

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to determine if voluntary simplicity is an emerging social movement as its advocates claim. Newspapers and magazines frequently publish articles about people quitting high-paying jobs, abandoning the "rat race," and seeking peaceful, less demanding lifestyles. Many people feel that these press reports reflect a developing social movement which potentially could alter our society. Voluntary simplicity, a term first used by Richard Gregg in 1936, describes a way of life outwardly simple and inwardly rich. This lifestyle consists of frugality of consumption, a strong sense of environmental urgency, a desire for smaller scale living and working conditions, and a quest for higher human potential. Proponents of this way of life believe that voluntary simplicity has the ability to become a powerful economic, social, and political force and could change our values and habits in consumption patterns, institutional operations, and national policies.

I am personally interested in voluntary simplicity for two reasons. While I was a high school student, I was fascinated and repelled by the European Holocaust that occurred during the Second World War. I read everything I could find on the subject, both non-fiction and fiction. One question that was not satisfactorily answered was why the persecuted, both Jewish and non-Jewish, did not leave their home countries when it became clear what was to come. Obviously, leaving was possible only during the beginning of Hitler's rise to power and many took advantage of such opportunities. But many did not. Excuses given for not leaving were varied but the ones that have haunted

me were related to personal property. People didn't want to lose the things that they had worked so hard to obtain, so that possessions themselves came to be more important than life. One example of this was Anne Frank's family in Holland. They attempted to live family life as usual, but in hiding, which led ultimately to their discovery and death (Bettleheim, 1961: 84). The Franks and others like them lost their lives because they could not separate themselves from a comfortable, known environment.

The second reason for my attraction to voluntary simplicity is from personal experience, living with very little money during one period as an adult. While there were naturally some hardships associated with being poor, I discovered that my life was not qualitatively different than during more affluent times. In fact, there was a freedom of action that emerged when middle-class consumption was no longer possible, or even expected. Worries about the future were no longer realistic and life settled into an immediacy that left more time for family and friends. This experience, while only temporary, proved to me that a lot of money was not necessary for living a satisfactory, happy life. What seems important for a rewarding life is more valuable than money; good friends, a supportive family, and worthwhile work. When I discovered the concept of voluntary simplicity, as it was defined by others, I felt that it was proposing a better way of life. It advocates freedom from obligations to live in certain ways or define ourselves by what we buy. I think that voluntary simplicity has a tremendous potential to create not only a better life for us as individuals but to shift the focus of our society from quantitative concerns to qualitative concerns.

Since the purpose of this paper is to determine if voluntary simplicity is indeed a social movement, it first is necessary to include a working definition of social movements and voluntary simplicity. Next will be a discussion of mass society because social movements do not develop within a vacuum, they can only emerge from the culture of which they are a part. Voluntary simplicity will then be analyzed in terms of the required components of a social movement, such as change, organization, geographical scope and persistence over time. Additionally, there are various types of movements differentiated by goals that they pursue. All social movements are similar in that they have ideologies, group cohesion, and organizations. Careers of social movements will be discussed next. Concluding will be an assessment of voluntary simplicity as a social movement with an estimation of the possible affects of it in our lives.

## DEFINITIONS OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

Most definitions of social movements are very similar to Aristotle's statement: "Men journey together with a view to particular advantage, and by way of providing some particular thing needed for the purposes of life..." (Olson, 1965: 6). Neil Smelser's (1962: 270) definition of social movements in Theory of Collective Behavior is one of the most comprehensive, defining social movements as "Collective attempts to restore, protect, modify, or create norms (or values) in the name of a generalized belief." Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian (1957: 308) in Collective Behavior also have a broad definition of social movements as "... collectively acting with some continuity to promote a change or resist a change in the society or group of which it is a part." On the other hand, Herbert Blumer (1969: 8) defines the movement simply as "... a collective enterprise to establish a new order of life." This is similar to Mayer Zald and Roberta Ash (1970: 518) who call it "... a purposive and collective attempt of a number of people to change individuals or societal institutions and structures." Rudolf Heberle's (1951: 6) definition, in Social Movements: An Introduction to Political Sociology, is in line with these by stating that it is "... a collective attempt to reach a visualized goal, especially a change in certain social institutions." "It's main criterion...is that it aims to bring about fundamental changes in the social order" (Heberle, 1951: 199). Hans Toch (1965: 5) says social movements "... represent an effort by a large number of people to solve collectively a problem that they feel they have in common." Wendell C. King (1956: 27), in his classic book, Social Movements in the United States, defines social movements as "... a group venture extending

beyond a local community or a single event and involving a systematic effort to inaugurate changes in thought, behavior, and social relationships."

As is readily observable, all of these definitions of social movements have two things in common. In a time of apathy and unwillingness to get involved, they all emphasize an effort by men/women to intervene in the process of social and cultural change by attempting positive changes in their society and developing new social or cultural expressions. Even Flack's (1976: 367) opinion that mass movements are efforts to resist threats of changes in everyday lives suggests a desirability for involvement in actively controlling the social system and their own lives. Men/women are viewed as actors/actresses, not only as passive respondents to the flow of life (Killian, 1964: 430).

The second essential element in these definitions, the action, is collective and not individual. People are acting together based on a shared viewpoint over an issue, or issues, that they think needs to be changed. In Heberle's (1951: 7) words, "When acting individuals think of themselves as united in action, then that acknowledges the existence of social movement." They share a common consciousness and are united in action by that sharing.

These two features, collective action and behavior to affect or resist change, form only the skeletal outline of a social movement. Many more features are needed for the whole, such as goals, ideology, a sense of membership, and an organizational structure (Killian, 1964: 430; Turner and Killian, 1957: 20; King, 1956: 30-38). These features will be discussed in detail later.



Voluntary simplicity as a term brings to mind many images. For me, it suggests a reduction in material objects that have cluttered my life and cause me to lose sight of the more satisfying aspects of my life. For others, responses range from highly personal concerns to attacking critical social issues on a local, national, or world level. Deciding to simplify our lifestyles is clearly an individual or family matter because what is simplification for some would not be for others. What is simplification for an American would seem far from simple for a Chinese or Guatemalan peasant. It becomes relative, depending on outside conditions such as culture, customs, climate, and personal natures. In India, for example, almost everyone sits on the floor. Thus, there are few chairs, so simplification regarding furniture would probably be fruitless. But in the United States, where many homes look like furniture stores, this could be an area for reductions. Other people feel that it is necessary to have many, many kinds of clothing for reasons beyond temperature changes and cleanliness. This could be an area of simplification for them. Simplicity, then, is in deciding what has the greatest meaning in your life and clinging to that while getting rid of other things. Regarding this, Gandhi said,

As long as you derive inner help and comfort from anything, you should keep it. If you were to give it up in a mood of self-sacrifice or out of a stern sense of duty, you would continue to want it back and that unsatisfied want would make trouble for you. Only give up a thing when you want some other condition so much that the thing no longer has any attraction for you, or when it seems to interfere with that which is more greatly desired (Gregg, 1977: 27).

Voluntary simplicity is not a new idea. It has been advocated and practiced by many influential people throughout history. Many of these practitioners have been religious leaders, such as Buddha, Moses,

Lao Tse, Jesus, and Mohammed. Others have been philosophers or political leaders like Lenin, Gandhi, and Thoreau. In the United States, our tradition has been one of frugality and self-reliance. In addition, religious groups such as the Amish, the Mennonites, and the Friends (Quakers) have adopted simple living as a way to salvation. This concept has also been called voluntary poverty, functional poverty, or creative simplicity.

While there are diverse and individual ways of expressing a life of voluntary simplicity, there are five core values that are central to this philosophy. These core values are material simplicity, human scale, self-determination, ecological awareness, and personal growth (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977b: 5).

Material simplicity is probably the most visible value of a life of voluntary simplicity. The Quakers define simple living as "... a non-consumerist life-style based upon being and becoming, not having" (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977b: 5). People practicing voluntary simplicity would not identify or define themselves by what they own or buy. Since high consumption, as measured by an increasing Gross National Product, has been thought to be necessary as an indication of a healthy society, changing our life-styles in such a way would have a significant and lasting impact on our society.

A significant change in consumption patterns would not only reduce the GNP but would create a revolutionary challenge to modern capitalistic practices, which assume a dependency on experts, a conformity in consumption, coercive control, centralized technocratic decision-making, and personal deskilling (Luke, 1980: 101). Capitalism appears responsive to voluntary simplicity's interest in quality

goods rather than mere quantity. However, this is not due to any real concern with economic or resource scarcity but is a way to reap tremendous profits while at the same time not losing out on a share of the available, but reduced, spendable income.

A preference for smaller living and working environments, on a human scale, is another central value of voluntary simplicity. Believers tend to equate the gigantic scale of present institutions and technology with anonymity, incomprehensibility, and artificiality. Schumacher's (1977) Small is Beautiful raises the issue of appropriate technologies in response to this concern. Appropriate technologies are smaller and on a more human working scale. They also include the concept of decentralization to gain manageability and comprehensibility. They are more localized, more labor intensive, and more likely to use renewable resources. The reduction of scale is seen as a way to get back to basics by restoring a more human sense of proportion and perspective (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977b: 6).

Human scale is as significant in dealing with social issues as it is with technologies. Large scale social problems are just as incomprehensible and anonymous as large scale institutions and technologies. When problems are looked at on the proper human scale, they become manageable. For instance, unemployment becomes realistic and manageable only when we know how many are unemployed in our own neighborhood or town. A total of eight million unemployed in the United States is an incomprehensible figure. It can't be comprehended unless reduced to workable, sensible numbers. Then we can focus on the problem and attempt to solve it (Schumacher, 1977: 16).

Self-determination is another critical aspect of voluntary simplicity. When we depend on large, complex institution, we are less able to think for ourselves and to feel that we can affect our own environments. We are then forced to accept someone else's definition of craftsmanship, good food, pure water, and meaningful work because we have no other alternatives. Economic dependency is created when we become tied to installment payments, maintenance costs and the expectations of others to present ourselves in a given way. Food dependency is fostered on a regional level when certain crops are only produced in given areas of the country even though they might grow better in other areas. Broccoli is an example. It would grow better in the cool climate of New York but instead is grown in California and shipped to New York, 2,700 miles away. This used 950,000 gallons of fossil fuel in 1979 and on a national level, one dollar out of every three is spent for transportation (The Progressive, 1980: 3). We can attempt to become more self-sufficient by following the Puritan advice of growing our own, making our own, doing without, or exercising discipline in what we buy.

The fourth core value of voluntary simplicity is ecological awareness. This value acknowledges that our earth is finite and its natural resources cannot last forever. It recognizes the interconnections and interdependence of people and resources and the likelihood that resources will, in all probability, determine our future more than our political, economic, or social aspirations (Johnson, 1979: 54). As we greedily overuse and abuse our existing resources, we are guaranteeing that the earth will suffer as a result.

The fifth core value of voluntary simplicity is personal growth. Although it often has a spiritual aspect, voluntary simplicity is not

connected with any particular religion or philosophy. Personal growth could include activities ranging from biofeedback, humanistic psychology, fundamental Christianity or meditation. Freeing oneself from external hassles and clutter could allow greater freedom and time to explore non-material aspects of life that are often overlooked. As Simone de Beauvoir said: "Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying" (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977a: 202). Voluntary simplicity wants to guarantee that life consists of more than just not dying.

These five values, or themes, in voluntary simplicity are not exclusive. They will be followed to different degrees and in varying combinations by different people, and there are others that could be added. Taken together, they have the potential for constituting a particular outlook or view on life that could provide a necessary bridge between a traditional, industrial world view and a more humanistic, steady-state world view.

It should be clearly stated and understood that living simply is not the same as living in poverty. Poverty on an involuntary basis rarely allows time for the development of the values inherent in voluntary simplicity. Poverty consists of a constant struggle to maintain a minimal standard of living with little or no time for anything else. In many ways, poverty totally opposes simple living.

## MASS SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The study of social movements and the settings in which they occur is important to sociology because a basic assumption in sociology is that human behavior is predominately shaped by the groups to which people belong and by the social interaction that occurs within these groups. Turner and Killian (1957: 3) state: "A major portion of sociology is the examination of groups and group life in terms of social organization and the normative order, of the group and its culture." Collective behavior, which includes group behavior, takes many forms, ranging from short-lived mobs to long-lasting movements advocating social change. Collective behavior offers a special opportunity for sociologists to observe human behavior that generally lies dormant.

Under conditions of stable interaction, many social elements - myths, ideologies, or the potential for violence - are either controlled or taken for granted and hence not readily observable. During episodes of collective behavior, these elements come into the open; we can observe them "in the raw". Collective behavior, then, like deviance, affords a peculiar kind of laboratory in which we are able to study directly certain components of behavior which usually lie dormant. (Smelser, 1962: 3).

This behavior is affected by the society in which it occurs. Since individual or group behavior is so influenced, Cameron (1966: 21) suggests that the purpose of a social movement cannot be understood unless we clearly perceive the background of the society in which it develops. Given that we live in a heterogeneous rather than a homogeneous society, our task is more difficult in this respect. This diversity of subgroups and social structures creates a milieu in which social movements, as struggles for satisfactions, are nurtured in an environment that has generally allowed free expression.

Circumstances identified in an environment as conducive to the rise of social movements are social heterogeneity, cultural confusion, and individual discontent. Mass communication further helps by drawing these diverse groups and opinions together (King, 1956: 13).

Our mass society (social heterogeneity) has differentiated people on the basis of age, sex, marital status, and kinship, with other additional social distinctions, or subgroups. These subgroups are based on occupation, wealth, geographical locality, social class, political leanings, race, religion, and ethnic background. In addition to these classifications, there is also a societal emphasis on organizations and large numbers of formal associations. Although personal and intimate relations do exist, they have a tendency to be overshadowed by formalized and impersonal relations (King, 1956: 12). This variety of subgroups and associations leads Oberschall (1978: 285) to observe that we only share values on two things: consumption and aspirations to lead certain life-styles. On all other issues relating to social interaction, community, associations, and future plans, we are divided.

While disagreeing on many things, these varying subgroups also have diverse codes for behavior and systems of belief. While some might be held in common, it is likely that many are different.

Cultural confusion is partly a result of these varying subgroups existing side by side within our heterogeneous society. Conflicts arise when attempting to balance these opposing values and beliefs and then acting on them. If an individual is a member of several subgroups, the strain for consistency of values and beliefs will be severe. These personal strains can be further aggravated by the

appearance of new knowledge, deprivation of wealth, power or prestige, or changes that occur in norms or values (Smelser, 1962: 287-289).

Individual discontent also plays a role in creating circumstances conducive for a social movement to arise. Those people who play an active role, attempting to make changes in society, are obviously not just passive observers. Hans Toch (1965: 11-12) believes that in order to first become involved, a person must sense a problem. That alone is not enough though, for the person must feel that something can be done about the problem, a solution is possible, and that the status quo is not inevitable. In addition, the person must feel that s(he) personally can do something about it and then must be willing to get involved toward that end. From that point, a sufficiently concerned person will begin to search for meanings. Concern and searching combine to create susceptibility to social movements, which often offer solutions that appeal. This susceptibility is further defined as ranging from mild to highly susceptible. "A mild increase in susceptibility would involve a slight lowering of sales resistance to available solutions...a strong increase in susceptibility creates gullibility or suggestibility. It involves a tendency to jump at promising propositions, and a readiness to adopt them" (Toch, 1965: 12). (Susceptibility is influenced by education, past experiences, social influences, age, general outlook on life, etc.).

It generally is recognized that the discontent, the disenchanting, and the dissatisfied establish or join social movements (Heberle, 1951: 106; King, 1956: 17; Blumer, 1969: 8). While most literature suggests this dissatisfaction, Morrison and Steeves (1967: 427) say that participators differ from non-participators also about the nature



and sources of problems encountered while reaching aspirations, the means required to reach them, and beliefs on individual versus group action. For example, people who adopt an economic theory of the state believe basic services are provided only through compulsion. This type of person would more likely become an advocate for change, such as starting or joining a social movement, than would a person who believed that people get what they need and deserve without making any waves (Olson, 1965: 98).

Individual discontent can also be influenced by relative deprivation, how one's situation ranks in relation to where s(he) wants to rank. This highly subjective view has been called the social movement participation paradox and states: "... the degree of dissatisfaction with the situation is dependent on the extent to which one has available and takes points of comparison that are more desired as standards of reference for evaluating one's situation" (Morrison and Steeves, 1967: 423). In other words, the higher your reference groups, the higher your aspirations the greater your potential for dissatisfaction. Two dissatisfied subgroups that have seen a better way of life and think it should be possible for them are the disadvantaged minorities and college graduates who are unable to find meaningful work (Flacks, 1976: 267). Both of these groups, because of individual discontent, are ripe for social movement involvement.

The attraction to voluntary simplicity has been influenced by these three circumstances; cultural confusion, social heterogeneity, and individual discontent. It is seen by some as a rational response to an irrational situation in our world (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977a: 206).

Most thoughtful people now realize that their children's lives will be far different than their own. No longer can we expect them

to have a higher standard of living, and the reality is that it might even be significantly lower. The causes are complex but readily agreed upon, such as shortages of crucial natural resources, distribution problems with food, wars, toxic chemical use causing polluted water and air, overpopulation, and world inflation. These are just a few problems, of which an elementary awareness indicates the end of an era (Johnson, 1979: 236; Ehrlich, 1974: 219; Science Action Coalition, 1979: 180). While some would accept this as the end of an era, others would see it as the beginning of another. Yet, others would not even be concerned. This is an illustration of cultural confusion, where are we going and where we have been. One response is to suggest that we are now entering a new Dark Age of civilization, not unlike the Dark Ages after the fall of Rome (A.D. 476-1000).

The new Dark Age, like the original, will not be an age of affluence. The "jet set" celebrities and their playgrounds will become less newsworthy. Super-sonic jets and luxury steamers will be remembered as the dinosaurs of a bygone age. Bicycles will become more numerous than autos, even in the America of Henry Ford and General Motors. The old electric trolley will come back in modern streamlined form as the answer to the need for cheap pollution-free mass transit. There might well be a revival of sailing ships, which, making use of modern aerodynamics and light metal alloys, could transport cargos around the world cleanly and profitably in an era of high fuel costs. If less attention is paid to the "beautiful people", more will be paid to the plain ones organizing the self-sufficient Adams Morgan neighborhood community in Washington, D.C., painstakingly resolving the problems of worker control in Yugoslav factories, working in and managing the successful kibbutzim industries, managing themselves in Chinese communes and factories, and developing the techniques of organic farming and of self-sufficient housing in various countries of the world. In short, there will be a return to the New England adage: Use it up, wear it out, make it do, do without (Stavrianos, 1976: 188).

New knowledge, such as the dangers of pollutants in our environment or the threat of nuclear energy expansion, have caused us to question the wisdom of continuing to develop indiscriminately as we

have in the past. Others, feeling deprived of desirable attributes such as power, wealth, or prestige, encourage almost any kind of political or military action that will restore the United States to its "rightful" place as leader among the world powers. (I think this sentiment accounts for Reagan winning the Presidential election in November of 1980). Furthermore, as we adapt to the new stress of living with expensive and scarce gasoline instead of cheap and abundant gasoline, there will be continued chaos and confusion.

Norms and values are also changing. Fiscal problems are causing inflation, high credit use and increases in bankruptcy. It now appears wise to buy things and pay for them later with cheaper dollars. Values relating to work also are undergoing changes. There is little identification with a job when it is impersonal and automated or the only one that can be found. Our world is changing in many ways that are not understood or accepted. Turning to social movements like voluntary simplicity can ease the modern stresses for some, while others will find their answers elsewhere.

The middle-class is the strongest advocate of voluntary simplicity. It has been argued this is because they have already experienced the American dream with its storehouse of goodies, and found it wanting. The social movement participation paradox of Morrison and Steeves (1967: 423) would suggest that the middle-class, who generally are better educated, have a greater knowledge of the world and its available wisdoms. Thus, when their dissatisfaction causes a search for points of comparison that are desirable, the range of potential actions is greater. Philosophy and religion are possible sources of answers, as well as the traditional belief that happiness comes from buying more and owning more.

The roles played by communication in social movements range from that of creating further cultural confusion through introducing new ideas or standards to that of increasing awareness of the world beyond oneself. Furthermore, mass communication has the potential to relieve confusion and bewilderment through answers and solutions to problems. Experts, self-appointed authorities, and leaders of various movements are all ready to explain the world as they see it. If people are so inclined they can choose to follow a leader or join a movement that offers reasonable answers, tidy arguments and possible solutions.

Since the individual in a mobile and heterogeneous society may be entirely unaware of how many people share her/his ideas, one unique role of mass communication is to develop a wide-ranging camaraderie between strangers who have like ideas. This is an important function for voluntary simplicity since it is primarily an individual venture, and many advocates are united only through various modes of mass communication, either television, radio, or the press. Motion pictures, while another potent form of mass communication, have not yet picked up the theme of voluntary simplicity.

Journals dealing with themes relating to voluntary simplicity are numerous. Rodale Press currently has several publications with over a million subscribers each; they are Organic Gardening with 1.2 million subscribers and Prevention, with 2.25 million subscribers. Rodale Press is not surprising as a representative of values important to voluntary simplicity since they present a vision of the world as it could be...where technology works in harmony with the environment.

In addition, other journals involved with issues important to voluntary simplicity are Mother Earth News, Acres U.S.A., Countryside,

Manas, CoEvolution Quarterly, the Futurist, and Social Problems, just to name a few. Recent articles specifically about voluntary simplicity have been published in Manas (September 1974), the Futurist (Summer 1977), CoEvolution Quarterly (Summer 1977), and in Social Problems (December 1980).

Research revealed that Richard Gregg used the term "voluntary simplicity" in the 1930s. He wrote a pamphlet with this title for Pendle Hill Press in 1936, while he was acting director of Pendle Hill, a Quaker Center for Religious and Social Study. The pamphlet was reprinted in an Indian journal, Visva-Bharati Quarterly, in 1936. This article, reprinted in the September 4, 1974 issue of Manas and the Summer, 1977, issue of CoEvolution Quarterly seems to have renewed popular interest in voluntary simplicity.

Scott and Helen Nearing (1954) and Ralph Borsodi (1929) are early practitioners of a lifestyle advocating voluntary simplicity. The Nearings have continued to influence the advocates of simplicity with their books and examples that have almost created a cult following. Additionally, E. F. Schumacher has been responsible for the theoretical theme in voluntary simplicity of appropriate size, or human scale and a reduction in needs. He succinctly states:

The cultivation and expansion of needs is the antitheses of wisdom. It is also the antithesis of freedom and peace. Every increase of needs tends to increase one's dependence on outside forces over which one cannot have control, and therefore increases existential fear (Schumacher, 1973: 33).

Environmentally, Rachael Carson's Silent Spring (1962) was responsible for a new fear that our world was being rapidly and systematically polluted beyond repair. Both Silent Spring (1962) and Small is Beautiful (1973) have spawned other publications too numerous to mention but whose overall impact has been to educate the general public