Own Less, Smile More and Save the Planet: The influence of neoliberalism on narratives of lifestyle minimalism

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The influence of neoliberalism on narratives of lifestyle minimalism

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INTRODUCTION

I wonder how much academic work was inspired by mild annoyance. At any rate, this thesis constitutes a modest contribution to that archive, because it was a flatmate's love affair with a minimalist lifestyle that originally prompted me to think critically about the topic.
What does it say about "us" (people living in wealthy industrialized countries, who are concerned about the environment and variously displeased with the state of politics/society/economics) that we are so attracted to the promise and aesthetics of minimalist lifestyles? How have we grown convinced that obsessively curating our possessions and agonizing about the volume of plastic waste created after a trip to the supermarket constitutes a significant contribution to the planet's wellbeing?

Questions like these have motivated me to investigate the ideological roots of minimalism, which – as I will soon lay out – I have traced back to neoliberal capitalism. To be sure, it cannot be said that finding a link between some contemporary phenomenon and the neoliberal system within which it thrives is a surprising move. On the contrary, it is a well-practiced strain of criticism.[1] Still, I am convinced that pointing out the ways in which so-called alternative modes of existence are actually reproducing the system they allegedly challenge is important: if someone is convinced that something is off (that wealth is distributed too unequally, for example, or that the environment is quickly degrading, or that contemporary life is often isolating) and feels that change is necessary, their efforts ought to fix the causes of their concerns, not just manage symptoms. In the case of minimalism, for instance, some practitioners devote an incredible amount of energy, time and resources to achieving "zero-waste" households (more in chapter 3), in the belief that this is an efficient way to pursue an environmentalist agenda; given that they are simply shifting their purchasing habits to "alternative" suppliers without paying any mind to the underlying logic governing the economic-political system, however, their efforts cannot effectively solve any existing issues. This mechanism, where various modes of resistance are ultimately defused, is extremely pervasive. Capitalism has long shown an uncanny ability to mutate and absorb all kinds of attempts to resist it, a tendency that is sometimes referred to as *recuperation* – "the process of opposition and critique becoming incorporated and constitutive of a new order" (Taylor 732).

[1] In the following chapters, for example I will use texts by Wendy Brown, Sam Binkley and Miriam Meissner that, too, hinge on critiques of neoliberalism.

In the following chapters I explore the hypothesis that books on lifestyle minimalism might be fundamentally informed by the logic of neoliberal governmentality. My concern is that the neoliberal recuperation of low-consumption lifestyles turns them into individualistic practices that one pursues almost exclusively for one's own benefit, rather than the coherent critiques of an alienating and exploitative system they could potentially be. My project, it is important to emphasise, is not conceived as an attack on the idea of reducing consumption. On the contrary: given the ever-rising CO2 emissions and the baffling volume of waste produced every day, I am convinced that citizens of wealthy so-called developed nations ought to drastically reduce the amount of goods they consume. The problem, as I will soon discuss in more detail, is that the dominant neoliberal rationality tasks each individual to minimize the number of goods they purchase: if "we" all do a good job, then the problem of pollution will eventually be solved. Lifestyle minimalism is deeply involved in promoting this mindset – *responsibilizing* citizen-consumers is arguably one of its main tasks. Contrary to this understanding of a healthy environment as a consequence of thoughtful consumption, I would instead propose that thoughtful consumption ought to be a consequence of radical political and social policies protecting the environment for the benefit of all people, animals and other organisms.

In the first section I lay out the complex (and sometimes contradictory) concept of neoliberalism, in an attempt to clarify the conceptual framework on which my thesis is based. The topic of chapter 2 is happiness, and more specifically the emotional self-management that is at the core of contemporary self-help cultures, the larger genre to which minimalism belongs. Chapter 3 moves from the individual to the collective issue of environmentalism: here, I analyse a small selection of texts to identify the techniques they position as necessary for minimizing one's environmental footprint. What the texts that take center stage in these last two sections share, fundamentally, is the idea that every individual needs to make changes in their own life and, importantly, that such an approach is the only viable (or conceivable, for that matter) path for change and for environmental sustainability. Unconvinced by the advice offered by such books, in the conclusion I briefly introduce three environmentalist thinkers whose distinct approaches directly counter those of minimalist literature, suggesting other possible routes for action and future change.

CHAPTER 1

Neoliberalism, environmentalism and their intersections

Blaming neoliberalism for a displeasing socio-political state of affairs is hardly a shocking move. Some scholars argue that neoliberalism constitutes fertile soil for a new form of social conservatism[2], for example, while others blame the seemingly omnipresent rhetoric of crisis in politics (and the closely-related fetishizing of resilience) on neoliberal capitalism[3]. As Sean Phelan points out, there is a whole body of scholarship that criticizes a form of criticism concerned with denouncing various things as neoliberal (26-30).

Does it make sense, in 2021, to write a piece smugly claiming that yet another facet of culture actually shows itself to be the result of neoliberal hegemony? The existence of this thesis clearly shows that I think it does.

Lifestyle minimalism constructs itself in opposition to ideas of "consumerism", "out-of-control materialism" and "a world of too much" that are depicted as inherently constitutive of contemporary Western societies (Meissner 187). Authors of minimalist texts take great care to emphasise just how groundbreaking and innovative the lifestyle they promote is, which serves two central aims. On the one hand, it is a good business move, as it contributes to the idea that the audience could benefit from reading their books. On the other, people who are attracted to genres like self-help and lifestyle guidance are typically unsatisfied with some aspects of their life. Authors of self-help and lifestyle books craft a compelling message by vaguely positioning "society" as the source of this dissatisfaction (all the while carefully avoiding systemic critique, as I will show in the following chapters), thus framing readers as members of an enlightened, strong-minded minority. The message conveyed by many minimalist texts could be summed up as: "you are unfulfilled because you were told that owning a large amount of consumer goods is the key to happiness, but it is not – show how shrewdly you have pierced through the illusion by getting rid of your possessions!".

This is where my criticism of the neoliberal ethos of lifestyle minimalism finds its relevance. By highlighting the ways in which minimalism is – as I will argue throughout this thesis – perfectly coherent with neoliberal logics of self-management and consumption-as-production, I hope to offer a corrective interpretation to minimalism's supposed uniqueness and innovative character. Ultimately, my aim is to challenge the implicit claim that minimalism represents a collection of

[2] See Cooper, Melinda. *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism.* Portland, Zero Books, 2019.

[3] See Bracke, Sarah. "Bouncing Back. Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience." Vulnerability in Resistance, Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay (eds.), Durham, Duke UP, 2016, pp. 52-75.

practices of resistance to a soulless capitalist system that does not care for the environment or people's wellbeing.

What is at stake is the status of individual consumption in ethical and political matters: is it reasonable to argue that many of the people who are unhappy with their lives are simply struggling with excessive consumption? And, more importantly, what is there to gain by suggesting that environmental issues can (and should) be managed by single individuals making more conscious purchases?

Defining neoliberalism

The task of defining neoliberalism is a notoriously difficult one, and for multiple reasons. For starters, the term *neoliberalism* is hardly ever used by its proponents – but it is virtually omnipresent in the critical vocabulary of its opponents (Peck xxii). This state of affairs inevitably suggests that either there is something derogative in the label "neoliberal" (why else would it be shunned by its supporters?), or that the term describes a constellation of forces that do not actually belong under the same linguistic umbrella. Both concerns are worth taking seriously. Yes, a lot of publications on neoliberalism (including this very thesis) are very critical of it, which contributes to the piling on of negative connotations attached to the term. And yes, the concept of neoliberalism has been used to describe such a broad range phenomena – in diverse fields like politics, media, economics, psychology, geography – that has emerged from these interdisciplinary travels a little beaten up. Each scholar and each academic field define the ever-elusive idea of neoliberalism a little bit differently, which leads to a kaleidoscopic multiplication of definitions, which in turn feeds skepticism about the concept itself: if neoliberalism can represent so many different ideas, is it even a singular thing (Phelan 2)? Could it be that, instead of being a specific phenomenon, it instead simply represents a vague constellation of critiques aimed at contemporary society?

Having listed a couple of reasons why neoliberalism is a troubled concept, I now turn to the elements that justify speaking of neoliberalism as a fundamentally coherent conglomerate of ideology and governmentality. A handful of elements recurring in all definitions of neoliberalism, as I will show in the next paragraphs, are an exaggerated emphasis on 1) free-market economics, 2) an individualistic ethos, and 3) a belief in the idea that the functions of the State ought to be very limited, especially as pertains the sphere of the economy. Where liberalism is also characterized by these traits, they are typically depicted as means to an end: they are, supposedly, the most efficient path to human wellbeing and social welfare. Advocates

of neoliberalism, instead, often endorse values like individualism and competition for their own sake, paying less attention to their alleged positive consequences for citizens and society at large; as Luca Mavelli suggests, there is an almost religious component to the neoliberal faith in market exchange (66-67). Lastly, as I will soon mention in my discussion of Foucault's work, the biopolitical control of populations is also an important component of neoliberal governmentality.

Harvey: neoliberalism as a class project

Marxist geographer David Harvey's book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* has been a foundational text in the field of neoliberalism studies because it was amongst the first to attempt to apply a historiographic approach to the topic (Cahill, Cooper, Konings, Primrose xv). Because of his influence, I will briefly recap some of the most important points made by Harvey; not only will this start fleshing out the concept of neoliberalism, but it will also function as a point of comparison for Foucault's prescient theories on the topic.

Harvey's historical account starts in the 1970s, a periodization that has been taken up by almost every author writing about neoliberalism. An early example of neoliberal thought in action, Harvey claims, was the coup substituting Chile's elected president Salvador Allende with general Augusto Pinochet. Backed by the United States, the coup dismantled a variety of social movements and a vibrant culture of political organization and replaced them with a policy of free markets, "privatized social security, and facilitated foreign direct investment and freer trade" (Harvey 8).

Similar policies, after this first test run in Latin America, were introduced in the United States and in the United Kingdom under the governments of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher at the dawn of the 1980s (9). The goal was to definitively move away from the political-economic organization of 'embedded liberalism', which had been introduced in both America and Europe between the 1930s and the 1940s. In embedded liberalism,

> market processes and entrepreneurial and corporate activities were surrounded by a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment that sometimes restrained but in other instances led the way in economic and industrial strategy. State-led planning and in some instances state ownership of key sectors (coal, steel, automobiles) were not uncommon (Harvey 11).

These ideas that the State was first of all responsible for the wellbeing of citizens, and that this goal was to be achieved by heavily intervening in the market, were anathema for neoliberal

economists, and indeed under the governments of Thatcher and Reagan embedded liberalism was substituted by a set of neoliberal policies that aimed at restoring free markets and cutting down on welfare (*ibidem*).

Harvey's contributions were not limited to establishing the periodization and cast of characters that would populate all later accounts of neoliberalism: he also, crucially, advanced the hypothesis that the process of neoliberalization is to be understood as an attempt to "restore class power", protecting it from the political threat advanced by the left-leaning population of European and developing countries (15-16). Overall, the goal of neoliberalism as understood by Harvey is the re-establishing of an economically-privileged ruling class that can endlessly profit from the capitalist system; such an interpretation is a far cry from the a utopian (and somewhat more palatable) reading of neoliberalism as advanced by its theorists, touting it as a system to reorganize society according to the supposedly rational system of market competition (19).

To sum up, Harvey believes neoliberalism to be a conscious project aiming at maintaining inequality and guaranteeing the subjugation of the vast majority of citizens. His definition of neoliberalism is worth citing in full, and I want to draw the reader's attention to the presence of the three elements listed a few pages before: free markets, individualism and a limited range of State interventions.

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free market, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices … But beyond these tasks [guaranteeing the integrity of money, establishing a military/legal system able to protect private property, establishing markets where they are absent] the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit (Harvey 2).

Foucault: theorising the economic man

Foucault's account of neoliberalism can be found in his 1978-79 lectures at the Collège de France, which – at least according to Harvey's historical account positioning the birth of neoliberalism in the 1970s – means that he was thinking about the topic long before it became a widespread component of the contemporary political-economic system. Indeed, Foucault's lectures were written before Ronald Reagan became the fortieth president of the United States and a few months before Margaret Thatcher rose to power: two of the most prominent protagonists of Harvey's history are entirely absent from this account. Foucault actually traced the roots of neoliberalism further back in time, to the time between the 1930s and the 1950s, and individuated two key geographical sites for its birth: Germany and the United States.

Now, geography and history are not the only differences between Harvey's and Foucault's ideas of neoliberalism. Perhaps more significantly, they fundamentally diverge in their accounts of what neoliberalism is – a "theory of political economic practices", closely related to the concept of ideology, (Harvey 2) or a form of governmentality. The concept of governmentality is a central one for understanding Foucault's theories, but for brevity's sake it can be summarised as "the way in which one conducts the conduct of men", an analytical tool to understand how people are brought together by relations of power (Foucault 186). Governmentality is especially useful when it comes to analysing situations where power is not centralised, despotically exercised by a dictator over its citizens, but rather when it grants people the impression that they are governing themselves – a key element of neoliberal states, which typically value individual freedom to great degree, opposing it to an oppressive State extending its reach into the lives of private citizens (Foucault 189).

Neoliberalism, then, is understood by Foucault as a specific governing logic that regulates the relationships between the State, the economy and society. The model of the market permeates every facet of life under neoliberalism (Foucault 131). The free market represents not only the logic to be pursued (that of profit and competition) but also a peculiar form of subjectivity, one that sees each individual as an enterprise (Foucault 240-41). This form of subjectivity implies an idea of the human being as *homo oeconomicus*, the economic man, a figure that should be understood through the lens of economics: his behaviour can be analyzed as if he was constantly aiming at bringing in profit in any situation, whether he is at the workplace, or at home, or even if he is alone. This is not to say that *homo oeconomicus* necessarily thinks of his own behaviour in this way, nor that there is an anthropological interest in looking at human life from an economical point of view – it is to say that he is an intelligible member of society insofar as he is an economic actor (Foucault 252). The figure of the

economic man, as I will soon get to, is of fundamental importance for Wendy Brown's argument tying neoliberalism and depoliticization together.

Also important in that regard is the limited role of the State, which – according to Foucault, as well as Harvey – only intervenes in society to promote and facilitate the existence of markets. After that, however, citizens are on their own: the inevitable socio-economic inequality that is originated by a strict adherence to a logic of competitive market exchange is seen as something desirable, emphatically not a state of affairs that needs ameliorating (Foucault 145, 160). The State, then, needs not be concerned with ensuring that everyone is on a roughly comparable economic footing; all it needs to do is to guarantee everyone the barest minimum of necessities, so that even the poorest and most destitute can still be integrated in the competitive game of marketplace economics (201-02). Similarly, according to neoliberal theories, citizens should not be insured by the State against risk, be it illness or natural disasters: every individual ought to have accumulated enough means to take care of himself and his family should misfortune strike. Social policy, in other words, is then tasked with promoting individual forms of insurance, not with the distribution of wealth (Foucault 144).

Yet another significant difference between Foucault's and Harvey's accounts of neoliberalism is that the latter wrote about it as a historian, looking back and determining what events were essential for understanding the development of the present neoliberal system. Foucault, instead, wrote at the dawn of Westen neoliberalism – he therefore had very little political-historical material to analyse, and chose to instead focus his attention on the documents written by the fathers of neoliberal thought, economists working in universities and think-tanks. If Harvey was concerned with understanding the political consequences of decennia of neoliberal policy, Foucault was instead trying to discern what traits were properly characteristic of a neoliberal logic, and where they came from.

Brown: neoliberalism as a threat to democracy

Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* is the last (and most recent) text that I will build upon for this rather cursory exploration of the concept of neoliberalism. Brown's urgent project involves sounding the alarm about how detrimental neoliberalism is to a healthy democracy – a theme that will come back in chapter 3 of this thesis.

Brown's critique embraces a rather Foucauldian understanding of neoliberalism, emphasizing its identity as an order of reason, as a form of governmentality and as a mode of subjectivity. From this theoretical position, Brown can build her argument without being led

astray by the constantly shifting, polymorphous and sometimes contradictory ways in which neoliberal policy finds real-life application: what she is ultimately pursuing is the way in which some components of a neoliberal governmentality are fundamentally at odds with democracy (Brown 48). "Neoliberal reason," Brown argues, "is converting the distinctly *political* character, meaning, and operation of democracy's constituent elements into *economic* ones" – a claim that I will soon explore, and which is also central to my own project (17).

The first element that I should delve into is the concept of *economization*, which is to say the application of an economic/market logic to spheres of life that had previously not been the object of economics (Brown 30). Foucault also explored economization when he described the theory of human capital, which takes two forms. In the first instance, economic analysis is extended into a domain it had previously overlooked, that of labour. Under neoliberalism, labor is performed by an economic subject whose capital consists in his ability to work – thus transforming him into a "machine/stream complex", an inseparable merging of that which performs labour and the one who profits from it. Each worker becomes an "enterprise-unit", an entrepreneur of himself (Foucault 222, 225-26). In the second instance, economic analysis is applied to a domain that had before been understood as entirely extra-economic – a process Foucault has labeled *biopolitics*. Elements like human health, public hygiene and childcare all become important insofar as they have economic consequences: a healthier population is more profitable, well-educated children will become more skilled workers and so on. Investing in these fields might become a good idea *if* it demonstrably improves human capital (Foucault 229-30).

Through economization, neoliberal systems understand all entities, be they individual persons, businesses or even states according to the model of the enterprise, whose ultimate goal is the maximisation of present and future value (Brown 22). This process is based on competition, on what is ultimately a zero-sum game where everyone is exclusively focused on their own (economic) success at the expense of others. If the realm of the political is confined by an exclusively economic understanding of all kinds of social domain, there is no space for pursuing the common good, for creating and maintaining public services (39).

In such a climate, Brown asks: "what happens to rule by and for the people when neoliberal reason configures both soul and city as contemporary firms, rather than as polities? What happens to the constituent elements of democracy – its culture, subjects, principles, and institutions – when neoliberal rationality saturates political life? (27). Her answer is that the political imaginary of neoliberalism has, despite its rhetorical claims of the contrary, demolished moral autonomy and freedom. By shaping citizens' understanding of themselves as human

capital, by constructing the figure of the homo oeconomicus and elevating it to the role of single grid of intelligibility for the human, neoliberalism abandons the idea of the human as a political creature and the values of humanism tout court (Brown 41-42).

Wendy Brown's interpretation of neoliberalism as an inherently anti-democratic order of reason will resonate clearly in my critique of depoliticization as part and parcel of lifestyle minimalist texts. As I will argue in chapter 3, minimalism fundamentally frames individuals as consumers, whose only possible field of action is that of the marketplace. This, in accordance with neoliberal rationality, implies a very limited understanding of the political. Instead of encouraging citizens to join forces and influence policymaking, minimalist texts almost exclusively target individual consumption. Also very relevant for my thesis is Brown's idea that "the economization of society and politics could occur through the model of the household" (32). As I will show in chapters 2 and 3, it is this understanding of economics and politics as fundamentally akin to self- and household management that constitutes a foundational element of the minimalist worldview.

Environmentalism in the marketplace

It is not difficult to imagine how a disinvestment in democracy and in the concept of the public good might reflect negatively on the environment, the public thing *par excellence*. If the neoliberal idea that all that matters is maximising profit and capital accumulation becomes the dominant ethos of states and other large organization, it cannot help but cause damage to the climate and biodiversity: modern enterprises typically favour profit based on short term rather than long-term strategies, a disposition that might be somewhat sustainable in business but that appears to be funest for the environment. Once natural resources are depleted, they cannot be renewed; once levels of CO2 are allowed to rise to monstrous proportions, it takes centuries for them to dissipate; once animal species go extinct, they cannot ever be brought back.

A key problem is that is it impossible to establish a price for most environmental "goods" – how is one to put a price sticker on a species of fish, or on a unique ecosystem that is threatened by deforestation (Layzer 28)? Despite what seems to me to be the clear impossibility to reason about this in monetary terms, neoliberal rationality's trust in economization maintains that economics is able to (and *should*) account for everything. Not only that: if maintaining and promoting the free market is the ultimate goal of the State, and if intervening in market processes is indeed the greatest faux pas a government might commit, then it is clear that the only form of environmental action possible in a neoliberal framework is a voluntaristic one: if

environmental values are something the public values, then people will simply vote with their dollar and ensure that polluting or otherwise unsustainable enterprises are simply unprofitable, and thus abandoned.
This, as I will later show, is the exact same logic adopted by texts on minimalism.

The objective facts of climate change – the statistics, the graphs, the projections into the future of an apocalypse that we can predict but perhaps cannot stop – are well-known and easily accessible, so I will not list them here. Instead, I will briefly delve into the kinds of techno-managerial discourse that currently dominate mainstream environmental discussions (Swyngedouw 298). First of all, climate change is depicted as a threat to the entirety of the human race: in the face of such an unthinkably large and diffuse enemy, everyone is invited to perceive themself as a future victim (Swyngedouw 302-03). On the one hand, this picture is inaccurate because it ignores (or at least downplays) the fact that the consequences of climate change are already being disastrously felt in many parts of the world, threatening the lives of millions. In depicting the risks of climate change exclusively in terms of future threats, the hardships experienced in many parts of the Global South are being overlooked (Swyngedouw 299). On the other hand, as Swyngedouw points out, a discourse that places "people" as future victims of climate change does not understand these people as political actors, but only as a disempowered and vulnerable collective (302). Once again, the shadow of depoliticization makes itself visible.
Secondly, the proposed solutions for climate change are typically centered around free markets (which, again, will be discussed in detail later) or technological breakthroughs. The idea is that capitalism *as has been practiced so far* has led to multiple ecological disasters, but that the capitalist system could be re-imagined and reconfigured so that it is sustainable. The crux, then, is only devising ways to harness clean energy and improve efficiency – "deriving four, ten, or even a hundred times as much benefit from each unit of energy, water, materials, or anything else borrowed from the planet and consumed" (Hawken, Lovins and Lovins 5). Alternatively, or in addition, other mechanisms such as carbon trading might be devised to compensate for pollution, the idea being that the negative consequences of various industries can be offset by an ostensibly equivalent effort to undo the damage in some other way (Parr 24).

The point, which will return time and time again in this thesis, is that the "mainstream", popular discourse of climate change is only allowed to exist within the constraints of the capitalist neoliberal system (Swyngedouw 305). All problems and all solutions are thinkable insofar as they can be made to fit in the economized grid of intelligibility that is constitutive of neoliberalism: the issue cannot possibly be the fact that, for example, economic growth is

unsustainable in the long run – the issue is that economic growth is not being pursued in a sufficiently efficient manner.

In my analysis I intend to show that the minimalist attitude towards the environment and towards ideas of the good life suffer from the same fundamental restriction: they only ever advocate for a future that is essentially the same as the present, and as such lacks any critical power. In the conclusion to this thesis, as a coda of sorts, I will briefly touch upon the worlds imagined by critics of neoliberal approaches to climate change – bold visions of possible futures that break away from the limitations of neoliberal governmentality.

CHAPTER 2

From *eudaimonia* to self-berating: what happiness is to be found through minimalism?

Literature on lifestyle minimalism, as a whole, urges readers to take stock of their physical possessions, evaluate the elements of their lives that they deem valuable and come to the conclusion that their homes and agendas are filled with objects and obligations that are incompatible with one's values and desires. What a process of decluttering and "simplifying" is meant to achieve is a multifaceted form of wellness: minimalists are presented as happier, more fulfilled in their relationships and healthier.

Given that the narrative of lifestyle minimalism is fundamentally composed of collections of techniques meant to improve their readers' lives, I would argue that it can be analysed as part of what Sarah Ahmed calls "the happiness industry". Ahmed's critical study *The Promise of Happiness* was written in response to the "happiness turn", an increased interest in creating and sharing methods through which people could learn to lead more joyful lives. Unlike the how-to genre, to which the texts at the centre of this thesis belong, *The Promise of Happiness* is deeply skeptical of the desirability of happiness. Ahmed, far from being interested in providing step-by-step instructions for a more satisfying existence, aims instead at understanding how the concept of happiness has changed in history and how it has been used to naturalise certains worldviews over others.

In the spirit of her work, I believe that it is important to delve deeper into the murky concept of happiness to try and evaluate how and to what effect it is mobilised in guides to lifestyle minimalism.

What does it mean to be happy?

Summing up the long and complex history of happiness in philosophy would be significantly beyond the scope of this project, but I will nonetheless begin my account in ancient Greece. Through his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle might be said to have started the philosophical tradition of claiming that happiness is the ultimate goal of life (Ahmed 15). While this seems to be regarded by many scholars as largely true, it needs to be qualified: the happiness Aristotle wrote about is not the same happiness philosophers of the Enlightenment discussed, which in turn is far from the happiness one is expected to enjoy after a thorough decluttering of their home.

Aristotle used the word *eudaimonia* to refer to the type of happiness that one should aim for. Its defining characteristic is its final quality: while health, relationships and honour are all desirable goals one should pursue, one should only strive to achieve them because they are components of the larger, most complete form of happiness; *eudaimonia*, on the other hand, is the ultimate goal, not the means to anything else. *Eudaimonia* differs from our twenty-first century understanding of happiness in a few significant ways: it is a stable condition (rather than a fluctuating emotional state), it is objective and universal (rather than subjective and changing from person to person, from culture to culture) (Pakaluk 47-48). All individuals who have reached a state of *eudaimonia*, in short, share the same condition: the definition of this all-encompassing conception of happiness is fixed and constant, and therefore categorically not up for debate.

Happiness 1 and *2* are used in the opening chapter of the *Handbook of Eudaimonic Well-Being* to differentiate between two fundamentally different understandings of happiness. *Eudaimonia*, in its depth and completeness of meaning is a typical form of what Joar Vittersø schematizes as *Happiness 2*. By contrast, *Happiness 1* is subjective, fleeting and related to someone's emotional state (Vittersø 4). It is hardly surprising that using one definition the concept rather than the other dramatically changes what philosophical and scientific claims can be made about happiness, which in turn lead to a variety of techniques through which happiness can be achieved.

Achieving happiness is typically posited as the ultimate goal of life both by those who understand the term as an all-encompassing, complete state and by those who regard it as an inherently fleeting sensation of contentment. There are significant differences, however, in believing that everyone should strive for a universal eudaimonic goal versus positing that every individual ought to pursue whatever it is that will make them feel good. In the first case, happiness tends to involve normative ideas about responsibility and commitment. Happiness 2 can function as an ordering principle for society, emphasizing the importance of consistently behaving according to certain values in order to reach an end that is presumably shared amongst all (Ahmed 36). In the case of Happiness 1, however, there is no such teleological order: different people will be made happy by different things, so they will engage in a wide range of practices in order to earn their temporary feeling of satisfaction.

It therefore makes sense that understandings of happiness that lean more towards the eudaimonic end of the spectrum involve certain amounts of self-sacrifice for the common good. Aristotle thought happiness involved performing valuable activities and, though most of them would naturally give rise to pleasurable feelings, some of them might actually be painful for the

individual; crucially, however, the individual would achieve happiness by fulfilling his role despite the displeasure (Nussbaum 342). Such a line of thinking would be entirely incompatible with the subjective, psychological understanding of Happiness 2, where someone *is* (necessarily) happy if they *feel* satisfied, content, joyful, and *is* unhappy if they are experiencing pain, distress or sadness.

This is not to say that conceiving of happiness as a temporary feeling implies an individualistic, anarchic view of society where everyone is exclusively focused on maximising their own happiness (other kinds of ethical considerations are still considered valuable when it comes to regulating social relations), but it is to say that an eudaimonic understanding of happiness is more likely to invite public policy that, in the words of Martha Nussbaum,

> make[s] room for, and honor[s], commitments that are in their very nature fraught with risk, pain, and difficulty, especially commitments to fighting for social justice, as not optional but mandatory parts, in some form, of the good life of any human being (353).

Indeed, Nussbaum continues, an example of such policies might be compulsory social service programmes where youths learn the value of altruism by caring for the less fortunate. By strongly encouraging young people to perform unpleasant tasks, Nussbaum argues, their ability to reach a deep, nuanced and long-lasting form of happiness will be increased (ibidem).

This proposal is by far not the only attempt to devise policies that will increase the total happiness of a population. An iconic example of such an approach to public happiness is Bhutan's philosophy of "Gross National Happiness" (GHN), an approach proposed in the early Seventies by Bhutanese king Jigme Singye Wangchuck who argued that pursuing the happiness of citizens would be a more valuable goal for a country than the abstractly economical pursuit of a higher GDP. No other countries have exactly followed into Bhutan's footsteps, but the realization that ever-increasing prosperity has done little to improve the average happiness of citizens has struck even in the United States: former president Obama decided to monitor the happiness level of Americans, presumably to attempt to improve on it at a later stage) (Samuel 134). Amongst the numerous important concerns related to state-mandated pursuits of happiness I will briefly mention the risk that normative definition of happiness adopted by the state might not overlap with the interests of individuals, or of society as a whole. There is of course no guarantee that the happiness-enhancing policies proposed by the government will benefit the population equally, and there are inherent dangers in a biopolitical regime of emotional control of citizens because it can easily be ideologically manipulated. The state, in other words, is unlikely to define happiness in ways that run counter to its political aims.

Happiness as an individual pursuit

As Lawrence R. Samuel's *Happiness in America: A Cultural History* details, however, the pursuit of happiness does not necessarily involve public policy. On the contrary, especially from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the task of fulfilling their innate drive to happiness has overwhelmingly been placed on individuals. Everyone was supposed to find ways to make their life better, more enjoyable and overall happier, but as I have shown the concept of happiness is very slippery and difficult to place. How can someone aim for a goal that is almost entirely unclear?

To attempt to put some order into the matter many experts in several different fields chipped in with their findings: sociologists ran surveys, psychologists interpreted said surveys and interviewed exceptionally happy individuals, economists and marketers stressed about how to stay relevant. In all this, publishers were probably the ones who benefitted the most from the affluent West's interest in increasing the happiness level of each individual: the self-help genre condensed the findings of all these fields and purported to distill them down to actionable steps everyone could enact in their own life.

The sheer number of books, magazines articles, coaching sessions and week retreats that spawned in the last fifty years or so should be sufficient proof that the definitive answer to the question of "how to be happy" is either terminally evasive or, more likely, nonexistent. Popular desire to be handed a recipe for a better emotional state, however, is a rather strong incentive to keep looking for an answer.

Positive psychology is defined as "the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions" (Gable and Haidt 104). In other words, it is the field of inquiry chiefly interested in determining what causes happiness and in finding ways to use these insights to optimise one's emotional life. Positive psychology was born out of a project for the broadening of the scope of psychology: no longer would their only object be the mentally ill, the depressed and the traumatized; now even the healthy could be case studies for psychological research (Binkley 17).

There are two ways to understand psychology's move away from the pathological, one rather lenient and one critical. In the first case, by attempting to understand how to cultivate a healthy emotional state psychologists could be of use to a larger swathe of the population; positive psychology could function in ways akin to knowledge about nutrition and physical health, helping not only the sick to heal but also the healthy to stay in good shape (Gable and Haidt

105). A more critical interpretation, however, could instead point out that the optimizing ethos of positive psychology makes patients of us all: if happiness is the goal, then all those who are not regularly extatic are in need of therapy, or at least of improvement.

The link between the academic study of positive psychology and the popular narratives of self-help and how-to guides is fairly straightforward: people, by and at large, want to be happy. More forcefully, one could argue that they largely think that they *should be* happy, and upon finding that their emotional states do not match up with what appears to be the desirable norm they turn to experts to find guidance (Binkley 17). Given that most academic research is difficult to obtain and often challenging to understand, hundreds of authors opted to condense some scientific insights of positive psychology into publications presenting more actionable, concrete strategies to improve readers' wellbeing.

Given the proximity of positive psychology and the self-help genre, in the next section I will summarise some critical observations on both. These points of criticism will form the base of my analysis of the function, form and use of happiness in literature about lifestyle minimalism.

The neoliberal happiness of self-help and positive psychology

Numerous critics have pointed out the many ways in which positive psychology and its popular offspring, self-help literature, help create the perfect subject for neoliberal states.

Perhaps the most significant way in which the ethos of neoliberalism is echoed by that of positive psychology is the understanding of life in terms of setting and achieving precise goals; furthermore, whether this continuous reaching for goals is bound to succeed or fail is predicated on each individual's ability to manage and control their desires and personality (Miller 593). In untangling this statement I hope to clarify exactly how intertwined the logic of neoliberalism and that of self-help are.

First of all, a goal-based approach to life is reminiscent of corporate culture: managers determine how much a company is supposed to grow each quarter, they hash plans, and then each worker is responsible for fulfilling their role; if everyone does what they are expected to, the goal will be reached. Goals are also helpful in sports, for example: by constantly pushing one's body to run faster, jog longer distances, lift heavier loads, athletes can monitor their process and keep an eye on their training regime, their diet and their health.

The two contexts of companies and sports share two key characteristics: progress can be uncontroversially tracked, and obstacles to success can be identified and solved.

Alistair Miller's "A Critique of Positive Psychology" points out that, according to positive psychology, "people can be re-crafted into goal achievers able to control their emotions and harness all their positive energies in the service of their goals" (595). The kind of goal-setting mentioned here however, is applied to the much more complex field of one's life. What goals can be set in terms of enjoying one's hobby, spending time with friends or contributing to household management?

Indeed, he argues, only some people have specific goals in mind, and only some of the time. Miller reasonably states that only those who know exactly what they want are in a position to define clear goals to achieve, but if goal-setting is seen as a technique to improve motivation and focus then that is redundant: those who have a clear idea of what they want are presumably already motivated, while those who do not are hardly able to set up any goals. Furthermore, both goals and emotions are inextricably linked to the personality and history of every individual – domains that are mostly outside one's conscious control (ibidem).

Practitioners of positive psychology would not give much weight to this latter argument. On the one hand, they typically believe that individuals have the ability to consciously control their psyche, and that happiness is actually dependent on this ability (Csíkszentmihályi 5). In addition, they acknowledge that mental states and outside reality are not closely linked: by exercising control on their emotions, individuals can "find enjoyment regardless of outside circumstances" (Csíkszentmihályi 16).

Sam Binkley sums up the "happy subject" created by the discourse of positive psychology as one that is compelled to "maximize happy emotions through the direct manipulation of his own thoughts understood as resources for the optimization of an emotional state" (29-30). He further points out that positive psychology turns Freudian understandings upside-down: whereas the founder of psychoanalysis believed that the psychological experiences of an individual formed the basis for their emotional life, which in turn was expressed by thoughts, practitioners of positive psychology like Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi take thoughts to be the cause of shifting emotional states. By positing that thoughts can be consciously controlled, then, they envision happy subjects who create their own happiness by curating their thoughts (Binkley 30). Choosing to be happy then is nothing other than a show of emotional mastery and agency. Untethered from external circumstances, which are irrelevant insofar as all that counts is how one reacts to them, subjects are understood as ultimately impermeable individuals who can assert their will by simply refusing to feel unhappy.

If we take happiness to be the ultimate goal of human life (which, as Ahmed observed, is one of the few constant ideas in philosophy), then positive psychology proposes that people

can only really pursue their fulfillment as individuals: we can all, at most, control our own thoughts and mindsets. This is the essential point of convergence between neoliberalism and positive psychology-inspired self help. Both narratives are thoroughly centred around the principle of individuality, which "assume[s] the social world to be the sum aggregation of atomized, autonomous and self-governing individual persons" rather than the result of complex historical and cultural processes (Rimke 62).

The autonomous subject described by positive psychology does not rely on society to improve their living conditions in hope that a higher level of welfare will in turn positively impact their mental state. On the contrary, such a subject takes their unhappiness to be a moral fault, a failure to reign in the negative thoughts that are in turn the direct cause of one's unfortunate situation. Such a mindset by nature excludes any forms of political action hinging on creating coalitions and interest groups to promote a society where solidarity is the base of democracy, and dismisses the importance (or even the possibility) of systemic change.

I propose that the discourse of happiness advanced by positive psychology and self-help is a prime example of the process of *economization* of everyday life that Wendy Brown considers a fundamental characteristic of neoliberal governing rationality (31). In this paradigm happiness is a resource that subjects learn to maximise and exploit by applying the management techniques taught by experts. By chasing happiness by carefully curating their daily habits and the workings of their mind, individuals are constantly engaging in an intimate, emotional entrepreneurial project that matches the entrepreneurial attitude they are expected to reflect in their economic behaviour (Binkley 3).

Under the regime of neoliberal happiness, individuals are meant to govern *themselves* by mastering a plethora of techniques of emotional manipulation. On the other hand, this self-management is variously imposed *on* individuals: first of all by the experts promoting specific techniques for the efficient governing of the self, and secondly by a society that deems individualised self-rule a desirable skill. Binkley sums up the dynamic between these two facets of governmentality well when he says that "government of oneself is simply a mirroring, an effect read off from the broader governmental policies and the rationalities imposed upon populations (46). Such an understanding of neoliberal governmentality is explicitly inspired by Foucault's extensive scholarship on various modes of power, which I have summarised in the previous chapter.

Heidi Marie Rimke's article "Governing Citizens through Self-Help Literature", also thoroughly grounded in Foucauldian theory, delves deeper in figuring out how the genre of self-help (much like its parent discipline of positive psychology) constitutes – rather than

uncovering – the reader's idea of the self. Invocation of the figure of the 'true' self is an ever-present trope in self-help materials, who typically insist that only those who know their true self can hope to be happy. Thankfully there is no such thing as a select group of people who know themselves; instead, what self-help manuals do is invite the readers to apply the numerous proposed techniques (quizzes, tests, journaling exercises, typologies and so forth) and uncover their real self. Rimke however problematizes this process by highlighting how the various methods to find one's 'real' self that are promoted in self-help literature actually contribute to "an artificial discursive and extra-discursive construction of the self", turning self-disclosure into a "constructed and tailored narrativization of the self" (70). In the neoliberal rhetoric of self help, knowing oneself is not a process of uncovering and embracing pre-existing truths, but instead of building up a self through one's mastery of a specific form of discourse (*ibidem*). Readers of self-help manuals are invited to understand and produce themselves as psychologically healthy selves, which are by definition "governable, predictable, calculable, classificable, self-conscious, responsible, self-regulating and self-determined" individuals (Rimke 63).

Subjects who aspire to be happy are expected to enact the forms of manipulation of their emotional life that are promoted by positive psychology on the basis of the 'true' self they have been directed to uncover. Happiness is therefore always framed in a discourse of future-orientedness: entrepreneuring individuals, in their quest to maximise their wellbeing, are always learning and applying new techniques for improving themselves, and consequently become happier. The outlook is not that of traditional psychology, which looks to the past to understand present states of mind; instead, subjects are invited to "investigate" (or construe) who they 'really' are now in order to start building up their future happy life (Binkley 50-51).

The happy minimalist

In the previous paragraphs I shifted my focus from the classical philosophical understanding of happiness as *eudaimonia* to the less complete, more temporary happiness that is studied by social scientists. From there I have zoomed in on the subfield of positive psychology and its related medium of transmission, namely self-help literature. As a last step, I have highlighted the ways in which the discourses of self-help and positive psychology are fully compatible with neoliberal governmentality.

In this next section I will make use of the insights gathered so far to investigate the rhetoric of happiness that is so central to many texts on lifestyle minimalism.

First of all, it should be explicitly pointed out that I understand books on minimalism as the practical siblings of self-help, given that they share the same goals and methods. I propose that there is a genealogy in place: certain notions originate (or rather take form) in the academic field of positive psychology, then trickle down through self-help literature into how-to manuals.

Minimalism: Essential Essays

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the book by Millburn and Nicodemus straddles the line between self-help and how-to because it provides a lot of rather general advice. This collection of essays is undoubtedly geared towards convincing the reader that his (the implied reader is male, like the two authors) life is unsatisfying and unhappy, and that a wholehearted embrace of minimalism is the necessary solution to such a bleak existence.
The main argumentative strategy employed by Millburn and Nicodemus is postulating an equivalence between themselves and the reader, who is expected to experience the same frustrations as the authors did a few years ago and who would, inevitably, fix all of his problems if he were to follow the advice provided throughout the pages. This tactic will soon be scrutinized.

In my analysis of happiness in this collection of essays I will briefly start with a close-reading of an extract found in the introduction, and then I will move on to the section about mission and passions because it encapsulates a lot of the ideas that have already been discussed.

> Minimalism is a tool to achieve fulfillment in life. It is a tool to achieve happiness, which is (let's face it) what we are all looking for. We all want to be happy. Minimalism can help. There are no rules in minimalism. Rather, minimalism is simply about stripping away the unnecessary things in your life so you can focus on what's important. We believe that there are four important areas in everyone's lives: your health, your relationships, your mission, and your passions. (Millburn and Nicodemus, 12)

An immediate observation that can be made is that this text positions fulfillment as synonymous with happiness, and identifies happiness as a goal "we all" share. This is consistent with virtually all of philosophy and all facets of what Ahmed calls the "happiness industry", so it is not too surprising but still worth pointing out. It is also worth noting that the idea of exposing "what is important" is not altogether different from the mandate to discover one's "true" self, but it is more openly prescriptive. If the happy subject "finds itself" by applying the techniques

of self-help (which allow for the constitution of a limited range of "authentic" selves), the minimalist subject proposed by this book does not have to discover *what* is important, but just realise that Millburn and Nicodemus have indeed assembled a short list of essential concerns. To summarise and rearrange this initial passage, it can be said that minimalism entails focusing on certain prescribed areas of one's life and presumably ignoring, neglecting and abandoning others. This process of selective attention is what leads to the universal goal of happiness and fulfillment. Inversely, it is implied, those who pay attention to other "superfluous" areas of existence are liable to be unhappy and feel unfulfilled. It is therefore imperative that subjects have their priorities set straight, that they distinguish between what is good for them (in that it will lead them towards happiness) and what is instead extraneous.

This emphasis on discerning between competing desires is a ubiquitous feature in self-help discourses and discourses on happiness as a whole; as Sara Ahmed succinctly summarised, "[a] happy life, a good life, … involves the regulation of desire. It is not simply that we desire happiness but that happiness is imagined as what you get in return for desiring well" (37). In the case of Millburn and Nicodemus, to achieve a "meaningful" life (*meaningful* being the qualifier they tend to prefer, but it is often alternated with fulfilling and, occasionally, happy) one needs to give up on most material comforts and exclusively focus on what is deemed essential. Though this process of paring down one's lifestyle is apparently motivated by a need to reduce monthly expenses as much as possible, thus allowing for shorter work days and more free time, the ways in which typical expenditures are depicted betrays a belief that they are not only superfluous but also actively harmful. The problem with "[a] nice house with too many bedrooms, [a] too-fancy car, ridiculous gadgets, and [a] life of opulence" goes beyond the fact that they represent a lifestyle that is expensive, but also – and most importantly – that they are stand-ins for a subject whose desiring is out of control, led astray by the menacing forces of contemporary consumerist society (83). To be able to live a happy life it is imperative that one sheds these pernicious, artificial wants and returns to what *really* matters.

Such a message certainly sounds antithetical to the ethos of capitalist society, rooted as it is in constantly acquiring consumer goods and displaying status and wealth as signifiers of having performed well as subjects operating under a capitalist system. It is no mystery that huge sums are spent every year in marketing efforts to ensure that citizens spend as much as they can, especially when one takes into account how efficiently debt and instability work as technologies for social control (see Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition* for a deep analysis of the function of debt in the neoliberal system).

Still, I want to propose a skeptical reading of the form of desire control advocated by Millburn and Nicodemus. There are two points to my argument. Firstly, the two authors of *Minimalism: Essential Essays* make it a point to emphasise how successful they were in their professional lives and how large their paychecks were as a result, bemoaning the flashy ways in which they squandered their wealth as if their financial decisions were determined by their six-figure incomes. Despite their staunch denial that such accounts of professional success constitute "bragging" ("I'm not trying to impress you with these details … You see, I don't care about impressing you, I care about helping you live a more meaningful life" (78)), it is difficult not to detect a certain self-satisfaction in their descriptions of corporate excellence. This functionally signals to the reader that Millburn and Nicodemus did not renounce their lifestyle because they were failures, but rather because they were too wise to be bogged down by inconsequential status-symbols: hardly a message that would be dear to someone genuinely critical of the capitalist, neoliberal system. Secondly, and most importantly, the essays by Millburn and Nicodemus enthusiastically embrace a rhetoric of independence and self-responsibility: they were unhappy despite their "good jobs" they initially spent their wealth in a "lazy", non-purposeful way, but as soon as they took the matter into their own hands and employed a more discerning attitude they were able to achieve fulfillment. Binkley generalises this dynamic as follows:

> [u]nhappiness is therefore synonymous with the inability to act on one's own deriving from one's acceptance of habitualized outlooks derived from others, tinged by inevitability … To the extent that one realizes that one can make oneself happy through one's own actions, one becomes happy. Agency, enterprise, and responsibility for oneself are both the means for achieving and the very content of happiness itself—freedom as an attribute of individual conduct. (31)

Much like neoliberal thought is wholly opposed to any kind of reliance on others, the positive psychology-infused advice found in self-help manuals like *Essential Essays* warns against mindlessly adopting the values and outlooks of others. If you are unhappy because of your failure to act as an independent individual, the story goes, you can only really blame yourself – but the solution is within your grasp.

It is highly unlikely that most readers of *Minimalism: Essential Essays* are wealthy unsatisfied corporate managers, if only because the median income in the US is far below the six figures Millburn and Nicodemus are so careful not to boast about. The message that permeates the book is therefore made even more questionable when one takes into account that most of its readers are probably enjoying far less glamorous lifestyles than the authors. Despite

this, they are still encouraged to place the blame for their dissatisfaction on their inability (framed in most essays as unwillingness) to radically overhaul their existence. Far from acknowledging that there are significant systemic reasons most people might feel unsatisfied with their lives (precarity, loneliness, lack of opportunities), Millburn and Nicodemus encourage the readers to blame themselves for not being enterprising enough: they could take charge of their lives by quitting their jobs, selling most of their belongings and pursue their passions or "[they] could just sit back and do nothing. [They] can just keep being [themselves], content in the vast pool of mediocrity" (83).

New Minimalism

If the collection of essays by Miller and Nicodemus learns towards the self-help genre as a consequence of its broad scope, Quilici and Fortin's *New Minimalism: Decluttering and Design for Intentional, Sustainable Living* is easily catalogued as a how-to manual. Its central aim is to give the reader clear and actionable instructions on a variety of topics related to decluttering and improving her house.

I use the feminine possessive adjective here because, unlike the authors of *Minimalism: Essential Essays* (who appear to have had a male reader in mind), Quilici and Fortin are primarily writing for an audience of women. In the next chapter I will delve deeper into the gendering of the implied reader in literature about lifestyle minimalism, but for now I will just mention that the female reader of *New Minimalism* is consistent with Laurie Ouellette's insightful analysis of decluttering as a set of techniques depending on the domestic work of women. Women have of course historically been tasked with taking care of the household, an assumption which – paired with the cultural assumption that women are by and at large the biggest purchasers of consumer goods – has led to the belief that curating household possessions is female work (Ouellette 536-37).

The all-important pursuit of ridding oneself of unnecessary possessions, commitments and desires, central to *Minimalism: Essential Essays*, can be found in this second manual too. I will point out a clear example of it from the first chapter, where Quilici and Fortin establish the link between the material practices they advocate for (the how-to) and the deeper, presumably life-improving consequences of following the advice (which ultimately is the essence of self-help).

> On the surface, we help people declutter and design their spaces. But what we really do is guide overwhelmed, fatigued folks through a process of *peeling back layers (of stuff,*

> *commitments, habits, or beliefs) until they have clarity about what matters most to them*. We have found that people who have recently undergone a major life transition … tend to have the clearest vision for what is important in life. They appreciate the profound clarity that comes with grief, change, sickness, divorce, or death. At this point, what we believe we need versus what we really need reveals itself in a pure way. *Stuff is worth little, if anything at all, when we are stripped bare in front of life's big events* (18, italics added).

Here, too, identifying what parts of life are essential and which ones are unnecessary is of crucial importance. Two differences are however worth pointing out.

First, motivation to pursue a minimalist lifestyle does not originate in unhappiness or dissatisfaction, as it did for Millburn and Nicodemus, but rather by the interruption of ordinary existence by means of a seismic event in one's life. This "external" push to work on one's lifestyle frees Quilici and Fortin from having to goad the reader into making a change. Rather than implying that someone who has yet to adopt minimalism is a passive person who enjoys being mediocre, they instead offer a more understanding approach: many of their customers have recently experienced significant changes, and if the reader has not then it is easy to explain why they might not have "the clearest vision" for their priorities.

Secondly, this passage encapsulates the aim of the book quite efficiently because it emphasises that Quilici and Fortin are interested in helping the reader declutter and downsize their material belongings, not in completely overhauling their lifestyles. To be sure, *New Minimalism* maintains that owning fewer items will lead to a host of psychological, environmental and interpersonal benefits – but, unlike *Essential Essays*, it refrains from offering any advice on broader issues. Still, the fact that this passage juxtaposes death, sickness and divorce and the pursuit of decluttering is evidence of how significant and life-altering the advice given by Quilici and Fortin is meant to be.

New Minimalism introduces an approach to decluttering that has a lot with practices of meditation and mindfulness. These para-spiritual practices have gained increased popularity in Western countries in the last couple of decades and they are considered by Ahmed as key elements of the "happiness turn" that inspired *The Promise of Happiness* (3).

> If you've ever received meditation guidance, you were probably instructed to quiet the chatter in your mind and settle into the experience of breathing and observing … These skills of quieting and centering are the exact skills our style of decluttering will have you tap into and strengthen. We ask you to move beyond the fears, anxieties, and reactions in order to sink into a deeper, quieter place of knowing. In decluttering your

> home, you have the opportunity—in fact, thousands of micro-opportunities—to strengthen and deepen your mindfulness and to incorporate this into your everyday life. [This is] the chance to tap into your underlying self who has always been there, the one who knows what you truly need and wholeheartedly love (Quilici and Fortin x).

Aside from once again framing the discovery of one's "true self" as necessary for the pursuit of happiness, passages like this one underline the ways in which emotional and spiritual life are unproblematically made to support some material, banal practices of household management. One does not simply assess what things are worth keeping and which ones are obsolete, useless or broken: instead, this process is understood as an exercise in introspection. Texts on lifestyle minimalism often adopt the language of meditation or psychology, perhaps with the aim of elevating the relatively prosaic process of decluttering into a pursuit that has the potential to radically improve the well-being of the whole family.

New Minimalism advises the reader to "question everything" in order to "determine how they want to feel in a space … and their own lifestyle needs and desires". Through this questioning it is easy to identify clutter, which is "[t]he material items that don't support this vision" (14-15). By means of an introspective, future-oriented intellectual exercise the reader is encouraged to embark on a managerial, curatorial pursuit that involves setting goals and achieving them through the optimisation of one's home. The results of this process are repeatedly detailed as a "litany of positive side effects", including more time, more flexible schedules, "more meaningful relationships". The process, far from being unpleasant, is "liberating and joyful" and it enables the practitioners of lifestyle minimalism to experience "peace of mind" (4).

As I have shown, *New Minimalism* and *Minimalism: Essential Essays* both ultimately maintain that through limiting their possessions and carefully managing their lifestyle their readers will obtain freedom and flexibility, save money and enjoy an increase in free time. These texts imply that all such benefits are available to everyone who is willing to embrace the ethos of minimalism. On the flip side, they make it clear that the widespread discontent of those who are always busy, stuck working long hours in unfulfilling careers is a direct consequence of their lack of discipline and unsound household management. Happiness, peace of mind and fulfillment are the result of sound choices that are within anyone's reach, and so – books on lifestyle minimalism inevitably conclude – individuals can only really blame themselves for failing to put in the effort to opt out of the more consumerist facets of contemporary society.

CHAPTER 3

Non-consumptive non-politics of minimalist environmentalism

Minimalism is often perceived to be an environmentally-friendly lifestyle because of its emphasis on lowering consumption and living more frugally. This "green" image is probably based on the large amount of content on social media that plays up the sustainability of a minimalist lifestyle, and it draws a lot of popular interest – especially in light of the growing concern about the climate crisis.

I believe that the intersection of minimalism and environmentalism is well worth exploring, given how common it is to encounter lifestyle advice based on the idea of reducing one's carbon footprint or waste output. As I will show, this individualistic and exclusively private approach to environmental sustainability constitutes the core of what I will call *minimalist environmentalism*.

In the first part of the chapter I will point out that there is a surprising imbalance in environmental discussion within the genre of lifestyle minimalism: far from being a common theme in minimalist texts, the environment is only discussed in a small percentage of books. These tend to be how-to guides to minimalism that deeply focus on consumption, rather than other elements of lifestyle. Such books are often written by and for women, following stereotypical views of gender that associate the act of consumption (and, relatedly, the responsibility of looking after the domestic domain) with femininity. In this section I will attempt to understand the relations between gender, consumption, domestic work and environmentalism for two reasons: first, to figure out why minimalist authors who are male consistently avoid discussing pollution; secondly, to better grasp how the challenges of environmentalism are framed and understood.

In the second half of the chapter, then, I will analyse and critique the ways in which the minimalist texts that *do* discuss sustainability depict environmentally- friendly behaviour. I will specifically insist on the further implications of this depoliticized approach to the strain of environmentalism that is typically found in minimalist publications.

A surprising distribution

When I was choosing which texts to analyse in my thesis I opted for Nicodemus and Millburn's *Essential Essays* because of its broad scope and influential authors, and Quilici and Fortin's *New Minimalism* (subtitle "decluttering and design for sustainable, intentional living") because

it wore its concern with sustainability on its sleeve. I believed that I had selected a fairly representative, albeit small, sample of the genre.

What I had not realised at the time was how skewed my perception of minimalism was, and how much it differed from most publications on the matter. It is my experience that individuals who are attracted to minimalism are acutely concerned about environmental issues, but that concern is actually hardly reflected by literature on the lifestyle.

When I got to reading, in fact, I was taken aback when I noticed that nowhere in *Essential Essays* is the topic of environmentalism discussed. It was even more surprising to realise that Nicodemus and Millburn's book was not an outlier: the "green" theme, which is a significant component of minimalism in popular consciousness, is only highlighted in a small subset of publications about minimalism. Most texts that aim to promote a minimalist lifestyle are either completely silent on the topic of the environment, or they only mention it a handful of times.

This puzzling situation begs a closer investigation. Why is minimalism perceived to be such an eco-friendly lifestyle? Why are the authors of minimalist books avoiding addressing the topic? Are certain subsets of the genre more likely than others to discuss sustainability?

The ingredients of minimalism

When exploring the affinities between the environmentalist movement and minimalist lifestyles, a good first step is to trace the constellation of practices that inform, influence and inspire minimalist practice. I could begin this account by mentioning that the industrialised West has long been fascinated with Buddhism, for example, a faith that strongly emphasises the importance of detaching oneself from the material aspects of the world. In the 19th century, translated Buddhist texts became very popular in Europe and significantly influenced culture and philosophy, as exemplified by German philosopher Schopenhauer. In the 20th and 21st century Buddhism has been embraced in the US and Europe as a countercultural spiritual practice (Mitchell 60-65). This brief note aside, however, I will not delve into religiously- or philosophically-informed ascetic practices, influential though they might be for minimalism – they are complex sets of belief that extend far beyond the scope of the present project.

Instead, the first ancestor of minimalism that I will engage with is *voluntary simplicity* (VS), a lifestyle that originated in the United States in the Seventies. The similarities between the two movements are made rather evident by the following definition, dating back to 1977:

> The essence of voluntary simplicity is living in a way [that] is outwardly simple and inwardly rich. This way of [life] embraces frugality of consumption, a strong sense of

> environmental urgency, a desire to return to living and working environments which are of a more human scale and an intention to realize our higher human potential – both psychological and spiritual – is often perceived to be an environmentally-friendly lifestyle in community with others (Elgin and Duane 5).

Like minimalism, voluntary simplicity proposes that excessive consumption will not bring happiness, but rather cause personal stress and environmental woe. Unlike minimalists, however, practitioners of VS emphasise community with others and strive to imagine alternative forms of society – an important point whose significance will be explored later in the chapter. For now I will limit myself to pointing out that later accounts of voluntary simplicity tend to abandon the themes of community and social responsibility and more closely resemble texts on lifestyle minimalism, as evidenced in this 2003 collection of quotes:

> Voluntary Simplicity is a growing social movement.[4] According to the New York Times, "Choosing to buy and earn less-to give up income and fast-track success for more free time and a lower-stress life-involves a quiet revolt against the dominant culture of getting and spending,"[5]. More recently, the Los Angeles Times reported, "the core ideals of voluntary simplicity-spend less, work less and focus on important personal goals-are resonating with Americans who have been shaken by the recent events (terrorist attacks) and who are looking for more meaning in their lives".[6] "Simplify" is becoming the rallying cry for a generation of alternative consumers (Johnston and Burton 19).

All in all, minimalism and voluntary simplicity share a criticism of excessive consumption and a distaste for the frantic pace of contemporary life. The two movements are extremely similar and basically impossible to conclusively disentangle, not least because voluntary simplicity can be considered the forebearer of minimalism. Instead of attempting to determine when exactly minimalism came into its own, I will try to formulate a provisional distinction by arguing that there are two identifiable differences, one of aim and one of aesthetics.

Minimalism and VS differ slightly in the path that they chart to achieve happiness and wellbeing. The project of minimalism involves taking stock of what is “really” important and, as a consequence, *reducing* commitments and material goals to a minimum: the problem is located in clutter, in overly full calendars, in long work days (Meissner 187).

[4] Etzioni, A. “Voluntary Simplicity: A new social movement?” 1999.
[5] Goldberg, C. “Choosing the joys of a simplified life”. 1995.
[6] Weston, L. P. (2001, November 25). “Planting seeds for simpler life”. 2001.

Voluntary simplicity, instead, takes issue with the ways in which modern societies atomize individuals and force them into inauthentic, alienating lives; the proposed solution, at least in VS's originary form, is connection and alternative consumption.
Aesthetically, minimalism is strongly associated with a few specific traits that can be found in both its textual narratives (in the books, articles and podcasts that belong to the genre) and in its visual vocabulary: a lack of clutter, cleanliness, "effortlessness". Voluntary simplicity, which is far less aesthetically coherent, typically describes attitudes, beliefs and behaviours rather than their visible manifestations.

Another practice that should be mentioned in relation to minimalism is *ethical consumption*. Itself a complex phenomenon with its own historical and cultural premises, ethical consumption really started gaining traction (that is to say, for my purposes, that it became widespread enough to pique scholarly attention in the fields of social studies and marketing) at the dawn of the 21st century (Lewis and Potter 8). Its emergence was directly influenced by the discomfort consumers experienced when faced with the "environmental and social impact of their own consumption" (Shaw and Newholm 168). The growing interest in issues like environmental sustainability, fair working conditions for the farmers and factory workers in the global south and out-of-control consumerism, which characterised the early 2000s, encouraged many citizens to let ethical considerations inform their shopping practices. Unable to opt out of consuming tout court, people were faced with two non-exclusive options to practically enact their ethical concerns: shifting their purchasing habits by preferring more ethically-sourced products, or adopting a lifestyle like voluntary simplicity, thus attempting to reduce levels of consumption to lower, less destructive levels (Shaw and Newholm 168). Ethical consumption has only increased in popularity since the early 2000s. These days it is possible to purchase bamboo toothbrushes, biodegradable earphones, and all sorts of groceries in glass jars in a bid to avoid creating plastic waste. Companies like Apple highlight how their products are fully recyclable, thus crafting an image of sustainability (Valenzuela and Böhm). Plenty of companies also highlight how humane, how empowering their product is for the workers who manufactured it, or enact schemes where for every item purchased by a (Western, wealthy) customer, another identical item would be donated to a community in need. I could continue listing examples of how the concerns informing ethical consumption have been fully embraced by corporations big and small, but the point is clear: if customers want to purchase items that are environmentally-friendly and fairly produced, the market will provide. The twin questions of transparency (is a product that claims to be fully recyclable *really* recyclable, especially considering that different areas use different methods?) and of effectiveness (is

donating a second pair of socks to homeless shelters really the most efficient way to help, or is it more of a feel-good practice for customers?) are often brought up by commentators and critics, but that does not seem to inspire much debate (see Valenzuela and Böhm, and Kalina).

How do the three movements just discussed fit together? In short, voluntary simplicity informs the basic tenets of minimalism: life is too hectic, consumerism does not lead to happiness, a simpler lifestyle can be a lot more rewarding. Consumption, though curbed, cannot however be stopped entirely: it is unthinkable that the (sub)urban reader of books on minimalism could do without acquiring groceries, some clothing and technology. There, in those more or less unavoidable purchases, is where ethical consumption fits in.

The feminine domain of minimalism

So far I have shown that the content of most publications on minimalism typically boils down to two interrelated domains: the material ("own as few items as possible, consume less and consume responsibly") and the psychological ("these material changes can improve your emotional wellbeing, your relationship with your family and your sense of self"). Though not all texts emphasise it in the same way, there is no lifestyle minimalism without decluttering – going through one's possessions and deciding which ones to keep (few) and which ones to discard (the vast majority) – and committing to maintaining lower levels of consumption.

With this summary I want to highlight that minimalism is fundamentally about consumption, a concern that is at its most conspicuous in books belonging to the how-to subgenre. Their aim is to provide guidance for a reader who is about to engage in the material practice of decluttering, an uncomfortable process that fundamentally involves facing all the decisions one has made as a consumer – fossilized into their possessions – and discarding most of them as unwise or deluded. The tone in the "decluttering" section of minimalism manuals is typically sympathetic and reassuring, generally emphasising the importance of forgiving oneself for the "mistakes" one has made. Marie Kondo famously recommends that her readers thank and hug the items they are about to discard, and similarly Fortin and Quilici advise taking a moment to "bless and release" sentimental objects that one is not going to keep (42).

Why is there such an emphasis on the emotional side of decluttering? Because the objects one acquires were supposed to be useful and make them happy: the items were invested with an affective value dependent on the expectation that they would produce happiness or wellbeing (Ahmed 26-28). Now, however, the reader of a how-to minimalist guide has to come to terms with the ways in which the very object whose proximity was meant to generate

happiness were actually the source of negative feelings. The discomfort, the overwhelming feelings, the stress were coming from inside the house! The budding minimalist had welcomed them in!

This horror, I posit, is something that pervades the minimalist texts written by women because they, as wives and mothers, are traditionally tasked with homemaking – with ensuring that the house is a relaxing welcoming space, that it is tidy and safe. To learn that all of those efforts actually led to the creation of a hostile, unpleasant home environment is potentially highly distressing, hence the textual emphasis on not dwelling in the mistakes of the past and just focusing on pursuing "good" (that is to say, minimalistic) homemaking techniques going forward.

To say that American and European societies typically associate the domestic domain with femininity and the public domain with masculinity is hardly controversial: that had been the case in ancient Greece (Arendt 30-31), in Victorian England (Boardman 150), in the Dutch Republic of the Seventeenth century (Franits) and it is the myth behind the figure of the "happy housewife" in mid-century America (Ahmed 50-51, Bordo 170).[7] The association of women with the home informs the logic of the *feminization of consumption*. Contrasted with production, which is typically deemed an important economic activity that is of public interest (and thus carrying "male" connotations), consumption is understood as private, economically marginal, and fundamentally secondary to production (Weller, 338-39).

Considering how the project of minimalism is essentially one of highly regulated consumption and noting that most texts on lifestyle minimalism appear to be concerned with the minutiae of household management, the fact that the majority of authors in the minimalism genre are female is not very surprising. According to such considerations it also seems reasonable to call upon traditional understandings of gender to explain why Fortin and Quilici decided to dedicate the majority of the pages of *New Minimalism* to the topic of the home and of family management, whereas Millburn and Nicodemus' *Essential Essays* (a book written by and mostly for men) focuses so much on professional issues, on financial decisions and on fitness – all activities typically considered "productive".

Minimalist gender politics

[7] All of the histories mentioned are a lot more complex and nuanced than the sweeping statement made in the text, but because of a lack of space it will be impossible to delve deeper in the fascinating gender politics of 19th century English households and in the subtle interrelations of sex, class and ethnicity in postwar American families.

A brief exploration of the depiction of gender in *New Minimalism* and *Essential Essays* will justify my claim that these books reproduce rather stereotypical views of men and women.

Chapter 3 of *New Minimalism* is devoted to delineating four "archetypes" according to how different people "relate to their possessions" (Fortin and Quilici 35). The strengths and the flaws of each archetype (as pertains to the limited scope of decluttering) are carefully described, along with the category of items they are likely to struggle to part with. To clarify things further, each profile is exemplified by a former customer of Fortin and Quilici's decluttering company. I will summarize the descriptions of these archetypical former customers, and then point out the blatant ways in which such descriptions are influenced by traditional views of gender.

Kate, the example of the "*connected*" archetype (the one that values emotion and relationships above all else) is "a treasured friend, a beloved wife and mother, and a high-powered manager at work" (40).

The "*practical*" archetype, whose outlook is described as "data-driven, methodical, and factual" is represented by Shawn, "a highly in-demand Silicon Valley engineer—a man who was flown around the country to attend conferences". His room was overflowing with all kinds of bits of electronics, tools and t-shirts, which he failed to organize because "his time was so valuable that it didn't seem worth it to him to deal with his stuff" (45).

"Powerhouse attorney" Mei is also "a beloved wife and a mother to two precious young children". Her "*energetic*" archetype (very physical, always engaging in hobbies and passion projects but often saying "yes to most things and typically [running] ten minutes late to everything") manifests in her having no free time because, along with work, she is always "trying out new types of exercise, cooking new cuisines, and learning new crafts" (51-52).

Lastly, "*frugal*" retired professor Mark finds it impossible to let go of old possessions out of a fear that someday he would need them – a fear that is clearly irrational given that his life has been very fortunate: "he'd scored a great job and an incredible deal on a lovely house" (56).

There are a couple things worth noting in these profiles. First of all, Fortin and Quilici chose to describe female clients to describe the most outgoing, caring, emotional archetypes. They conversely elected to select men to represent the rational and practical archetypes, thus fully adhering to ideas of (white) masculinity as reasonable and femininity (together with racialized and naturalized identities) as irrational that can be traced back to the Enlightenment (Braidotti 13-16). Secondly, it can hardly be ignored that all four customers are presented as over-achievers in the workplace, but the women are the only ones that are also placed within a family structure (they are mothers and wifes, as well as valuable friends). Whether Shawn and Mark live on their own or with others, whether they have friends or other family members is

not deemed necessary to explain who they are. Again, this gendered pattern has a long history – and it is no accident that Fortin and Quilici follow it so uncritically: such stereotypical depictions of men and women abound in minimalist literature, so much so that I would argue they are a defining characteristic of the genre.

Moving on to *Essential Essays*, it is mostly the scarce mentions of the authors' family situation that could be brought up as evidence of the book's view of gender. Millburn and Nicodemus repeatedly bring up the six-figure jobs they quit in their late twenties to pursue a more fulfilling way of life, the luxurious ways in which they used to spend their wealth, the successes they accumulated – but not their families, their friends or their communities.
The chapter titled "Dealing with Overwhelm" contains a passage where "overwhelm" (a neologism standing for the oppressive feeling of always having some obligation, some concern, some worry) is personified as follows:

> Overwhelm is a heartless bitch who makes us doubt ourselves into oblivion. And it's easy to let her into our lives. Overwhelm seems like the natural reaction to the barrage of information with which we're faced every day of our lives. *Everybody else is doing her, why shouldn't I give it a whirl too?* But there is a way to have an amicable separation from overwhelm, a way to deny her access to your life (32).

In this extract Millburn clearly turns the feeling he so dislikes into a female figure, one that is devoid of emotion, sexually promiscuous, and who has a parasitic desire to take over her victim's life.
It would be absurd to look too deeply into this short passage and to use it to claim that a misogynistic rhetoric pervades *Essential Essays*, but I believe that it *is* evidence of a markedly masculine viewpoint.

Gender and the environment

At the start of this chapter I mentioned the puzzling situation that is environmentalism in minimalist rhetoric, and specifically the fact that the eco-conscious image of the minimalist in popular culture is nowhere to be found in most books belonging to this subgenre. Why is that? I suspect that there are two fairly realistic – and interrelated – explanations, both having to do with the audience of these texts.

For one thing, and rather obviously, publishers only print and distribute books that they believe will be profitable. It is conceivable, then, that the intended audience for these texts is on the older and wealthier side, because those who are younger and more money-conscious are

likely to engage with minimalist content for free online (through blogs, YouTube and social media). If that is the case, choosing not to emphasise the environmental side of minimalism might be a savvy business move – older adults in the US, according to a 2018 Gallup poll, are significantly less concerned about climate change than their younger counterparts (Reinhart). As research by Ballew and colleagues show, the age gap is especially noticeable in the Republican electorate – the older cohorts of the right-leaning demographic being substantially less convinced that climate change *is* happening, that it is a consequence of human industrialization, and that it is something concerning (Klein 36). It is therefore possible that authors and publishers might be reticent to include environmental themes because of their potential divisiveness, preferring instead to deal with the less controversial lifestyle advice.

Secondly, research shows that women are significantly more likely to engage in eco-conscious behaviours (Weller 336, Bloodhart and Swim; problematized in Arora-Jonsson). This is coherent with the data I have compiled in the Appendix, which shows that – at least in the sample of books on minimalism I have analysed – the only texts that extensively discuss environmental topics are written by female authors, typically with an audience of women in mind. This gendered difference ceases to be noticeable when it comes to books featuring more limited mentions of the environment (a few sentences here and there, but in the service of other topics) or with absolute silence. In other words, it seems that both men and women write books on minimalism that no not mention environmental topics at all; men and women *also* write books where brief mentions of the environment occasionally come up; only women, however, discuss the environment in enough depth to mention it in the title of the book or to include a whole chapter dedicated to it.

Keeping in mind what has been said about the traditional ideas of gender that typically inform texts on lifestyle minimalism, I would tentatively venture to suggest that the stereotypical view of who men and women are actively discourages environmental discussion in books aimed at men. Individuals who are highly invested in their masculinity "value achievement, assertiveness, and material success but undervalue caring for others, cooperation, and solidarity" (Hofstede 1980, cited in Shang and Peloza 131). Shang and Peloza's study suggests that men who choose to consume ethical products are perceived to be more feminine and less masculine than when they purchase "unethical" (or rather, unmarked) goods. This effect, however, depends on the reason why ethical products are chosen. If the decision is informed by considerations of self-benefit (price, quality of the item) subjects are still perceived as manly; it is subjects who are swayed by advertising highlighting "other-benefit"

(sustainability, better working conditions for the manufacturers) that are seen as more feminine and less masculine.
"Green" behaviours are reliably judged to be feminine according to Brough and Wilkie as well: in their article for *Scientific American* they describe how men are likely to consciously make less environmentally-friendly choices in order to preserve their masculinity.

To sum up, authors of texts on minimalism might choose to avoid discussing environmental topics in order to avoid displeasing a subset of their readership, according to whom the problems of pollution and climate change are overblown. Books explicitly written for a male public might also stay silent on topics related to the environment because eco-friendly behaviours, often perceived as feminine, can be threatening to the idea of masculinity that the authors are attempting to convey.

Minimalism in texts

In the previous sections I have sketched out the relationships of minimalism to its lifestyle siblings, voluntary simplicity and ethical consumption. I have mentioned the primary importance that all three movements assign to consumption, and in showing that consumption is an activity that is typically associated with femininity and domestic values I have started a little sketch of the traditional gender dynamics depicted in most minimalist literature. Lastly, I have hypothesised that a strong investment in such traditional gender roles might help explain why many of the books I analysed do not discuss the environment in great detail (or at all).

In this section I will draw on three books on minimalism (Fracine Jay's *The Joy of Less*, Bea Johnson's *Zero Waste Home*, and Cary Fortin and Kyle Quilici's *New Minimalism*) selected on the basis of the significant amount of environmental discourse contained in them. My goal is to highlight common themes and recurring suggestions in order to tease out the ideological implications of the "environmentalist" side of lifestyle minimalism.

Main or side?

Zero Waste Home could be broadly described as a guide to environmentally-friendly homemaking. It straddles the line between voluntary simplicity and minimalism, highlighting the beneficial effects of its lifestyle recommendations without necessarily devoting (too) much attention to the aesthetic pursuit of sparse-looking interiors. The title already sets the reader up to expect a book whose main goal is to promote a "green" lifestyle.

The same cannot be said for *The Joy of Less*, nor *New Minimalism* (whose subtitle "Decluttering and Design for Sustainable, Intentional Living" ambiguously evokes both meanings of *sustainable*, both "environmentally-friendly" and "easy to maintain").
That is probably the reason why both of these texts frame the ecologically beneficial aspects of minimalism as welcome side-effects of their aesthetic and psychological main goal. Jay acknowledges that her readers may "have embraced minimalism to save money, save time, or save space in [their] homes", but that their minimalist practice – their decluttering and re-using, their donating and ethical purchasing – has nonetheless had the effect of "[saving] the Earth from environmental harm, and [saving] people from suffering unfair (and unsafe) working conditions" (Jay ch. 30.1). Similarly, the authors of *New Minimalism* point out that – beyond improving one's well-being (as I described in the previous chapter) – a minimalist lifestyle offers "less obvious benefits … like, ahem, saving the planet" (ix). Though readers might not be particularly motivated to turn into "warrior[s] for our planet's health", if they enact the advice offered by Quilici and Fortin "[their] actions will be a benevolent service to our earth" (*ibidem*).

These passages offer a feel-good rhetoric that has a reassuring effect on their readers. By only addressing environmental concerns peripherally – as the last items of a list of benefits of a given lifestyle, or in the last chapter of a lengthy book – the authors seemingly imply that issues like climate change and pollution are not all that urgent. Most importantly, they propose that such issues are made irrelevant by the fact that adopting a minimalist lifestyle already automatically takes care of them: if the practices of self-control and restraint one would adopt to enhance happiness, productivity and wellbeing are already so beneficial for the environment, what is the point of addressing them separately?

The limitless power of consumption

The idea that lifestyle changes have a decisive impact on the serious environmental issues caused by centuries of industrialization – which is ultimately what the passages I just analysed imply – betrays a boundless faith in the efficacy of the individual choices one makes as a customer. Mentions of the "rippling effect" of small quotidian behaviours abound in the sample of minimalist books I am interrogating. Though sometimes these effects are said to have an interpersonal impact (showing friends and family that a minimalist lifestyle is beneficial and not overly difficult to implement, for example), when they are called up in service of an environmental ethos their effect is simultaneously economic and societal.

An understanding of economics and proto-politics as intermingled is the defining feature of "environmental minimalism". This economic-political hybrid is a domain to which the individual has access through their role as a consumer, and it is presented as the privileged arena for environmental change. This (oddly apolitical, as I will soon explain) consumer-centric meshing of economics and the social sphere, I would argue, is the foundation around which the architecture of lifestyle minimalism (as well as voluntary simplicity and ethical consumption) is built. To exemplify what I mean, I will provide a passage from *Zero Waste Home* that exemplifies how the purchasing habits of individuals are expected to "trickle up" to the domain of production.

> We have incredible power as consumers. We rely on grocery shopping for survival and restock a multitude of products weekly (sometimes daily), and our decisions can promote or demote manufacturers and grocers, based on the packaging or quality of food they provide. Where we spend the fruit of our hard labor should more than meet our basic need of filling a pantry shelf; it should also reflect our values. Because ultimately, giving someone your business implicitly articulates this message: "Your store satisfies all my needs and I want you to flourish." We can vote with our pocketbooks by avoiding wasteful packaging and privileging local and organic products. (Johnson 52)

The legacy of the post-1968 slogan "the personal is political", with its recasting of private daily practices into political issues, resonates strongly in this passage. Movements advocating for sustainable consumption, Ines Weller recognizes, are indeed the heirs of this logic (334). In her investigation of the relationship between gender politics and sustainable consumption Weller points out that in the 21st century we are experiencing a privatization of environmental responsibility, which greatly overemphasises the influence individual consumers have to enact environmental change (331).

Given that – as I have previously discussed – consumption is an eminently feminized domain, this privatized environmental responsibility is largely placed on the shoulders of women. It is in their grocery runs that they have to decide which stores, which manufacturers, which production practices they want to see "flourish" and which ones they believe should wither. Agency is wielded on the level of the final consumer, whose decisions supposedly influence the retailer they favour. Retailers, the story goes, will place fewer orders of unsustainable products from their suppliers, which will ultimately result in a loss of profits for manufacturers, who will decide to tweak their production methods to be more eco-friendly.

This chain of events undoubtedly makes logical sense, but it is overly simplistic. In its primary focus on individuals it fails to adequately account for other actors. Retailers, suppliers,

manufacturers, large corporations: the relationships between these nodes, far from straightforward and univocal, are complex and layered. The fact that profits for the larger players (shareholders of corporations) are largely independent from sales of individual products is a decisively important fact which ought to be acknowledged rather than obscured. How many Band-Aid plasters, Listerine mouthwashes, O.B. toothbrushes should be left on the shelves for Johnson & Johnson to notice, let alone reinvent its production line? How many consumers would have to boycott Nescafé and Kitkat for Nestlé to cease exploitation of farmers in the Global South? Ultimately, as Weller concisely puts it, a privatized and feminized theory of environmental sustainability "fails to take adequate account of … the other actors who are as relevant, and perhaps even more influential, in the development of strategies and concepts for promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and production than individuals" (334).

Our consumerist overlords

It would be inaccurate to say that books on minimalism *completely* ignore the existence and crucial role of corporations, the manufacturing sector and the macroeconomic domain as a whole. On the contrary, such actors are almost inevitably touched upon when authors feel compelled to explain why most people would benefit from paring down their material possessions. Understandably enough, a genre whose central concern is the (supposedly controversial) idea that happiness cannot be bought has to account for its claim that most people believe that spending more will make them happier. How can everyone be so patently wrong?

New Minimalism reconstructs a brief historical account of consumerist society that places the turning point after World War II, when the economy allegedly started depending on increased consumption. This, Fortin and Quilici explained, marked the birth of "our modern-day big-budget multimedia advertising industry", whose aim is to convince us "to buy things we don't need" by exploiting the "sneaky technique called neuromarketing", which allows advertisers to "tap into both our conscious and unconscious brain to override our natural circuitry … trigger[ing] our reptilian brain and make us feel that we are lacking something. And then, once we are in this vulnerable place, we are conveniently presented with the item that will solve this 'problem'" (12).

The issue, in short, is that the capitalist system (which is evoked but not explicitly addressed in these terms) needs constant consumption to keep itself alive, and in its vampiric desire for

growth it does not hesitate to engage in the unethical manipulation of innocent people's brains. Horrific stuff.

Now, I happen to be in full agreement with the assessment that capitalism is far from a desirable system, and I welcome publications aimed at a broad public that challenge the dominant logic of industrialized economies. What is concerning, however, is that the minimalist guides that are the object of this chapter posit the existence of a malicious system that – and this is the problem – can easily be avoided. One can, supposedly, simply opt out of consumerist (read: capitalist) society by being mindful about one's purchases and not being taken in by advertising. If you do not purchase unnecessary things, according to this logic, you are no longer implicated in the workings of society. Not buying becomes an act of defiance.
To Quilici and Fortin "every thoughtful purchase —and nonpurchase—is an act of rebellion, a declaration to businesses and advertisers that you are not merely a passive consumer purchasing according to their advertising calendar and quarterly financial forecasts" (13). Johnson similarly feels "as though [she is] outsmarting the system in place" when she makes food from scratch instead of buying processed products. Her "rebellious side also gets satisfaction from being able to make do without buying into corporations and their marketing engines. It gives [her] a sense of freedom, knowing that [she does] not depend on them" (39).

The problem of material consumption is somehow understood as separate from other social issues that are, too, rooted in a capitalist society built around the maximisation of profits. "Advertisers, corporations, and politicians" desire to acquire wealth, according to Jay, leaves us "working long hours at jobs we don't like, to pay for things we don't need", but it could be argued that, since rent, groceries and health insurance take up a substantial portion of the average person's income, focusing one's gaze exclusively on material consumption is myopic (Jay ch. 30.2).

To be clear: it would be ludicrous to criticize books on decluttering for not zeroing in on the catastrophic effects of the erosion of the welfare state on the working class. That is not their goal – they are mostly about the pursuit of a certain aesthetically pleasing, presumably healthy lifestyle, so it is completely reasonable that shopping habits would be more closely scrutinized than anything else. Even keeping this in mind, though, I find it impossible to ignore the ways in which a systemic critique is repeatedly brought up, only to be understood in the most literal and restricted way possible.

A politics of imagination

It is unnerving, frustrating, even terrifying to imagine the complexity of the systems that are standing in the way of an effective change in climate policy. Investing one's time and energy purchasing bulk goods in glass jars, buying free-range eggs from a neighbour's chickens and refusing receipts (all practices Bea Johnson recommends) undoubtedly contributes to a sense of control and mastery, but in the grand scheme of things it might just be little more than apotropaic (Morton 32).

The introduction to Naomi Klein's urgent *This Changes Everything* acknowledges how necessary it feels to shield oneself from really beholding the realities of the climate crisis. To Klein we are not really *looking* at the facts when we

> tell ourselves that all we can do is focus on ourselves. Meditate and shop at farmers' markets and stop driving—but forget trying to actually change the systems that are making the crisis inevitable because that's too much "bad energy" and it will never work. And at first it may appear as if we are looking, because many of these lifestyle changes are indeed part of the solution, but we still have one eye tightly shut (4).

I am well-aware that in being dismissive of minimalist consumption-based approaches to changing the system *I* am apparently the resigned voice saying that "it will never work". What will never work is, in my view, handling the threat of climate change (whose effects are *already* being felt in many parts of the world, making it less of a future crisis than a present disaster) as something that can be tackled by individual consumers. This is, unfortunately, what books on minimalism typically suggest. This quote from the Joy of Less demonstrates it with an unusual clarity.

> So what do we have to do to become minsumers? Not much, actually. We don't have to protest, boycott, or block the doors to megastores; in fact, we don't even have to lift a finger, leave the house, or spend an extra moment of our precious time. It's simply a matter of not *buying*. Whenever we ignore television commercials, breeze by impulse items without a glance, borrow books from the library, mend our clothes instead of replacing them, or resist purchasing the latest electronic gadget, we're committing our own little acts of "consumer disobedience." By simply *not buying*, we accomplish a world of good: we avoid supporting exploitative labor practices, and we reclaim the resources of our planet—delivering them from the hands of corporations into those of our children. It's one of the easiest and most effective ways to heal the Earth, and improve the lives of its inhabitants (Jay ch. 30.2).

I have already pointed out the disproportionate importance that is placed on consumers in this rhetoric, and I will not go over it again. Rather, I want to point out how this book *mandates* a

passive stance towards the environmental crisis: there is no need for political action, for effort or direct involvement. If one of the easiest and *most effective* ways to solve the climate crisis is to stay at home and just slightly tweak one's purchasing habits, then why not do that?

Michael Maniates' article "Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?" was written twenty years ago, but its critique of this depolicized, passive mode of environmentalism is still enormously relevant for an analysis of this kind of rhetoric. Maniates' main point is that the most common, most popular and best-understood "strain" of environmentalism is a neoliberal one. It asks that people see themselves exclusively as consumers who express their concern through "informed, decentralized, apolitical, individualized" consumer practices (41, 47). Like Ines Weller, Maniates is concerned about the consequences of the individualization of responsibility: by shoving the isolated consumer in the foreground, this approach allows institutional thinking to sit unnoticed in the background.

The problem is ultimately that of depoliticization, which – as discussed in chapter 1 – is deeply embedded in the neoliberal understanding of society.

Mainates posits that individualization is an obstacle to people's willingness to join in on the "empowering experiences and political lessons of collective struggle for social change" because it frames all action that exceeds the individual domain, any action that is not strictly limited to consumption as irrelevant (44). I disagree with this point, and I instead propose that the issue at hand is what Mark Fisher defined *capitalist realism* – the widespread perception that the capitalist system is the only feasible way to organize society and the economy, so much so that it is impossible to imagine a viable alternative to it (2). Moving beyond capitalism seems unthinkable because it is typically described as a *rational* system, and the idea of rationality is constitutive of contemporary Western society. Rationality is the rubric according to which we evaluate what ideas make sense and which ones do not, what is right and what is wrong. As long as the association *capitalism = rational* is uncritically accepted, the system will keep being perceived as natural and, therefore, indispensable (Straume 33, 37-38).

Lurking behind the depoliticized rhetoric of minimalism is the absolute triumph of global neoliberal capitalism, which has successfully managed to popularise its understanding of individuals as exclusively economic agents (Brown 39). But a crucial contribution to this state of affairs is the foreclosing of other horizons of imagination – all that can readily be imagined is a more eco-friendly, less aggressive form of the socio-economic system we are currently embedded in, and not something different.

One can read the severely limited futurity of minimalism when Francine Jay fantasises about a future scenario where she can scan the barcodes of products to learn about its

environmental impact and to learn whether the people who made it were working in humane conditions, rather than picturing a world free from exploitation (330). When Johnson paints a picture of a world where zero waste is considered an economic opportunity, rather than a way to manage waste, she is still thinking of "economic opportunities" as an absolute boon (241).

Conclusion

Minimalism typically sees consumption as the only way to make the difference in a world that is facing several environmental disasters. This individualized and apolitical approach to the challenges of pollution and climate change is fully compatible with the neoliberal atomization of individuals and their reduction to consumers, rather than political beings.
The minimalist texts I have analysed in this chapter betray a deep commitment to the processes that have led to the current hyper-acceleration of the anthropogenic climate crisis in their inability (or unwillingness) to imagine radically different systems, which I would argue – along with Klein, Mainates and many other thinkers – are the only possible way forward.

CONCLUSION

If lifestyle minimalism lacks promise, what then?

Critique is easy: it is satisfying to lay out exactly why something is lacking, insufficient, misguided. What is more difficult is to move on to a positive moment, one that charts a more desirable path. Still, challenging and treacherous terrain as it might be, I feel like my project would be incomplete if I did not even gesture to the approaches that I would deem promising.

In the previous chapters I have delved into the neoliberal understanding of happiness as the result of a correct management of one's emotional resources, something minimalism adopts wholesale by suggesting that happiness can be achieved by optimizing one's material possessions. According to this logic, the reason someone might be stressed, unsatisfied or burned out is because they were too greedy and failed to prioritise what is really important, not because of deep-seated structural reasons having to do with politics, economics and society. Similarly, minimalism deals with the environmental threat of climate change and pollution by framing them as issues caused – and, crucially, *solvable* – by a shift in purchasing habits. By placing such high hopes in consumption, minimalist texts betray their neoliberal commitment to the free market: if single consumers are able to conscientiously change their purchasing habits, then any talk of regulating corporations becomes irrelevant.

In this section I want to contrast the individualistic and depoliticised attitudes typical of minimalism with a few radical proposals for alternative societies. A few disclaimers are in order: first of all, every one of the texts mentioned in the following paragraphs is built upon fundamental critiques of capitalism. All texts, too, take it for granted that equality is a goal worth pursuing and that human well-being is more important than the well-being of the economy; these are both positions that run deeply contrary to a neoliberal ethos privileging market competition above all else.

It is also worth pointing out that the proposals I will soon lay out share a utopian kind of futurity: their authors, despite the gloomy projections of climate researchers and the all-encompassing hegemonic force of neoliberal capitalism, dare to imagine how the world *could* be. In the words of Adrian Parr, "habitual thinking and praxis have to be replaced by a more utopian imagination – one that injects disobedience into the institutionalized political order" (7). This is what Donella Meadows, Naomi Klein and Kate Soper are all doing when they envision realities that are necessarily wholly different from the world we are all familiar with. Crucially, however, they are not so naive as to imagine that the utopias they imagine will easily become realities; on the contrary, they are fully aware of how unlikely it is that the

scenarios they describe will come to fruition. Still, apparently far fetched as their proposals might be, all these authors have dared to put them on the page, to share them with the public in the hope to inspire resistance, to motivate change.
This willingness to imagine the world otherwise is, I think, a crucial asset that will only become more necessary as time goes on. Mark Fisher denounced the destructive effects that capitalist realism has on the imagination, and it could be argued that Soper, Klein and Meadows are amongst the intellectuals who propose antidotes to the despair-inducing mindset theorised by Fisher.

The three scholars whose work I will briefly lay out in lieu of a conclusion share both a deep concern for the environment and a glimmer of hope that climate change might be reversed, or at least mitigated. As I will show, however, they are also very different thinkers. Meadows was a biologist and physicist working in the 1970s, before anthropogenic climate change became a widespread concern; Klein is a superstar public intellectual, representing here a host of ecosocialist movements; Soper, to conclude, mobilizes philosophy and lifestyle critique to articulate a detailed proposal for a less-materialistic society – bridging the gap between minimalism and political activity that involves systemic change. By bringing their contributions together in this conclusion I hope to show how, thanks to their shared anti-neoliberal stance, various eco-critical traditions can offer viable visions for sustainable futures.

Donella Meadows: how much is too much?

Donella Meadows published her book Limits to Growth in 1972, when concerns about humans' environmental impact on the planet were much less pronounced than they are now. Scientists at the time, for example, were not even sure whether the rising levels of CO2 in the atmosphere would lead to an increase or a decrease in average temperatures (Layzer 475). Meadows warned, on the basis of complex computer models, that planet Earth only has limited resources and that their careless consumption might lead to unforeseen and catastrophic consequences. It is no wonder, then, that this early prescient text not only became a foundational document of post-war environmentalism, but also maintained a great popularity, so much so that it has seen several updates and reprints (Layzer 23).

What I am currently interested in, though, are not Meadows' fascinating research method and her convincing arguments – I want to briefly explore her vision for the future.

In order for humanity to be sustainable (that is to say, to consume resources at a pace that allows them to regenerate rather than running out),

> humanity must increase the consumption levels of the world's poor, while at the same time reducing humanity's total ecological footprint. There must be technological advance … greater respect, caring, and sharing across political boundaries. This will take decades to achieve even under the best of circumstances. No modern political party has garnered broad support for such a program, certainly not among the rich and powerful, who could make room for growth among the poor by reducing their own footprints. Meanwhile, the global footprint gets larger day by day (Meadows et al. xv).

Such a message can accurately be described as pessimistic, but what I want to point out are the values it centers – equality, equity, care and respect for the common good. These very values are at the core of all utopias to follow.

Meadows' ambitious vision for mankind sees everyone (but especially those inhabiting wealthy countries, who morally ought to take the lead) embark into a third revolution: after the agricultural and the industrial, this new era of human existence should have *sustainability* at its core (237). Meadows argued for a significant shift touching all aspects of life – societies were radically changed when they adopted agriculture and industrial manufacturing, after all – an undoubtedly ambitious programme. The techniques that might be able to bring about the sustainability revolution ("visioning, networking, truth-telling, learning, and loving") are also interesting, because they are all untechnological: far from the techno-managerial solutions advocated in neoliberal approaches to environmentalism, Meadows charted a path relying not so much on technical know-how, but rather on "soft" skills anyone can master (271). Still, Donella Meadows believed that scientific-technological development would be essential to establishing a sustainable lifestyle for all humans on Earth (she was a biophysicist at MIT, after all), and most of her book is devoted to computer models determining the environmental effects of a variety of scenarios. What makes her approach interesting is that it weaves technological advancement together with an ethical and political vision that unflinchingly centers values like equality, equity and the idea of everyone obtaining a sufficient level of wellbeing, all the while taking care not to overburden the planet.

Naomi Klein: challenging capitalism, for everyone's sake

Klein's career as a journalist, writer and activist has always centered her critiques of globalization and capitalism, so it is no wonder that she has passionately been engaged in the

discussion of environmental topics. The title of her 2014 book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* efficiently sums up her fundamental thesis: if climate change is to be stopped and reversed, the capitalist system needs to be dismantled. She evaluates many reasons why, despite scientific research proving without a doubt that climate change is a very real threat with severe consequences, emissions have not been curbed in any appreciable way. Is it human nature? A lack of suitable technology? Is it too challenging to coordinate action between all countries on Earth? Klein dismisses all of these theories as unconvincing. All that is left, she concludes, is the simple fact that the goal of lowering emissions is essentially at odds with the ideology of deregulated capitalism. As she summarises, "the actions that would give us the best chance of averting catastrophe—and would benefit the vast majority—are extremely threatening to an elite minority that has a stranglehold over our economy, our political process, and most of our major media outlets" (18).

If market logic has successfully established itself as the only seemingly rational lens through which to approach problems, as I have laid out in chapter 1, it is indeed very difficult to advocate for the changes that need to happen. Still, "very difficult" is not "impossible", and the last few years have seen a flourishing of climate activism that might lead us to hope that this ideological obstacle might slowly be dismantled[8].

Besides, ideology aside, the facts are clear: at the end of the day we are faced with only two scenarios, Klein argues. Either we continue emitting CO2 at unsustainable levels (thus maintaining business as usual on the economic and lifestyle front) until the Earth's climate becomes so severe that only slivers of the planet are inhabitable, or we do everything in our power to prevent such a catastrophic future. This latter option, too, involves a great deal of change – not of the climate, but of ourselves: "for us high consumers, it involves changing how we live, how our economies function, even the stories we tell about our place on earth" (Klein 4). Like Meadows, Klein emphasises the ways in which the complete systemic upheaval that will be necessary (if the planet is to remain livable for humans, that is) can be exciting and beneficial. Emphasising justice and equality, this shift would bring billions of people out of poverty and substantially improve their access to food, health, education and all kinds of services (7). This is how the book describes the effects of switching gears and wholeheartedly committing to stopping climate change:

[8] For an up-to-date account of contemporary environmental activism, and especially the youth climate strikes of 2019, see Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire*. Verso Books, 2021

> [it] can be a People's Shock, a blow from below. It can disperse power into the hands of the many rather than consolidating it in the hands of the few, and radically expand the commons, rather than auctioning it off in pieces. … The kinds of transformations discussed in these pages would do the exact opposite: they would get to the root of why we are facing serial crises in the first place, and would leave us with both a more habitable climate than the one we are headed for and a far more just economy than the one we have right now (Klein 10).

The world imagined by Klein is clearly incompatible with capitalist (much less neoliberal) governmentality, a point especially driven home by the mention of an expanding commons, which is perhaps less of a tragedy than mainstream economics makes it out to be.

Klein's work is intricate, detailed and urgent; there is no possible way I could ever make it justice in the short space of this conclusion. The takeaway of it, however, is the enormous scale of change that needs to happen, and its fundamentally political and anticapitalist character. Yes, the future it optimistically imagines inevitably involves a change in consumption patterns for those living in affluent areas, but that is a consequence of a sustained political struggle, not the end-all-be-all envisioned by minimalist texts.

Kate Soper: perhaps this new world might be fun

Unlike Klein and Meadows' books, more concerned with large-scale processes than their consequences on individual lives, Kate Soper's *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism* focuses on what pleasures a simpler, more sustainable lifestyle might afford. I hope that the reader's alarm bells are going off: what I am describing seems entirely in line with the texts I criticised only a few pages ago. But of course it is not.

There are two fundamental differences between mainstream minimalism and Soper's alternative hedonism. For starters, at the core of Soper's project is the realisation that seriously fighting climate change will necessarily involve minimizing consumption for people living in relative wealth. What she wants to suggest is that this new pattern of consumption might be genuinely pleasurable; it will not be atoning for past sins, but rather developing new aesthetics and fresh outlooks on leisure and joy. Alternative hedonism, then, is an ideological reframing of necessary change – not a lifestyle change whose consequences will trickle up.

Secondly, in the world imagined by Soper, "developed nations" realize that they "would be better off focusing on the formation of a much needed alternative model of progress, and breaking with current ways of thinking about prosperity and well-being" (2). Indeed, many of

the changes Soper advocates for cannot be enacted by single households on an individual basis: they need public investment. When she suggests riding trains to vacation spots she certainly challenges the idea that the most desirable holiday destinations are in the tropics, but she also implicitly demands an efficient and affordable railway system. When she praises the unassuming bike, she is also stating that cycle paths are necessary everywhere. Further, in advocating for a reduction of work, she is clearly making a point that goes beyond what any single consumer could autonomously achieve, proposing a complete restructuring of society (Soper 84). Far from adhering to the technological-utopian dreams of a world where work is fully automated, Soper's alternative hedonism understands certain forms of labour to enrich people's lives (86-87). Caring for others should be considered a valuable pursuit, and as such it should be shared with the community and thus it would constitute a much lighter burden on each single individual.

Alternative hedonism, then, also contributes to conversations on happiness, on what a good life looks like. Aside from its clear contribution to environmental rhetoric, alternative hedonism maintains that "even if the consumerist lifestyle were indefinitely sustainable it would not enhance human happiness and well-being beyond a certain point already reached by many" (Soper 50). Here, again, the echoes of minimalist discourse can be distinctly heard. Still, as I have shown in chapter 2, thinking about what happiness is and how to best cultivate it is a pursuit as old as philosophy itself. Many influential thinkers, from Aristotle and Plato to the Buddha, have maintained that accumulating material belongings does not lead to happiness – such a position is hardly a minimalist breakthrough. The difference is that, like Soper, the figures I just listed argued that well-being is independent of wealth, not that getting rid of possessions is *the* path to contentment.

Lastly, to cement my inclusion of Kate Soper's project in this brief list of promising alternatives to the neoliberalism-infused rhetoric of lifestyle minimalism, I want to draw the reader's attention to her statement that "I regard alternative hedonism as helping to foster electoral mandates for radical economic and political change" (Soper 69). Alternative hedonism is not a substitute for political action, nor is it the spark originating a better, more just and more sustainable society. It is a tool to reassure citizens that socio-economic change, necessary to ensure that planet Earth can keep supporting human life, should not be thought of as a step back in well-being. Instead, it holds great promise and it offers new ways of enjoying life.

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APPENDIX

On the presence or absence of environmental themes in a sample of books on lifestyle minimalism

As I mentioned before, the environmental theme is surprisingly marginal in a lot of minimalist literature. This appendix offers an overview of all the texts on lifestyle minimalism I consulted for the third chapter of this thesis, with specific attention to ways in which they discuss topics related to the environment.

To assess that, I have searched digital versions of all these texts for the keyword "environment". When no (or very few) matches were shown, I also searched for related terms such as "sustainable", "green", "Earth" and "nature". All these words, of course, appear in contexts other than environmental discourse: many texts discussed things like "clutter-free *environments*" (that is to say, indoor spaces), "sustainable organization *systems*" (systems that are easy to keep up in the long run) and "*green* socks" (which need no explanation). Such irrelevant matches have been disregarded for this appendix. The texts that delve deeper in the topic of the environment (that is to say, they include two or more contiguous paragraphs on the topic) have been discussed in chapter three, while notes on the other books are included here.

In the following overview I have also noted the presence (or absence) of environmental rhetoric in the title or subtitle, and whether the cover design of the edition I consulted depicts any natural themes. The cover is classified as *lacking references* to nature if it is exclusively graphic or only depicting artificial objects, *partially relating* to nature if it shows houseplants/vegetal life used as decoration in indoor settings, and *significantly relating* to nature if it exclusively depicts plants or natural landscapes.

The gender and nationality of the author(s) are also included, in order to offer some insight into the demographics of the genre.

Fortin, Cary Telander and Kyle Louise Quilici. *New Minimalism: decluttering and design for sustainable, intentional living*. Seattle, Sasquatch Books, 2018.

Environment in title: Partially, in the subtitle.

Environment in cover: Partially.

Discussion: Abundant, see chapter 3.

Gender: FF

Nationality: American.

Johnson, Bea. *Zero Waste Home: the ultimate guide to simplifying your life by reducing your waste.* New York, Scribner, 2013.
Environment in title: Yes.
Environment in cover: No.
Discussion: Abundant, see chapter 3.
Gender: F
Nationality: Born and raised in France, now residing in America.

Millburn, Joshua and Ryan Nicodemus. Minimalism: Essential Essays. Mins Publishing, 2011.
Environment in title: No.
Environment in cover: No.
Discussion: No.
Gender: MM
Nationality: American.
Niequist, Shauna. Present Over Perfect: leaving behind frantic for a simpler more soulful way of living. Zondervan, 2016.
Environment in title: No.
Environment in cover: No.
Discussion: Minimal, in the form of a couple of passages describing the benefits of enjoying the outdoors as a way to feel closer to God.
Gender: F
Nationality: American.

Jay, Francine. *The Joy of Less, A Minimalist Living Guide: How to Declutter, Organize, and Simplify Your Life*. Medforn, Anja Press, 2010.
Environment in title: No.
Environment in cover: Partially.
Discussion: Abundant, see chapter 3.
Gender: F
Nationality: American.

Becker, Joshua. The More of Less: Finding the Life You Want Under Everything You Own. Colorado Springs, Waterbrook Press, 2016.
Environment in title: No.
Environment in cover: No.
Discussion: Moderate.
Gender: M
Nationality: American.

Becker, Joshua. Simplify: 7 Guiding Principles to Help Anyone Declutter their Home and Life, 2010.
Environment in title: No.
Environment in cover: No.
Discussion: Moderate.

Becker, Joshua. *The Minimalist Home: A Room-by-Room Guide to a Decluttered, Refocused Life.* Colorado Springs, Waterbrook Press, 2018.
Environment in title: No.
Environment in cover: No.
Discussion: Moderate. Environmental themes come up repeatedly, but are not examined at length.

Flanders, Cait. *The Year of Less: How I Stopped Shopping, Gave Away My Belongings and Discovered Life Is Worth More Than Anything You Can Buy in a Store.* Carlsbad, Hay House Inc., 2018.
Environment in title: No.
Environment in cover: Yes.
Environmental discussion: None.
Gender: F
Nationality: Canadian.

Babauta, Leo. *The Power of Less: The Fine Art of Limiting Yourself to the Essential...in Business and in Life.* New York, Hyperion, 2009.
Environment in title: No.

Environment in cover: No.

Environmental discussion: None.

Gender: M

Nationality: American.

Strobel, Tammy. *You Can Buy Happiness (and It's Cheap): How One Woman Radically Simplified Her Life and How You Can Too*. Novato, New World Library, 2012.

Environment in title: No.

Environment in cover: Yes.

Environmental discussion: Minimal. Of special interest is the following quote:

> "In addition, I've deliberately avoided the wider social and political aspects of these choices. For some, living simply is an active political and environmental choice; it's pursued as part of a larger belief in the need for societal change. While I agree with many of these social goals, I'm not a political pundit, and I have no interest in becoming one. My goal is to offer stories based on my experience and to provide new options for you to ponder." (16)

Gender: F

Nationality: American.

Mckeown, Greg. *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. New York, Crown Business, 2014.

Environment in title: No.

Environment in cover: No.

Environmental discussion: None.

Gender: M

Nationality: British.

McAlary, Brooke. *Slow. Live Life Simply*. Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2017.

Environment in title: No.

Environment in cover: Yes.

Environmental discussion: Moderate; the supposed environmental benefits of a "slower lifestyle" are occasionally mentioned, but not delved into – a decision Brooke acknowledges in the conclusion.

> “So you’d be forgiven for picking up this book with the expectation of more. I certainly expected to cover more when I first sat down to write. Where’s the sustainability advice, the green cleaning, the DIYs? … The problem I realised quite quickly was that by putting all these together, to present them as the way to do slow living, is to paint a detailed portrait of a new set of Joneses. This book is an introduction to the foundations of slow living—intention, simplicity, mindfulness, balance,connection—and enough examples of tiny, imperfect actions to encourage you to begin regardless of how small the step.” (*Where to now?*)

Gender: F

Nationality: Australian.

White, Dana K. *Decluttering at the Speed of Life: Winning Your Never-Ending Battle with Stuff*. Nashville, W Publishing, 2018.

Environment in title: No.

Environment in cover: No.

Environmental discussion: None.

Gender: F

Nationality: American.

Rubin, Gretchen. *Outer Order, Inner Calm: Declutter and Organize to Make More Room for Happiness.* New York, Harmony Books, 2019.

Environment in title: No.

Environment in cover: No.

Environmental discussion: None.

Gender: F

Nationality: American.

Ley, Emily. *When Less Becomes More: Making Space for Slow, Simple and Good*. Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2019.

Environment in title: No.

Environment in cover: Yes.

Environmental discussion: None.

Gender: F

Nationality: American.

Boyle, Erin. *Simple Matters: Living with Less and Ending Up with More*. New York, Abrams Image, 2016.
Environment in title: No.
Environment in cover: Partially.
Discussion: Minimal.
Gender: F
Nationality: American.

Sasaki, Fumio. *Goodbye, Things: on Minimalist Living*. London, Penguin Books, 2014.
Environment in title: No.
Environment in cover: No.
Environmental discussion: Minimal.
Gender: M
Nationality: Japanese.

Kondo, Marie. *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: the Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*. Berkeley, Ten Speed Press, 2014.
Environment in title: No.
Environment in cover: No.
Environmental discussion: None.
Gender: F
Nationality: Japanese.