

The Frugality Phenomenon

More and more Americans are turning towards a life-style that is "outwardly simple and inwardly rich"

Carter Henderson

There is occurring today a deep change of attitudes about what is the desired "good life" in the Western countries. The most advanced market-oriented Western country, namely U.S.A. seems to have changed; away from the earlier attitude of demanding more and more worldly goods, to a less materialistic one. America, and the Western world generally, was built on the acquisitive drive and the Protestant ethic exemplified at times by such catch-words as "Keeping up with the Joneses". The accompanying article by Carter Henderson, co-director of the Princeton Center for Alternative Futures, which we reproduce with the courtesy of Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, A Magazine of Science and Public Affairs (copyright, Educational Foundation for Nuclear Science, Chicago, Illinois), summarises some of the emerging new American attitudes.

This turning back from some of the assumptions of Western industrial civilisation of the last 200 years is of significance not only to America, but also to the Third World, as well as to the Socialist countries. The goal of the Socialist countries whether it was under the Leninist slogan of Socialism equals Soviet Power plus Hydroelectricity or under the post-Maoist slogan of the "four modernisations" has always implied a philosophy of following, catching up and overtaking the West, in material production. The Socialist world has rejected some—though not all—of the social institutions of production in the West but not its products. Western products whether they be cars, aeroplanes, colour television or smart clothes has tantalized Eastern Europe. American rejection of an acquisitive trend has therefore a strong impact on some of these follower countries (especially, for instance, countries that have overtaken the West, as the G.D.R. has today with a higher standard of living than Great Britain). For the Third World the same holds true; post-independence rhetoric has always evoked an image of gaining part of the West's supply of material abundance. A reversal and partial denial therefore of a model of technological development in the West is of tremendous significance for "follower" countries, whether they be the Third World or the Socialist ones.

The question one has to pose is whether symptoms of the US today are a sign of a society in decline, a spent-out force or is it still the torch bearer of future technology, a "technology" very different from what has been hitherto accepted.

In the accompanying piece Manel Tampoe, a journalist reputed for her serious and thought-provoking commentaries on social issues, and particularly on non-renewable-resources and changes to the environment, looks at this same situation from a local angle and poses the issue "A New Economic Order or Human Extinction". She maintains that "the progressive or developed societies of the future will have the characteristics of the present 'under-developed' societies".

What would happen if consumers decided to simplify their lives and spend less on material goods and services? This question is taking on a certain urgency as rates of economic growth continue to decelerate throughout the industrialized world and as millions of consumers appear opting for more frugal life-styles.

The Stanford Research Institute, which has done some of the most extensive work on the frugality phenomenon, estimates that nearly five million American adults are pursuing lives of "voluntary simplicity", and double that number "adhere to and act on some but not all" of its basic tenets.

The frugality phenomenon first achieved prominence as a middle-class rejection of high consumption life-styles in the industrialized world

during the '50s and '60s. In *The Silent Revolution*, Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan's Institute of Social Research examined this experience in the United States and 10 Western European nations. He concluded that a change has taken place "from an overwhelming emphasis on material well-being and physical security toward greater emphasis on the quality of life", that is, "a shift from materialism to postmaterialism".

Inglehart calls the '60s the "fat years". Among their more visible trappings were the ragged and flamboyantly patched blue jeans favoured by the affluent young. Most of the retreat from materialism, however, was less visible. Comfortably fixed Americans were going without, making things last longer, sharing

things with others, learning to do things for themselves and so on. But while economically significant it was hardly discernible in a U.S. Gross National Product climbing vigorously toward the \$ 2 billion mark.

Yet as the frugality phenomenon matured—growing out of the soaring '60s and into the sombre '70s—it seemed to undergo a fundamental transformation. American consumers continued to lose faith in materialism and were being joined by new converts who were embracing frugality because of the darkening economic skies they saw ahead. Resource scarcities, soaring energy prices, persistent inflation, high-level unemployment, balance-of-trade deficits, and the declining value of the U.S. dollar on foreign exchange markets forced consumers to look to their own resources. The one device which seemed most promising, the one over which they had the most control, was frugality—learning to live with less in a world where a penny saved was still a penny earned.

The Western democracies are now "in the midst of a revolution that we have only begun to perceive", former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told a 1977 meeting of business, political and education leaders in Washington, D.C. The next decade he added, will decide whether the industrial democracies will be able to manage their economic policies and maintain social peace "in the face of a probably lower long-term growth rate in the 1980s".

According to the Stanford Research Institute, the nearly five million Americans living lives of voluntary simplicity appear to be predominantly young (between the ages of 18 and 39), evenly divided between the sexes, almost exclusively white, from middle or upper class backgrounds, exceptionally well-educated, politically independent, largely urban and from households where both wife and husband earn incomes. The reasons these men and women have chosen simple life-styles include the desire to live in a way that is "outwardly simple add inwardly rich", a "preference for smallness" as opposed to "complexity, anonymity, artificiality, dehumanization manipulation and wastefulness." There is an "insistence upon living as naturally as

possible" and a desire "to free the inner self for exploration" and to better cope with the "new scarcity". The Stanford Institute authors projected that Americans pursuing lives of fully voluntary simplicity would grow from 5 million to 25 million in 1987, and to 60 million in the year 2,000; while those opting for partial voluntary simplicity lifestyles would be from 10 million to 35 million in 1987, and 60 million by the turn of the century.

Paradoxically, the authors suggest that this growth in voluntary simplicity stands a good chance of being "perhaps the fastest growing consumer market of the coming decades". The reason for this paradox is that "the person living the simple life tends to prefer products that are functional, healthy, non-polluting, durable, repairable, recyclable or made from renewable raw materials, energy-cheap, authentic, aesthetically pleasing, and made through simple technology.

The growth projected for both the number of Americans pursuing lives of voluntary simplicity and the size of the new consumer markets this would generate, presupposes (1) a continuation of the pressures currently pushing people toward more frugal lifestyles such as the prospect of chronic resource shortages, (2) that those choosing these lifestyles will find them satisfying, and (3) that America's mass production/consumption economy will remain strong enough to avoid a severe depression and to maintain decent living standards.

Many of the Stanford Research Institute's basic contentions about the trend toward more frugal lifestyles are supported by a public opinion poll recently conducted by Louis Harris and Associates Inc. on the subject of America's unlimited economic growth.

"The American people", said Harris, "have begun to show a deep skepticism about the nation's capacity for unlimited economic growth, and they are wary of the benefits that growth is supposed to bring. A significant majority places a higher priority on improving human and social relationships and the quality of American life than on simply raising the standard of living."



Among the Harris survey's more significant findings were that a large majority of the American public now prefers:

"Teaching people how to live more with basic essentials" than on "reaching higher standards of living" (79 percent vs. 17 percent);

"Learning to get our pleasure out of non-material experiences," rather than on "satisfying our needs for more goods and services" (76 percent vs. 17 percent);

"Spending more time getting to know each other better as human beings on a person-to-person basis", instead of "improving and speeding up our ability to communicate with each other through better technology" (77 percent vs. 15 percent); and

"Improving those modes of travel we already have" rather than "developing ways to get more places faster" (82 percent vs. 11 percent).

"Taken together, the majority views expressed... suggest that a quiet revolution may be taking place in U.S. values and aspirations. Some of these attitudes reflect the energy crunch and the realization that the supply of raw materials is not boundless; others are a legacy of all those ideas young people pressed for in the 1960s that have now begun to take root in the 1970s."

In America frugality and hard work have been ingrained in the national character since the Pilgrims bequeathed to America the Puritan ethic. Since then, we have been continually reminded of the joys of simple living and the discomforts of its antithesis by a succession of such social commentators as Henry David Thoreau (*Walden*), Thorsten Veblen (*The Theory of the Leisure Class*), David M. Potter (*People of Plenty*)

CHOPPING WOOD FOR FUEL — a practice this American's family had abandoned many generations ago is now back in vogue, with more and more Americans turning towards a life-style that is 'outwardly' more simple than earlier and certainly more frugal. A recent estimate indicates that nearly 5 million American adults are pursuing lives of "voluntary simplicity" with the new middle-class rejection of high-consumption life-styles in the industrial world. Most of these nearly 5 million Americans living the 'simple life', are said to be young, idealistic and imaginative and appear to be displaying once more a mentality of frugality and hard work that has been ingrained in their national character from the days of the founding of the American nation.

and Staffan Linder (*The Harried Leisure Class*). Only very recently, however, have we begun to believe that the transition from baroque to basic consumption patterns may be essential to national economic survival.

In examining frugality, and its potential as a resource for national economic survival, it is useful to look at the difference between those Americans currently turning to more frugal lifestyles and those who have been living in what is generally described as the "counterculture".

While the two groups differ in many ways, the most significant difference would appear to be that frugal Americans largely accept the values of the industrial culture while the counterculture Americans do not. The essence of the counterculture lifestyles is its commitment to unhook from the consumption driven mainstream economy.

The fact that more and more Americans are choosing to live lower-consumption lifestyles is, of course, attracting attention throughout the country. A lively family of publications such as *Mother Earth News*, *Whole Earth Catalogue*, *Rain Prevention and Organic Gardening* are showing hundreds of thousands of readers how to actually create more self-reliant, wholesomely simple lifestyles. Should these readers wish to pursue any particular aspect of frugal living they can do so consulting hundreds of 'New Age' books.

Groups pursuing New Age lifestyles are springing up all over the United States. A recent issue of the counterculture magazine *Green Revolution*, for example, examined more than 200 communities, most of which got their start in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Begun in private homes, these communities are overwhelmingly populated by young people in their 20s and early 30s.

The emphasis on sharing and self-reliance in the growing New Age movement arises in part from its adherents' belief in the philosophy of "right livelihood" which might be broadly defined as engaging in work which does not threaten our human species, the planetary environment which sustains us, or future generations whose lives will be largely shaped by what we do today.

What seems to be happening in America and the other market-oriented democracies is that a "counter-economy" more interested in psychic than material income, is taking firm root within our mainstream economy whose vitality is dependent on endlessly growing production and consumption.

Those moving into the counter-economy are apparently convinced that the mainstream economy is now encountering limits to its previous exponential growth, and that those whose lifestyles are attuned to *enough* rather than *more* will be far better equipped to get through the wrenching transition many see ahead.

Finally and perhaps most important, is the suspicion now shared by so many people in the industrialized world that fulfilment on this planet cannot be found in the endlessly increasing consumption of material goods (even if this were possible in the future), but only through the life of the mind and spirit as taught by all the world's great religions.

Whether the frugality phenomenon represents a fundamental shift in Western economic attitudes, or something more transitory, remains to be seen. What does seem clear, however, is that the appearance of millions of Americans, Canadians, Britons, Swedes and others willing to live more frugal lives could not have come at a more opportune time.