

## *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* by David E. Shi, (2007),

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Convocation Study Guide, September, 2008

### Prologue (PDF Version)

#### Chapter 1: The Puritan Way

While varied motives for coming to America existed among Puritans, their ethic boiled down to a blend of "hard work, temperate living, civic virtue, and spiritual devotion" (8). Material gain and Spiritual Salvation were at odds, so happiness was tied not to the marketplace but to the individual's spiritual connection with God. As the 17<sup>th</sup> century closed and commercial life opened to most in New England, materialism closed in on and at times suffocated Puritan spirituality. Visitors noted that Boston merchants were rich and that there existed in much of New England an "infectious commercial spirit" (17). As Eleazer Mather noted in one of his sermons in Boston, "Outward prosperity is a worm at the root of godliness, so that religion dies when the world thrives" (17). But the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a cultural shift occurred whereby "values that legitimized profit-seeking for private gain as the best means of promoting the welfare of society began to surface in New England at the same time that such an economic liberalism was taking root in England. In the process the Puritan ethic began to be transformed into the secular entrepreneurial ideology found among eighteenth-century Americans and Englishmen...The self-limiting Puritans were becoming gasping Yankees" (20). Cotton Mather eventually saw the accumulation of wealth as a sign of God's favor on those with wealth who were obligated to a theology of prayerful philanthropy for the good of the community. John Winthrop's earlier notions of societal solidarity which was "knit together" by "common purposes" (22) faded away until the first Great Awakening" led by its greatest preacher, Johnathan Edwards. Edwards espoused simplicity and he and his family practiced a "conscientiously temperate existence" in Northampton (24). Fellow revivalist George Whitefield and others, responsible for spreading the Gospel and the message of Christian simplicity to the colonies, were in general agreement that the "upper classes began living up to the same standard of plain living and public concern that they had for years tried to impose on the masses" (25). Nevertheless, by mid-eighteenth century, revivalists of Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Baptist persuasion felt that their message had been heard but not implemented; as Dr Shi notes, "the gap between professed ideals and actual behavior seemed to grow ever wider, and the Puritan ethic took on a meaning that bore little resemblance to the credo preached by the colonial founders" (27).

#### Chapter 2: The Quaker Ethic (PDF Version)

Quakers followed Puritans a half century later in another attempt at "establishing a plain and pious society" (28). Rather than doing only "good" in America many also did "too well" because opportunity for economic benefit existed here without the class restrictions of England. Revitalization of the simple life occurred shortly after the Great Awakening in which the genuine simple life—plain living spirituality of John Woolman contrasted sharply with William Penn's more cluttered life (including four wigs and fine wines). Authentic Quaker doctrine of founder George Fox was at odds with Puritanism's predestination and the grace of God and placed those in the Society of Friends "at the extreme left wing of the Protestant spectrum" (28) with an emphasis on "perfectionist enthusiasm, insistent pacifism, and equalitarian implication." Yet, "the Friends echoed Calvin and the Puritans in emphasizing the virtues of thrift, sobriety, and hard work at one's calling" (29). Possessing wealth itself was not evil according to Penn "but the luxury and avarice that frequently accompanied it were" (31). Penn would scare those evil doers with his 1682 Frame of Government, somewhat authoritarian. He instituted wage and price controls and forced Friends to "assume charitable obligations and



to engage in ethical business practices and plain habits of living" (33). The simple life centered on serving society—doing God's will. Agricultural life was preferable to urban life. The arrival of other Europeans in Pennsylvania (Germans and Scots-Irish) outnumbered the Quakers who made up only 25% of the population in 1750. Quakers lost political power and came to see their role in society as a return to "their original emphasis on person-to-person relationships rather than political structures. They came to realize that, instead of transforming the world, they had been transformed by a too close accommodation to it. Many concerned Friends thereafter began an energetic effort to revive the piety and plainness of their sect" (38). Perhaps the greatest example ever of true Quaker spirituality was John Woolman, who became very successful as a general store owner only to realize that he had to return to the simple life, learned the tailor's trade, and wore clothes without any dye. His *Journal* remains one of the classics of Western Spirituality. He opposed exploitation in all forms—especially the institution of slavery, and the horrible treatment of the Indians by Europeans and by American colonists. His spirituality held an economic and social doctrine. Simplicity was at the root of what Jesus' life embodied. Indeed, "if the rich moderated their tastes, more laborers could return to the production of staples rather than baubles. Workdays could thereby be reduced so that a man's vocation could again become a source of pride rather than drudgery" (43). Americans who came after Puritans and Quakers "would tenaciously hold onto at least the rhetorical expression of the "broad and middle way" of pious simplicity. Their doing so illustrates the growing discrepancy in American life between promise, values and actions, that has remained a central theme in the national experience" (49). The fatalistic, elitist, authoritarianism of the Puritans juxtaposed itself with the perfectionist, equalitarian, and humanitarianism of the Quakers-- both morphed into different portions of an American spirit.

### Chapter 3: Republican Simplicity ([PDF Version](#))

As the eighteenth century slipped away, radical social and economic changes were obvious in pre-Revolutionary Colonial American society. At mid-century wealthy Americans copied the lifestyle of their counterparts in London, importing "costly fashions and furnishings" (51). America had caught the plague: the materialism of Europe's upper classes. This infection in character undermined our uniqueness as a city on a hill; "America was losing its community identity and moral distinctiveness" which "helps explain the surprisingly intense colonial response to increased British regulation and taxation after 1763" (52). Radical philosophers referenced *res publica* and reminded us that the fall of Rome was caused by the cancer of excessive wealth accumulation, of selfish self-centeredness and loss of civic mindedness--a loss of virtue both collective and individual. Republicanism for many Americans meant not only a "rationale for political independence and popular representation" but "entailed a comprehensive moral vision that provided a secular analogue of the Protestant ethic espoused by John Winthrop, John Cotton, William Penn, John Wolman, and others" (52). While the thinkers of the Enlightenment connected directly to our founders such as Jefferson, Franklin, and Paine, an indirect link was experienced by many in the ruling classes and ordinary citizens as well with the earlier Puritans and Quakers: forging "a successful society depended upon maintaining a necessarily tenuous balance among power, liberty, and virtue. The first two factors—power and liberty—would ideally counterbalance each other. But such an equilibrium between force and freedom fundamentally depended on developing and sustaining a virtuous citizenry" (52). Specific virtues valued by the early Puritans and Quakers included "industry, frugality, simplicity, enlightened thinking, and public spiritedness" (52). The promotion of the public good meant the subordination of the private interests. The conflict with Great Britain united disparate elements in our social and political culture and called on all Americans not only to "gain political independence" but "to cleanse America's soul of its impurities and halt the disquieting growth of a crass economic individualism that threatened to dissolve all traditional community and kinship ties. By doing so, republicanism added a "moral dimension, a utopian depth to the political separation from England—a depth that involved the very character of their society" (53). Indeed, republicanism owed more to the Quakers than to the Puritans in one important insight which Sam Adams and Tom Paine articulated: moral corruption belonged not to the masses but to the "ruling elites" so why promote "deferential simplicity on the part of the common people" but rather they "stressed the need to replace officeholders of great wealth and luxurious habits with men of modest



estates and demonstrated civic virtue" (53). The simple life idea had become an agent of social change rather than one of social control suggested by the Protestant ethic. Colonial readers reached back into the Roman republican past for examples of the simple life from the great Roman writers of the Republic including "Cicero, Livy, Tacitus, and Plutarch. These and other Roman writers portrayed the Republic as a serene, pastoral nation of virtuous citizens. As long as the majority of Romans had remained simple, rustic husbandmen devoted to the public good rather than to selfish interests, Rome had thrived" but her expansionist military success ruined Rome with the love of opulence and with "massive inflation at home" (53). British mercantilist policy directed at her colonials in America focused our minds on resisting, on boycotting British trade items, and "provided an incentive for Americans to revive the Spartan virtues of their forebears and to re-emphasize the public good over private gain" (56). Therefore, "plain living became a symbolic measure of one's patriotism" (56). Sam Adams, John Adams and his wife Abigail. John Adams "emphasized how dangerous the growing consolidation of property distributed was to him crucial to the stability of the social order" (64). While "men may have been the most prominent spokesmen for the the ethic (of the simple life), women have most often been responsible for translating the ideal into domestic practice" so for Abigail, "Frugality, Industry and economy are the lessons of the day" (65). Ironically, winning the Revolution would defeat the moral simplicity idea of many of our founders, and happiness would be pursued in many different ways. After 1783 "enlightened simplicity had become intertwined with other political and economic ideals making up republican social theory" and "traditional notions of simple living often became expendable. As John Adams had correctly observed, self-realization, not self-restraint, was the republican virtue prized most by the populace in the aftermath of the Revolution" (73).

#### Chapter 4: Republicanism transformed

Fragmenting factionalism occurred in the mid-1780's stealing the hope of a "stable republican consensus" (74). Representatives of various social groups ("debtors, farmers, artisans, seamen") destabilized the new nation's institutions—just being formed and fragile. Added to class conflict was the anti-republican sensibility notion that the fuel of the flames of discontent was the "raging materialism" (74). And "no sooner had the fighting stopped than British vessels began clogging American harbors, and British traders began offering easy credit to the former colonists" (74). How to promote and keep the ideal of republican simplicity became the focus of those few thinkers still committed to it—divided as they were on means to accomplish the end. Sam Adams wanted people of Boston to behave: "obey the laws and act in an orderly and temperate fashion" (75). He and the other republican heroes of 1775 were ridiculed by the younger materialists to the extent that in despair Sam Adams wrote in 1787, "that one would be almost inclined to conclude that communities cannot be free" (75). Another group of revolutionary leaders were more optimistic: it would take time for the new Republic to mature and to teach republican virtues to the people; Rush and Jefferson were among this group. Both men put great faith in the idea of state supported schools. Both great friends of public education, Jefferson concluded that the aim of life was happiness, "and he defined it as 'to be pained in body, nor troubled in mind, i.e., In-do-lence of body, tranquility of mind.' To achieve such tranquility of mind required not hedonistic living, but temperate living in order to avoid 'desire and fear, the two principal diseases of the mind.' As Epicurus advised, to be 'accustomed to simple and plain living is conducive to health and makes a man ready for the necessary task of life'(77). Personal corruption was the greatest danger facing us. Equal opportunity education but not equal status was Jefferson's hope, and state funded public education would produce a learned class of leaders—men who "would form the 'natural aristocracy' of talent and virtue necessary for the moral and political guidance of the republic" (77). John Adams, however, stated that Europe had had great educational institutions for centuries and a rigid class system based on the wealth of the few was the result. Character could be best developed in the family as he told his young daughter, "'to be good, and to do good is all we have to do.'" John Adams wanted all to see that since "public virtue was not inherent in the American character and that neither parental attention nor public education could be relied upon to inculcate it, they would turn to government for the glue to hold the social order together" and to "prevent the bad effects and corruption of luxury, when, in the ordinary course of things, it must be expected to come in" (81). Adams



thought that a mixed form of government was best suited to manage our deplorable human nature. In his mixed government, "the ambition of commoners would be tempered by the haughty pride of birth. And the Constitution of 1787 "closely resembled Adams's plan in its basic structure. Another founder, James Madison, would initially side with John Adams and Alexander Hamilton on the structure of government but after the *Federalist Papers* Madison returned to Jefferson's point of view on republican simplicity, happiness, and the importance of public education to shape virtuous character of the yeoman farmer. Alexander Hamilton followed David Hume's model of political economy rather than those of "classical and Christian simplicity" (83). People always want to acquire more things suggested Hume, so take this key component of human nature and make it work for the good of society by raising the standard of living. For Hamilton it was "therefore in the national interest to promote an expansive commercial ethic" (84). Hamilton felt that "it was ridiculous to seek for models in the simple ages of Greece and Rome" so his was the world view that saw "the encouragement of economic interests and personal aggrandizement, not the cultivation of private restraint, as the best way to promote national power and social stability" (84). When Jefferson took the Presidency in 1801 (to the chagrin of Hamilton) Jefferson symbolically donned a plain wardrobe and adopted an austere fiscal policy in an effort to lead the country back to patterns of frugality and simplicity" (87). While Jefferson's embargo was an economic failure, enacting it restated his hope for a virtuous America which was free from "economic dependence on Europe by encouraging consumer restraint and the growth of domestic manufactures" (88). In the end, "the differences between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were much like those that divided Puritans from Quakers; the two perspectives revolved fundamentally around their contrasting views of human nature and historical development" (91). When the factory system impacted America in Rhode Island and in Massachusetts by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, rights of factory workers would be at odds with the managers and the other forces of advancing industrial capitalism, equalitarian Republican simplicity for the inequality of market economics. "In 1815 Jefferson sounded one of his few pessimistic notes when he confessed that 'I fear, from the experience of the last twenty-five years that morals do not of necessity, advance hand in hand with the sciences.' Again American moral idealists had been the victims of a cruelly ironic development wherein their plan to spiritualize materialism ended up materializing the spirit" (99).

## Chapter 5: Simplicity Domesticated

Jefferson's notions regarding agrarian nation led by an "aristocracy of character" were overtaken by market economics which thrived in urban areas of the commercial elite all of which promoted "economic individualism, social mobility, political equality, and material gratification. In the process, the self-limiting assumptions of republican simplicity were brusquely pushed aside by new generations of aspiring Americans" (100). After the deaths of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, and "the subsequent emergence of new and frequently conflicting social and political elites, the ideal of republican simplicity came to be used in different ways for different purposes by different groups" (100). For example, values in the Age of Jackson were in flux, often depending on which social class you occupied. Those yet to experience the good life of capitalism "stressed a more equalitarian version of republican entrepreneurship" which embraced the slogan 'free soil, and free labor' as "their prescription for national happiness" (100). While notions of simplicity waned after 1820 it nevertheless remained a prominent subject of social discourse" (100). From 1820-1860, simplicity "was most often as a conservative moral idiom" (101) Jacksonians generally were in agreement with the "hope of the Jeffersonian expansionists that they could promote both a dynamic free enterprise system and a self-limiting republican morality. And they likewise shared a hatred for Hamiltonian centralization. Thus, Jackson, himself a self-made man, advocated the democratization of prosperity...Yet Jackson skillfully coupled such laissez-faire individualism with an appeal for classical simplicity and civic virtue. By abolishing the Bank of the United States and thereby encouraging wildcat banking, however, Jackson paradoxically served to expedite the entrepreneurial grasping that his rhetoric opposed" (101). How to temper rampant materialism became the obsession of various groups including evangelical religious spokesman who "sought to revive the moral code of the early Puritans" and reflected in part "a traditional elite's typical fears of a disruptive social and political order" (104); Lyman Beecher of Connecticut was such a "firebrand revivalist." People had to be made to



"believe and behave" so moral conservatives in the Age of Jackson "sought to revive and strengthen measures of shaping character...in the tradition of the Quaker meetings and Cotton Mather's informal moral and spiritual improvement societies" (105). Perhaps the poets and the artists could also help us be mindful of the bounty of simplicity from the pre-urban area (Longfellow, Whittier, Bryant) and allegorical paintings by Thomas Cole dealt with the "problem of retaining rustic simplicity and republican virtue in an age of encroaching urban civilization and expansive prosperity" (106). Hopefully American life would start to imitate American art. Indeed, the most famous "architect of virtue" was Andrew Jackson Downing of New York. A romantic regarding nature and the transforming power it held for us when expressed in art, was Jeffersonian in that art and architecture were didactic. He appreciated classical styles (107) in public buildings but not in homes—these should be "organically related to its natural environment" (108). With a belief in a hierarchical social order, Downing designed "different homes for the different classes he saw represented in a well-ordered American republic" (109) and his "blueprints for simple republican homes were intended to provide the proper physical setting for the moral development of their residents" (109). Since men were too busy to focus on children, seen by the Puritans as little adults, mothers became teachers of the republican simplicity virtues. "The family was to be the repository of moral virtue in the nation, and the mother was to be the curator" (111). Factory work for women resulted in more available time than in colonial days, so it was women who would save the nation by educating children in the virtues of republican simplicity. Sarah Josepha Hale of New Hampshire advanced the ideas of women as custodians of republican virtue as editor of Boston's *Ladies Magazine*. While the men were earning the money the women would remind the children that "there are objects more elevated, more worthy of pursuits than wealth" (116). "As with the Puritans, Quakers, and old republicans, the domestic redeemers of the Jacksonian era found themselves advocating a static set of values in the face of a dynamic new culture. That culture showed "the failure of republican domesticity" owing to the "proliferation of reformatories, orphanages, and prisons during the Jacksonian era" (119). Therefore, public schools had to be started by Horace Mann because the family alone could not instill republican virtues. Mann argued, "we shall teach mankind to moderate their passions and develop their virtues" (122) and children would become successful economically. Here Mann conflated republican virtue in general with material gain in particular. "Perhaps Mann recognized this development when he admitted that it "may be an easy thing to make a republic, but it is a very laborious thing to make republicans" (124).

## Chapter 6: Transcendental Simplicity (summarized/copied for convocation 2008, RGNS)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, moral and social reform advocates of the simple life came to recommend "simplicity as a personally chosen, rather than a socially imposed, way of living" (125) and they were called romantics of the transcendentalist variety. These thinkers and writers in the 1820-60 era in the US emphasized "naturalism, immediatism, individualism, and perfectionism, espoused a more spontaneous and liberating version of the simple life than ...conservative moralists such as Horace Mann, Andrew Jackson Downing, and Lyman and Catharine Beecher" (125). The focus of the romantics would be to "perfect individuals "rather than "institutions" (125). Compared to their intellectual predecessors (Puritans, Quakers, Revolutionary fathers), "they were more extreme and diverse in their interpretation of simplicity" (125). Whether the chosen expressive path was academic philosopher (Emerson), Utopian (like Brook Farm's organizer George Ripley), or eclectic (Henry David Thoreau), these writers, poets, and philosophers were going to go beyond the material for happiness and for fulfillment, they were Transcendentalists who "wanted internal improvements in man himself" who according to Emerson "believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy" (126). These transcendentalists differed from their European counterparts in that they grafted a romantic naturalism onto the tough and springy root of Puritan moralism" (127). And "their common goal was to develop modes of living that reduced their material and institutional needs to a minimum so that they could more easily pursue spiritual truths, moral ideas, and aesthetic impulses" (127-128). Indeed, Emerson defined a man as a Great Man who could see "that the spiritual is stronger than any material force; that thoughts rule the world" (128). "Emerson's Puritan strain *instrumental* ensured that he led a life of enlightened material restraint" (131) but the key in understanding



Emerson is that “like Aristotle, Winthrop, and Woolman, he believed that there were two selves—inner and outer, spiritual and material, imaginative and physical. Each is an essential aspect of human experience, but Emerson insisted that the inner self was ultimately superior” (131). Regarding the role of technology and money in everyday life, Emerson maintained that they “were to be valued only for their qualities, for what they could contribute to the more noble pursuits of self-culture (131). Emerson did not want to rid the world of capitalism, only have individuals in that system “redress the imbalance that had developed between materialism and idealism in their pursuit of happiness” (132). This type of reform must “come with plain living and high thinking” by “placing work and its rewards in the proper perspective, subordinating the material to the spiritual, man could achieve the higher level of being advocated earlier by Puritans, Quakers, and classical republicans” (132). Social engineers scared Emerson to the point where he famously declared “‘whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist.’ In a land of abundant opportunities and social diversity, the American, Emerson assumed, had the luxury of freedom of choice. If he wanted to engage in a life devoted to pursuits higher than the merely material, it was his choice to make” (133). Emerson believed according to Shi that “plain living was designed to lead to high thinking of one sort one another—intellectual, moral, spiritual” (133). Emerson hired Thoreau and so began one of the most important mentorships in history. Harvard graduate Henry David Thoreau continually urged his countrymen to simplify and his twenty six month residence at Walden Pond (owned by Emerson) in a house he had himself built offers us one of the most compelling case studies for the virtues of the simple life. “He came to appreciate how free and satisfying a life could be led with a minimum of money and status” (141). This would encourage “true virtue” which “resided with those who successfully resisted needless material and sensual temptations in order to concentrate on spiritual or inward development” (142). This connection was that of “the strenuous piety of the Puritans” (142). Indeed, one should work less and have more leisure for the inner journey. Six weeks of manual labor more than supplied Thoreau with the money for daily living. When the Civil War started in 1861, many saw an opportunity for moral regeneration “both northerners and southerners, conservatives and romantics, saw the Civil War as a purifying and strengthening event” (152). While the north emerged victorious from war in 1865, “the nation emerged from the conflict with no viable commitment either to republican or romantic simplicity... Instead of the war producing a Socrates or a Pascal, it spawned a Jay Cooke and a Jay Gould” (153).

**Chapter 7: Patrician Simplicity—At Bay; Chapter 8: Progressive Simplicity; Chapter 9: Prosperity, Depression, and Simplicity, and Chapter 10: Affluence & Anxiety (Chapter 10: [PDF Version](#))**

A summary of the last several chapters of Dr. Shi’s wonderful book lends itself to this clumping of the last three chapters into a single unit for the purposes of an abstract or synthesis: while there were efforts at accomplishing THE SIMPLE LIFE reflected in “plain living and high thinking in American Culture” our country became fully industrialized and urbanized in the decades after the Civil War. The Gilded Age witnessed the simple life idea captured by the few well to do who found it challenging to simplify owing to excessive wealth—the bounty of our status as a great power after our victory in the Spanish American War of 1898. The Capitalist economies of the Great Powers led by the West started the twentieth century with Teddy Roosevelt’s Progressivism—capitalism with a social conscience. Wilsonian idealism of the era of The Great War continued the search for and the practice of the virtues of life simplified—made a necessity by our entry into World War I in 1917 as had been the case in our revolutionary war of 1775-83 and in the U.S. Civil War of 1861-65. Economic collapse came with the interwar period (1919-1939) and the rise of totalitarianism of the left (Communism) in Russia and of the right (Fascism) in Italy, German and Japan from (1917-1945) continuing from the left until the fall of the USSR in 1991.

Patrician Simplicity was practiced by a limited cast of intellectuals in the period after the Civil War. The elite “considered themselves a natural aristocracy of virtue and culture.” Among the key figures several names stand out including Henry and Brooks Adams, George William Curtis, Richard Watson Gilder, E.L. Godkin, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Oliver Wendell Holmes, William Dean Howells, William James, James Russell Lowell, Charles Eliot Norton, Barrett Wendell, and other like-minded intellectuals saw their role as that of a saving remnant, imbued with an abiding sense of public duty and a presumptive sense of moral and intellectual



superiority" (157). These thinkers were "conservative elitists in their social outlook and political gentility, preferring the security of tradition over the idealism of revolt, they were romantic individualists in their stress on the desirability of personal freedom (within prescribed bounds) and in their fondness for country life. They reflected a transcendentalist distaste for organizations and institutions" (158). Obviously, "America in the aftermath of the Civil War thus seemed to offer a further opportunity to elevate the material basis of the ideal of self-culture" (158). Carnegie, while defending capitalism and the social order of inequality it enhanced, "went on to develop what he thought was a new version of the simple life, one specifically directed at the very wealthy... Through his 'gospel of wealth,' Carnegie transformed the crass pursuit of private gain into a magnanimous enterprise on behalf of the 'better' public" but "such a pristine 'gospel of wealth' was in fact practiced by only a relatively few enlightened entrepreneurs" (161-163). Attacking this wealth head on, Thorsten Veblen, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, and William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, insightfully captured the materialists' greed. Conspicuous consumption, said Veblen, was apparent in the rich who had so much money they displayed it often in their extravagances of lifestyle. And William James, who "clearly lacked any sophisticated appreciation of modern complexity, especially the economic realities which underlay the class antagonisms and social problems," (169) nevertheless remarked perceptively that "'lives based on having are less free than lives based either on doing or on being'" (168). Hence James "shared Jefferson's belief that everyone possessed an innate moral sense" (169). James was distinctive (of this group of patrician intellectuals) "for his ability to sustain a sense of involvement and optimism in modern life" (173) that "personal security could be achieved by a sheer exercise of positive will" (174).

Progressive Simplicity of Chapter Eight depicts reformers in the progressive era as searching for ways to end the squalor and suffering of "slums, sweatshops, child labor, and trusts as symptoms of a growing cancer infecting the commonweal and they vigorously searched for antidotes" (175). Additionally, the social thought of the era reflected a "renewed interest in simpler ways of living. Social reformers drew upon the combined heritage of the Christian social ethic and Jeffersonian republicanism in revitalizing the old dream of a prosperous, yet virtuous American commonwealth in which most of the citizenry enjoyed a comfortable standard of living but at the same time possessed a high degree of civic involvement and personal sobriety. The 'tyranny of things,' one reformer asserted, must be attacked along with the tyrannies of trusts and boss rule"(176). How the simple life advocated by the progressives differed from the New England intellectuals of the Gilded Age was that "it included a cluster of practices and values that have since remained associated with the concept: discriminating consumption, uncluttered living, personal contentment, aesthetic simplicity (including an emphasis on handicrafts), civic virtue, social service, and renewed contact with nature" (176). Hull House of Jane Addams hoped to bring to Chicago "a sense of community among all classes" (180). Edward Bok became "the most persistent voice promoting simple living for the middle-class millions at the start of the new century, the intense young editor of *the Ladies Home Journal*" (181). The *Journal* "developed into an uplifting practical guidebook for middle-class simplicity" (181). Bok "saw the middle-class American woman as the crucial 'steadying influence' between the 'unrest among the lower classes and rotteness among the upper classes'" and he "used his editorial pulpit to promote a variety of 'progressive' causes—city beautification, billboard removal, wilderness preservation, sex education, American-designed fashions, and pure food and drug legislation. The most consistent subject of his avuncular preaching, however, was the personal satisfaction provided by simpler living" (183). John Muir, another advocate of the simple life, was involved in the founding of the Sierra Club and as such was an environmentalist of the highest order and captured the wild in his art and his writing. The Boy Scouts of America (1910) although originating in England with Baden-Powell, came to be seen by two veteran woodmen named Seton and Beard "as the crucial agency for sustaining traditional American values in the twentieth century" (209). Yet, "if progressive simplicity in its various forms did not provoke a dramatic shift from the status quo of conventional urban life, it was a significant departure for many and a genuine transformation for a few" and as Bok would remark: "We can never make life simple, but we can make it simpler than we do" (214).

## Chapter 9: "Prosperity, Depression, and Simplicity"



After World War I, notions relating to simple life traditions in our history almost disappeared. "The electorate clamored for what President Harding ambiguously called a return to 'normalcy,' which apparently meant going back to the tried and true values of the Gilded Age—laissez-faire individualism, limited government, isolationism, and, above all, material prosperity" (217). Indeed, modern advertising's advent in the interwar era led to a forming of public opinion through what public relations specialists called cultivating the "'fancied need'" whereby advertisers "were confident that they could greatly expand consumer tastes and desires" (220). This standardizing of mass culture had as its companion a "spiritual vacuity that they (intellectuals) felt permeated the age" (220). Sinclair Lewis captured the poverty of materialism with the "banality of George Babbitt" but unfortunately many thought Babbitt to be a worthwhile role model. One of the leading journalists of the period between the World Wars (Walter Lippmann) observed "in 1929 that the ethic of plain living and high thinking ... 'was clearly out of favor' among the American people" (222). Just a few intellectuals of the time were interested in the simple life including the agrarians of Vanderbilt University (Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Frank Owsley, Robert Penn Warren who had written the famous anti-northern industrial work of 1930 *I'll Take My Stand* (223). However, "the Agrarians reflected the old tension between the desire to translate classical simplicity into a societal ideal for the masses and the practical reality of its being primarily the possession of an educated elite" (224). Nevertheless, the Vanderbilt twelve had a realistic type of utopia in which there would be industry but it would be "kept small, local, humane, and limited to producing articles for immediate household use" while agriculture would continue to 'enlist the maximum number of workers' and be given preferential treatment by the government so that commoners would again have access to the ownership of land. All this, they added, must be achieved without creating the political centralization endemic to both communism and fascism" (226). Other social critics of the time include New York's Ralph Borsodi in which the title of his books captures their theses—the *Ugly Civilization: A Study of the Quest for Comfort* (1929), and *Flight from the City: an Experiment in Creative Living on the Land* (1933). Synthesizing the salient elements of Borsodi and the Agrarians was urban planner Lewis Mumford who saw no need to flee from cities but rather to humanize them by means of urban planning to enhance livability. Mumford belonged to the Regional Planning Association of America whose members included the designer of the Appalachian Trail, Benton Mackaye. Cities for Mumford would become garden cities and the role of the intellectuals was to state these goals and to make them desirable. (232) Ironically, the surprise of history happened in 1929, the Great Depression, and gave the context for Jeffersonian simplicity to be restated as the republic of virtue envisioned by the revolutionary fathers—as both a spiritual goal and an economic necessity. FDR stated in his first inaugural address, that the key to happiness "lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort" (233). Performing public service in nature as William James had suggested was represented by the Civilian Conservation Corps or FDR's New Deal. Arthur Morgan tried to bring republican simplicity to rural areas by means of the Tennessee Valley Authority. (235) In line with the TVA, the Department of the Interior created its Division of Subsistence Homesteads in 1933 "to help ease the degrading unemployment problem by resettling penurious urban and rural families in planned homestead communities" (238). However, the centralizing trends of the New Deal would ironically splay the programs which could perhaps have revived and kept simplicity virtues.

## Chapter 10: Affluence & Anxiety (Chapter 10: [PDF Version](#))

For a time the American people responded well to the requirements of sacrifice and service demanded of our entry into World War II. Victory gardens encouraged family farming and rationing of consumer goods like coffee, sugar, rubber, and gasoline all combined together to promote notions of the simple life. But as soon as the war ended, "the same citizens who exhibited such patriotic frugality quickly repeated the familiar cycle and clamored for the emoluments of a consumer culture. The deprivation caused first by the depression and then by the war had resulted in a pent-up consumer demand that exploded in a frenzy of indiscriminate buying. In the face of such developments, *Free America* finally ceased publication in 1947. As Agar and the editorial board admitted, "the American people have not suddenly become converts to the credo that appears at the *Free American* masthead; the editors not to delude themselves by thinking that is likely to happen before the



millennium” (246). Social critics like Reich in the *Greening of America* (1970) and Roszak in the *Making of a Counter Culture* (1969) offered a new version of the simple life based “neither on Christian theology nor on classical philosophy but on the visionary ecstasy of Oriental mysticism...they revived a radical transcendentalism that called for a revolutionary change in consciousness...to restore meaning in America required a revolutionary change in individual perception, a dramatic transformation in the way people viewed themselves and the world” (253). With the failure of the communal living experiments of the 1960's and with the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, there occurred an avalanche of save the simple life and environment publications including *Mother Earth News*, *The Whole Earth Catalog*, *Green Revolution*, etc. E.F. Schumacher would be invited to visit the White House and dine with the Carters who found that the book *Small Is Beautiful* provided a compelling economic vision for a return to a simple life that would help humans sustain republican simplicity. Carter's failure to mould our nation's support for a conservation of energy policy was one of the reasons for the success of Reagan and for a return for a vision of America as not an America of limits, but an America of boundlessness “revealed again the perpetual tension in American life between the ideal of enlightened self-restraint and the allure of unfettered prosperity” (277).

#### Epilogue (PDF Version)