

INVOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

The American marketplace is undergoing its most significant restructuring since the end of World War II — at the hand of consumers being forced to cut back on spending and simplify their lives.

The restructuring will lead to a century-long era of thrift, savings and antimaterialism, reversing a 50-year trend of postwar consumption and debt accumulation.

Legions of Americans — victims of lower wages, downsizing, underemployment and job insecurity — will increasingly have to abandon their expectations about “upward mobility.” (See “Economic Fallback,” Winter 1995, page 3.)

Retail sales will continue to fall as simplicity shoppers scale back their purchases.

Those who are unable, unwilling or unknowledgeable about how to survive the downturn will fall into the traditional lower classes. But others will “simplify,” making unconventional choices about how they spend their money and time so they can maintain, if not enhance, their quality of life.

TOUGH CHOICES

The choices won't always come easily, however.

Unlike “voluntary simplicity” advocates, who choose to cut back on material consumption because they believe it's wasteful, harmful, unnecessary and unfulfilling, most involuntary recruits will initially find retrenchment painful.

But as the trend grows, they'll join their voluntary counterparts in rejecting the doctrine of materialism, which teaches that physical well-being and worldly possessions constitute the greatest good and highest value in life. (See “Voluntary Simplicity,” Winter 1994, page 7.)

Already 82 percent of Americans agree “We buy and consume far

more than we need,” according to a poll commissioned last summer by the Merck Family Fund.

'SIMPLIFY, SIMPLIFY'

The new national simplicity movement will be marked by moderation, self-discipline, and training of the mind and body — spiritual growth over material accumulation.

It will mean making life-style changes based on three big questions:

- How much do I really need?
- How much do I really want?
- How much am I willing to do to get it?

It will not mean deprivation; indeed, it will often mean “prosperity.” A monthly budget may cover, among other things, a diet of quality “clean” foods, while eliminating often more costly and harmful junk foods. (See “Clean-Food Diet,” page 8.)

The trend will spread across age groups and class lines, and will establish itself as accepted mainstream convention when it reaches maturity early in the new century.

Retail sales, currently in a downtrend, will continue to fall as simplicity shoppers scale back their purchases, buying things they really need, rather than things they simply want.

Products they do buy will be high quality, durable and functional.

These shoppers will also dramatically cut back on gift-giving, and grow resistant to impulse-buying and image advertising.

But simplicity seekers will still spend on high-technology, and will even go into debt for purchases they perceive as critical to their business' growth or essential to their children's education.

And they'll save more, even while earning less. Pushed by a simplicity consciousness, the national savings rate, currently about 4 percent, will gradually but steadily grow, doubling by next decade's end.

Note: *Success in the new age of simplicity will be measured by an acquisition of inner peace, spiritual growth, creative development, and a deepening respect for and commitment to family, friends and community.* ■

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