

Temporal Belongings



Interview Series Number Nine

Samuel Alexander
Founder, Simplicity Institute

Michelle Bastian
March 2017



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Bio

Samuel Alexander is the co-director of the Simplicity Institute, a lecturer at the University of Melbourne, and a Research Fellow with the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute. He is author of *Prosperous Descent: Crisis as Opportunity in an Age of Limits* (2015), *Sufficiency Economy: Enough, for Everyone, Forever* (2015), and *Entropia: Life Beyond Industrial Civilisation* (2013). As well as his academic work, in recent years Sam has been working on a 'simpler way' demonstration project called *Wurruk'an*.

This interview was conducted as part of the AHRC-funded Sustaining Time project (www.sustainingtime.org). The project asks, if clock time helped build industrial capitalism & the idea of a speeded-up, networked time supports late capitalism, what kind of time would support alternative, sustainable economies? It took place in July 2013 and has been edited for length and clarity.

Challenging growth

MB: So just to set the scene, would you say that the Simplicity Institute is explicitly trying to shift towards an alternative economy and if so what would your definition of an alternative economy be?

SA: We're very explicit in our advocacy for an alternative economy. We dedicate half of our attentions to critiquing the industrialised growth model and spend the rest of our energies trying to envision and describe a vision of an alternative economy. We would position it within the steady state economic model, but would note that within that paradigm there are still many differences of opinion. There are various ways of conceptualising a steady state economy and even amongst the Simplicity Institute fellows we have individual ways of conceptualising that paradigm. Even so, the notion of an alternative economy is very much part of what has inspired us to do what we do and write what we write.

MB: And the so within the work in general, have you noticed any issues to do with time come up?

SA: Well yes, quite explicitly. The growth economy privileges stuff over time--,

MB: Do you mean owning stuff rather than having free time?

SA: Yes, so there are structural and cultural issues that incentivise that sort of dynamic and this is despite quite extraordinary technological advances over recent decades, which were initially celebrated as promising a relief from labour. In the United States for example, and in Australia, we're working longer hours than we did several decades ago, despite these advances.

There's an American theorist called Juliet Schor who made an interesting comment in one of her books called *The Overworked American*, where she said in the '50s Americans and most other westerners made a remarkable choice. And the choice was to put all of those technological advances into producing more, not reducing work hours. That choice raised material standards of living and for a time, perhaps also because of an increase in wealth, that increase in the material standards of living contributed to an individual's or a society's or community's wellbeing.

But there's an increasingly robust body of social science and empirical studies into the correlation between income and wellbeing which is suggesting that there comes a point where that relationship between income and wellbeing fades and that raises the question, 'If quality of life, wellbeing or happiness are what we are aiming for is there scope for increasing that wellbeing by deliberately reducing our consumption and our production and exchanging that material wealth for time?'

So quite a central part of the alternative steady state economy is advocating voluntary simplicity, that's a central part of the argument. While environmental issues lie at the core of those arguments, when you're advocating for as radical a change as a shift from the growth economy to the steady state economy, human beings, insofar as they have a human nature, care about their own wellbeing and their own interests. So as a means of persuading people to shift from a growth economy to a steady state economy you want to talk of the advantages that would flow from that shift. If part of what it would involve would be reducing material wealth, people might instinctively think that it must therefore imply hardship or sacrifice or deprivation and so it's important to highlight the fact that it's not just about taking away or doing with less in a material sense, although that is what it would imply because for environmental reasons consumer affluence simply can't be globalised.

But if people are going to have to do with less in a truly ecologically sustainable society, they probably want to know how could that also benefit them and that's where time comes in. It's shifting the pursuit of the good life away from continuous materialistic pursuits and trying to seek the good life through non-materialistic sources of wellbeing and fulfilment and satisfaction. That exchange of one economy for the other can be understood as privileging time over money or time over stuff. With that time you are freer to live the life you want and seek happiness in non-materialistic domains, whether that's socialising or community engagement or artistic pursuits or reading or relaxing or whatever tickles one's fancy.

Time and value

MB: Yes, it seems as though part of what is happening there is unpicking the knot that ties together time, money and value, where only time used to earn money is seen as truly worthwhile. Voluntary simplicity in particular seems to be a good example of some of the ways that people are trying to shift where value is placed, for example by challenging the idea that only paid work is valuable or that unpaid work should primarily be seen as an optional activity that you might do around the edges of your job.

SA: Absolutely and even the economics of it can be so distorted. I'm a passionate gardener; my small household grows probably toward 90 per cent of its vegetables from our small suburban backyard which we are cultivating quite intensively. If we were to put those hours in at a paid job, we would be able to work less overall and be able to go and buy the vegetables. But that is such a narrow economic way to look at it, which distorts the whole process because it totally misses other factors, such as we're out there with our hands in the soil, connected with nature, experiencing the elements, watching the seasons change, to say nothing of the fact that we know exactly what's going into our food as opposed to whatever we would get at a supermarket. If we were to go and work for say half the amount of time that we put into our garden we'd be able to buy the food at a supermarket. But like most transactions in a market economy there are externalities that get left out of the economics. Time is an interesting problem and growing your own food is a perfect example of an activity where you don't get the time benefits as such because it takes longer to grow your own food and yet it's a good exchange, I'm the richer for having less time in this sense.

MB: Yes, it does seem like it's partly about developing a wider repertoire of value, and rather than translating everything into a monetary value, making all these other important factors more visible to yourself.

SA: Yes, and just as that applies at the microeconomic level or the lifestyle level so too does it apply at the macroeconomic level and the notion of a steady state economy as developed by Herman Daly. In 1989 he and a colleague published a book called *For the Common Good* where they first provided a macroeconomic indicator that included so many more values than the GDP accounts. You may have come across the *Index for Sustainable Economic Welfare*, which has now transformed into the *Genuine Progress Indicator* and while it still quantifies things it doesn't just say a society's progress can be measured by its cumulative market expenditure. It says that while its still important to have GDP accounts we also need to ask how that is affecting our environment? Because if we get really rich but cut all our trees down and have dirty

rivers then are we rich? If we work 80 hours a week instead of 40 hours a week the GDP accounts are going to look good but is that going to be good for our lives, our families, our communities and so on and so forth? So there are all these different ways of thinking about what goes into the notion of progress but increasingly that notion of progress has been economic progress, GDP growth. And so in much the same way that an individual could potentially increase their quality of life by reducing their material consumption, if they rethink their attitude to material culture and production and consumption, so too can a nation as a whole potentially be poorer in a material sense and yet richer in a true holistic notion of progress sense.

Redefining progress

MB: So developing a more critical approach to what time is, how it should be valued, and how we might use our time is quite important? Particularly when you consider that progress is also linked to particular understandings of time and its directionality and flow, which the steady-state idea challenges very directly. Would you say there were any other ways that explicitly understanding time differently would be important?

AT THE CORE OF VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY IS A QUESTIONING OF HOW MUCH TIME HUMAN BEINGS... ARE DEDICATING TO THE MATERIAL REALM

SA: Well, I guess as human beings we only have a certain amount of life to live and so the more we dedicate to materialistic pursuits the less we have to dedicate to other things. At the core of voluntary simplicity is a questioning of how much time human beings, in consumer cultures in particular but increasingly elsewhere, are dedicating to the material realm. The central question for me is "How much is enough?" This lies at the centre of all my work and is the question that everything else is related to. Once you have enough food and clothes, a modest shelter, access to basic medical care, and some basic education, you don't need three TVs. You don't need to travel to Bali a couple of times a year. You don't need to have brand new furniture. You don't need to paint your house every three years just for a cosmetic change. There's so much of what can be considered superfluous consumption in consumer cultures today that if people thought about the question, 'How much is enough?', they could say 'I'm not going to spend my limited life, my limited precious freedom, working for those superfluities and instead consciously say I have enough to live a full dignified, meaningful life with my basic needs met'. They could then spend the rest of their time essentially doing whatever they wanted.

MB: Do you think there's a problem with the kind of narratives that we have of a 'successful life'? I'm

wondering because the realisation that you have enough could perhaps feel at odds with the idea that we should always be learning, progressing, building up, climbing the ladder (whether its the property ladder or the career ladder)? Because we have these stories, which shape how the flow of time is supposed to feel — as something that's always increasing in some way — then the ideal of 'enough' kind of jars in a way doesn't it?

SA: Absolutely but that's more, I think, a problem with the conception of progress than with something specifically time related.

MB: Well perhaps, although I think you can understand progress as one particular story about time, it draws on understandings of how time flows (a linear forward motion, rather than backwards, circular or even multiple flows) and it also gives an account of the meaningfulness of time. It can privilege particular parts of time, for example the future is seen as meaningful and valuable while the past is something to be left behind. If you had a different orientation in time, for example where the past was in front of you rather than behind, then the concept of progress would potentially be very different. So in those ways I see them as interlinked.

SA: They're certainly interlinked but I feel that a key point is this idea that we have a limited amount of time to live our lives. How we spend that is shaped by our conception of progress and currently a lot of people's conception of progress is the materialistic conception, so that their limited amount of time gets spent, disproportionately in the material realm, in trying to enrich oneself in a material sense. But if the conception of progress changed to a more inclusive conception of wellbeing and wasn't just about the material, the spending of that time could and would be different.

*IF THE CONCEPTION
OF PROGRESS
CHANGES TO A
MORE INCLUSIVE
CONCEPTION OF
WELLBEING...
THE SPENDING OF
THAT TIME COULD
AND WOULD
BE DIFFERENT*

MB: So what do you think about the 'climbing the ladder' story versus the 'enough' story. The notion of enough might be a bit intimidating? Once it's reached is there the problem of stories failing, of people wondering 'what on earth am I supposed to do now?'

SA: Exactly and I've written about this because, you know, I've enjoyed reading the existentialists over the years, and I'm sure you have too, and part of what they talk about is how terrifying freedom can be. And I've often wondered whether or not part of the reason that some people remain in the rat race is because the idea of confronting their freedom is terrifying. Imagine someone comes to the realisation that they have enough

and that they're suddenly liberated from work and they have four days instead of two days to do whatever they want and they have to ask themselves, who am I? Who is this person who is now free to spend this much time doing something, am I going to be an artist? Am I going to be a gardener? Am I going to be a volunteer? You have to ask yourself, Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? And it can be terrifying and exhilarating at the same time.

Being enriched by the past

MB: Thanks, so in a way that issue of freedom links to the question of the future and how opened or closed our perceptions of it might be. I want to move on now to talk about understandings of the past. As I suggested before there can be a tendency, particularly within progressivist narratives, to view the past as something to be left behind. But it seems that in my reading on this issue and in my fieldwork there's actually been a strong interest in seeing the past as a source of inspiration, where approaches that have been forgotten, or were never fully realised, are being used to inspire present-day responses. I wondered if you had noticed any of that kind of approach in your work?

SA: I do, although maybe due to this myth of progress that we've been talking about, whenever I talk about being enriched by lessons in history people think it might mean sort of returning to the past, or a going backwards. Whereas I would argue that we can take the best lessons from the past and then use that to build a better future rather than that meaning a return to the past, instead it would actually be an advancement in the sense of progress.

MB: So you would want to keep the idea of advancement?

SA: I think it's a very natural and perhaps an inevitable way to think about the world. People want to live a good life; people want their children to live a good life, a better life, they want to keep learning, building. Some of the critiques of growth are fundamentally quite pessimistic in the sense that the argument is that the planet simply cannot sustain continuous growth in all nations around the world. And because the global economy is already in gross ecological overshoot, and we know that population is going to grow in the next few decades, and that the poorest people on the planet probably still need to expand their economic capacities just to provide a dignified life for themselves, there are going to be further strains an already overburdened ecosystem.

The notion of inevitable progress, that things are always going to be getting better, that came about with the enlightenment and the industrial revolution and that story is beginning to fray. And while environmentalists

are sometimes criticised for being doomers, I feel like I could defend this picture well with the report after report that has been raining down. And yet people don't like thinking that perhaps progress has come to an end in that sense, and that actually the more we grow the more the historical standard for progress is turning back on itself.

The fossil fuel issue is particularly interesting, especially from a time perspective because that is, of all things, the most extraordinary temporal anomaly. Human civilisation is eight to ten thousand years old, we started pumping oil in 1859 and it's close to peaking; crude oil has perhaps already peaked. Pinpointing the peak is perhaps less important than highlighting that historical trends that were increasing have now flattened out and decreased, even while demand is still growing. So from a broad perspective if you take 10,000 years ago to now we have a fossil fuel era that only registers as a small blip. The growth in shale oil and gas might have delayed peak oil a little but it's a physical inevitability.

The long term in simple living?

MB: So there are other organisations I've visited that have been interested in more explicitly developing a longer sense of time, like you've just been talking about then. How important would you say that was for you? I'm thinking, for example, that, of all the work I've read on voluntary simplicity, much of it is focused on the timescale of the individual and the choices they are making in the present and near(ish) future.

SA: So the term voluntary simplicity is ambiguous in the sense that it was only coined in 1936 and yet the notion of living the simple life goes back millennia and even though it was coined in 1936 the term only came to prominence in 1982 with the publication of Duane Elgin's book *Voluntary Simplicity*. Now the term is generally associated with an American leisure expansion movement. Although I am sympathetic to that movement, I think that it is potentially a non-oppositional form of a very important concept. If a bunch of rich people sell their Porsche and buy a Prius and sell their mansion and buy an eco-home in the country; in a sense that's voluntary simplicity, people are down-shifting in some way; they're trying to re-evaluate their life and decide that they don't want to be working 60 hours a week in a bank and that they will go and sell the huge house for two million dollars and buy a \$500,000 house in the country with solar panels and all this kind of stuff.

If voluntary simplicity is limited to that very privileged existence it still has benefits in that it's counter-cultural in some sense but I, and my colleagues at the Simplicity Institute, certainly take a more radical interpretation of voluntary simplicity and in that more radical expression I think there is more appreciation of the importance of

a broader time perspective. This is primarily because we, more than the conventional mainstream voluntary simplicity movement, focus quite a lot on energy issues and seeing energy from the perspective of 10,000 years of history is really quite striking. So the short answer is that, I think you are right in that within the more mainstream voluntary simplicity movement the question of longer term thinking is certainly not a prominent theme. Even so, I'm sure there are passages that people could cite to say that they are talking of longer term conceptions of time and there's certainly an appreciation that we've lost a lot in the past that could enrich our lives of today. Especially in terms of home production and self-sufficiency it's been quite a recent cultural change; our grandparents grew most of their own food and if something broke in the house they would probably fix it or get their neighbour to fix it or if there were tears in the clothes they would mend them rather than go to Target and buy some new ones for six dollars.

MB: Yes, it has been a very quick shift hasn't it really?

SA: Yes, and I often find grounds for hope in that, because it shows that the roots of consumer culture are quite shallow. At the same time, humans have quite short memories and if you grow up in a culture of consumption then it's quite easy to imagine that that is what life has always been like.

Progress in a steady-state

MB: Yes that's true. So we've discussed the notion that growth is linked to stories of success over time, but I want to explore this a bit further by asking you about the perceived links between growth and creativity. One of the critiques of the steady state economy, for example, is that the aim of stability doesn't seem likely to support the dynamic creativity that is seen to have produced so many benefits within capitalist systems.

SA: So, although the term steady state was coined by Herman Daly, it itself had roots in John Stuart Mill's work. In 1848 Mill published his *Principles of Political Economy* and in Chapter Four of that book there is a very short section called "Stationary state of wealth and population dreaded by some writers, but not in itself undesirable" and it is extraordinary. Even back then Mill was saying that there will come a time, surely, when human beings don't want to just spend all their life getting materially richer and he was talking in the middle of the 19th century. He was very aware that there were lots of poor people who quite justifiably did need to be better off materially, and he himself was obviously writing from his perspective as an aristocrat, so he never had any money worries himself. But even so, he suggested that there would come a time when we wouldn't spend all our lives just getting richer and there would be other things to do. He talked of this notion

of a stationary state and he argued that of course the notion of a stationary state does not imply any stationary state in human improvement. So I guess it's realising that the notion of a steady state in the ecological economic literature is a biophysical concept in the sense that we need to figure out how to provide everyone with the material needs they require to live a full life without growing in biophysical impact. But if we stabilise that biophysical impact, it's then about confronting the question of freedom, but I imagine that we would want to keep our lives interesting and new, whether that's through writing or art or something else.

Feeling time in the simple life

MB: In terms of managing that freedom, have you seen the comic *Time Management for Anarchists* by Jim Munroe?¹ It talks about how institutions create a kind of temporal exoskeleton for us by providing structure for our lives. This exoskeleton starts developing in childhood at school and continues in university and/or work. He then suggests that it can be very difficult to create your own systems of time management if other people have always been doing it for you. It makes a really interesting point that thinking about time and how we manage it, what rhythms we adopt in our use of it, is an important part of moving toward a life that is less resource intensive. So my last question, I suppose is around this issue of time as rhythm and flow. Have you noticed in your work, or your life more generally any changes in how time feels? Have you tuned into different cycles for example? I know you mentioned seasons before?

SA: Yes, well I think I can definitely say that given that I research this and I obviously think about it a lot and do my very best to apply the insights that I come across, that has involved me thinking about how much is enough. That has allowed me to minimise my paid working time and freed me up to do things, like gardening, that I had never done prior to having the awakening moment I had when I started reading all of this stuff, Henry Thoreau in particular. And, so, in terms of nature and connection with nature, I feel that this way of life has re-connected me quite deeply with seasons and elements and I think it's through the time/stuff trade-off. I could have had more stuff but I chose not to and because of that I have more time. I've dedicated part of it to food production and it's had me out in the garden more than I had ever done so in the past and I'm the better for it, again richer for it, despite being poorer in the material sense.

MB: Did you find anyone else talking about it in the survey that you did recently?² Did they talk about that different sense of rhythm?

SA: The questions weren't that specific about time in terms of rhythm of time but one of the questions was - what motivates you to live simply? And there were eight options plus a text box and several of the options involved things like: more time with family, more time for oneself, more time for a community engagement, that kind of stuff. So I guess even through those sort of pre-conceived notions of what might motivate people, time played quite a central part of the notion of living simply. Less stuff, more time.

MB: Cool. That's it. Did you want to say anything else that I haven't asked you about yet?

SA: The only other thing that I thought about at one stage was, linking back to your very first question about alternative economies is that, in my transition group we've recently started trying to decide whether or not we should try to get a LETS system up and running. And I guess that has quite interesting ideas, or some versions of it can have interesting ideas, about time since they speak of time in terms of time banks. So rather than using money to value things, whether or not you're a lawyer or a janitor, if you do an hour's work for a community member that's one credit. So the lawyer doesn't get paid \$500 an hour while the janitor gets \$15 an hour. It's a way of democratising value by trying to value things more in terms of the expenditure of time rather than valuation that is given to somebody's work through the capitalist system. And so you have these accounts set up where maybe somebody's out of work for a short amount of time and they can't say buy food but they're good at fixing gutters, the neighbour might have surplus broccoli or potatoes or something and the LETS system can facilitate barter and different ways of paying for things in time rather than money. I haven't thought it all through, or theorised this stuff but I guess it links in with some of your questions.

MB: Yes, it does indeed. Thanks for that. Okay, well thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today.

SA: Thank you.

¹ Available from <https://archive.org/details/TimeManagementForAnarchists1>

² See report on this survey at <http://simplicityinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/The-Voluntary-Simplicity-Movement-Report-11a.pdf>

Temporal Belongings

The Temporal Belongings research network supports the development of a more coordinated understanding of the interconnections between time and community. We provide opportunities to share research and practical experience and to develop new collaborations. We also produce resources that will support the development of this research area. To find out more about our activities go to: www.temporalbelongings.org

The Temporal Belongings Interview Series is published under a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). In simple terms, copyright of articles remains with the author, but anyone else is free to use or distribute the work for educational or non-commercial purposes as long as the author is acknowledged and the work is not altered or transformed.



Arts & Humanities
Research Council