

Journal of Consumer Culture

<http://joc.sagepub.com/>

Voluntary simplifiers as political consumers: Individuals practicing politics through reduced consumption

Einat Zamwel, Orna Sasson-Levy and Guy Ben-Porat

Journal of Consumer Culture 2014 14: 199 originally published online 20 March 2014

DOI: 10.1177/1469540514526277

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://joc.sagepub.com/content/14/2/199>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journal of Consumer Culture* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://joc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://joc.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://joc.sagepub.com/content/14/2/199.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jun 9, 2014

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Mar 20, 2014

[What is This?](#)



Voluntary simplifiers as political consumers: Individuals practicing politics through reduced consumption

Einat Zamwel and Orna Sasson-Levy

Bar-Ilan University, Israel

Guy Ben-Porat

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

Journal of Consumer Culture

2014, Vol. 14(2) 199–217

© The Author(s) 2014

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1469540514526277

joc.sagepub.com



Abstract

This article seeks to contribute to the discourse on the politicization of voluntary simplifiers' consumption patterns. Some scholars argue that voluntary simplifiers' consumption practices are individualistic and escapist in nature, and therefore cannot be defined as political, and that they are likely to become such only if they organize for collective action. Conversely, we argue that voluntary simplifiers' lifestyle is an individual political choice that should be analyzed using theories of political consumption. This article, based on interviews with voluntary simplifiers in Israel, identifies four characteristics of voluntary simplifiers that attest to their political nature: (1) multidimensional political discourse, (2) embracement of a holistic and uncompromising lifestyle of simplicity, (3) lifestyle changes as ongoing political process, and (4) the desire to exert influence. We therefore argue that voluntary simplifiers are not only political, but they represent a clear-cut instance of noninstitutionalized political activity realized through individual practices in the private realm.

Keywords

Personalized politics, political consumption, subpolitics, voluntary simplicity

Introduction

Voluntary simplicity is a way of life practiced by individuals whose ideology calls for minimizing consumption and maximizing reduction. Although various scholars

Corresponding author:

Einat Zamwel, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan 52900, Israel.

Email: einatya@gmail.com

define voluntary simplicity in differing ways (see, among others Elgin, 1993; Grigsby, 2004; Heanfler, 2004; Shaw and Moraes, 2009), for the purpose of this article, we use Etzioni's (1998) definition: "Voluntary Simplicity refers to the choice out of free will [...] to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services, and to cultivate non-materialistic resources of satisfaction and meaning" (p. 620). This phenomenon has been attracting research attention because, among other reasons, it stands out against the ethos of our own era, wherein consumerism and consumerist behavior are viewed as the norm, whereas abstention from consumption is perceived as eccentric and inexplicable. Based on 35 in-depth interviews with voluntary simplifiers in Israel, we demonstrate how these consumers, whose consumption patterns are individual in their essence, use their consumption choices as political tool, albeit outside formal political processes.

One question that preoccupies scholars of voluntary simplicity is that of motivation: Why do people choose this alternative lifestyle that defies the capitalist ethos of amassing goods? Some scholars stress the individualistic aspect of voluntary simplicity and assert that voluntary simplifiers are mainly interested in bringing about a personal change in their lives. Thus, they are perceived as escapist and apolitical, and hence incapable of generating significant change (Grigsby, 2004; Maniates, 2002).

Herein, we propose a different perspective on voluntary simplicity based on a distinctive definition of politics. Following Ulrich Beck (1996, 1997), we begin by arguing that politics and political involvement also exist outside the formal channels of elections and professional politicians. Next, following Bennett's (2012) concept of "personalized politics," we argue that voluntary simplicity – like other initiatives – is a political choice made by individuals who seek to engender change using available alternatives to formal politics.

When studying voluntary simplifiers and their political potential in the Israeli context, an additional factor must be considered: While Israel is a highly politicized country and society that has an evolved activist culture, its political discourse revolves almost entirely around security and the army. Although attitudes shifted slightly following the civil protests concerning economic and social justice in the summer of 2011 (Grinberg, 2013) – which broadened Israelis' political horizons – social, environmental, and global issues remain secondary and for the most part have failed to find a platform or mobilize government and institutional support (Drori and Yuchtman-Yaar, 2002). Therefore, research on the phenomenon of voluntary simplicity in the Israeli context, judged by affect and outcomes, could lead to the conclusion that the phenomenon is essentially apolitical. Yet, Israel possesses an evolved network of organizations and groups devoted to environmental and social causes. Environmental organizations have long been active alongside ad hoc associations. Organic food co-ops have emerged in recent years, as have a variety of ecologic and permaculture farms that seek to implement and disseminate the concept of sustainability. Information and study centers disseminate ideas on environmentalism and sustainability, and community-run as well as professional websites host productive discussions on alternative consumption. In addition, there

are initiatives such as fair trade shops, sustainable tourism, and even communities founded on the principle of sustainability and environmental protection. All bear witness to the existence of a vibrant culture of alternative consumption that provides inspiration and information to those seeking alternatives to the mainstream consumption culture. However, these groups have yet to exert significant influence on environmental behavior in Israel or on its politicization. A 2007 study of environmental behavior found that only a small percentage of Israelis recycle or avoid driving out of concern for the environment, and even fewer “display environmental activism” by, for instance, donating to environmental protection groups or signing petitions (Ne’eman-Avramovich and Katz-Gerro, 2007).

In a context wherein ecology and the environment are nearly absent from the political discourse and organization there around is limited, voluntary simplicity offers a political alternative. Although simplifiers’ practices are mostly individual, personal, and domestic, they should be interpreted not as apolitical, but rather as seeking alternative channels of influence. This argument is based on the idea that consumption (or refraining therefrom), while executed in the private sphere, is in essence a political act. Viewed thusly, the discussion should focus not only on consumers as political agents, but also on the individual consumer as a political activist. In order to study voluntary simplifiers as political actors, we contend that their practices should not be judged by the same criteria as are conventional political activity or ordinary extra-parliamentary social movements – as proposed, for instance, by Alexander (2011), who looks at criteria such as organization and critical mass – but rather as an innovative form of political activity.

Based on the present study of voluntary simplifiers in Israel, we have found that the political essence inherent in these alternative consumers’ practices and discourse is characterized by four distinctive features: (1) multidimensional political discourse, (2) embracement of a holistic and uncompromising lifestyle of simplicity, (3) lifestyle changes as ongoing political process, and (4) the desire to exert influence. These features will be investigated based on the theory of political consumption. Thus, we hope to enhance our understanding of voluntary simplifiers as political agents and to contribute to the ongoing discourse among scholars regarding the definition of the boundaries of political consumption.

Politics, consumption, and voluntary simplicity

The question of whether voluntary simplicity constitutes a political movement depends on how we define politics, as well as on our understanding of the motivation underlying the decision to reduce consumption and abstain from monetary transactions.

As mentioned, scholars stress the individualistic aspect of choosing voluntary simplicity as a way of life. Mary Grigsby (2004), for example, claims that proponents of simple living are individuals acting out of personal considerations, who have tired of careerism and capitalist accumulation, and seek to lead a fuller life.

Other scholars maintain that these individuals constitute a social movement inasmuch as they display awareness of the existence of a broader movement of voluntary simplicity and participate in the public discourse (through study groups, literature, and online) regarding the content and aims of voluntary simplicity. Alexander and Ussher (2012: 66–67) define the voluntary simplicity movement as a “diverse social movement,” whereas Heanfler (2004: 786) views it as an example of a “diffuse” social movement lacking formal structure. The above scholars question whether these “diverse and diffuse movements” are indeed political. Alexander (2011), for example, calls for politicization of the voluntary simplicity movement. In his view, voluntary simplifiers should not confine themselves to personal, individual actions; they must act as a grassroots movement and aspire to effect political change from the bottom-up by organizing for collective action. Grigsby (2004) and Maniates (2002) also call upon individuals in the voluntary simplicity movement to unite and work together towards political goals from within the existing political framework. We argue that while for the most part they act individually, voluntary simplifiers’ individual acts emanate from a political worldview, and their choices are likely to have political goals and political outcomes.

Discussions surrounding “the political” and “politics” tend to revolve around formal aspects of politics and concentrate on formal decision-making processes on national or local levels. In this restricted view, civic political participation is defined as the attempt to influence decision-making processes by differing means, ranging from voting to demonstrations or petitions aimed at policy-makers. Politics has been defined in Easton’s (1965: 96) classical study as the authoritative allocation by the political system of values for society, and by Lasswell’s (1958) book title, *Who Gets What, When, and How*. While the basic definition of politics as power and struggle over allocation has not changed, the loci of politics have expanded beyond the state and formal political struggles. The rich negotiations, interactions, and resistance that make up politics extend beyond the state and its institutions (Migdal, 2001). Similarly, political activity constitutes not only what is openly declared and visible, and not only direct engagement with rulers and elites (Singerman, 1995). This expansion of the political is all the more important in a period wherein traditional forms of politics lose their appeal (Boggs, 2000) and alternative forms of politics have become more popular. Differently stated, while individuals continue to act collectively to engage in politics, they may do so in new ways and in non-conventional settings.

Political activity bypassing formal channels is often an indication of a lack of faith in political institutions and in the ability of citizens to exert influence. Trust in politics and politicians is declining in many Western countries, all of them democracies of relatively long standing. This decline is manifested in waning satisfaction with political institutions, lack of interest in and alienation from politics, diminishing membership in political parties, and lower election turnouts (Boggs, 2000; Dalton, 2004; Diamond and Gunther, 2001; Yishai, 2012). Yet, the decline in trust in political institutions does not necessarily reflect political apathy, rather it may lead citizens to new, alternative expressions of political influence.

Ulrich Beck (1996) claims that scholars often look for politics in “the wrong place” when they direct their gaze at formal channels and traditional patterns of political action. Citizens who are dissatisfied with their social reality and wish to change it are likely to act in creative ways, which he terms *subpolitics*, or “a noninstitutionalized form of politics outside and beyond the representative institutions of the political system of nation-states” (Beck, 1996: 18). Subpolitics unfolds outside the formal political arena, in the streets, schools, and supermarkets – and wherever citizens express their values, priorities, and political preferences through daily actions. By means of these actions, they seek to fill the political vacuum and assume responsibility for issues relevant to their private lives and their social and political engagement.

Consumption patterns can be viewed as a locus for subpolitics. Based on the perception that consumption is essentially a political and civic act, researchers have proposed the hybrid concept of the *citizen-consumer* (see Johnston, 2008; Schudson, 2007; Soper, 2007). In the United States, the republican discourse on citizenship, which measures citizenship and belonging in terms of contribution to the common good, has long considered that consumerism is at odds with civicism and politics, since it belongs to the private sphere of the individual. Yet, Schudson (2007) asserts that distinguishing between consumption and political participation is fundamentally unsound, and the two should not be separated. Like Beck (1997), Schudson (2007) suggests that we should understand the politics of everyday life as a consequence of the marked decline in traditional political participation and citizens’ dissatisfaction with the performance of government. Likewise Giddens (1991) and Bennett (1998) maintain that everyday life practices such as leisure activities, entertainment choices, and fashion decisions carry political significance.

Issues relating to lifestyle, so Bennett (1998) argues, are highly personal, tend to avoid conflict, and hence are associated with a preference for personal, direct solutions rather than those supplied by government. At the same time, a lifestyle choice may be a political statement. From this perspective, consumption is a political matter even if it occurs in the private sphere. In a recent essay, Bennett (2012) discussed the concept of personalized forms of political participation. Consumption, he notes, has a strong relationship to personalized politics, and is expressed through what is termed political consumption.

Political consumption regards the marketplace as a political arena and views consumers as political players (Micheletti et al., 2003). Micheletti (2003) defines political consumption as “consumer choice of producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices” (p. xiv). However, the fact that consumption is a personal, low profile, and sporadic practice makes it difficult for researchers to study consumer motivation and distinguish between political consumption and other consumer activities. The question therefore arises: What distinguishes political consumption from ordinary consumption, and likewise, what distinguishes political from ordinary consumers (Halkier and Holm, 2008). Stolle et al. (2005) argue that the problem lies in our inability to establish the number of political consumers in the population at large, because

political consumption is less organized and structured and more sporadic than is conventional political participation.

The difficulty of defining political consumers is reflected in a study conducted in Britain, which found that 55% of British citizens regard themselves as ethical (and thus political) consumers (Cowe and Williams, 2000: 27). In a survey of Danish consumers, 47% declared that they often purchase products based on ethical, political, or environmental considerations (Goul Andersen and Tobiasen, 2006: 209). Of course, the discrepancy between declarations regarding political consumerism and the actual price consumers are prepared to pay for principles is hard to determine, as is the frequency with which such considerations overcome purely economic ones (Eckhardt et al., 2010). Nonetheless, the involvement of values in consumer choices points to a close link between politics of contribution to the common good and consumption as a supposedly private matter.

Goul Andersen and Tobiasen (2006) suggest that the criterion defining political consumption should be the aspiration to influence or change society. While mainstream consumers are mainly guided in their choices by personal (economic or taste) considerations, political consumers should, at the very least, show awareness and concern for the cumulative implications of consumption. Another important criterion is translation of values into personal action, either in the form of a boycott (negative consumption), or in the form of preferential purchase of a product that matches with certain values – the “buycott” (positive consumption) – in order to influence producers (Friedman, 1996; Goul Andersen and Tobiasen, 2006; Halkier and Holm, 2008; Holzer and Sørensen, 2003; Stolle et al., 2005).

A different approach is proposed by Stolle and her colleagues who argue that political consumption should meet three criteria: (1) behavior – do consumers truly buycott or boycott certain products?; (2) motivation – are the consumers making “political” purchases at random, or for reasons that are neither ethical nor political?; and (3) frequency – political consumption is neither a one-time nor a sporadic act, but rather a systematic, recurrent practice (Stolle et al., 2005; Stolle and Hooghe, 2003). The question whether political consumption is an attempt to use market means as a form of struggle, or whether this struggle eventually succumbs to the market, lies beyond this discussion.

The impact of political consumption depends on available resources, commitment, organization, and social capital (Forno and Ceccarini, 2006; Neilson and Paxton, 2010). Nonetheless, consumption guided by moral reasoning should be considered a political act. We argue in this article that their individuality notwithstanding, voluntary simplifiers represent a clear-cut instance of political consumption as measured in individual commitment and political goals.

Methods

The fieldwork for this study was carried out between September 2008 and January 2011, and relied on two qualitative research methods: in-depth

semi-structured interviews and participant observations.¹ The study is based on the phenomenological interpretative standpoint (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), and adopts the grounded theory strategy (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This approach seeks new understanding of social processes and as such rejects preconceived premises and explanations in favor of general questions formulated in the course of the research.

We began the study by recruiting and interviewing individuals who define themselves as consumers seeking an alternative to mainstream consumption, with the aim of tracking their consumption behavior and classifying them into groups of distinctive consumption patterns. Our initial question was what social, environmental, and personal significance alternative consumers attribute to their consumption patterns.

However, as the study progressed, we discovered that due to the many points of overlap, it was nearly impossible to categorize the consumers into distinct groups. Rather, we treat them as a single group with diverse characteristics, the most prominent being reduced consumption coupled with the aspiration to maximize reduction. We thus label them all voluntary simplifiers. While not all of them defined themselves as voluntary simplifiers, all reported engaging in conspicuous practices that qualified them as such. A precondition for participating in this study was the free and conscious adoption of this lifestyle, that is, anyone living the simple life out of economic or other constraints was excluded.

The study is based on in-depth interviews with 35 consumers who have opted for various levels of restricted consumption. All participants in this study can be regarded as what Etzioni (1998) classified in his tri-level division of voluntary simplicity as “holistic simplifiers” – the most dedicated simplifiers, who adjust all their life patterns as per the ethos of voluntary simplicity (p. 625).

The first interviewees were found via invitations on an environmental portal and an alternative community web site. The rest were approached in the course of participant observations, or in a snowball sampling.² The semi-structured interviews were based on a set of questions relating to consumption patterns in various consumer areas. The decision to confine the questions to consumption patterns and omit specific questions about associated beliefs and conceptions was based on the premise that consumption patterns inevitably reflect beliefs, conceptions, and values, and that the latter will arise in the interviews. The interviews were generally conducted in the homes of the interviewees, lasted 1½ to 2 hours each, and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The arguments presented in this article are based on a thematic analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) of the principal themes recurring in the interviews and observations.

Of the 35 interviewees, 19 were women, 15 men, and 1 who defined himself or herself as queer. The youngest was 18 years, the oldest 55 years, but most were in their 30s. About a third were unmarried and two-thirds married with families. About a third reside in the center of Israel (Tel Aviv or its satellite towns) and the rest in outlying areas. All but six have higher education. To protect their privacy, we use pseudonyms.

Clearly, a sample of 35 participants is not considered a representative sample nor is it statistically large enough to generalize about the patterns and meanings of voluntary simplicity. However, while we do not purport to make general statements about political consumption, the inductive analysis of the interviews allows us to reveal how the subjective meaning of voluntarily simplicity is constructed by its agents.

Since we were studying a novel cultural field, we attached great importance to gaining insights into this new world of concepts and ideas. Not content with understanding the consumers' stories at the theoretical level, we conducted participant observations in an organic food co-op, an organic farm, a cooperative store, shops selling organic food, second-hand shops, swap meets, and at the 2-day Activism Festival dedicated to ecology and environmentalism. In addition, observations were conducted at organized events such as lectures at an information center for alternative culture and social change, and at two Buy Nothing Day events organized thereby.

Consumption practices of voluntary simplifiers

The consumer practices of voluntary simplifiers are based on the "five Rs" current in environmental discourse – recycle, repair, reuse, reduce, and refuse – with "reduce" being the most significant. All our interviewees sought to reduce their consumption to the lowest possible level. The most extreme even chose to avoid all monetary transactions and to lead a vagabond life, never residing at a fixed address. Four others elected to live in a commune in a marginal neighborhood of a city in the center of Israel, out of belief that such a life offered an alternative to the capitalistic culture of consumerism. The rest – a little less total but equally fervently committed – opted for reducing their consumption as best they could: They reside in houses and to some degree consume in conventional ways, but forswear ownership of cars and electrical appliances and make an effort to be self-sufficient in their production of various products such as cosmetics, toys, clothes, and gifts. They prefer second-hand shops, reuse of items, or collecting discarded items and repairing them. They opt to buy local, organic foods, and unpackaged, unprocessed products. Some ("freegans") even obtain their food by gathering or "dumpster diving." Another facet of simple living is that less time is spent working for pay. Most of our interviewees refuse to work solely in order to get a paycheck, and their minimal consumption facilitates this aspiration.

Some studies demonstrate that many voluntary simplifiers perceive themselves as belonging to a movement (Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Heanfler, 2004; Sandlin and Walther, 2009). The interviewees who participated in our study asserted that they do not maintain declared, regular ties with each other, and preferred to refer to themselves as individuals having no connection or commitment to a particular community or group. Yet they are connected in some sense, either by virtue of being members of the same organic food co-op, cultivating the same community garden, or belonging to the same homeschooling group. Moreover, the fact that a

number of interviewees were located by the snowball method necessarily implies a connection. This situation afforded an interesting opportunity to study political individuals linked to each other through a loose system of relationships, yet not belonging to an organized movement.

In examining the significance of the consumer practices exhibited by voluntary simplifiers in Israel, we identified four salient traits that justify defining their practices as political. In the following section, we elaborate on each of these traits.

Multidimensional political discourse

In an online survey of 2268 voluntary simplifiers, Alexander and Ussher (2012) assert that the adoption of a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity is driven by diverse motives, among them the desire for more time for oneself or with one's family, saving money, concern for the environment, wanting to live a healthier life, self-sufficiency, having more time for community activity, social and humanitarian concerns, aspiring to minimalism and de-cluttering, and leading a more spiritual life. While these authors attribute the adoption of voluntary simplicity to a number of motivations, we discovered a set of political issues that preoccupy voluntary simplifiers and affect their consumer practices. We term this the "multidimensional political perspective."

For example, when Yael, 39 years, a former kibbutz member who returned to her kibbutz after some years living in a city and working as a chef, was asked the reasoning underlying her consumption habits, she replied,

The airplane that brought this [clothes sold in retail chains] to Israel – how much energy did it use? And who knows what worker exploitation was involved there and where this cloth was manufactured and what really is the cost versus the benefit, that is, what does the farmer who grew the cotton really earn and how much did he get for a kilo of cotton compared with the price of this garment [. . .] and the McDonald's fries you buy for a dollar and a half? The American farmer gets six cents for the same amount of potatoes! [. . .] where are these crazy percentages? Who earned them? Where did they go? And besides, how much energy did you waste and how much air was polluted and how much water was consumed and how much petrol was spent on this thing?

From this quote, it is clear that for Yael, every act of consumption is bound up in deliberation about the broader implications thereof. All her queries relate to political issues, such as wasting natural resources, environmental damage, and workers' rights. Like Yael, all of the interviewees spoke of ethical and environmental considerations guiding their consumption patterns, among them preference for organic and local food, opposition to buying from large corporations known as unethical employers, minimizing the use of energy- and water-guzzling products, avoiding unnecessary purchases and products that could aggravate pollution, and so forth.

The political issues that preoccupy these consumers can be grouped into two main discourses: the anti-capitalist and the environmental. Under the rubric “anti-capitalist discourse” are several issues, chief among them a critique of globalization, large corporations, capitalism, and consumer culture. The respondents, as a rule, did not discuss each issue separately, but rather grouped them together. For instance, 30-year-old Anna, a doctoral candidate in computer sciences living with her partner in the center of Israel, explains,

In a capitalistic society [...] Consumer unawareness creates small-mindedness and encourages the imitation of relations between producers and consumers in many other life scopes. For instance, non-local behavior such as a massive import from China separates us from those who work hard on the products that we purchase [...] We do not have compassion toward those workers, because they are far away and out of sight, and we don't see the price they must pay – only the cheap price we pay. Practically, not only do they pay a heavy price, but also this impacts the environment ...

Anna was among the responders who made frequent use of expressions and explanations taken from the anti-capitalist discourse to criticize the dissonance between production in one locale and consumption in another, distant locale. The environmental discourse at the end of Anna's statement is inseparable from the anti-capitalist one. The environmental discourse recurred most frequently in the interviews, and was cited as the principal motive for opting for the simple life. Inbal, 32 years, who runs a yoga studio together with her spouse and the father of her two daughters, explains,

We use cloth diapers because disposable diapers are simply an ecologic disaster [...] we buy recycled toilet paper. We recycle printer paper and use both sides of the paper [...] Underlying this too is an ecological thought [...] there is so much trash in the world, and so many resources are required to produce all these new objects that it is simply a pity.

In her statement, Inbal refers to recycling and reuse, common practices among environmentalists, and she also mentions that she buys in second-hand shops and is given used items by acquaintances. In this way, environmental practices and discourse overlap the anti-capitalist discourse: Abstention from buying new products is not only an environmental practice, it also signals opposition to the consumer culture inasmuch as it constitutes an alternative to traditional consumption.

Scholars of political consumption agree that consumers may indeed be defined as political even if they focus on a single political issue, such as boycotting the products of a certain company or state (Goul Andersen and Tobiasen, 2006). What distinguishes the voluntary simplifiers who participated in this study is the fact that they give considerable weight to diverse and multiple political issues, and engage in a host of practices with equal enthusiasm on a daily basis.

Embracement of a holistic and uncompromising lifestyle of simplicity

Halkier and Holm (2008) address the difficulty of assessing the frequency and breadth of consumer activity and of determining at what point the scale of such activity justifies classifying consumers as political. To this end, they employ the term “political agency” and propose two dimensions by which a consumer may be identified as a political agent. The first is intent to assume social responsibility, that is, to be regarded as political, consumption must be goal oriented. The second dimension is autonomy, or availability of resources, space, and time, and the economic ability to implement consumption goals. In a survey they conducted, only those respondents who replied “all the time” or “mostly” to questions relating to autonomy were classed as political consumers.

Application of these two dimensions of political agency to the participants in this study shows that they address numerous political issues and are highly committed to achieving these goals.

Ariel, a 38-year-old married father of one, lives in an urban community in the south of Israel. In the concluding part of the interview, he had this to say about his consumption pattern: “[For me] it is everything . . . simply . . . everything . . . there is no aspect of life that it does not affect.” Like Ariel, the other respondents also remarked that they invest a great deal of thought in every facet of life connected to consumption. They declared themselves prepared to accept a relatively low standard of living, and in particular to devote much thought to every consumer issue in their lives, from buying food, clothes, and electrical appliances to decisions about where to reside and buying a home.

While the resources available to consumers opting for simple living are often limited, there are certain items in which they are prepared to invest and will not forego, such as organic food or locally produced products, which generally cost more than do conventional products. Many of the interviewees spoke of the economic calculations they frequently make, forfeiting a certain item in order to buy another, and even more importantly, paying more for a product that conforms to their principles or whose better quality assures that it will last longer and not deteriorate after a short time.

Take for instance Idit, 36 years, married, and the mother of one. She and her partner hardly work for a living, and have resolved to live and raise their child in strict simplicity:

I believe that morally speaking . . . it isn't that I look for the highest price, but things have a price, and when things become too cheap, when chicken costs, I don't know, ten shekels [US\$2] that shows contempt. Life has no value . . . let's say, there is no value to the hen . . . [Our] shopping list contains exactly how many tomatoes, cucumbers [we'll eat] . . . we don't stuff the refrigerator, and I prefer it so. [. . .] We have lots of nuts and grains and lentils – there is abundance – but paying attention to what we truly need, and not [buying] puddings and all sorts of cheeses.

This was Idit's answer to a question about the high price of organic food, the only kind her family buys. In light of the couple's choice of a very simple life, we assumed that as they work so little and therefore earn very little, it was likely that their purchasing power is severely limited. Yet in her reply, Idit emphasizes the importance of the moral considerations that guide her food consumption habits: She is striving to abide by her principles even though they make things difficult financially, and indeed, she resolves her economic challenges – consume less, or precisely what she needs, and no more. Interestingly, she does not look for cheaper products, but rather sees them as items whose production cost is not properly valued.

Nira, 33 years and a mother of two, speaks of the effort she is willing to make in order to consume products that align with her worldviews:

In principle, I believe that small businesses need to be developed and we have to think about who stands behind what you buy and how much they pay their workers and how they employ them morally, and health, and where it grew before it came to the plate ... but it means paying more from my salary and investing more time [...] we buy our vegetables from an organic farmer, which is nice because it doesn't have the mediation gap [...] but it requires us to drive all the way to his farm instead of doing the normal round in the supermarket.

Nira talks about the high physical and economic price of buying non-mediated products that conform to her principles, a price she is willing to pay in order to subordinate her consumption to her principles.

In regard to Halkier and Holm's (2008) two dimensions of political agency mentioned above, the deep commitment to adapting consumption to political principles that emerges from Idit's and Nira's willingness to meet many challenges underscores the strong political nature of these consumers. Their highly directed intent and stalwart autonomy are salient traits that distinguish voluntary simplifiers from other political consumers.

However, these consumers' uncompromising adoption of political consumption practices is not static, but rather constitutes a constant process of change, a change that we interpret as a political process in and of itself.

Lifestyle change as an ongoing political process

None of the respondents in this study comes from a family of environmentalists or alternative consumers. All experienced childhood and adolescence in a setting of capitalistic consumption, and some even participated actively as adults in the capitalist market, both as consumers and as producers working in various corporations. Accordingly, all spoke of a very specific juncture in their lives at which they began to shift to an alternative consumer lifestyle involving cutbacks and substantial modification of their patterns of consumption, leading to a significant, holistic change across their entire lifestyle.

Efrat, 50 years, married and the mother of two teenagers, served in the Israel Defense Force (IDF) for many years in a senior position. Upon retiring from the army at the age of 45, she took a course given by the foremost expert in permaculture in Israel, in the wake of which she embarked upon a process of lifestyle transformation and reduction in consumption. In her case, the critical juncture was catalyzed by the permaculture course, and she describes the process of transformation by referring to her home garden:

Taking the [permaculture] course did a lot and generated many changes [...]. Vegetation, for instance – if until a certain stage it was all seasonal, flowers, and “to be seen,” I have now arrived at a minimum of that, and more and more invest in trees and shrubs, in things that truly create a complete life system that repeats itself and really contributes to clean air, shade, and so on. In other words, I believe that wherever we touch, I had lots of very trivial things, but just mention them and I see how many changes have been made.

In the past, Efrat’s garden was a showcase of the consumer life, manifested in the display of an aesthetic, flowering plot (“to be seen”), as seasonal flowers that have to be replaced frequently are a symbol of wasteful consumption. Now she has come, as she says, to minimize her investment in her garden, contributing thereby to protecting the environment, clean air, and shade, and testifying to her forbearance from wasteful investment in a “mere” flowerbed.

Opting for a life of voluntary simplicity and alternative consumption always involves change, and is invariably compared with a previous lifestyle. For all the consumers interviewed, it was a sustained, ongoing sequence of events involving improvement, growing commitment, learning, and constant attention to further changes they might wish to make in their lifestyle.

The process of transformation unfolds along the past–present–future axis: The past represents voluntary simplifiers’ world before they began the process of personal change; the future is perceived via the rationale of sustainability, aimed at a world that humanity will bequeath to coming generations, while the present represents the process of change itself. This is a prolonged process of becoming that progresses toward some point in the future, as expressed by Inbal:

Yes, we are becoming increasingly extreme. There are things that bothered me less or that I chose to ignore, and now I just can’t [...] I suppose that I could be even more extreme than I am now [...] Once it seemed strange to me to go to the WIZO shop [offers discarded items collected for the needy], like, only the poor go there. Today I have no problem doing it [...] There are some things I am still far from doing. For instance, I would be glad to stop eating dairy products [...] The treatment of cows in that industry is simply terrible, worse even than the meat industry. But technically I’m not there yet [...] It will happen, that’s the next stage [on the “simplification scale”]: Someday I’ll also stop eating dairy products.

As this quote from Inbal's response tells, the process of transformation – which she refers to as “becoming increasingly extreme” – has no defined endpoint; it is continuous and dynamic. Mentioning radicalization is Inbal's way of stressing that she is interested in making even more changes and improvements.

This future-oriented, long-term process of change is the most striking and important trait of voluntary simplifiers. In preceding sections, we asserted that voluntary simplifiers' multidimensional political discourse and practices, together with their embracement of an uncompromising lifestyle, constitute evidence of their politicization. Commensurately, we assert that the long-term process of change – involving continual adoption of new practices and their expansion into day-to-day life – in itself constitutes daily, ongoing political activity. Whereas the practices of traditional politics are reduced to voting in elections every few years and/or joining a party, and the activism of social movements finds political expression in demonstrations or activism, for voluntary simplifiers, political activity is a daily, domestic, and individual affair unfolding away from public view. What makes it so central and special is the fact that it is ongoing, progressive, and never stagnates.

The desire to exert influence

As we have seen, political consumption is defined as the purchase of specific products with the aim of altering the practices of institutions or the market (Micheletti et al., 2003; Stolle et al., 2005). While determining whether consumers are indeed capable of influencing institutions or the market lies outside the scope of this study, we seek to establish whether their actions are intended to exert such influence.

Ya'ir, a 32-year-old teacher and a member of an alternative theater group, explains how he envisages his own capacity to influence as a consumer:

One of our most significant ballots is our money, the banknotes . . . so I am very aware of this [. . .] I want to support things such as local, communal, collective initiatives where the money goes to people who are close and I know them, not so that the cashier will get little money, and this will go on and the chain store owners have lots of cash [. . .] When I explain to people about this matter, I say that our money is a significant ballot, because we use it every day and not once every few years. Like the ballot, its relative weight is low, but it has a cumulative influence, over time.

A study carried out in Sweden, Belgium, and Canada found that political consumers doubted that political consumption could engender real political and social change, and regarded voting as the only effective political act (Stolle et al., 2005: 261). In stark contrast, the above quote, indicative of our findings, shows that simplifiers believe that their consumption practices can have an influence, and they attribute at least as much value to political consumption as they do to voting. Ya'ir also implies that there are two channels of influence: through positive and through negative consumption. Ya'ir is referring to positive consumption when he states his support for local and communal initiatives, and to negative

consumption when he says that he avoids shops whose corporate owners exploit their workers.

Many of the interviewees spoke of the importance of recruiting a critical mass of people to voluntary simplifying in order to realize its influential potential. The response of David, a 36-year-old musician, married and father of one, tells us something about how voluntary simplifiers assess their ability to influence on other people:

I very much want to influence people. Very much. But . . . we're learning how to go about it. Preaching doesn't work . . . Of course I would want everyone to refrain from using products that pollute, to not eat meat, which causes such damage to the world, to be good [. . .] but we have come to understand that . . . we are learning to refine how we deliver our messages to other people: Pleasantly and through personal example as far as possible, and whoever wishes to ask, our door is open.

David is one of the respondents who chose a life of extreme simplicity: He hardly ever works as he objects to the "capitalist rat race"; he consumes only organic food or food that he grows himself; other than light bulbs and refrigerator, he owns no electrical appliances; instead of a conventional toilet, he has a composting toilet; and he does not own a car. David is a highly aware and highly political consumer who is prepared to invest a great deal to abide by his principles, yet only a little in influencing others. The strict lifestyle of abnegation that he has adopted may appear to conflict with his relatively passive approach to recruiting and influencing others. However, his contentment with the consumption style he has chosen reflects how he envisions his own power to influence. In contrast to Ya'ir, who adopts an explicitly political discourse peppered with slogans (money as ballot), David's discourse is implied rather than explicit, and his practices are domestic and directed inward.

Yael, 39 years, a kibbutz member who works in the grocery store of her kibbutz, adopts a more active, community-oriented way of exerting influence than does David:

At the beginning of the process, what happened here really is that I worked in the grocery store and the whole thing began to develop very strongly when we decided that we would stop using plastic bags, so it was nice to see that the members aren't hurt or offended, but actually begin to think about the environment [. . .] and then I saw that actually there is something to talk about, that there is thought here and that there are people who are interested in this [. . .] Then we just said, OK. Next Sunday we'll have a first meeting, we are a team [. . .] and the moment we really started on our informational activity, I published materials once a week in the kibbutz bulletin [. . .] relating to ecology, how much time it takes for each material to biodegrade, how much trash every individual produces in a day, where our garbage goes, what methane gas is [. . .] how to minimize, think twice before buying [. . .] see how to reduce the volume of garbage at home and of course where each thing goes for recycling: cardboard, paper, plastic, glass, metal, organic waste.

Alongside the change she made in her private life, Yael felt an obligation to spread the word in her own community. She chose to begin the most significant effort of her information campaign at her workplace – the kibbutz grocery store – thereby demonstrating her belief that she could influence the awareness of others through consumption habits. Unlike Ya'ir and David, Yael actually acts to see immediate outcome. She is unique because not only does she intend to influence, she has also succeeded in bringing about an actual outcome.

Conclusion

Studies of political consumption have largely focused on two types: negative consumption (boycott) and positive consumption (buycott). This article suggests broadening the discussion on political consumerism by focusing on reduced consumption, or voluntary simplifying.

The study of voluntary simplifiers in Israel demonstrates that individual, private, domestic, and seemingly apolitical practices can in fact be defined as political acts. This view of consumption entails a differing view of politics, one that embraces the idea that politics can exist outside and beyond the traditional political arena.

The findings show that voluntary simplifiers, embrace post-materialist values such as social justice and environmentalism, but while these values are discussed on a global scale, actual consumption patterns and practices are domestic and focus on the local scale. Voluntary simplifiers' resistance to consumption and the mainstream market is manifested in their daily life and in nearly every consumption choice they make. In that sense, the solution they offer is remarkable and unique in comparison to that suggested by other political consumers. In order to address environmental and social justice challenges, voluntary simplifiers embrace a holistic lifestyle of simplicity: They withdraw from the rat race and seek to find solutions like communal consumption and freeganism, favor supporting local and small-scale production, and practice self-sufficiency. By means of their own consumption practices, voluntary simplifiers are willing to make themselves a personal example of how it is possible to challenge the rules of the capitalist market and consumerism, thus expanding the practices of political consumption known in this field of study (i.e. boycotting and buycotting). Moreover, the politicization of voluntary simplifiers' consumption patterns stems from the fact that they constitute a continuous process of learning and action wherein they constantly improve their consumption and non-consumption practices.

Thus, while other scholars of political consumption are hesitant to apply the label "political consumer," we believe that voluntary simplifiers represent a clear-cut and indisputable instance of individuals practicing political consumption. Moreover, our research on voluntary simplifiers can contribute to the understanding of various routes to exerting political influence that lie on the market's fringes and outside the market entirely.

To summarize, Alexander and Ussher (2012) found that 68% of the respondents perceived themselves part of a voluntary simplicity movement. Accordingly, they

argue that voluntary simplicity has acquired a group consciousness that is an important and necessary phase in the maturation of a social movement into a more potent social and political force. Our study, of the Israeli branch of this world movement, which – differently to the picture drawn by Alexander and Ussher – is composed of individuals who did not report any awareness of belonging to a movement and who maintain only very loose links with each other. However, this group did demonstrate a political character and mindset, yet one that does not depend upon being “a social movement of considerable collective power” (Alexander and Ussher, 2012: 82). Rather, their political commitments were expressed individually, as concerned and aware (non)consumers willing to take action toward collective goals, even if these goals are loosely coordinated and the participants lack formal organization. Therefore, in their desire to generate change, voluntary simplifiers’ preferences and choices are both political and collective.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Notes

1. The research was carried out by Einat Zamwel as part of the work for her doctoral dissertation.
2. Snowball sampling is a sampling design in which a few members of a certain population are asked to identify other members of the population, and those so identified are asked to identify others, and so forth, for the purpose of obtaining a non-probability sample (Thompson, 2002).

References

- Alexander S (2011) *Property beyond growth: Toward a politics of voluntary simplicity*. Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia, Doctoral Thesis.
- Alexander S and Ussher S (2012) The Voluntary Simplicity Movement: A multi-national survey analysis in theoretical context. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 12: 66–86.
- Beck U (1996) World risk society as cosmopolitan society? Ecological questions in a framework of manufactured uncertainties. *Theory, Culture & Society* 13(4): 1–32.
- Beck U (1997) *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Society Order*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Bennett LW (1998) The uncivic culture: Communication, identity, and the rise of lifestyle politics. *Political Science & Politics* 31(4): 740–761.
- Bennett LW (2012) The personalization of politics: Political identity, social media, and changing patterns of participation. *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644: 20–39.
- Boggs C (2000) *The End of Politics: Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere*. New York; London: The Guilford Press.
- Cowe R and Williams S (2000) *Who are the Ethical Consumers?* London: The Co-operative Bank.
- Dalton R (2004) *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (2005) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Diamond L and Gunther R (2001) Introduction. In: Diamond L and Gunther R (eds) *Political Parties and Democracy*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. ix–xxxiv.
- Drori I and Yuchtman-Yaar E (2002) Environmental vulnerability in public perceptions and attitudes: The case of Israel's urban centers. *Social Science Quarterly* 83(1): 53–63.
- Easton D (1965) *A Framework for Political Analysis*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Eckhardt GM, Belk R and Devinney TM (2010) Why don't consumers consume ethically? *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 9: 426–436.
- Elgin D (1993) *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Etzioni A (1988) Voluntary simplicity characterization, selected psychological implications and societal consequences. *Journal of Economic Psychology* 19: 619–643.
- Forno F and Ceccarini L (2006) From the street to the shops: The rise of new forms of political action in Italy. *South European Society and Politics* 11(2): 197–222.
- Friedman M (1996) A positive approach to organized consumer action: The “boycott” as an alternative to the boycott. *Journal of Consumer Policy* 19(4): 439–451.
- Giddens A (1991) *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Glaser B and Strauss A (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Goul Andersen J and Tobiassen M (2006) Who are these political consumers anyway? Survey evidence from Denmark. In: Micheletti M, Follesdal A and Stolle D (eds) *Politics, Products, and Markets: Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, pp. 203–222.
- Grigsby M (2004) *Buying Time and Getting By: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Grinberg LL (2013) The J14 resistance mo(ve)ment: The Israeli mix of Tahrir Square and Puerta del Sol. *Current Sociology* 61(4): 491–509.
- Halkier B and Holm L (2008) Food consumption and political agency: On concerns and practices among Danish consumers. *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 32: 667–674.
- Heanfler R (2004) Collective identity in the straight edge movement: How diffuse movements foster commitment, encourage individualized participation, and promote cultural change. *Sociological Quarterly* 45(4): 785–805.
- Holzer B and Sørensen MP (2003) Rethinking subpolitics: Beyond the “Iron Cage” of modern politics? *Theory, Culture & Society* 20(2): 79–102.
- Johnston J (2008) The citizen-consumer hybrid: Ideological tensions and the case of Whole Foods Market. *Theory and Society* 37: 229–270.
- Lasswell HD (1958) *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How*. New York: Meridian Press.
- Maniates M (2002) Individualization: Plant a tree, buy a bike, save the world? In: Princen T, Maniates M and Conca K (eds) *Confronting Consumption* London: MIT Press, pp. 43–66.
- Micheletti M (2003) *Political Virtue and Shopping*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Micheletti M, Follesdal A and Stolle D (2003) *Politics, Products, and Markets: Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press.
- Migdal J (2001) *State in Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Neilson L and Paxton P (2010) Social capital and political consumerism: A multilevel analysis. *Social Problems* 57(1): 5–24.

- Ne'eman-Avramovich A and Katz-Gerro T (2007) Social bases of environmental attitudes and behavior in Israel. *Megamót* ["trends"] 44(4): 736–758 (in Hebrew).
- Sandlin JA and Walther CS (2009) Complicated simplicity: Moral identity formation and social movement learning in the Voluntary Simplicity Movement. *Adult Education Quarterly* 59: 298–318.
- Schudson M (2007) Citizens, consumers, and the good society. *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 611: 236–248.
- Shaw D and Moraes C (2009) Voluntary simplicity: An exploration of market interactions. *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 33: 215–223.
- Singerman D (1995) *Avenues of Participation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Soper K (2007) Re-thinking the “Good Life”: The citizenship dimension of consumer disaffection with consumerism. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7(2): 205–229.
- Stolle D and Hooghe M (2003) Consumers as political participants? Shifts in the action repertoires in Western societies. In: Micheletti M, Follesdal A and Stolle D (eds) *Politics, Products, and Markets: Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, pp. 265–288.
- Stolle D, Hooghe M and Micheletti M (2005) Politics in the supermarket: A three-nation pilot survey on political consumerism as a form of political participation. *International Political Science Review* 26(3): 245–269.
- Strauss A and Corbin J (1990) *Grounded Theory: Basics of Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Thompson SK (2002) *Sampling*, 2nd edn. New York: Wiley.
- Yishai Y (2012) Escape from politics: The case of Israel. In: Herman TS (ed.) *By the People, For the People, without the People? The Emergence of (Anti) Political Sentiment in Israel and in Western Democracies*. Jerusalem, Israel: Israeli Democracy Institute, pp. 288–313.

Author Biographies

Einat Zamwel is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Bar-Ilan University, Israel. Her dissertation focuses on the politics of voluntary simplicity in Israel.

Orna Sasson-Levy is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, and the Program in Gender Studies at Bar Ilan University, Israel. Her research and teaching interests include feminist theory, militarism and gender, gender and new social movements, and Israeli ethnicities. Her work has been published in journals such as *Gender & Society* (2007, 2011), *The Sociological Quarterly* (2013), *Sociological Forum* (2013), *Signs* (2007), *British Journal of Sociology* (Forthcoming), as well as in the *Handbook of Gender, Work and Organization* (2011), (edited by E. Jeanes, D. Knights and P. Yancey Martin) Wiley-Blackwell Publishing.

Guy Ben-Porat is a lecturer at the Department of Public Policy and Administration at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. He is the author of *Between State and Synagogue: the Secularization of Contemporary Israel* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).