lifestyles within this group, with some taking relatively minor steps to downshift and others taking more radical steps. But if these people are connected by their attempt to reduce or restrain their consumption – and if they also *feel* connected – then together they are a social movement of considerable collective power and political import, potentially, at least. If the movement were to organize, radicalize and expand in coming years, its collective power and political import would obviously increase.

Our study also indicates that the Simplicity Movement is not merely a movement of social and political aspirations without any action. 68% of participants report that they are involved in a community organization and, more specifically, 42% report that they are engaged in a community or political organization related to simple living. Before all else, perhaps, this can be interpreted as the emerging 'politicization' of the Simplicity Movement, albeit one driven from the grassroots up rather than the top down. When one looks at the world today, however, it is clear that more action is needed if a politics of voluntary simplicity is ever to reorientate the world's trajectory into the future.

⁸¹ See generally, Michael McCann (ed), *Law and Social Movements* (2006).

⁸² See The Hardwood Group, above n 2.

⁸³ Hamilton and Denniss, above n 2, 154. See also, Chhetri et al, above n 2 (reporting that their study of one Australian state identified 28% of the population as 'downshifter').

⁸⁴ See Clive Hamilton, 'Downshifting in Britain: A Sea Change in the Pursuit of Happiness' (2003) (Australia Institute, Discussion Paper, 58) 12.

6. CONCLUSION

We suspect that there will be readers who wish to take issue with certain points raised in this paper and, indeed, with the core concept of voluntary simplicity more generally. In fact, that is both inevitable and as it should be. But whatever criticism is leveled at the argument or analysis of this paper, we hope that it has at least provided some deeper empirical insight into a subject that is of fundamental importance to the future of the human story. As soon as one recognizes the multi-faceted problem of overconsumption for what it is – the root or contributing cause of environmental degradation; global poverty; uneconomic growth; peak oil; and consumer malaise – the ethos of voluntary simplicity presents itself as a remarkably coherent philosophy of life with which to live in response to all of those great problems. The prospect of nine billion people on the planet by mid-century makes it all the clearer that voluntary simplicity is a living strategy whose time has come.

At the same time, there is little that is ‘simple’ about living simply in a consumer society, a point that should not be understated. Certainly, having the desire to live more simply is not enough. For this reason, theorists like Daniel Miller offer insightful warnings about the dangers of demonizing consumption.⁸⁵ Those who present critiques of ‘consumerism’ or ‘materialism’ – simplicity theorists, in particular – must be wary of treating consumption one-dimensionally, as nothing but a means to status distinction, for example, or just the manifestation of hedonism and greed. Things are much more complex, as every participant in the Simplicity Movement probably knows very well! Miller is one of very few consumption theorists brave enough to acknowledge (or perceptive enough to see) that much of the literature on consumption is ‘saturated by a pervasive anxiety most acutely felt by fairly well-off academics... about the possibility that they may be too materialistic.’⁸⁶ It would be hypocritical, of course, as Miller notes self-reflectively, to see ‘the aspiration of any other person to at least the same level of consumption that I enjoy with my family as anything other than reasonable.’⁸⁷ But, at the same time, if the universalization of such standards of living would be, for example, ecologically catastrophic, then the problem that comes to the fore is the quite confronting one of knowing that lifestyles of reduced consumption may be necessary, but finding the realization of such lifestyles extremely challenging.

Consequently, the tasks at hand are the patently *practical* ones of learning how to live more simply in a world that, in many ways, makes doing so very difficult, and also figuring out how best to restructure that world to facilitate patterns of sustainable consumption. The ‘social’ nature of consumption makes this all the more difficult. As Mary Douglas put it, ‘An individual’s main objective in consumption is to help create the social universe and to find in it a creditable place.’⁸⁸ Any injunction to consume less, therefore, ought to acknowledge that commodities play a symbolic role in the social world that go well beyond their material functionality. For this reason, among others, the problem of how to *practice* lifestyles of reduced or restrained consumption will surely not have any ‘simple,’ silver-bullet solution; instead, it will require the rethinking of almost every aspect of life, at the personal, social, and political levels, as well as every level in

⁸⁵ Daniel Miller, ‘The Poverty of Morality,’ in Jackson (ed), *Sustainable Consumption* (2005) 222.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid* 223.

⁸⁸ Mary Douglas, ‘Relative Poverty, Relative Communication’ [1976], in Jackson (ed), *Sustainable Consumption* (2005) 243.

between and beyond. This is, it could be said, the defining challenge of our age, and we hope that our survey results and analyses provide some of the groundwork needed to advance this important debate.

We do not, however, hold up the Simplicity Movement as it exists as the answer to all problems. It hardly needs stating that the movement will need to radicalize to some significant extent and expand into the social, economic, and political mainstream if it is ever to respond effectively to the problems outlined at the beginning of this paper. But we maintain that there is an overall coherency to the ethos of voluntary simplicity that hacks at the root of those problems, while other responses (such as technology and economic growth) seem merely to be hacking at the branches. Therein, we contend, lies the fundamental importance of voluntary simplicity to the future of human civilization.