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# STATE OF THE WORLD

*Transforming Cultures*

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*From Consumerism to Sustainability*

**THE  
WORLDWATCH  
INSTITUTE**

2010

# STATE OF THE WORLD

## *Transforming Cultures*

### *From Consumerism to Sustainability*

Advance Praise for *State of the World 2010*:

**“If we continue to think of ourselves mostly as consumers, it’s going to be very hard to bring our environmental troubles under control. But it’s also going to be very hard to live the rounded and joyful lives that could be ours. This is a subversive volume in all the best ways!”**

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**“Worldwatch has taken on an ambitious agenda in this volume. No generation in history has achieved a cultural transformation as sweeping as the one called for here...it is hard not to be impressed with the book’s boldness.”**

—**Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank**

**“This year’s *State of the World* report is a cultural mindbomb exploding with devastating force. I hope it wakes a few people up.”**

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Like a tsunami, consumerism has engulfed human cultures and Earth’s ecosystems. Left unaddressed, we risk global disaster. But if we channel this wave, intentionally transforming our cultures to center on sustainability, we will not only prevent catastrophe but may usher in an era of sustainability—one that allows all people to thrive while protecting, even restoring, Earth.

In this year’s *State of the World* report, 50+ renowned researchers and practitioners describe how we can harness the world’s leading institutions—education, the media, business, governments, traditions, and social movements—to reorient cultures toward sustainability.



full image



extreme close-up

Several million pounds of plastic enter the world’s oceans every hour, portrayed on the cover by the 2.4 million bits of plastic that make up *Gyre*, Chris Jordan’s 8- by 11-foot reincarnation of the famous 1820s woodblock print, *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa*, by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai.

For discussion questions, additional essays, video presentations, and event calendar, visit [blogs.worldwatch.org/transformingcultures](http://blogs.worldwatch.org/transformingcultures).

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# Inspiring People to See That Less Is More

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*Cecile Andrews and Wanda Urbanska*

Voluntary simplicity is an age-old philosophy that advocates turning away from the pursuit of money, possessions, and greed in order to live more deeply and fully—limiting outer wealth for a greater inner wealth. Philosophers have seen simplicity as a central component of the “good life,” arguing that the pursuit of wealth distracts people from more important things, and for much of human history it has also been a religious and spiritual ideal personified by people like St. Francis of Assisi and Gandhi. Today voluntary simplicity has become a movement for sustainability and happiness in a post-consumer society.<sup>1</sup>

Environmentalists have established the harm caused to the planet by consumerism. Voluntary simplicity builds on these facts to create a movement to change behaviors. It is a critique of the values of consumerism: the belief that money is the measure of all things; the practice of using people and the planet for personal benefit; the competitiveness that pits people against each other; and the acceptance of impersonal, sterile, authoritarian, and irresponsible values. In place of these, voluntary simplicity advocates caring and community.

Above all, it is a challenge to the dominant philosophy about money found in most societies. As theologian Abraham Heschel puts it: “The most urgent task is to destroy the myth that accumulation of wealth and the achievement of comfort are the chief vocations of man.”<sup>2</sup>

## Levels of Simplicity

The subject of simplicity is a complex one, with at least three levels—practical, philosophical, and public policy. First is the practical level: cutting back and consuming less. People limit consumption for a variety of reasons—to clear out clutter, to reduce or avoid debt, to secure savings, to afford to work less, or to protect the planet. But focusing only on frugality does not work in the long run. It’s like a diet: sooner or later people begin to indulge themselves again. So for deeper engagement, people need to understand that less consumption can lead to more fulfillment: more time for connection to others; more time spent in nature; more satisfaction, security, and balance.

Thus an enduring simplicity must move to

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**Cecile Andrews** is the author of *Less is More*, *Slow is Beautiful*, and *Circle of Simplicity*. **Wanda Urbanska** is an author and the producer/host of *Simple Living with Wanda Urbanska*, the first nationally syndicated series dedicated to promoting simple, sustainable living.

a second level, a philosophical approach that asks what is important and what matters. At this level, voluntary simplicity becomes a way of living that asks about the consequence of behaviors for the well-being of people and the planet. In fact, it can be argued that consuming becomes a habit for people because they do not take the time to think and make choices based on their own best interests. In a rushed society, people do what is easiest—which is often the things the corporations want them to do.

At the philosophical level of simplicity, people strip away the inessential so that they have time for the essential. In particular, they explore the idea of the “good life” and the nature of happiness. As researchers like Tim Kasser, author of *The High Price of Materialism*, have found, after a certain point more money does not make people happier. Yes, people need a certain level of money, but the lust for more causes people to ignore the important things like friends, family, and community. Having supportive relationships is what makes people happy. Thus the public must come to understand that voluntary simplicity is not a sacrifice. It is about increased personal benefit, about greater life satisfaction and fulfillment—all with a smaller ecological footprint. It’s about “less is more”—more security, more tranquility, more joy, more happiness.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, at the public policy level the issue is “less is more” for all people. Although individuals can make changes in their own behavior and live more simply, very few people can live a truly simple life in western industrial societies. For too long, the simplicity movement has focused primarily on individual change. It is time to move to a greater advocacy of public policy change. In order to enable all to live simply, society needs public policies that provide health care, vacations, parental leave, and reduced work hours.

Perhaps the most essential policy change has to do with wealth inequality. The biggest predictor of the health of a nation, as measured

in terms of longevity, is the gap between the rich and the poor. It’s not just that the health of the poor brings down the average—everyone is affected because inequality undermines social cohesion. Richard Wilkinson, author of numerous books on the wealth gap, shows how the stress of inequality undermines health and promotes consumerism. It is highly stressful when someone is denied respect and dignity in a status-conscious society, and stress makes people sick. Further, inequality contributes to consumerism: in an unequal society, people use material possessions to fight their way up the ladder of status. In *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, Wilkinson and Kate Pickett show how wealth inequality affects community life, mental health, and violence, among others—all factors making it hard to live simply and attain happiness.<sup>4</sup>

## Motivating Change

How do we motivate people to begin to reduce their consumerism and to work for change? First, some will respond to information about the issues. Knowing the dire facts about climate change will motivate them to change. But for others, more is needed. Berkeley linguist George Lakoff says that too often change agents rely only on information and facts—but that is not enough. It is important to evoke empathy and caring. The simplicity movement does this through the vision and the experience of the joyful community.<sup>5</sup>

The voluntary simplicity movement holds out a vision of the good life, a life based on connection, caring, and the common good. Environmental author Bill McKibben, writing in *The Nation*, said: “In fact, the only way to endure the transition will be with a renewed sense of community. The real poison of the past few decades has been the hyper-individualism that we’ve let dominate our political life—the idea that everything works best if we think

not a whit about the common interest. In the end, that has damaged our society, our climate and our private lives. The final hope we have is resurgence of a politics that calls on us to work together.”<sup>6</sup>

This focus on community takes several forms in the simplicity movement: the study circle, cohousing, ecovillages, and the relocalization or Transition Town movement. Certainly not all of these efforts label themselves as “simplicity,” but most people involved in them are trying to live more simply.

The simplicity study circle is a small-group method of community education and social change that has its roots in European history. Study circles originated in Sweden and the Danish folk education movement, although folk education has a long heritage in the United States as well. The Highlander Center in Tennessee, for example, began as a folk school after its founder Myles Horton visited Denmark in the 1920s. Highlander was also influenced by the popular education movement in Latin America, in particular the theories developed by Brazil’s Paulo Friere, author of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The focus of folk education, popular education, and the study circle is the belief that if people come together to talk, they will find the answers to their own problems—that the wisdom is in the people. Whereas the purveyors of consumerism put a great deal of effort into manipulating people and their emotions, the community education approach restores people’s abilities to think for themselves—an approach that can break the manipulation of advertising in consumer societies.<sup>7</sup>

While the study circle is a small group of six to eight people, other forms of community are larger. Efforts such as cohousing and ecovillages, for example, ask people to move into a new setting. At the same time, more and more people are working to transform their own neighborhoods into places that encourage sustainability and community. What began in

the United States as the relocalization movement is now joined by the Transition Town movement, which originated in the United Kingdom and is spreading around the world. (See Box 22.) As of August 2009, almost 200 communities were recognized as official Transition Towns in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, and Chile.<sup>8</sup>

The Transition Town movement focuses on reducing the use of oil by building “resilience” in a community—first by helping people to see that almost everything they buy involves oil, whether in its manufacture, transport, or marketing, and then by teaching people ways to reduce their use of oil by gardening and other traditional skills such as canning and knitting. Transition Town leaders work with neighbors to shop and eat locally. They encourage people to share through projects like local currencies, tool exchanges, car sharing, community gardens, community-supported agriculture, and farmers’ markets. All these projects involve working with others in a collaborative and cooperative way, undermining the competitiveness of corporate consumerism.<sup>9</sup>

People involved in these movements may not even realize they are practicing “voluntary simplicity,” and indeed the label is not important. For instance, the Slow movement has gained attention in Europe—particularly the Slow Food and Slow Cities movements as described in Carl Honore’s *In Praise of Slowness*. The Slow Food movement, founded in Italy, encourages people to support local, organic food. (See Box 23.) It supports farming that nurtures the planet as well as promoting social justice—focusing on the practices of corporations. The *Cittaslow* movement states that its purpose is to resist “the fast-lane, homogenized world so often seen in other cities throughout the world”; it supports local food and artisans, less use of cars, and places for people to linger and enjoy.<sup>10</sup>

In the United States, the Slow movement

## Box 22. Growing a Degrowth Movement

Today many people believe that economic growth will lead to perpetual improvements in well-being, even as growth has increasingly taxed Earth's ecosystems, exploits the poor, and threatens the security of future generations. To proactively address the current environmental, financial, social, and ethical crisis, a radically different societal model is necessary: a degrowth society. The movement in support of this—tailored for countries that have grown beyond their fair share of Earth's bounty—has developed a political platform that envisions degrowth societies centered on sustainability and proximity, where, for example, they relocalize production and consumption. Degrowth societies promote human relations instead of consumerism and reduce waste and polluting transport through the use of ecotaxes. All of this is done so that these societies will have sustainable ecological footprints and be in balance with nature.

Today there are degrowth political parties in France and Italy. The publication *La Décroissance* (*Degrowth*) can be found in newsstands across France and has readers in the rest of the francophone world as well. In Spain, Temps de Re-voltes organized a “degrowth publicity tour” of more than 30 small municipalities in 2008. In cooperation with local authorities, the group organized panels and discussed future energy crises and degrowth visions while celebrating local culture and traditions.

To have the impact needed to stabilize ecological systems, degrowth will need to be pursued at a variety of levels. Cities, towns, and villages will need to relocalize agricultural and energy systems, introducing community and backyard vegetable gardens as well as locally generated renewable energy to promote resilience. Local currencies such as Totnes Pounds or Ithaca Hours can help wealth remain in the hands of individuals and small local businesses as opposed to multinational corporations

and financial institutions. There also need to be broader societal efforts such as reducing working hours and improving regulation of international institutions that only promote destructive growth.

Currently, the initiatives that best put into practice the values set forth by degrowth are the Transition Towns that are found mainly in the United Kingdom, but also in Australia, the United States, Japan, and Chile, among other countries. Transition Towns are based on preparing for resource scarcity and climate change by building communities that are both socially and economically resilient, where the focus is on improving quality of life for the inhabitants while living sustainably. The “showcase” of Transition Towns is Totnes in England.

The movement for a “degrowth society” is radically different from the recession that is widespread today. Degrowth does not mean the decay or suffering often imagined by those new to this concept. Instead, degrowth can be compared to a healthy diet voluntarily undertaken to improve a person's well-being, while negative economic growth can be compared to starvation. In a degrowth world, people will spend less time working and more time living. They will consume less but better, produce less waste, reuse and recycle more, understand the impacts of human behavior, and have ecological footprints that can be sustained. People will find happiness in human relationships and conviviality rather than the never-ending pressure to accumulate more and more goods. All this implies a serious rethinking of people's current concepts of reality and significant imagination, but the shifting ecological realities are sure to provide the necessary inspiration.

—Serge Latouche  
 Professor Emeritus of Economics  
 University of Orsay, France  
 Source: See endnote 8.

### Box 23. The Slow Food Movement

The international Slow Food Movement started in 1986 as a protest against the opening of a McDonalds near the Spanish Steps in Rome. The restaurant became a physical representation of the erosion of the local, sustainable, and healthy food culture in Italy. Since then, Slow Food has become a global organization with chapters, or *convivia*, in 132 countries, and with more than 100,000 members. They work to promote “good, clean and fair food,” thereby transforming cultures via food. This is done through a wide range of activities that both educate and inspire.

Slow Food aims to reconnect producers and consumers (or co-producers, as they prefer to call the educated consumer who supports slow food) and promote culinary diversity and healthy, tasty food on a local scale, while also seeing the “bigger picture,” promoting biodiversity as well as international networking among artisanal producers, and enhancing traditional production in order to make it economically viable. Throughout the movement’s activities, the emphasis is on making gastronomic pleasure and ecological responsibility inseparable.

The movement works to educate the public through a variety of initiatives. Many books now teach the art of “slow cooking.” Lectures, articles, and Web sites describe the grim realities of agribusiness and fast food, as well as the benefits of buying local and Fair Trade products. The movement also uses events to educate and mobilize people. During one such event, Slow Fish 2009 in Genoa, Italy, 55,000 local and international guests learned about sustainable fish harvesting, met artisanal fishers, and got gastronomic educa-

tion through food and wine tasting.

The Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity—a division of Slow Food—works to “defend local food traditions, protect local biodiversity and promote small-scale quality products.” Small artisan producers around the world are organized in 300 Presidia that focus on improving production techniques while preserving traditional products and methods and finding new markets for these. The Foundation also has an Ark of Taste that is a register of food products they hope to reintroduce in the marketplace but that are in danger of being forgotten because traditional production methods are no longer in use or certain ingredients are scarce.

Communities are also setting up Earth Markets and Slow Food cafés and restaurants—both of which help food producers and co-producers interact while promoting local food and helping customers. Earth Markets and cafés are now located in Delhi, Tel Aviv, Beirut, and Bucharest, among other cities.

Slow Food members also do a lot of lobbying on behalf of their causes, particularly on issues regarding agricultural and trade policy in the European Union. Recently, a Time for Lunch campaign was organized by Slow Food USA; it encourages Congress to improve the Child Nutrition Act, which sets the standards for school meals in the United States. The whole Slow Food movement—through its role in promoting good, clean, and fair food—is playing an important role in facilitating a shift to sustainable cultures.

—Helene Gallis

Source: See endnote 10.

has become a part of the simplicity movement, encouraging people to live deeply by exploring and reclaiming the ancient vision of leisure. People are beginning to find ways to take back

their time in order to walk more, talk with their neighbors, and spend more time in local neighborhoods. Advocates of the slow life are involved in the Take Back Your Time cam-

paign, a project to bring some European labor management polices to the United States. Certainly, without shorter work hours, more vacations, and parental and sick leave, it is difficult to live simply.<sup>11</sup>

Creating community is central to inspiring people to live more simply. And it is important to see that this approach has implications for democracy, which is the only way to wrest power from corporations, the force behind consumerism. Robert Wuthnow, in *American Mythos*, calls for more “reflective democracy,” opportunities to talk about basic values and ideals. He argues that in the usual democratic discourse, people fail to move beyond the idea of “the informed citizen”—someone who engages in discussions about current events—when they also need to reflect on basic values and assumptions. Certainly voluntary simplicity is the “examined life,” helping people determine what’s important and what matters.<sup>12</sup>

As Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, notes, the culture in which people talk over the back fence is the culture in which people vote. When people are involved in their local communities, they are talking with each other and are usually more involved with public policy—often trying to stop intrusive development in their neighborhoods. So the neighborhood movement is important in many ways. Ultimately, conversations and engagement with others help people transform the “lone wolf” culture and realize that true security lies not in material wealth but in people.<sup>13</sup>

In their new book, *Meeting Environmental Challenges: The Role of Human Identity*, Tim Kasser and Tom Crompton argue that it is important to focus on strategies that inspire people to move away from materialistic values. They maintain that focusing on fear—through dire warnings about the environment—can drive people to consume as a compensatory behavior. They cite simplicity circles as a way to offer social support that evokes more transcendent values of caring and concern.<sup>14</sup>

Another way to elicit feelings that evoke hope rather than fear is through people’s stories. People become interested in voluntary simplicity when they read or hear a story they identify with. The story usually goes something like this: a corporate employee is stressed, sick, and depressed, so he consumes less, quits his job, moves to a smaller house, finds work that is more satisfying, reduces his work hours, plants a garden, and begins to work with his local community center. People see themselves in these stories. They begin to see that their desire for more—more money, more status—will not make them happy. They awaken from the spell of the false promises of consumerism, and they begin to search for a better way. One story about downshifting can perhaps do as much to change people’s consumer behavior as 10 facts about climate change.

One effort to use stories like these is the U.S. public television series *Simple Living with Wanda Urbanska*. Rather than being shamed into change by finger-wagging and images of environmental degradation and calamity, the audience learns from the stories of real people. The series illustrates different approaches to simplicity, allowing all kinds of people to relate. For instance, it documents one family’s commitment to bringing Great Plains bison back from the brink of extinction in Bozeman, Montana. It shows a Massachusetts church encouraging people to “roll or stroll for your soul” by asking congregants to ride bikes, walk, or carpool to service, followed by the minister’s dramatic “blessing of the bikes.”<sup>15</sup>

The series challenges viewers to keep possessions in service past their date of planned obsolescence in a playful, recurring feature called “The Thing That Refused to Die.” One such “thing” was a 1930s Fireboat put out to pasture by the New York City Fire Department that was a knight in shining water when its ancient hoses were pressed into service to fight the fires at the Twin Towers on 9-11. The

moral of this segment was simple: “That thing you put out to pasture may be the most valuable thing you own.” Stories like these can motivate people to reexamine their consumption choices, to make change.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, a sense of joyful community is evoked by new kinds of social inventions: experiences that bring people together in new and creative ways that challenge consumerism. For instance, “Buy Nothing Day” led by *Adbusters Magazine* was originally the day after Thanksgiving in the United States, reportedly the biggest shopping day of the year. Now more than 65 nations participate with different activities—the zanier the better. Volunteers stand in shopping malls with scissors and a sign offering to cut up people’s credit cards. Others sponsor a “zombie walk” through malls, mirroring the blank looks on the faces of shoppers. People have fun driving their shopping carts around in long conga lines in places like Walmart or filling their carts and leaving them without buying anything. *Adbusters* encourages “culture jamming” to fight consumerism, and it stages events like giving fake tickets to SUVs or sponsoring a “detox week,” encouraging people to “unplug” from video games and computers.<sup>17</sup>

Another creative idea is The Compact, an initiative in which people agree to go a year without buying anything new. Some become involved in “freeganism,” which can include “dumpster diving” for food and other items that have been thrown away but are perfectly good, gleaning, wild foraging, urban gardens, or squatting in empty buildings. Another movement that appeals particularly to young people is “couch surfing,” where they travel cheaply by finding homes on-line to stay in for free. In a similar vein is “wwoofing” (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms), where

people work on organic farms in return for room and board.<sup>18</sup>

## Creating Post-Consumer Cultures

All over the world people are developing ways to challenge consumerism and create post-consumer cultures. At the Barefoot College in India, local impoverished people are encouraged to maintain their sustainable ways of living. Gaviotas, a village in Colombia, has reclaimed barren savannas and regenerated forests using innovative techniques such as solar and wind power and children’s seesaws to drive a water pump. Europeans engage in “placemaking,” where “spaces are turned into places” by, for example, Denmark’s Jan Gehl, who has transformed urban spaces into experiences of community and conviviality by expanding the cafe society and the bicycle and pedestrian culture. A similar movement called “city repair” started in Portland, Oregon, and involves people “taking back” streets in their neighborhoods by painting designs in the intersections, moving lawn chairs into the streets, and creating straw bale benches and bulletin boards at the corners—all to bring people together.<sup>19</sup>

The goal is not only to get people to consume less but to create a new society, to inspire and motivate them to become more involved in social change efforts by evoking empathy, caring, and connection. When people get involved with others, they lose their desire to consume because they encounter a new, more satisfying way of life. Voluntary simplicity, then, is at the same time a practice, a philosophy, and a method of social change that can help transform consumer cultures by helping people understand that “less is more.”

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### Inspiring People to See That Less Is More

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