DEGROWTH IMPLIES VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY: OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

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Our country is set up structurally to oppose voluntary simplicity. **– Michael Jacobson***

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global economy is exceeding the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet, and it has been for some time (Global Footprint Network, 2012; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). This 'ecological overshoot' is being driven by the escalation and expansion of Western-style consumer lifestyles, which are highly resource and energy intensive. It is now commonplace to acknowledge that humankind would need more than five planets if North American lifestyles were universalised (e.g. Scott, 2009: 2). With the global population expected to reach 9 billion by mid-century, it is increasingly clear that these high consumption lifestyles are unsustainable and certainly not universalizable. The science of climate change, furthermore, implies that we must decarbonise consumer lifestyles without delay (Hansen, 2011), and the spectre of 'peak oil' suggests that the supply of cheap petroleum upon which consumer societies and their growth-orientated economies are based, may be coming to an end (Heinberg, 2011; Alexander, 2011a). All this means that 'business as usual' is simply not an option, and it may well be that the persistent delays in responding to these serious issues means that it is now too late to avoid some form of 'great disruption' to life as we know it (Gilding, 2011). What makes this admittedly gloomy situation even more troubling is that empirical research shows that many of those who have attained the Western-style consumerist ideal may not be finding such lifestyles all that fulfilling (Lane, 2000). Technological progress and economic growth, it would seem, cannot solve all our problems or answer for us the question of how we ought to live. For these reasons, among others, it has never been more urgent to rethink contemporary practices of consumption.

But the news is not all grim. The fact that many in the global consumer class are not finding high consumption lifestyles particularly fulfilling raises the tantalizing possibility that people could *increase* their quality of life by voluntarily *reducing* their material and energy consumption. This is sometimes called the 'double dividend' of sustainable consumption (Jackson, 2005), for the reason that 'simpler' lifestyles of reduced consumption can benefit the planet while also being in the immediate and long-term self-interest of the individual (Brown and Kasser, 2005). Exchanging some superfluous consumption for more free time is one path to this 'double dividend.' Reducing superfluous consumption can also open up space for a 'triple' or even 'quadruple' dividend, on the grounds that low-consumption lifestyles of voluntary simplicity have the potential to generate communitarian or humanitarian benefits too (e.g. by leaving more resources for others in greater need). It has even been suggested that lifestyles of voluntary simplicity, focusing as they do on non-materialistic forms of meaning and fulfilment, might provide something of an antidote to the spiritual malaise that seemingly inflicts many people within materialistic cultures today (Alexander, 2011b; Myers, 2000). But if indeed there are multiple dividends to sustainable

* Jacobson is referring only to the United States, however this paper is framed by the assumption that his comment applies, to varying degrees, to all developed nations.

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consumption, including self-interested ones, why does the global consumer class consume so much? Are we not free to step out of the rat race and simply consume less?

Unfortunately, things are not that simple. Our lifestyle decisions, especially our consumption decisions, are not made in a vacuum. Instead, they are made within social, economic, and political structures of constraint, and those structures make some lifestyle decisions easy or necessary and other lifestyle decisions difficult or impossible. Change the social, economic, and political structures, however, and different consumption practices would or could emerge. With a practical focus, this paper seeks to develop some of the theoretical work that has already been done in this area (Jackson and Papathanasopoulou, 2008; Jackson, 2003; Sanne, 2002; Ropke, 1999). More specifically, this paper examines the extent to which people in consumer societies are 'locked in' to high consumption, energy-intensive lifestyles, and it explores ways that structural changes could facilitate a societal transition to practices of more sustainable consumption.

This subject should be of interest to all those broadly engaged in work on sustainability, for the reasons outlined in the opening paragraph. But it should be of particular interest to those who have been convinced that the richest nations, if indeed they are serious about realising a sustainable world, ought to be initiating a degrowth process of planned economic contraction, with the aim of moving toward a socially desirable, ecologically sustainable, steady state economy (Kallis, 2011, Alexander, 2012a). It barely needs stating that a degrowth or steady state economy will never emerge voluntarily within societies that are generally comprised of individuals seeking ever-higher levels of income and consumption. It follows that any transition to such an economy will depend upon people in those societies transitioning away from consumer lifestyles and embracing lifestyles of reduced and restrained consumption. This may seem like an unlikely cultural revolution, and it is, but if it is a *necessary cultural precondition* to the emergence of a degrowth or steady state economy, then it is an issue of critical importance that ought to be given due attention. In short, a macroeconomics of degrowth imply lifestyles of voluntary simplicity, in much the same way as a macroeconomics of limitless growth imply lifestyles of insatiable consumption. If it is the case, however, that contemporary consumer societies are structured in such a way to oppose lifestyles of voluntary simplicity, then it is important that those structures are exposed and challenged. Put otherwise, we must understand how our societies function to lock people into high consumption lifestyles and then set about changing those structures to better facilitate practices of sustainable consumption. Structural change will not be enough, on its own, of course; there also needs to be a shift in values (Murtaza, 2011). However, it is tragic to think that there are some people living consumer lifestyles today who genuinely want to consume more sustainably, but who find it difficult or impossible, for structural reasons, to actually live lives of voluntary simplicity and put those values fully into practice. It is more tragic still if those consumerist structures are inhibiting people from increasing their quality of life through reduced consumption. This paper seeks to deepen the understanding of the relationship between consumer behaviour and the structures which shape that behaviour, in the hope that the existing barriers to sustainable consumption can be overcome.

2. THE PRODUCTION ANGLE VS. THE CONSUMPTION ANGLE

Before commencing the primary analysis it is worth outlining briefly how the present approach to consumption differs, in critical respects, from conventional, market-based analyses. In market economies, solutions to environmental, economic, and social problems are typically viewed from what has been called the 'production angle' (Princen et al, 2002). This perspective assumes that if the full costs of production were internalised to the productive process, an optimal number of various goods and services would be produced and consumed. According to this view, which has its roots in

neoclassical economics, social utility will be maximised when markets are free and the price of commodities are correct, because then rational consumers can be left alone in the marketplace to satisfy their private preferences in an optimal way, within the confines of a given income (Samuelson, 1938). Given these assumptions, all market activity is utility maximising, because rational economic agents would only trade in a free market if it were in their own best interests – otherwise why would they trade? Since it is assumed that market activity is the interests of both seller and purchaser, it follows that market activity – including market consumption – should be maximised. If the overconsumption of certain commodities is causing problems of some sort, however, this must be because the costs of production are not fully internalised to the productive process, leading to artificially cheap commodities and thus their overconsumption. Governments should respond to such problems (or 'negative externalities') by internalising them, and then leave markets alone to do their work. One central implication of the 'production angle' is that governments do not need to concern themselves with how people consume, because it is assumed that human beings are rational consumers who know best how to maximise their own wellbeing in the market. That is, it is assumed that consumers are 'sovereign,' such that it would be inappropriate for governments to try to shape, intervene, or regulate consumption behaviour. In recent decades, this has been the dominant view both in economics and politics (Hamilton, 2003).

This neoclassical 'production angle' is not without its insights, and governments in market societies do need to play a role creating the conditions necessary for markets to price commodities correctly. But as contemporary philosophers of language tell us, every conceptual framework conceals as it reveals, and neoclassicism is certainly no exception. In fact, as the following sections show, the production angle has several significant blind spots, particularly with respect to understanding consumption. An alternative perspective – what has been called the 'consumption angle' (Princen et al, 2002) – is beginning to receive more attention, and rightly so, because it exposes some of those blind spots in illuminating ways. In ways that will be explained, this alternative perspective rejects the assumption that getting prices right is the best or only response to today's myriad environmental, economic, and social challenges, and it rejects the assumption that consumer preferences are simply 'given' and beyond critical evaluation. By taking this position the consumption angle reveals how problems and solutions look very different when they are viewed from a perspective that does not marginalise consumption but places it at the centre of analysis. This paper seeks to develop the consumption angle by examining the ways that social, economic, and political structures can 'lock' people into high consumption, energy-intensive lifestyles even when they desire a 'simpler life' of reduced or restrained consumption. This analytical approach can be contrasted with the production angle, not because it assumes that governments should be forcing alternative lifestyles on people, but because it recognises that governments are not neutral bystanders when it comes to consumption but are implicated always and necessarily in creating the structures that shape and guide consumer behaviour.

3. STRUCTURE AND SIMPLICITY: EXPOSING AND TRANSCENDING CONSUMER 'LOCK IN'

The remainder of this paper explores, with a practical focus, some of the most important areas where consumer behaviour is shaped by structures of constraint, and it also outlines (in a preliminary way) how those structures could be changed to facilitate the transition to more sustainable practices of consumption. This critical examination begins by considering the largest multi-national survey analysis of the Voluntary Simplicity Movement (Alexander and Ussher, 2011), for this study (hereafter, 'the survey') provides an firm empirical basis for understanding what barriers people face when trying to live 'simpler' lives of reduced or restrained consumption. The survey,

which has been completed by more than two thousand participants in the Voluntary Simplicity Movement, was comprised of 52 questions, one of which asked participants what the *greatest* obstacle they face is when trying to live 'simpler' lives of reduced or restrained consumption. Participants were provided with six categories and then asked to select the one that best signified their *greatest* obstacle. The categories provided were: (1) suitable transport; (2) suitable employment; (3) insufficient product information; (4) resisting consumer temptations; (5) suitable social activities; and (6) suitable housing. If participants felt those options did not reflect what they considered their greatest obstacle, then they were able to submit their alternative answer in a textbox labelled 'other.' Since only 12% answered 'other,' it can be tentatively inferred that the six obstacles suggested by the survey quite accurately expose some of the greatest challenges people face when trying to live simply. This empirical finding provides some helpful guidance to those seeking to understand and dismantle the obstacles people face when trying to live more simply, and the following discussion uses the six obstacles outlined in the survey to structure the analysis. This empirically grounded approach seems particularly important given that some of the largest existing studies on policies for sustainable consumption (e.g. OECD, 2008) have failed to address some of the most important obstacles to sustainable consumption, such as transport, working hours, and housing.

3.1 *Lack of Suitable Transport Options as an Obstacle to Sustainable Consumption*

The question of transport provides one of the clearest examples of how structure can 'lock' people into high impact, energy-intensive consumption. Riding bicycles and taking public transport are widely regarded as important characteristics of more sustainable consumption in transport. It is probable that simply reducing the distances and regularity of travel will also be a requirement (Moriarty and Honnery, 2008). This is primarily because driving and flying are extremely carbon-intensive modes of transportation, and climate change and peak oil both indicate that transport practices dominated by driving and flying are unsustainable in anything like their current forms. It is very likely, of course, that there will always be cars on the roads and planes in the air, but these forms of transport are likely to get much less common, and much more expensive, if the world transitions to a post-carbon future over coming decades. In short, lifestyles of sustainable consumption require people to make different decisions when 'consuming' transport, especially with respect to driving cars.

The fact is, however, escaping car culture is very difficult or impossible for many people in consumer societies today, as the survey results imply. There are undoubtedly cases where people have the option to ride their bikes to work or to take public transport, but for one reason or another choose to drive. However, there are also people who would like to cycle to work or take public transport, but for structural reasons beyond their immediate control they are unable to do so. For example, someone may be convinced of the ecological problems caused by petroleum-based driving, but in the absence of safe bike lanes or accessible public transport, this person may find themselves driving to work for lack of any other option. This exemplifies perfectly the background thesis being explored in this paper, for it shows how 'structure' influences consumption behaviour by making some transport choices easy or necessary and other options difficult or impossible. If those structures were different, however – say, if governments decided to invest heavily in bike lanes and public transport – this would 'unlock' many people from their dependence on driving and allow them to engage in more sustainable modes of transport. Driving, therefore, is not just a matter of 'private preference.' By not investing sufficiently in sustainable transport infrastructure, governments are implicated in the structures that promote unsustainable consumption of transport.

Note how this analysis exposes how differently the issue of sustainable transport looks when viewed from the 'production angle' compared to when it is viewed from the 'consumption angle.' From the production angle, if the overconsumption of petroleum (e.g. from driving too much) is causing negative externalities (e.g. climate change, pollution, etc.), then to maximise social utility governments should attempt to internalise the costs of those externalities. This would make the production of petrol more expensive and those increased costs would be passed onto consumers. Through market forces that price increase would presumably lead to reductions in driving, until an 'optimal' amount of driving is achieved. From the consumption angle, however, the aim is not simply to internalise externalities (although that may be part of the solution). Rather, the consumption angle shows that the way people consume transport is partly a function of the structures within which their consumption decisions are made, so by changing those structures, different consumption patterns would or could emerge. Instead of merely aiming to price petrol correctly, therefore, the consumption angle suggests that governments should also try to promote alternatives to damaging consumption, such as investing heavily in sustainable infrastructure in order to dismantle existing barriers to sustainable transport consumption.

Of course, even if there were safe bike lanes and accessible public transport, some people would still choose to drive. But that is a different 'value-focused' or behavioural issue which cannot be addressed here. There is also the unexplored question of broader structural issues beyond those considered above which may also affect consumption of transport. For example, sprawling urban landscapes as well as globalised trade encourage more travel rather than less, so another way governments can promote structures of sustainable transport is to promote higher density living and more localised economies. But for present purposes the point has been made sufficiently that external 'structures' affect consumption patterns in transport. If people are expected to consume transport sustainably, therefore, governments must help create social and economic infrastructures that unchain people from carbon-intensive travel. It is not clear, however, that many governments have made this commitment in any serious way; nor is it clear that governments are receiving much pressure to do so from the cultural mainstream.

3.2. *Lack of Suitable Employment Options as an Obstacle to Sustainable Consumption*

Neoclassical economic theory, upon which the production angle is based, posits that actors in market economies are free to maximize their happiness by selling as much or as little of their time as they want (Kimmel and Hoffman, 2002). The consumption angle being unpacked in this paper calls that assumption into question. Currently, it turns out, there are structural biases in many 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 (Robinson, 2007). The effect of these structural biases is essentially to 'lock' many people into longer working hours than they want or need, which gives rise to cultures that tend to over-consume resources and under-consume leisure. This might lead to higher income and consumption per capita, but at the cost of quality of life and planetary health (Hayden, 1999).

This is at least part of the reason why people trying to reduce their consumption highlight 'suitable employment' as their greatest obstacle, as indicated by the results of the 'simple living' survey discussed earlier. 56% of participants in that survey reported 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 people who identify themselves with the Voluntary Simplicity Movement. It is a problem endemic to many modern market societies and is a significant structural barrier

inhibiting the transition to practices of sustainable consumption. For example, 28.7% of full-time workers in Australia work 50 hours per week or more; and of those workers, 46% claim they would prefer to work fewer hours, accepting a drop in pay (Australian Conservation Foundation, 2010, p. 11). This consumer 'lock in' demands a political response.

One way to overcome to this barrier would be to introduce a shorter 'standard' work week, such as the 35-hour work week that exists (to a diminishing extent) in France, or some more radical policy such as the 21-hour work week proposed by the New Economics Foundation (2010). 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). 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 (2009: 274):

> Unless there is a clear hardship for the firm – something shown in less that 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.

This policy exemplifies one means of dismantling the structural 'lock in' outlined above, for it opens the door to a society in which consumption is reduced in exchange for more free time. Some may object that industrial relations policies such as this will not maximise GDP per capita, but that is to miss the point. The point of an economy, after all, should be to promote quality of life for all, and if a smaller economy promotes quality of life by providing increased leisure but less income and consumption, then a smaller economy is the most economically rational option to choose. In a word, this is the rationality of degrowth (Latouche, 2009), and in many ways it would also seem to be implicit to a politics of voluntary simplicity (Alexander, 2011c).[2]

3.3. *Insufficient Product Information as an Obstacle to Sustainable Consumption*

Conscientious or 'ethical' consumption can be understood as the practice of choosing to purchase commodities on account of their ecological or social justice features, even if this means paying more for them (Lewis and Potter, 2010; Shaw and Newholm, 2002). While it is unlikely that conscientious consumption on its own could bring about the changes needed to create a just and sustainable society, this form of consumption may well need to play a significant role in such a transition (Micheletti, 2010). Accordingly, it can be argued that consumers have a duty to 'vote with their dollars,' whenever possible, especially when it is seems reasonably clear that commodities are not priced correctly (e.g. when prices do not include negative ecological externalities).

The importance of conscientious consumption lies in the fact that consuming this or that product sends a message, consciously or unconsciously, to the market (and to culture more broadly), affirming the product's origins, process of manufacture, and social and ecological consequences. This means that if people consume conscientiously, for the purpose of supporting only ecologically responsible and socially just

[2] Politicising voluntary simplicity might strike some as paradoxical, in the sense that anything mandated by law does not sound very 'voluntary.' But the position being developed herein does not suggest that 'simple 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 overconsuming societies).

corporations, producers will have an immediate economic incentive to produce differently, because producers want to produce what sells. In this way, capitalism has a sophisticated market mechanism already set up to deal with changes in consumer demands, and taken to its extreme, this mechanism has the potential to significantly change the nature of the global economy. If consumers mobilised *en masse*, for example, and boycotted all environmentally unsustainable products, global capitalism could be transformed quickly and significantly, for how we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world (Dominguez and Robin, 1999).

Nevertheless, conscientious consumption, like ordinary consumption, does not take place in a vacuum. Consuming conscientiously requires access to the information needed to make informed decisions, and the degree to which this information is provided to consumers can be understood as a structural issue that affects the way people consume or are able to consume. For example, suppose a person wants to buy locally grown and/ or organic fruit, but the origin or farming procedures of the fruit is not stated anywhere on the label. In such circumstances, purchasing local and organic fruit is structurally difficult or impossible, irrespective of one's value system. Change the structure of this situation, however – say, by making it mandatory to label products in certain ways – and it becomes easier to purchase ethically on account of the information provided. It would also make it easier for people to 'boycott' products that they feel are unethical, and this is the flip side of the same coin. In other words, part of what it means to consume sustainably is to 'vote with your money,' and in practice this means supporting businesses that produce ethically and not supporting businesses that do not produce ethically.

The results from the 'simple living' survey, however, show that a significant proportion of people who are trying to consume more sustainably state that their greatest obstacle in this regard is 'insufficient product information.' It would seem, therefore, that inadequate product labelling is an important structural barrier in the way of more sustainable consumption practices, and one that ought to be addressed. Voluntary labelling, which results when companies want to distinguish their products from others for self-interested reasons, is one way for this to arise. Organic farmers might voluntarily label their produce 'organic,' for example, knowing that some people only want to purchase organic food. 'Fair-trade' is another labelling practice that attempts to provide consumers with more confidence that the products they are purchasing are produced ethically. Another strategy is mandatory labelling, which involves state regulation of what is included on a product's label (e.g. a government might require farmers to declare whether eggs are free range or not, and provide minimum standards for this categorisation). Providing adequate and accurate information on product labels, whether mandatory or voluntary, gives consumers the option of purchasing ethically or not.

Obviously it is difficult to know where to draw the line here, since providing information on labels sometimes can be an expensive and controversial undertaking, and if the costs of labelling products in accordance with the mandatory standards are too high, this may stifle economic activity, whether ethical or unethical. But for present purposes the point is simply that conscientious consumption is not just about *wanting* to consume ethically; it is also about whether one is *able* to consume ethically, and this partly depends on the nature of the structures within which consumption takes place. Different structures make it easier or more difficult to consume ethically, and governments are partly responsible for deciding what those structures should be. While there is already some regulation of product labelling, the results of the simple living survey suggest that better and more extensive product labelling is one means of further unlocking people from structures that currently inhibit more sustainable practices of consumption.

3.4 *Exposure to Consumer Temptations as an Obstacle to Sustainable Consumption*

Another way to provide consumers with information is through advertising, but this method is very much a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is important to recognise that advertising has an important role to play providing people with information about products that could increase their wellbeing. Potentially, at least, advertising can even be important in promoting sustainable consumption (Oates et al, 2008). For example, it is no good developing some new product (e.g. solar panels) if the public does not know the product exists. Therefore, the marketing of genuinely ecologically sustainable products is undeniably a good thing, on the grounds that consumers need sufficient information to make informed decisions.

On the other hand, however, advertising has several well-known dark sides (e.g. PIRC, 2011). As noted earlier, the paradigm of neoclassical economics assumes that human beings are rational consumers who spend their money in ways that best satisfy their 'private preferences.' But many sociologists and psychologists have levelled a sustained and devastating critique of this assumption (e.g. Brulle and Young, 2007; Kasser, 2002). They show that people do not always spend their money in ways that contribute to their wellbeing, and they also show that consumer desires are not simply 'given' in advance, but can actually be shaped by external forces, norms, or structures in society, including advertising. Advertising, that is, does not merely provide us with information. It also actively shapes our desires to some extent, often in insidious ways, and this should not really surprise us. After all, the underlying message of every advertisement is 'your life will be better if you purchase this product,' and given the ubiquity of advertising in modern life, it is understandable why so many people come to think that more consumption is what is needed to increase happiness. This is especially so when advertisements deliberately play on our emotions and insecurities, rather than merely providing us with product information in impartial or objective ways. Many of the world's best psychologists do not work in universities or clinics anymore, but instead are hired by marketing agencies to apply their extremely sophisticated understandings of human psychology for the purpose of manipulating people into purchasing this or that product, without much concern being given to whether people need it. Not only does advertising implicitly or explicitly urge people to 'consume, consume, consume,' it also has the potential to create artificial desires in people for products that they did not even know existed and which may not contribute to wellbeing in any discernable way. Accordingly, the neoclassical notion that people are purely 'rational' consumers who are informed by advertising but otherwise uninfluenced by it is scarcely credible. The results of the simple living survey provide some further evidence for this, in that a significant proportion of participants noted that 'resisting consumer temptations' was their greatest obstacle to reducing and restraining their consumption.

Once again, this can be understood to be a structural issue, further emphasising the notion that our consumption decisions do not take place in a vacuum. Currently, people in consumer societies can be exposed to as many as 3,000 advertisements everyday (de Graaf et el, 2005: 165), in increasingly subtle and subliminal ways, and this relentless exposure undoubtedly affects the way people consume. Advertising is especially pernicious when directed at children (Schor, 2004). Change the nature and extent of people's exposure to advertising, however – which is a structural issue for which governments are partly responsible – and different consumptions habits, and attitudes toward consumption, would result. A politics of sustainable consumption, therefore, implies rethinking the nature and extent of advertising.

One example of a progressive politics of advertising can be seen in the Brazilian city of Sao Paulo – the world's fourth largest city – which has implemented a ban on virtually all outdoor advertising, including advertising on billboards, neon signs, buses, trucks, and taxis. This 'Clean City Law,' which came into effect in 2007, has eliminated

approximately 15,000 billboards (Worldwatch Institute, 2007), creating a new social structure and a new urban aesthetic within which the city's inhabitants live. Other ways to reform advertising structures include banning advertising to children; regulating where, when, and how much advertising people are exposed to; and regulating the nature of advertising more strictly to promote more socially and ecologically beneficial messages. These options all raise various issues that require more sustained and critical attention, but the present point is simply that governments are partly responsible for the nature and extent to which people are exposed to advertising. Advertising policies create structures that either support a transition to practices of sustainable consumption or inhibit that transition. Given that 'resisting consumer temptations' has been highlighted as one the greatest obstacles faced when transitioning to lifestyles of reduced and restrained consumption, it would seem that increased regulation of advertising is one way to free people from some of the structural pressures that encourage high consumption lifestyles.

3.5. *Suitable Social Activities as an Obstacle to Sustainable Consumption*

The complex relationship between consumption and structure is highlighted again when we consider why some people (as evidenced by the survey results) find socialising or social activity to be their greatest obstacle to sustainable consumption. As outlined below, human beings are not isolated and atomistic individuals whose desires are independent from those around them. Rather, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists have shown very clearly that human desires are shaped by the culture and social infrastructure within which they live. The complexities of this subject cannot be fully unpacked here, but two points should suffice to expose further how external structural issues often function to shape consumption habits in ways that are not always in the control of those consuming.

The first point concerns how the social meaning of consumption behaviour is culturally relative. Anthropologists have probably done the most to show that commodities play a role in human life that go well beyond their material functionality (Douglas, 1976; Miller, 2008). Commodities, they show, also function 'symbolically' as social artefacts through which people express and create their identities and in which people seek not just satisfaction but meaning and social acceptance too. 'Stuff is not just stuff,' as Tim Jackson (2009: 63) aptly puts it, implying that what we own and what we purchase (especially in modern consumer societies) can be understood to be part of the 'extended self.' The important point here is that the meaning of consumption is not somehow *inherent* to the commodity or the service purchased, but is instead a social construct that is dependent on the culture within which the act of consumption takes place. Change the cultural background and the meaning of the consumption changes also, with various effects. For example, wearing a branded t-shirt of a particular kind might be of social significance in one society, at a particular time, but be meaningless in another time or place where the cultural background is different. To provide a second example, roller-skating might be the 'thing to do' in one time or place, and yet be unknown or laughed at in another time or place.

This raises issues about 'structure' because the cultural background within which consumption takes place is basically a structural 'given' beyond the immediate control of the individual. Different cultures bestow different meanings and significances to different practices of consumption, and that influences how people consume. But unless we uproot ourselves from our current culture, we do not get to choose the culture within which we live, and this is problematic when a given culture celebrates practices of consumption that may not be in the best interests of the individual, the society, or the planet. What is more problematic still, however, is that people can find themselves locked in to those practices of consumption if social and cultural norms do not provide many or any alternatives. Suppose, for example, a group of old school friends is coming

to town and you are invited to a dinner one evening at an expensive restaurant; suppose also that you are trying to practice voluntary simplicity. In this scenario, to oversimplify somewhat, you are faced with the decision of either socialising with your friends despite the 'financial expense,' or choosing to decline the offer in the attempt to avoid high consumption lifestyles, but at the 'social expense' of missing out on the social event. In a different social context, however, a potluck dinner might have been 'the thing to do,' in which case this predicament would never have arisen.

This type of cultural analysis could be applied to almost all consumption practices, and it raises very important points about how cultures can seduce people into high consumption lifestyles. If high-level consumption of some sort or another is needed, not just for material provision, but also for social acceptance, the social expression of one's identity, and the creation of meaning in life, then consuming less is not always as easy as one might hope. After all, reducing consumption poses new challenges if, 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' (Douglas, 1976: 243). It may be, therefore, that people live high consumption lifestyles not because they are greedy or hedonistic or indifferent to environmental concerns, but because they are trying to negotiate cultural norms of consumption in search of meaning and social acceptance. To some extent, at least, this is undoubtedly the case.

This is not to suggest, however, that consuming more sustainably in a consumer culture requires denying oneself a 'creditable place' in society. Far from it. There are ways to *enhance* or *create* meaning and social acceptance by consuming in ways that *oppose* cultural norms, and it is certainly the case that anti-consumerist movements have never advocated *renouncing* meaning or social acceptance. But it remains true that different cultural contexts make some consumption practices easier and others more difficult, and it seems to be the case that consumer cultures make consuming sustainably – including socialising in sustainable ways – much more difficult than it needs to be. All too often, the cultural presumption seems to be that socialising needs to involve spending various amounts of money, and yet there is no reason why this needs to be the case. In the absence of a community people who are socialising 'for free,' however, people can be drawn into consumerist modes of social activity simply to avoid being alone.

The second point, which must be dealt with even more briefly, concerns social infrastructure. The insight here is that how a society is designed from an urban planning perspective can also be understood to be a structural issue that affects how human beings socialise – including to what extent they socialise through market consumption. For example, if your local council sells your community park to developers who put a high-rise apartment block on it, this affects social space in ways that affect consumption practices. Where once parents would take their children to the park as a means of free social engagement, now they may be coerced to go to a commercial play centre, at some financial cost and arguably a diminished experience. Where once people would meet up in the community park after work and kick a ball around, in the absence of the park they may find themselves going to the movies (which costs money) or staying home (which reduces opportunities for social engagement). Again, this type of analysis could be taken in many directions, and again the point is that external structural issues affect the way people in a society consume, promoting some types of social activity (through market consumption) and opposing other types (such as free social engagement in public space). Space does not permit any detailed exploration of what role governments could play in promoting post-consumerist forms of social engagement, but it is suggested that options will present themselves if it were ever decided that such a policy should be seriously pursued. Those options might include protecting public space from further privatisation or funding councils to organise diverse, community-based, social events. The fact is, however, overcoming barriers to sustainable social activity will probably depend (and should depend) on community-based action more than state action.

3.6. *Suitable Housing as an Obstacle to Sustainable Consumption*

Housing (whether purchasing, building, or renting) is typically life's greatest expense, so it is no surprise that many participants in the simple living survey highlighted 'suitable housing' as their greatest obstacle to consuming more sustainably. There are various issues here that deserve some attention, and yet we will see that addressing one issue can generate tensions with other issues, in ways that admit no obvious resolution.

One way to think of sustainable housing is in the context of 'eco-design,' but the fact is that often these types of houses, despite having all the eco-features (recycled materials, solar panels, doubled-glazed windows, etc.), end up being so expensive that only a privileged few people can afford them. Accordingly, they can easily be perceived as an exclusive 'bourgeois luxury.' Furthermore, it was noted earlier that living close to work can reduce one's dependency on cars, but if that means living in the inner city, this can also imply prohibitively expensive housing. This is especially so if people are seeking some land upon which to grow their own food, and yet if everyone were to have enough land to grow their own food, that could well contribute to urban sprawl in highly problematic ways. To make matters more complicated, if people decide to purchase expensive housing (e.g. eco-design, with some land, in the inner city) this may well lock people into a large mortgage, an unfulfilling job, and long hours, and this does not sit well with the 'balanced' life typically implied by lifestyles of voluntary simplicity. It is difficult to know how best to balance these competing factors.

From a different perspective – but one equally vexed – if people purchase or rent a house in much cheaper urban or even rural areas, this might allow them to reduce significantly their outgoings with respect to housing, and thus free them from some financial pressure, but it may bind them to their cars in ways that inner city living would not. Or it might involve living in particularly unsafe parts of town. Furthermore, searching for housing in cheaper parts of the country (or the world) might open up access to a house and some land, but at the expense of taking people away from their family, friends, and broader support networks, which is a very high price to pay. Once more, for the reasons just outlined, it is no surprise that many people highlight 'suitable housing' as their greatest obstacle to sustainable consumption. We may have some conception of what a sustainable house looks like – e.g. a small, energy-efficient straw bail house, built from local materials, which is close to work, social support networks, and public transport, and which has access to a community garden – but the structure of modern societies simply does not make that a very easy option to 'choose.' The point here, which of course mirrors the points in earlier sections, is that there are structural obstacles to sustainable consumption that can make it very difficult or impossible to consume sustainably, even for those who are committed to doing so.

This issue of 'suitable housing' was deliberately dealt with last because in many ways it seems to be the hardest to solve. Any adequate solution may well involve restructuring private property rights for the purposes of redistribution, but this would be very controversial (or at least resisted fervently by vested interests determined to maintain the status quo). But perhaps that is the conclusion towards which the analysis in previous sections has been headed. It is perfectly clear that, to achieve a sustainable and just world, members of the global consumer class have to consume less, consume differently, and consume more efficiently. But it is not clear that such a transition is possible within the structural confines of consumer-capitalist society. It arguably follows that if those structures were changed in ways to facilitate the transition to 'simpler lives' of reduced and restrained consumption, nothing that resembled consumer capitalism would remain (Alexander, 2011c; Trainer, 2010).

3.7. *Other Structural Obstacles to Sustainable Consumption*

The six obstacles to sustainable consumption discussed above are by no means exhaustive. They were selected, as noted earlier, because the largest empirical analysis of the Voluntary Simplicity Movement indicates that those six obstacles are among the greatest obstacles people face when trying to reduce or restrain their consumption. It is hoped that this provides helpful, empirically grounded guidance to any policy makers who genuinely seek to free people from the structures that lock them into lifestyles of high resource and energy consumption. Given that any transition to a sustainable world entails the global consumer class reducing and restraining its consumption, figuring out how to overcome *existing barriers* to reduced and restrained consumption would seem to be a matter of considerable importance. It has been the underlying argument of this paper that lifestyles of voluntary simplicity need to be systematically encouraged, privileged, and supported, rather than systemically opposed. This would seem to be particularly important to those who accept, as I do, that 'simpler' lifestyles of reduced and restrained consumption are a necessary cultural precondition, or at least a necessary contemporaneous supplement, to any transition to a degrowth or steady state economy (Alexander, 2012b).

As well as the obstacles addressed above, many more undoubtedly exist which also deserve attention. There will be people, for example, who would like to purchase green energy from an energy provider but who find that none is presently on offer; or who would like to reduce their weekly waste disposal but who find that there are laws that require superfluous packaging; or who would like to keep a few chickens in their backyard for eggs but who find that council regulations prohibit it, etc. In fact, it is likely that when looking at the world from the 'consumption angle,' almost all aspects of contemporary consumption can be seen to be affected by social, economic, or political structures that make some practices of consumption easy or necessary and other practices difficult or impossible. Currently, as we have seen, lifestyles of high consumption are structurally encouraged within consumer societies. Policy makers must recognise that these societies need to be fundamentally restructured for the explicit purpose of facilitating a transition to lifestyles of reduced consumption. But to the extent we cannot reasonably rely on sufficient action being taken by our governments, it would seem that the only option that remains is to take matters into our own hands and begin building alternative societies ourselves (Hopkins, 2008; Trainer, 2010; Alexander, 2011d).

4. CONCLUSION: TOWARD A POLITICS OF VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

Any transition to a sustainable and just society necessitates a shift in values away from the consumerist ethos that 'more consumption is always better' toward the post-consumerist ethos that 'just enough is plenty.' In high consumption societies of the developed world this generally means that people must consume not just differently and more efficiently, but less. Nevertheless, few people seem wiling to accept this, including many environmentalists.

A value-shift toward voluntary simplicity, however, will not be enough on its own. Structural change is also needed to make the practice of voluntary simplicity a more viable alternative to consumer lifestyles. This paper has outlined ways in which the structure of contemporary consumer societies make lifestyles of voluntary simplicity much more difficult than they need to be. And if people accept that these societies need to consume less, consume differently, and consume more efficiently, then the structural obstacles inhibiting these practices must be removed as far as possible and as soon as possible.

It was beyond the scope of this paper to explore in much detail the various options available, but it is hoped that this analysis provides some more insight into the nature of

the problem, providing a conceptual framework within which to think fruitfully about these issues. Once it is accepted *that* structure affects consumption practices, and *how* those structures do so, the next question is what specific restructuring should actually be pursued to facilitate more sustainable consumption practices. Previous studies (e.g. OECD, 2008) have explored this question but failed to address some of the greatest barriers to sustainable consumption (e.g. transport, employment, housing, etc), an oversight that can be put down to the lack of an empirical basis with which to guide the analysis. The analysis in this paper, however, was based on the simple living survey (Alexander and Ussher, 2011), and this study provides strong empirical grounds for thinking that the six areas addressed above represent some of the greatest obstacles to sustainable consumption.

In closing, it is worth noting that one of the biggest barriers to sustainable consumption – indeed, one of the biggest barriers to sustainability more generally – is the 'growth model of progress' that is so deeply entrenched in the developed world today, and increasingly elsewhere (Jackson, 2009). No pro-growth government will be much interested in the policies outlined in this paper, because if the policies were successful they would generally facilitate less consumption, and this would mean less growth. Less growth is widely assumed to be a bad thing, since it is assumed that growth in GDP per capita is closely related to a nation's overall wellbeing. That assumption, however, has been subject to devastating critique for several decades now (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971; Schumacher; 1973; Daly, 1996; Meadows et al, 2004), and the evidence for the critique is mounting and getting more sophisticated (e.g. Stiglitz et al, 2010; Lawn and Clarke, 2010). And yet, the growth model seems to remain firmly entrenched, refusing to budge in the face of the evidence presented in critique. Not until a government seriously embraces a post-growth model of progress – either voluntarily or by force of ecological or financial necessity – will a top-down politics of voluntary simplicity be taken seriously. That presents two main pathways for activists for sustainable consumption: on the one hand, there is much work to be done promoting post-growth models of progress both to governments and the constituencies upon whose mandate democratic governments depend; the other option is to direct one's energy into community-based action in the hope of 'doing for ourselves' what our governments seem unwilling or unable to do (Hopkins, 2008; Trainer, 2010). These paths are neither easy nor do they ensure success; but the longer our governments do nothing, the more it would seem that change, if it is ever to arrive, must be driven from the grassroots by a counter-culture based on practices of voluntary simplicity. If such a grassroots movement were ever mainstreamed, then, and only then, would we have the cultural conditions needed for a post-growth politics of voluntary simplicity to emerge.

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