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The Disparate Roots of Voluntary Modesty

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ABSTRACT: The effective solution of environmental problems calls for changes in levels of consumption. Sociologists have described moderation in households of high socio-economic status in affluent countries, and also a type of modesty which cannot be a response to the experience of abundance. However, its essence is not the way of life of a traditional community. Sustainable living based on self-restraint could be considered to be a symptom of the summit of cultural evolution to date. Nevertheless, historical experience warns us against making too much of contemporary cases of moderation.

KEYWORDS: voluntary modesty, international sociological comparison

APPEALS TO OUR BETTER NATURE VERSUS SOCIAL REALITY

Besides introducing appropriate technologies and in addition to the necessary demographic changes, a consistent solution to environmental problems involves changes in everyday lifestyles and in consumption. In recognition of this a growing number of topics such as 'Sustainable Living', 'Sustainable Lifestyles', 'Sustainable Consumption' and 'Alternative Patterns of Consumption' have featured in environmentally-oriented discussions. Most writers say that sustainable consumption implies changes in consumption patterns, while the braver amongst them state directly that this must also, or in particular, be understood as a *reduction of consumption*¹ in affluent countries.

In following what has been written about this topic, we are struck, on the one hand by the large number of texts on the level of more or less abstract visions and projects, and on the other by the paucity of references to actual changes in everyday life.² Sustainable consumption seems so far to have been limited to appeals to our better natures. This is not so surprising, since we reject the idea of totalitarian enforcement of lifestyle change. An effective and long-term change of lifestyle is probably conceivable only as the result of a change in human values; but we know that our values have been formed over millennia and reflect the complicated development of European culture, and thus it will hardly be possible for them to change in a short time, however necessary that might be for the environment.

We should bear in mind Inglehart's longitudinal research in *The Silent Revolution* (1977) and *The Culture Shift* (1990). Though not primarily inspired by environmental issues, it gave evidence of a growing number of people in industrially developed countries, particularly the young, who advocate post-materialistic values. There are, though, at least three reasons for preserving a certain caution.

First: the existence of small-scale research that might in our eyes cast doubt on the optimism of Inglehart's findings.³ Second: Inglehart's research, based on questioning, did not discover how people in fact behave. He merely declared what are the verbally expressed attitudes of the people questioned. It is evident that when investigating social facts such as value orientation, the questioning method is connected with an extra high danger of self-styling aimed at conforming to the existing social norm. At the same time Inglehart's research confirms that at least a social norm preferring non-material values does exist.

Inglehart's interpretation also contains a third aspect that deprives environmentally-aware readers of joy in the reading: it is the relationship between post-materialistic attitudes and the gross national product of a given country and its level of consumption. The interpretations that stress the material prosperity of the industrial stage as a precondition for post-materialistic values precludes the application of the concept of human value change to those societies that had not experienced the consumption peak of today's most affluent societies.

In my part of Central Europe, Inglehart's interpretation is particularly provoking. Were we to accept this, it would provide a negative answer to a frequent Czech question and to discussions about the chance the Czech Republic and other post-communist countries have to *jump over* the development stages of Western countries that showed themselves to be problematic.⁴

THREE PIECES OF RESEARCH INTO SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

In this article I would like to compare three of the rare studies that inquired into voluntary moderation in consumption of households.

1. Research on voluntary simplicity carried out by Duane Elgin in the USA in 1977. His results were published in the book *Voluntary Simplicity*.
2. A Netherlands case study by Wilma Aarts 'Some Characteristics of Voluntary Moderation and Its Snob Appeal', published in 1993.
3. My own research carried out in the Czech Republic in 1992, the results of which formed a part of the book *The Colourful and the Green: Some Chapters on Voluntary Modesty*, published in 1994.

Two sets of circumstances make comparison difficult. Above all, the great span of time over which these studies were carried out. Further, the fact that these three

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pieces of research were realised independently. The differences in the samples, about which I shall write later, can be considered as a 'child of the method' rather than as differences in the countries where the studies took place.

I should briefly mention the methods used:

1. Elgin published a standardised questionnaire in the periodical *Co-Evolution Quarterly* as a supplement to his article 'Voluntary Simplicity'. The respondents added some comprehensive self-reporting letters which became a source for further sociological information. The structure of the sample of 420 respondents was influenced by the fact that it was formed by the readers of one periodical and of one specific article. From now on I will call them *American Readers* for brevity's sake.
2. Wilma Aarts gathered data in semi-structured interviews with the adult members of ten typical households regulating consumption in some way, traced by 'snowball sampling'. They had at least a moderately high household income. Aart's research thus studied a group of rich Dutch people who did not spend all their income in everyday situations. They can be characterised by the label *Dutch Doctors*.
Aarts designed the research on the basis of the idea that 'people can only decide to take less if they have more'. With these presuppositions, along with Inglehart, in setting up her sample Wilma Aarts ignores the possibility that people could live modestly without having to go through the stage of abundance.
3. The existence of this possibility was supposed in my research in the Czech Republic. This also used snowball sampling.⁵ In-depth interviews with 70 people were carried out and completed by direct observation. The interviews were audio- and video-recorded. For the most part, the respondents were precisely those who were satisfied with their present low salaries and who had given up the realistic possibility of better-paid jobs. I refer to my respondents as *Colourful Czechs*, as they live modest but otherwise very varied lifestyles.

Similarities and differences

It should be said from the outset that all three samples are internally heterogeneous, and that is why they are difficult to compare with each other. Despite this, let us consider aspects of the lifestyle of the *Colourful Czechs* which make them, more or less, similar to the sample of Aarts and that of Elgin.⁶

- The shared basic characteristic is *low consumption* that is not imposed by external circumstances. This follows directly from the construction of the samples.

- A broad spectrum of *ages* was found in the samples, nevertheless young people were in a majority among the Colourful Czechs and American Readers (the average was roughly thirty) while the Dutch Doctors were older.
- All the samples are similar in the *relatively high education* of the respondents. (As we will see later on, the extent of its use varies.)
- The respondents of all the samples are able to resist the phenomenon that Konrad Lorenz called *neophilia*. They like objects that have been in use for a longer period of time such as furnishings, clothing and toys. In this point, they are immune to fashion influences. They do not object to *reusing things* from other households, and are customers of second-hand shops.
- Colourful Czechs dislike some of the typical commodities, such as microwaves, dishwashers, fryers, and televisions; though many of them use a PC and e-mail. Above all they have a distaste for cars. It does not mean that none of the respondents owns a car. Sharing a car, as well as the decision to get rid of it in the future, are common, especially in the Dutch sample.
- Both Colourful Czechs and American Readers learn basic skills that promote, to a greater or lesser extent, *self-reliance*. Colourful Czechs are able successfully to adapt the running of their households to unfavourable economic conditions. These people help their housekeeping by growing fruit and vegetables. Preserving, bottling, making and repairing furniture, and sewing take place every day. But we cannot say that it amounts to making a virtue out of necessity.
- These features (especially the last point) are further demonstrated by their choice of '*schumacherlike*' work activities – crafts and farming, and art work. However we can find Colourful Czechs also employed in public administration and conservation, etc.
- The path to low consumption is a relatively *slow process*, not a matter of resolution.
- It seems that all the studies confirm, more or less, Ronald Inglehart's idea that *socialisation in safety and relative (!) affluence* is a precondition for non-materialistic attitudes.
- The voluntarily modest have a very *wide sphere of communication*. By no means are they 'hermits'. Both Colourful Czechs and American Readers (and probably also Dutch Doctors) have a wide network of friendly contacts and are politically engaged. In the Czech sample there are a number of members of local authorities.⁷ Many of them show an altruistic interest in the handicapped and in nature conservation.
- The lives of both Colourful Czechs and American Readers have their *basis at the transcendental level*. The Czech respondents most often profess

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ecumenical Christianity, but some are also influenced by other religions. The American Readers indicate that they are involved with Buddhism, Zen, and Transcendental Meditation more often. It is a pity we learn so little about the importance of this dimension regarding the Dutch Doctors.

- We can affirm in case of the American Readers and Colourful Czechs, but only infer in case of the Dutch Doctors, that they expressed trust in other people and have the *feeling that their lives are happy*, resulting from a sense of their place in an ordered world.

What features of the Colourful Czechs differentiate them from the other samples?

- The basic difference between Colourful Czechs and Dutch Doctors is *economic status*. In contrast to the wealthier-than-average Dutch respondents, the Colourful Czechs are content with lower earnings than the Czech average. Their earnings per person are approximately on the boundary of the poverty level. (But the income levels of American Readers tends to be lower than that of the general US population as well.)
- It has been said that the voluntarily modest people of all the three samples are relatively highly educated. It should be noted, though, that the Czechs often drop out of higher education, or choose not to make use of it in their jobs. *Escape from technical education* is common.
- *The inclination to more traditional ways of life* appears to be a key feature within the Czech sample. In many cases, they are inspired by the lives of grandparents living in rural areas. How in concrete terms do these traditional inclinations demonstrate themselves?
- Colourful Czechs are distinctly family-oriented. They have *more children* than the Czech average (which could be true for the other samples). Nevertheless the other family features of the Czech sample contradict the concept of the western family more consequentially: *working at home* (not commuting) is typical. Colourful Czechs *share their households with their elderly parents*. Their lifestyles also exclude unmarried cohabitation, which is relatively common within the American sample.
- In almost none of the Czech families that we met was the mother employed. These parents of a number of children do not share the opinion that 'you cannot live on one salary'. Here we also observe the *traditional division of male and female roles*, which seems not to be true of the sample of the Dutch Doctors, with women's professional emancipation. Elgin expresses the strong affinity of his respondents for the spirit of the feminist movement, which is not the case with the Colourful Czechs.

- The Colourful Czechs' bond to tradition is also confirmed by the type of settlement where the majority of the respondents live. Approximately *two thirds live in a small town or a village*. At the same time these are not people who have lived in such settlements continuously from childhood. Mostly, they were born in the countryside and grew up there, but after some experience in the big city they returned there. This 'back to the land' tendency is missing in both the Dutch Doctors and the American Readers.
- In spite of some similarities in eating habits between the Colourful Czechs and the members of the other samples, there are also some significant differences. *The eating habits of the Colourful Czechs spontaneously follow the traditional and rural way of life, including self-sufficiency*. The inclination towards the ways of their grandmothers' cooking is evident. This means the near elimination of meat, but lots of potatoes, cereals, pulses, vegetables and fruit. The American Readers' struggle for self-sufficiency and to eat simply is more likely the result of both environmental awareness and conscious 'inner growth'. Well-informed Dutch Doctors follow the nutritive trends and environmentally beneficial aims, buying organic food in special shops (and sometimes depart from their modest eating deliberately, as we will see).

A SIDE EFFECT OR THE RESULT OF CONSCIOUS EFFORT?

For the most part, the Czech respondents are not oriented primarily by environmental intention. More often, they are led to its lifestyle rather spontaneously by inner, often Christian, values. Their lifestyle is absorbed by both family and social activities so that they do not enjoy shopping and travelling. Their self-restraint is an unintended and intuitive outcome. In this respect this is similar to some of the American Readers. They talk of their modest lives as the consequence of the 'inner growth'.

The life of the Dutch Doctors is consciously oriented by their efforts to free themselves from common mainstream consumerism, present in lower social strata. Besides, environmental motivation is significant. These highly educated and wealthy people are often members of an environmental organisation (which is, in most cases, only a matter of contributing money). They know what personal 'environmental virtues' are, and strive to apply them in their lives.

The Dutch Doctors do realise the power of many consumer goods and undertake external measures and 'exercises' to escape them. They try to keep attractive and alluring commodities out of their reach; this may remind us of the behaviour of a smoker trying to give up. For example, one married couple keep their TV set at a distance upstairs in their house, its turning on thus requiring more effort than the simple pressing of a button.

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In connection with sustainable living, we often hear the slogan 'A Way that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich'. Now, on the basis of sociological knowledge, we know that modestly living people do not have to be rich only inwardly; they can also be wealthy and have a high income. What is relevant here, from the environmental point of view, is the dynamism of material consumption (buy and throw away) and its character.

In this connection, Aarts studied the way the Dutch Doctors actually treated their money that must have been superfluous. She found out that the money saved in everyday life is spent in *ritualised situations*, e.g. on expensive holidays.⁸ One interviewee invested all his savings into the restoration of his large 17th century house. Eating in elegant restaurants, or esteemed activities such as an expensive hobby, books, the theatre or the opera all count as ritualised consumption. Such a lifestyle is said to be based on the remembrance of experience, to be 'non-polluting'; it tries to diminish the material impact on the natural environment. The Dutch Doctors often contribute considerable sums of money to environmental organisations and purposes. Such a nonmaterial consumption issue is thought-over, ecologically-sophisticated and refined. It emphasises its form and is willing to pay for it. One can hardly speak about 'living simply'!

Aarts mentions, through the self-characterisation of one of her respondents, an interesting consumption model: 'penny-wise and pound-foolish'. This finding answers to Reusswig's view (1994: 96) on a new pattern of consumer behaviour: while an interest in medium-priced goods was typical of recent decades, today a bipolar interest in both cheap objects and, at the same time, in luxury goods, has become the prestige spending model.

A RETURN TO A SIMPLER PAST – OR PART OF DEVELOPMENT?

The vision of sustainable living shared among groups of radical environmentalists is often built upon nostalgia for ancient times, when our peasant ancestors lived more modest lives. At other times the sustainability principle looks with admiration to the simple life of tribes as yet untouched by European/American consumer civilisation. Such a lifestyle is usually characterised by the term 'simplicity', which carries very positive connotations in the subculture of radical environmentalists. We are to cast away complicated, useless and harmful ballast and return to the modest lifestyles of our forefathers.

Expert sociological texts seeking to solve the contemporary crisis are mostly built on a contrary stand point. They understand sustainable living to be a result of the civilisation process and the peak stage of cultural evolution to date. Without always being aware of it, these works are based on a philosophy of history that expects permanent progress. Considering the relationship between man and nature, we can be optimistic on the basis of P. Teilhard de Chardin's (1947) or H. Skolimowski's (1994) idealistic evolutionism. In a similar light it

is possible to consider E. Fromm's (1966) opinion – that the human race will only become reconciled with nature at a high degree of development.

On the socio-cultural level, the idea of continuing progress is implied in the quoted sociological study of the environmentally-constrained economy written by C. Schmidt (1993) who refers to the classical works of N. Elias (1939). As with R. Inglehart, he deduces a high degree of civilisation from the economic maturity of the society and from the economic position of people. As we already know, Aarts really did find a tendency toward self-restraint in Dutch households with high socio-economic capital, in the form of an intentional, environmentally-aware and elegant lifestyle.

Aarts and Schmidt, in agreement with Bourdieu (1989), believe that here we are dealing with class-specific tastes. By living a life built upon post-materialistic values and self-control, people of higher social and economic status want to differ from the consuming majority. The authors understand moderation as liberation from the overall consumer climate and the pressure of advertising.

Aarts and Schmidt express the hope that environmentally-constrained consumption can gain popular support. They justify this by reference to the trickle-down effect, the spreading of the lifestyle from higher status groups to those of lower status. The subtitle of Wilma Aarts's paper – 'Some Characteristics of Voluntary Moderation and Its *Snob Appeal*' – is fitting. When environmentally-friendly values leading to lower consumption become part of prestige behaviour patterns, they will become attractive for those inhabitants of affluent countries who have not yet experienced the consumption peak on their personal routes.

Such a sociological interpretation, when thought through to a conclusion, lays the foundations for hope of a virtually global reach. It implicitly admits the possibility of spreading such a lifestyle by the same mechanism to the less rich countries – a crucial issue with regard to the solution of biosphere problems.⁹

However, one doubt comes to mind: The highest status group keeps on looking for new behaviour patterns to confirm its sense of exclusiveness. Once the moderation model spreads to lower social groups, the fashion of sustainable living may vanish as quickly as it appeared. Lifestyle change based on attaining prestigious positions in the social hierarchy is a relatively fast process but a fairly superficial one when regarded from a social-psychological point of view.

Fortunately a sustainable lifestyle does not necessarily have to be based solely on a social source of motivation (Aarts 1993, p. 13). This was empirically documented in research carried out in the Czech Republic as well as Elgin's research carried out in the US. Both showed sustainable living to be rather the result of personal life trajectories, as the fruit of an inner maturing that can hardly be recorded in the categories of sociological generalisation alone. This more deeply founded lifestyle has a smaller chance for fast dissemination by imitation, but on the other hand may weather the influence of fashion. As we have shown, the resources for this type of modest life are the transcendental anchoring of man, social altruism and the inspiration of older traditional lifestyles.

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Does the Czech finding agree with the view of 'simplicity' as an anti-civilisational return to the traditional society of the past? Despite the fact that it looks that way at first sight, significant features of the Colourful Czechs contravene this hypothesis. That might mean, for example, the idea of providing children with a university education, using modern communications technologies, as well as the direct expression of an opinion on the significance of culture and civilisation. Czech respondents do *not consider themselves as general critics of civilisation*. They are only of the opinion that some modification of the course of civilisation is necessary. The principal point is that the life of Colourful Czechs does not conform with the features of the traditional community in that *it is not subordinated to external social pressure*. No social order is imposed upon it through social control. The Colourful Czechs seek it themselves, proceeding from their individual freedom,¹⁰ which is given to them by the growing individualisation of modern society (compare Beck 1989, 1993; Giddens 1991).

They were passing, during their life trajectories, through the experience of a still traditional, frequently rural, mode of life and then through the experience of life in a big city. They were exposed to an increasing amount of information about risks associated with developments in the modern world. Of course, a subtle stream of a sub-culture of voluntary modesty might slowly be created in some groups of young middle-class people in the Czech Republic. However, at present, a modest lifestyle in Czech conditions can best be seen as an individual solution made under the social conditions of a rapidly changing society.

The basic lifestyle of voluntarily modest people in the Czech Republic may be understood as a result of that so frequently discussed *jump in the development stages, which can be regarded as some hope for the future evolution of the developing countries*. At the same time, it can be seen as a confirmation of the opinion that self-restraint is part of a high degree of civilisation transformation.

The question facing the sociologist is, what operable features in fact place their bearer at the development peak that evolution-oriented authors speak of. With regard to the empirical discovery of voluntary modesty in a relatively poor country, it is possible to doubt the adequacy of the common socio-economic delimitation of the importance of belonging to the inspiring elite. In relation to sustainable living it could be more appropriate to stress access and sensitivity to knowledge (Schmidt, 1993, p. 40) and cultural capital in a very broad sense.

It has already been said, and Elgin's research confirms it, that the types of sustainable living described are probably not linked with certain countries, that is, those with a certain level of economic prosperity. It is possible to expect that sociologists could find modest lifestyles in Holland that are a modification of the lifestyle of Colourful Czechs, i.e. characterised by relatively low income, being rural, traditional, family and community oriented, and with a transcendental dimension.

The set of voluntarily modestly living American Readers shows a number of these features. It is in fact possible for some of the features mentioned to coincide

in the Dutch Doctors with high socio-economic status and thus also to be present in Aarts' elite set; the hypothesis on which her research was designed did not allow for these to be investigated.

LET'S NOT INFLATE THE IMPORTANCE OF THESE EXAMPLES OF SUSTAINABLE LIVING

There are probably many other variations on modest lives that this article omits. It has for example left out the programmed modesty of members of radical environmental movements and the sociologically-interesting lifestyles of alternative communities. Also, let's not forget that we did not consider lifestyles outside the European/American context. The existence of various approaches or tastes that we might call sustainable may be understood as a source of hope.

Despite this, the lessons of history should make us cautious when judging the social phenomenon we call 'voluntary modesty'. The attempt to be moderate is not a new late 20th century phenomenon that has turned up as some auto-regulating self-preservation mechanism at the moment when the human population is overshooting its limits. The value of modesty is a part of the constantly present counterculture that accompanies like a faint line the general tendency to growth of *Homo sapiens* which is based on aggression towards nature and the maximising of personal profit.

The ancient roots and long tradition of attempts at moderation are documented by the opinions and lives of the Greek philosophers, the literature as well as the lifestyle of late Roman intellectuals (Kysučan 1996), and the asceticism of hermits and of many religious orders. We have come across the ostentatious as well as the sincerely meant modesty of romantics from a number of periods in both the European and non-European history. Attempts at such a life usually remained on the margins. When implemented on a larger social scale in various movements and sects, they become more of a memento for us than a model suitable for following.¹¹ It seems that such a longing for an ideal lifestyle turned to failure and dangerous and cruel reality where an attempt was made to put it into everyday practice and to rapidly disseminate it.

We can interpret the existence of this historical counterculture ambivalently; it may be evidence of the tragic inability of this strand in our civilisation to assert itself with any permanence against the ever-present desire to maximise personal material profit. We may also view it as an anthropological or at least historical constant upon which it is possible to build.

Such counterculture can be grasped as an undercurrent *pulling* humanity against the prevailing forces of a predatory technological civilisation, or at least weakening its influence. Now, when the human race is under pressure, there is an existential *push*, hitherto unknown in history, to implement a wide spectrum of changes, which contributes to the counterculture. Thus we can hope that

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something that effectively acts like a 'push-pull' mechanism will be created (compare with Elgin 1981, p. 37). The extent to which we can accept such an optimistic interpretation is up to us.

The principal question remains: can sustainable lifestyles become firmly entrenched in large enough populations over a short enough time-scale to have an impact on the rapid environmental degradation of the biosphere?

NOTES

Translated from the original Czech by Alena and Simon Hooper

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¹ In this context various terms are used. Authors use for example 'voluntary simplicity' (Elgin), 'moderation' (Aarts), 'voluntary modesty' (Librová). Reduction of consumption is implicit in Naess' category of 'life quality' (Naess 1988).

² In popular periodicals, we sometimes can find articles on people who try to reduce their consumption. Journalists often write about them ironically and deal with their eccentricity. If those reports are written by a journalist who sympathises with environmental endeavour, they are written, on the contrary, with a certain naive enthusiasm. A sociologist has to be careful here and has to subject such findings to the methodological scepticism of empirical research.

³ For example in their repeated research of university student attitudes, Myers and Diener (1995) declare that in 1993 75% of entering collegians agree that it is 'very important' or 'essential' that they be 'very well-off financially'. In 1970, only 39% of entering collegians felt that way. At the same time, the number who felt it 'very important' or 'essential' to 'develop a meaningful philosophy of life' plummeted from 76% to 43%.

⁴ Not only some post-revolutionary intellectuals in these countries but also some foreign thinkers were looking to the possibilities of such jumps. In 1990 they wrote about the countries of Eastern and Central Europe as having a chance to change tracks in the development of modern European civilisation (e.g. Dürr, 1990).

⁵ In the first step, the respondents were sought out by students of Sociology who had been introduced to the issue in the seminar. The advantage of this method was the fact that the students came from various social groups.

⁶ It is necessary to point out that there is often a lack of information for direct comparison. I often judge indirectly, from some logical context.

⁷ Here it has to be said that there is a difference from the 1960s when alternatively living young people in revolt tried to free themselves from obligations to their social surroundings, family included, and often refused to participate in political decision making.

⁸ The environmental benefits of far-flung holidays are, however, dubious.

⁹ The chance to disseminate modest lifestyles is rightly connected with fears of a harmful impact on production and the economy. I leave this urgent problem aside in this article.

¹⁰ If we venture a greater generalisation, an association comes to mind related to Teilhard de Chardin's idea about the transfer from an individualising to a personalising stage.

¹¹ In the first place probably will come to mind the medieval Waldenses or Fourier's Falanges and Owen's New Harmony. These are, though, merely the most famous of hundreds, if not thousands of scientifically described as well as forgotten movements.

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