

OpEd

# Living poorly in the land of riches

By Mark W. Anderson

In his book, "Changes in the Land," historian William Cronon details how native Americans and early European colonists of North America used and affected the landscape. One of the puzzles that faced the colonists was the apparent poverty of the Indians amidst a land of seemingly boundless natural wealth.

Some early European observers concluded that the poverty of the native populations was due to their failure to "improve" the land. Their lack of improvement, reliance on mobility to take advantage of ecological variability over the seasons, and few material possessions all looked to the Europeans as signs of idleness, a lack of industry.

The only problem with this idea was that the Indians who greeted the early colonizers did not see themselves as poor. Their lack of material possessions was a logical accommodation to a lifestyle centered on annual migrations that took advantage of the natural variations of the New England landscape. If the historical record can be believed, the natives encountering the Europeans did not "feel poor" at all. They had few wants, wants that were readily fulfilled by the natural bounty of the region. Few wants, readily satisfied, left a people content with their existence.

Cronon points out that Thomas Morton, a keen contemporary observer of the situation, saw that this attitude posed a challenge to his European colleagues. As Cronon says, "... If Indians lived richly by wanting little, then might it not be possible that Europeans lived poorly by wanting much?" Indeed, this is a question we might do well to answer for ourselves today.

The recent election is seen as a reaction of voters who were "mad as hell" about the state of American society. Part of this anger is the sense that our economy, and therefore our government, has failed to provide us with the jobs and consumption we want.

The puzzle in this discontent is just the opposite of that which Cronon talks about in his book. How can people so apparently rich as we are feel so poor, so discontent? Perhaps like the European colonists we live poorly by wanting much.

By almost any comparison to other peoples or other times, the average American household is well off indeed. Our levels of consumption are higher than the generations before us and higher than peoples anywhere else in the world. The data show this. Per capita disposable personal income is at an all-time high in this country, whether measured in constant or current dollars



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(\$18,153 per person). The anecdotal evidence supports this as well. For example, a couple years ago Florida became the first state where the number of registered cars exceeded the human population of the state.

This discontent, which is particularly obvious in the middle class, comes from two sources. First, we have convinced ourselves that our

well-being is a function of how much stuff we consume. We live poorly by wanting much and by wanting ever more. We seem to be in a constant state of "the day after Christmas letdown." The more we possess, the more disappointed we become.

The second source of our discontent is the increasing inequality in our society. Over the past 15 years

there has been a steady shift in the shares of income in American society, the result being that our income distribution is clearly the most unequal among industrial societies.

Twenty-five years ago in the United States, the ratio of all the income of the poorest 20 percent of society to the richest 20 percent was 1 to 7.5. That is to say, on average the richest households gave 7½ times the income of the poorest households. That distribution represented the results of

## Many think well-being is a function of how much stuff we are able to consume

steady improvements in income equality from the time of the Great Depression. Since 1969, the trend has reversed dramatically, and now the ratio is 1 to 11. The richest households earn 11 times the income of the poorest, the only group whose income actually went down over this period.

This income inequality is clearly part of the problem. Many of us envy the consumption of the wealthy. Marketers use that envy to encourage us to buy their products so we can emulate the rich, and financial institutions encourage us to borrow their funds to do so. At the same time we fear the poverty of the increasingly poor in our society, an anxiety rooted in the fact that we might fail to pay those credit card bills and have to give back all that stuff we buy in hopes of feeling rich.

The increasing income inequality makes the discontent of the middle class even worse. Despite consuming more material goods than our grandparents ever could have imagined, we are not getting as much as the wealthy. We are not concerned that the incomes of the poorest in our society continue to fall below levels where they can meet their basic needs. Rather we fret that we are not getting as big a piece of the action as those at the top.

So, in the midst of riches undreamed of even a generation or two ago, we live poorly by wanting much. Perhaps in this season of thanks we could become more content by emulating the natives who first settled in this bountiful land of ours. Like them, we might live more richly by wanting less. *Mark W. Anderson is coordinator of the Natural Resources Program at the University of Maine.*