

# Simplicity

**Sounds good, if you don't mind a dollop of ignorance with your bliss.**

**S**IMPLE solutions to difficult problems are exceedingly rare. Their attraction, however, is undeniable. The world is awash in cults, fanaticisms and miracle cures. Millions of media minutes are devoted to how we can stop climate change by dumping iron filings in the ocean, prevent cancer by taking massive doses of vitamins, or eliminate stress by tidying our closets.

Pantheons of pundits assumed that the fall of the Iron Curtain would automatically deliver open democracy and market civility to Russia. Hordes of strategists believed a military victory over Saddam Hussein and the Taliban would quickly bring peace and progress to Iraq and Afghanistan. Legions of large foreheads still think that liberalized trade will eliminate poverty, that genetic engineering will ensure food security, and that single-substance tests under controlled conditions will tell us what we need to know about living in a soup of contaminants.

In 1969, Bruce Cockburn recorded a cheerful little ditty that is still played now and again by superannuated hippies. The chorus celebrated getting back to bucolic nature: "I'm going to the country, sunshine smile on me." It was inspiration for a back-to-the-land movement that drew surprising numbers of largely urban young people to what they imagined would be the idyllic, simple, rural life.

Few of them lasted beyond the first winter.

Even the shortest experiences probably included several perfect days (and a few mediocre ones lifted by perception-enhancing substances). But nothing was simple. Everyone who went back to the

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land discovered that rural life – fixing the machinery, winning over the neighbours, keeping the rabbits out of the vegetables, making an actual living – is difficult. Doing well, or even well enough, in the country requires at least as much knowledge and stamina, and arguably more diverse skills and flexibility, than doing well in the city.

Such dashing of simple dreams is the main stuff of history. It is evident in virtually every area of inquiry and experience. The 20<sup>th</sup> century began with Einstein revealing that Newton's tidy laws of motion did not work with the very big and the very small. Then Freud and Jung undermined simple expectations for conscious reason, Hitler and Stalin eliminated grounds for faith in totalitarian politics, and two world wars crushed the simple illusion that we were advancing inexorably from savagery to civilization.

Anthropologists initially categorized all hunting, gathering and foraging people as primitive, then found an astonishing richness of traditional knowledge, wonderfully interwoven stories, and intricate systems for managing social conflict and minimizing ecological demand. Industrial management experts assumed that workers were machines driven by wage incentives, but discovered that workers were actually humans whose productivity

also depended on opportunities to converse and decide.

Urban renewal officials bulldozed poor neighbourhoods only to find that community is much harder to rebuild than housing. International development agencies neglected local conditions, concerns and capacities only to watch tractors rusting in fields and irrigation schemes spreading schistosomiasis and malaria.

None of this should have been a surprise. Applied to people, "simple" means naïve and feeble-minded – it's a condescending but marginally polite way of calling someone an idiot or a bag of hammers.

Even there, the actual complexity of the world has invaded. We don't often hear references to simpletons anymore, mostly because we've found that the term doesn't describe a coherent real category. Instead we now recognize many conditions and syndromes, only some of which involve general impairment of intellectual capacity. Many of those who would once have been dismissed as simple are now respected as smart children with learning disabilities, doctors with Tourette's and concert pianists with Asperger's.

Simple sounds good. In a world that is complex, difficult, ambiguous and uncertain, simplicity offers a soothing never-never land of uncomplicated truth and easy fixes. As a dream and diversion it is mostly harmless. As an approach to life it is balderdash and snake oil. ♣

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