

Voluntary Simplicity

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Alan Durning (1999) in his article *Asking How Much Is Enough* raises a number of topical for the contemporary society issues. Although this article was written more than a decade ago, one cannot but draw parallels with the today's world and see that, on the whole, our squalid situation has not improved but, on the contrary, has even worsened proving that the author's predictions are right. Alan Durning (1999) depicts the consummation society, gives a lot of staggering numbers and proves his viewpoint with various tables and schemas. At a glance, he shows the Western world as well as Japan and some other quickly developing Eastern countries as the utter materialistic consumerist communities that are highly ego-centered and value nothing but money and societal status that is obtained through the possession of miscellaneous expensive and luxurious goods. Then the author changes a bit his perspective of this horrid situation and claims that people realize all the importance of the human relationships and such eternal values as, for instance, love, family and friendship (Durning, 1999). In the closing parts of the article Alan Durning (1999) pays attention to voluntary simplicity arguing that this attitude to life may be the turning point for the whole world on the road towards salvation of our morals and, what is more important, our ecological system. Moreover, the author builds his arguments against the consumerist policy mostly around the indisputable fact that it ruins our eco-system and damages the environment of our planet. Having read the article, I must say that I agree with the majority of the author's thoughts, though his criticism may seem a little harsh at times.

“Consumption has become a central pillar of life in industrial lands, and is even embedded in social values” (Durning, 1999). This statement is proved with numerous examples and we cannot dispute this fact. Industrial and post-industrial world has been and is based on the production and consummation of goods. This is the basis of any economy and no country can

thrive without these processes. However, the author proves and I tend to agree with him, that our society pays too much attention to the materialistic welfare, often at the expense of the moral development and decline of the spiritual spheres of life.

The author raises a very pressing problem of sufficiency. Although the numbers he gives in the article are outdated, they can be easily applied to the current situation as the up-to-date statistics will show the same rates and frequencies of growth of the consummation levels. American society is taken as a central example of the ever-growing needs and wishes and the rest of the world does its best in order to reach the American living standards. Alan Durning vividly shows the impossibility of this, even theoretically, as our planet simply cannot sustain the humanity's demands. "The avarice of mankind is insatiable," wrote Aristotle 2300 years ago... If our wants are insatiable, there is simply no such thing as enough" (Durning, 1999). The author believes that human greed and insatiable desire are being cultivated by the modern media and the manufacturers of the goods (Durning, 1999). If so, then the government can somehow regulate this situation. Furthermore, there exist certain legislations and rules that are aimed at diminishing the quantity of advertisements and therefore, at minimizing their harmful influence on people. The author states that this policy proves to be successful (Durning, 1999). Nevertheless, nowadays we see that the situation has not changed much since the beginning of the century because the advertising business has turned out to be one of the most profitable ones in comparison to other spheres of economy.

Voluntary simplicity is the only possible way out of this dead end, from the author's point of view. Alan Durning (1999) points out that this philosophy is not a new one, it has existed since the ancient times. For example, Confucian taught that "Excess and deficiency are equally at fault" (Durning, 1999). The author seems to support the idea that people should not

fall into the extremes. Voluntary simplicity does not mean that we have to leave all the technological achievements and blessings of the 21st century behind and follow the Henry David Thoreau's example of living in the wood. "...the goal is not ascetic self-denial. What they are after is personal fulfillment; they just do not think consuming more is likely to provide it" (Durning, 1999). The author writes that switching from material to nonmaterial satisfaction is a long and painful process that requires a great deal of persistence and unbending strong will. "Realistically, voluntary simplicity is unlikely to gain ground rapidly against the onslaught of consumerist values" (Durning, 1999). Nonetheless, it is possible to gain satisfaction and happiness following such a lifestyle as the example of millions of its followers show. Personally, I have never guessed that this philosophy of simple life is so popular and it is really astonishing that about 10 million of adult Americans wholeheartedly try to live in such a way.

One of the main arguments in favor of voluntary simplicity is its positive impact on the environment. The reduction of the consummation rates inevitably leads to the lower emission rates which reduces the damage done to the ozone layer on the daily basis as well as brings benefit to all the natural resources. However, one of the major economic problems could arise in this case: if there is no production and no demand, then there will be no money and no national economy as it is. Still, the author believes that this difficulty can be tackled: "Ultimately, efforts to revitalize household and community economies may prove the decisive element in the attempt to create a culture less prone to consumption" (Durning, 1999).

All things considered, the author concludes, "In many ways, we might be happier with less" (Durning, 1999). There is a grain of truth in these words, for various sociological researches show that the humanity is not becoming happier with every passing year, yet the numbers of consuming rates are rapidly growing. It is high time to reevaluate the existing

situation and take urgent measures to improve it somehow. Besides, the problem of environmental protection has become an extremely vital one as our planet suffers from our selfish and ignorant behavior. Alan Durning (1999) believes that voluntary simplicity may be the salvation the humanity has been looking for and produces convincing proofs. Naturally, it is the personal choice of every human being whether to follow this lifestyle or no, yet we would lose nothing for trying.

References

Durning, A. (1999). Asking How Much Is Enough. *Environmental Management*. M. V. Russo (ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.