

Voluntary simplicity and the conundrum of consumption essay sample

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In *Culture Jam: the Uncooling of America*, media activist Kalle Lasn asserts that culture of consumption, which has characterized the American way of life for the better part of the 20th century, is uncool. This is not an entirely novel sentiment. The rejection and denigration of the consumer culture has been a ritual source of rebellion for a long time, and under Lasn's view, these sentiments are linked with the inverse relationship between acquisition and psychological well-being. Simply put, anti-consumerism is usually founded upon a belief that, contrary to what they are told, individuals derive little satisfaction from working hard to buy more. (Lasn 73-83; 169-172; Durning 23)

However, there is another angle to consumerism that should be considered when weighing its validity as a way of life: its sustainability. The culture of consumption requires massive rates of economic expansion to feed the desire for goods both basic and luxuriant. Yet the 21st century has given us more than enough evidence that unchecked economic expansion has problematic impacts upon the well-being of the planet: unsustainable agricultural practices, massive consumption of fossil fuels and intensive mining activities have resulted in alarming incidences of resource shortfall. Meanwhile, the infrastructure used to fuel these activities yield devastating impacts on climate, to the level of natural disasters: The normally humid country of Brazil has seen catastrophic drought, India has witnessed disastrous floods, while wildfires have struck the frigid lands of Alaska.

The overall picture we should gather from this is that even if we were to dismiss the psychic stress imposed by the consumer lifestyle on individuals,

it is difficult to endorse its continuance in the face of the environmental crises it generates. Alan Durning (21-23) maintains that the only thing rivaling massive consumption as a “ cause of ecological decline” is population growth, though in such a statement Durning has chosen to overlook the relationship between the two. Population growth imposes a greater demand in the exploitation of resources for consumer goods, and therefore as causes of ecological decline go hand in hand.

In recent decades, the response towards the problems of consumerism (regardless of which ones are validated) has been to voluntarily strive towards reduced consumption. Individuals have begun to link social responsibility and/or ideals of newfound spirituality with the impact of material living; a movement known as ‘ voluntary simplicity’ has emerged. Such material ‘ downshiffters’ as Lasn (169-172) terms them, have concluded that ecological sensitivity, personal growth, and responsible limitations are what is necessary to lead a fuller richer life. (Elgin & Mitchell 2-15)

However, even a movement such as voluntary simplicity is insufficient to address the problematic impacts that industrialization and the capitalization of natural resources have brought to bear on the planet in pursuit of the materials which fuel consumption. Lifestyle adjustment is all well and good, but they are small gestures that contribute very little in the way in offsetting planetary impacts. This is compounded by the fact that it is relatively futile to endorse such conscious asceticism to others, regardless of whether it comes from spiritualist advocacy or environmentalist proselytizing. As Alex Steffen (2006) notes of the latter:

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“ They called for tightening belts and curbing appetites, turning down the thermostat and living lower on the food chain. They rejected technology, business, and prosperity in favor of returning to a simpler way of life. No wonder the movement got so little traction. Asking people in the world’s wealthiest, most advanced societies to turn their backs on the very forces that drove such abundance is naive at best.”

Some have suggested that another alternative to conscious asceticism and the lifestyle of voluntary simplicity is to seek ways to retrofit the consumer lifestyle to accommodate green options. As *The New York Times*’ Alex Williams (2006) reasons, “ it is not so easy to conserve within a culture of affluence whose environmentally costly components have almost become entitlements.” As such, it has been proposed that the other means by which society can engage with environmental concerns while still making the consumer lifestyle possible is to develop green versions of consumer goods such as hybrid automobiles, reusable shopping bags and toxin-free household cleaning materials. In effect, develop the green-branded consumer lifestyle, in which environmental consciousness is not only a purchasing option, but a marketing point as well.

However, both Alex Steffen and Joel Makower find fault with this idea. Makower (2007) opines that self-reported ‘ green’ attitudes in consumers are not necessarily reflected in their own consumer behavior with green-oriented purchasing decisions. Makower notes that part of the problem is that most consumers who proclaim environmental values do not necessarily have well-articulated ideas about the environment. As such, their claim to

environmental sensitivity is largely one founded in opinions that “are pretty mushy,” rather than in well-defined personal views on the costs and consequences of their consumer behavior, or a deeply rooted belief in the *personal* relevance of environmental concerns.

Regardless, even if marketers were able to successfully link consumer interest in environmentalism with the values that motivate strategic consumption, the battle for developing successfully green-oriented consumerism would not be over. In fact, strategic consumption may merely obscure the reasons why make human economic development as we know it so problematic to the welfare of the planet. As Steffen contends, “Buying a hemp hoodie is not a blow for a better world, it’s at best a mere gesture towards the idea that the world ought to better.” Crompton (5) notes that strategic consumption is frequently positioned as the means of initiating behavioral change towards environmental ideals. However, he contends that these are also ineffective, largely because of their reliance on “small and painless steps,” with the expectation being that, “once they have embarked upon these steps, people will become motivated to engage in more significant behavioural changes.” (Crompton 5)

Crompton (5) notes that such strategies emphasize the use of marketing techniques to encourage strategic consumption as well as generating product-independent changes in consumer behavior. This is because green marketing sabotages itself. If small steps such as recycling and using low-watt bulbs are to be marketed as effective at addressing environmental problems, then they effectively reduce the incentive to take larger steps.

Mobilizing support for larger changes becomes undermined by the marketing of small steps.

This is where the bright green school of environmentalism comes in, which is viewed as an ideology of environmentalism that reconciles the guilt of modern living with concern for the well-being of the planet. The essence of bright green environmentalism is that it seeks to retrofit the present way of life using available and emerging social and technological tools in such a manner as to unchain it from the paradigms that create negative environmental impacts. Its primary ideological contentions are that it is unrealistic and unjust for either the developed nations of the Global North and the underdeveloped countries of the Global South to reject material abundance and industrial levels of luxury; that strategic consumption is ultimately trivial in relation to present ecological problems; and that green marketing cannot expedite the successful transition from minor actions to the mobilization of political will to introduce change.

Instead of attempting to psychologically engineer consumer attitudes and re-fit consumer goods, bright green environmentalism charges that the real solutions we need are those which address the systems which support consumerism, and many of other societal norms that contribute to the environmental malaise. The presumption is that we're all going to want convenience, luxury and not have to think too hard about that in order to account for environmental responsibility. To accomplish that, technological improvements designed to further economic gains must emphasize one-planet living and minimized ecological footprints on a sustainable level: The

quality of life can actually be improved even while ecological footprints shrink. As Steffen observes:

We don't need more carpool lanes. We need to eliminate fossil fuels from our economy. We don't need more recycling bins. We need to create a closed-loop, biomimetic, neobiological industrial system. We don't need to attend a tree-planting ceremony. We need to become expert at ecosystem management and gardening the planet. We don't need another unscented laundry detergent. We need to ban the vast majority of the toxic chemicals upon which our lifestyles currently float and invent a completely non-toxic green chemistry.

In effect, we don't need small-scale solutions but large-scale redesigns of how we harness resources and how process them into goods, we need sustainable ways of fueling the vehicles needed to distribute them and highway infrastructure that doesn't increase anthropogenic climate change and we need ways to provide those all sustainably In a nutshell, bright green environmentalism celebrates the idea that you don't need terrorism to incite change, nor do you need to subscribe to the virtues of asceticism to do so. You just need smart design.

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