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Fuchs, Doris

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Societal Determinants of Environmental Consumer Activism:

A Critical Inquiry

Doris Fuchs
Institute of Political Science
University of Münster
Scharnhorststr. 100
48151 Münster
Germany
Doris.fuchs@uni-muenster.de

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This paper aims to add our understanding of the factors determining the potential influence of consumers on the environmental performance of business by highlighting the importance of societal characteristics in this respect. The paper pursues this objective by delineating the societal determinants of consumption and the societal basis of collective action problems inhibiting environmental consumer activism.

The role of consumers in fostering a green transition of business has repeatedly received attention over the last decades, with some scholars postulating both a substantial willingness and ability of consumers to pursue environmental consumer activism. Optimistically at best, naively at worst, such accounts point out that the consumer could be the most powerful actor when it comes to influencing the environmental performance of business. After all, business cannot survive without customers. Thus, if consumers decided to switch from environmentally inferior to environmentally superior goods, they would give strong incentives to business to comply with their environmental preferences. To date, however, consumers have shown limited willingness to send strong signals to business that environmental superiority will be rewarded. Moreover, information asymmetries and the structural power of business to determine choice sets for consumers limit the actual ability of the latter to successfully pursue environmental consumer activism.

This paper argues that societal determinants of consumption posit an important additional barrier to environmental consumer activism, which optimistic accounts of consumer power often overlook. These obstacles go beyond questions of information asymmetries and the structural power of business and center particularly on the competitiveness of consumption benefits in terms of needs fulfillment. The latter, in turn, lead to significant collective action problems, which create barriers to the

willingness of consumers to exert pressure on the environmental performance of business via consumer activism.

At the same time, however, a focus on societal determinants of consumption also highlights opportunities for improving the willingness and ability of consumers to pursue environmental consumer activism. Why is it that – while environmental consumer activism has not reached its full potential in any society – it does exist to a greater extent in some societies than in others, independent of price and quality differentials, or budget constraints of consumers? Drawing on the literature on sustainable consumption, this paper attempts to persuade its audience that societal factors have the potential to explain differences in the motivation and potential of consumers to voice environmental preferences through consumption choices. In consequence, societal factors create both significant obstacles as well as opportunities for environmental consumer activism.

The paper builds its argument on the influence of socio-psychological, socio-cultural, and socio-political determinants of consumption on environmental consumer activism in two ways: 1) these factors influence (the extent of) the existence of needs which consumers try to satisfy through material consumption choices, and 2) determine the use of consumption in general and specific products in particular as a means to satisfy those needs. Moreover, the paper delineates the influence of societal characteristics on the extent of collective action problems with respect to environmental consumer activism in a society. Such collective action problems, in turn, influence the motivation for environmentally guided purchases in several ways: in determining the motivation or need behind a purchase in general, and in creating a sense of the degree of effectiveness of environmentally guided purchases in influencing the market.

This discussion is highly relevant for policy. If societal factors are as important for consumption patterns and specifically environmental consumer activism as this paper claims, they need to be taken into account in the design of strategies to influence the environmental performance of business. Given the continuing scarcity of resources in the public sector and antagonism to a large state especially in Western societies, the consumer still tends to be considered a welcome and necessary influence on the environmental performance of business. Accordingly, the actual potential for environmental consumer activism as well as potential strategies for its strengthening need to be critically evaluated.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section discusses the societal determinants of consumption as identified by the literature on sustainable consumption. Based on this discussion, the analysis will then delineate the nature of the collective action problems consumers need to overcome as environmental activists. Here, the paper will highlight the societal dynamics increasing the collective action problems, which threaten to render the consumer impotent. Then, the focus will turn to the potential for environmental consumer activism indicated by the malleability of these collective action problems.

Societal Determinants of Consumption

Societal factors have a substantial influence on the potential of consumers as a driving force behind the greening of business. To understand this potential, it is necessary to first explore how societal factors in general influence consumption patterns. Vlek, Jager, and Steg's (1997) NOA model, which identifies consumer behavior as dependent on *needs*, *opportunities*, and *abilities* to undertake a particular

activity provides a good starting point for this analysis. The focus on needs is particularly helpful, since societal factors

a) influence the (extent of the) needs consumers are trying to satisfy, and
b) influence how individuals try to satisfy those needs.

Opportunities and abilities to satisfy needs through consumption choices, in turn, are a primarily a function of the institutional, economic, and technological context. Furthermore, they relate to the collective action problems associated with environmental consumer activism that will be discussed in the next section.[1]

The most basic needs driving consumption are the needs for food and shelter. However, much of present day consumption in Western societies goes beyond the fulfillment of these basic needs. Scholars have identified various other needs that individuals have. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, in which he differentiates between physiological needs, safety, belonging and love, esteem, cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, and self-actualization needs is well known.[2] More recently, Max-Neef (1990) has developed a taxonomy of nine human needs: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity, freedom.

The question arises sometimes, whether these needs are "real" or "artificially created." This dichotomy is false. As scholars have shown all needs are to some extent real, and yet their existence is always influenced by socio-cultural conditions as well. There seems to be at the very least a human predisposition (possibly derived from the human being an animal after all) to want to accumulate, and to derive pleasure from certain new and "nice" things. The extent to which certain needs exist, however, is a function of the societal context, as is the predisposition to satisfy them through material consumption when other means are available. In the following, the

[1] The collective action problems are, of course, also influenced by the institutional, economic, and technological context.
[2] The hierarchical nature of these needs is controversial.

paper discusses this social nature of consumption in some depth with respect to such needs as belonging and esteem, and then draws brief parallels and contrasts to other needs.

Belonging, affection, love, esteem, participation, and identity

Today, we consume goods to express status and identity, to fulfill our needs for belonging, love and esteem (as Maslow would say) or for affection, participation, and identity (in the terminology of Max-Neef). Here, the importance of the socio-cultural context is obvious. First, the societal context increasingly predisposes individuals to fulfill these needs through material consumption. Secondly, the societal context influences the identification of specific products or attributes of products as satisfiers of those needs. Thirdly, the motivation behind consumption as suggested by these needs, especially status, esteem, but also identity and belonging, indicates the competitive nature of consumption that is driven by the desire to satisfy these needs. This last point lies at the foundation of some of the collective action problems that will be discussed in the next section.

The needs of belonging, affection, esteem, identity do not need to be satisfied through material consumption. Yet, changes in Western (and increasingly global) society have increased our tendency to do so. As identity is no longer given by a person's membership in a community, by his or her social roles, we have been "set free from traditional social bonds" (Ropke 1999, p.410).[3] Global technological and economic changes have created a new social setting with different relationships.

[3] Ropke's choice of terminology highlights that these changes have positive consequences as well, which scholars studying our tendency to express status, identity, and belonging through material consumption from the perspective of sustainable consumption often forget. Thus, the real benefit from raised standards of living at least up to a certain point, the at least relief from physical strain, worries, social branding, and frugality that some rise in living standard can bring, and the direct enjoyment from the use of a good should not be discounted.

> Directly visible social relationships are increasingly being replaced by abstract and large-scale social structures and mechanisms through which we are integrated in complex and worldwide networks (ibid.).

These changes have led to a heightened need and opportunity for the confirmation of the self, to express status, identity, and belonging to a certain social, political, … group. As a society, we increasingly choose to satisfy these needs and take up these opportunities through material consumption choices. We use material consumption to derive and establish meaning as well as differences and to take part in the sharing of meaning (op.cit.).[4]

The use of material consumption to satisfy these needs underlines its nature as a social phenomenon. Consumption clearly is as much determined by others and our relationships to others as by ourselves. This insight is not new. The Veblen model identifies the phenomena of conspicuous consumption and competitive display. Other scholars have similarly highlighted the relative nature of needs, the concept of social emulation and positional goods. Supportive of these theoretical insights are more recent empirical findings highlighting that relative rather than absolute income is the main determinant of self-evaluated welfare (Schor 1998).

Realizing that much of our consumption is a function of trying to fulfill certain needs, in particular such needs as the needs for belonging, esteem, and participation, means realizing the importance of social structures and relationships - be they of a competitive or a cooperative nature - for consumption choices. This influence of societal factors extends to the collective action problems associated with environmental consumer activism as well as for its potentials. The tendency to fulfill certain needs through material consumption rather than by other means, the extent of

the existence of these needs, and the competitive nature of this process have the potential to create substantial obstacles for environmental consumer activism. On the other side, the extent to which needs and satisfiers are socially constructed indicates the potential for change, in other words the potential to overcome the existing collective action problems and create the necessary conditions for increasing environmental consumer activism.[5]

Other needs

The need for security suggests the easiest parallel to the discussion of the above needs. Again, the extent of the existence of the need is a function of societal factors, as is the predisposition to satisfy it through material consumption. Various scholars have identified tendencies in society, such as increased alienation from society, the restlessness of society (Vlek et al. 1999), and the perception of increasing economic insecurity (Schor 1998) that lead to stress and a growing need for a feeling of security for the individual member of society. Increasingly, we satisfy this need for security through material consumption, not just purchases of security devices such as chains, and alarm systems, but, more importantly, purchases of insurance. Moreover, this need for security translates into a desire to be in control, which fosters the desire to consume in general. Consumption choices, in so far as we have opportunities and ability are under our sole control.[6] Furthermore, the possession of goods provides us

[4] In this sense, consumption is not just a means to fulfill the needs to belonging, esteem, and such identified above. It is also a means to fulfill an internal need, the need for understanding, and not just through the consumption of books or other providers of traditional "knowledge."

[5] For sustainable consumption, variability: can change how those needs are fulfilled, through material consumption or by other means.

[6] Closely related to the question of control is the apparent ease[6] with which material consumption allows us to fulfill our needs (of course, the long-term increase in stress due to increased financial responsibilities or material overload is often forgotten). If we wanted to fulfill our needs to social participation and relationships we would be dependent on others. This would involve more complex interactions, time, and emotional energy, rather than taking out the wallet and paying. Again, while there is a human tendency to look for easy ways to achieve a given end, the need for the easiest

with something over which we have control. These aspects add to the attraction of consumption.

Likewise, the needs for independence, creation, and aesthetic needs have to be seen in a social context, as has the tendency to fulfill them through material consumption. These days, the needs for independence and beauty mean that many individuals want a house full of light, air, and privacy, close to nature. They mean that independence and individualization for instance in the form of independent households are preferred. In all of these cases, we have witnessed different preferences over time within and across societies. Similarly, our need for variety and change (Vlek et al. 1999) is a function of the societal context. How much variety, how fast a change is desirable and/or necessary?

Thus, societal structures clearly have an influence on the existence of these needs for security, independence, creation, aesthetic fulfillment, and variety and change similar to the needs for belonging, esteem, etc. discussed above. Furthermore, the set of satisfiers for these needs is similarly socially constructed. The difference between these needs and the need for belonging, esteem etc., however, is that their fulfillment is not competitive (at least not to the same extent).

The Competitive Nature of Consumption

The above discussion has highlighted that consumption is being driven, at least partially, by certain needs that give it a competitive character. If individuals use consumption to establish status and to gain esteem, consumption necessarily is based on comparisons and hierarchies. Consumption is about 'keeping up with the Joneses' (if not keeping ahead of them), or as Juliet Schor (1998) suggests today's 'keeping up

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satisfaction of needs possible is also a function of the physical and emotional energy expended in every

with FRIENDS.'[7] One's success in achieving the objectives of this form of consumption is dependent on others and therefore always relative. The ability to achieve status by owning a specific good is, of course, a negative function of the possession of the same (or a better or newer) good by the "control group." After all, besides value/price, exclusivity and potentially newness are the most important attributes with the potential to provide status. Worst, the pressure to consume arising from the desire to fulfill needs such as the need for esteem is constant, since in present day society social categories are continuously redefined.

It is not only consumption that is intended to provide status and esteem that is competitive and a cause of constant pressure though. Even consumption intended to satisfy the need for belonging and to express identity often, though to a lesser extent, suffers from this pressure. After all, in-groups in Western society are often defined by wearing certain clothes, or owning certain identifiers.[8] Thus, expressing belonging to an in-group, which is achieved through the exclusion of the out-group, is inherently relational and competitive as well. The increased need for belonging caused by the growing social fluctuations in society, then, supports consumption intended to keep up with … or be as good as…as well.

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day life, and therefore a function of the societal context.

[7] As Schor (1998) points out, the tendency of today's consumers to compare with characters on TV or with colleagues (and bosses) at work has even increased the necessary consumption activities in pursuit of status, as individuals tend to compare themselves with people in other income groups.

[8] Partly, this is due to belonging to the in-group being linked to being successful and claims on status based thereupon. Of course, counter movements also exist, in which belonging to the in-group is based on the ownership of specific "non-fashionable" identifiers and the rejection of the strife for status as defined by the mainstream.

Obstacles and Opportunities for Environmental Consumer Activism and their Basis in Society

Environmental consumer activism is inhibited in its force by significant collective action problems. The collective action problems associated with environmental consumer activism arise from a) the competitive nature of consumption b) the often higher price (in money, time, and effort) of the environmentally superior goods, and c) the institutional "set-up" in the market place. The extent of these collective action problems is a function of societal factors. Thus, some societies are likely to experience less collective action obstacles to environmental consumer activism than others and be more successful in achieving its potential in driving the greening of business. This section discusses the nature of the collective action problems involved. Furthermore, it shows that societal characteristics such as social cohesion and shared attitudes, trust, communication, and the existence of environmental leadership are important influences on the potential of a given society to overcome these collective action problems and pursue effective environmental consumer activism.

The implications of a form of consumption that is driven by the desire to satisfy competitive needs are substantial. Most fundamentally, they highlight the influence of other factors besides environmental concern (and price and quality) on consumption decisions. The fact that other influences exist is not a surprise. Their competitive nature, however, is what creates major obstacles to the consumer's potential ability to foster the greening of business. Even if individuals realize that an environmentally superior choice would be a smaller, more fuel efficient car, rather

than a fast or out-doorsy gas guzzler, they are less likely to buy the smaller car if the neighbor and/or colleague has just trumped with the latter.[9]

This, of course, is a collective action problem. Because we associate owning a BMW with success relative to others, or owning a Ford Explorer with independence, activeness, and, yes, success relative to others, individuals by themselves are constrained in their options. [10] As long as individuals pursue competitive consumption, they have substantial disincentives to downshift individually. This should not be seen too deterministically, of course. As the voluntary simplicity movement shows, increasing numbers of individuals decide to leave the game. But they pay the "social costs" of doing so. The latter might seem non-existent to a voluntary down-shifter or actually be positive, and therefore one might think this whole discussion to be futile. The difficulties with individual exits from the competition for status and esteem driven as it is in our societies by material possessions, however, become much more obvious when considered with respect to children. Which parents can easily accept difficulties their children might face with respect to their social 'acceptance', however, superficially the criteria for the latter are defined? Thus, the best way to avoid this race to the top in gas guzzling and other consequences of conspicuous consumption, therefore, would be for society to downshift collectively.

Similar collective action problems arise from the fact that the environmentally superior goods are often more "expensive" to the consumer. This does not just apply to their monetary price. The purchase of environmentally superior goods also

[9] The good that provides more status is not always the environmentally inferior one, of course. Yet, the prevalence of energy intensive goods (big, fast, technologically complex), or the requirement of newness of status goods underlines the tendency of competitive consumption to run counter environmental benefit.

[10] In many cases, this is probably not a conscious influence on consumption decisions. Yet, nobody will deny that our consumption choices are influenced by social dynamics and environments.

involves time and effort needed for their identification and the gathering of the relevant information. Furthermore, these goods might provide less convenience and comfort. Why should the individual consumer pay these costs to voice environmental preferences in the marketplace, if others choose not to do so? Of course, the more important these environmental preferences are to the consumer the more likely she is to let them influence her consumption choices. However, the higher the costs involved in doing so, the less likely she is to consider them.

These collective action problems associated with environmental consumer activism are even bigger, since the individual consumer knows that by herself she has little impact on the environmental performance of business. Only if a substantial number of consumers act in a similar manner will the market send a clear signal to business about rewards for environmentally superior performance.[11] Thus, the individual consumer has even less incentives to downshift and forego the benefits of consumption in general and of "competitive" consumption in particular.

Here, the collective action problems of the institutional set-up come to play. In the market place, consumers act as millions of individual voices. The transaction costs associated with trying to get consumers to act collectively are extremely high. The costs of this effort are likely to outweigh the benefits for even the most environmentally concerned consumers. Individual environmental consumer activism, therefore, has to either ignore the lack of individual influence or trust that other consumers independently will act in a similar fashion.

An additional problem arises, since these collective action problems do not exist in a context that provides the institutional set-up allowing their easy resolution. The benefits of repetition or tit-for-tat, for instance, do not work, since the number of

small actions by millions of players separated across space and time does not allow for monitoring and enforcement. As Reichard (1998) points out, the pay-off structure, consequently, does not change from one play prisoner's dilemma to iterated games. In consequence, environmental consumer activism is a paradise for free-riders.

As argued above, the extent of the collective action problems associated with environmental consumer activism and therefore the potential for overcoming them is a function of societal factors. Ostrom et al. (1994) and others have identified a range of influential factors, the presence of which enhances the potential of societies to solve collective action situations. Based on the most relevant of these factors, the following hypotheses on the relationship between environmental consumer activism and societal conditions illustrate correlations that we can expect to find:

1) The higher the degree of social cohesion and shared attitudes in society, the higher the potential for environmental consumer activism.
2) The greater the extent of socially, environmentally, and politically informed communication in society, the higher the potential for environmental consumer activism.
3) The higher the degree of trust in society, the higher the potential for environmental consumer activism.

The first hypothesis is based on the notion that the individual consumer knows that her individual consumption choice has little influence on the market. If, however, there is reason to believe that other consumers will make similar choices, the individual consumer can more easily expect that her individual voice won't be lost. Therefore, a situation in which she seems to have almost no control becomes one where she can have an input.

A similar logic applies to the second hypothesis. If there is a greater extent of communication about preferences, motivations for consumption choices, and

[11] The focus of this paper is on consumption by private individuals. Therefore, the situation in which one company can have a significant voice in the market due to its purchasing power are ignored.

environmental information on products, companies, and concerns in society, the society as a group is more likely to act in similar manners as well. First, the relevant information on environmental aspects of products and producers spreads more rapidly and widely in that society. This is especially the case with respect to the environmental characteristics of producers, on which even less information is provided with the product itself.

The third important component of these dynamics is the existence of trust, which enhances the impact of shared attitudes and communication. A higher level of trust increases the willingness of individuals to pass on information received from others, and to act on the basis of such information. Moreover, a higher level of trust means that the individual will be more likely to expect others to act on the basis of their expressed believes rather than be free riders. In consequence, the individual is more likely to forego individual benefit of status consumption, or lower prices of environmentally inferior goods for the social benefit of environmental consumer activism based on the assumption that others will do the same.[12]

In sum, societal factors influence the potential for environmental consumer activism in two ways. First, they determine the (extent of the) need for competitive consumption and therefore the disincentives for consumers to prioritize environmental characteristics of goods. Secondly, they influence the ability of societies to overcome the collective action problems associated with environmental consumer activism due to the competitive nature of consumption, the frequently higher costs of environmentally superior goods, and the institutional set-up in the market place.

As the previous discussion indicated, societal factors do not only create obstacles but also indicate potentials for environmental consumer activism. After all,

[12] Moreover, trust is the foundation for productive communication.

societal conditions are malleable. Social constructs can be deconstructed or changed. Thus, the factors leading to the (extent) of the needs driving competitive consumption, to the predisposition to satisfy given needs through material consumption, or to the identification of specific satisfiers for given needs are subject to change. Moreover, the societal factors increasing or decreasing the potential to solve the collective action problems associated with environmental consumerism can be modified. Social cohesion, trust, or communication within societies are not constant over time. The societal basis for environmental consumer activism thus provides substantial opportunities for increasing its potential influence.

To some degree, the necessary changes are based on changes in social values. These changes are difficult to achieve, and take a long time to realize. Yet, these changes can and do take place. Furthermore, small steps can be taken to try to gradually pursue those difficult changes. Moreover, other policy strategies are available as well that do not require changes in social values. In the following, the most relevant strategies for enhancing the potential for environmental consumer activism will be discussed. As the reader will notice, all of the changes are related to reducing the transaction costs and therefore the collective action problems associated with environmental consumer activism.

One of the easiest strategies to increase a society's capabilities to effectively voice environmental preferences through consumption choices relies on the improvement of communication flows within society. Here, too, strategies at different levels of difficulty can be envisioned, ranging from the simpler ones of providing information to actual attempts to influence communication channels. By institutionalizing the provision of reliable and easily accessible information on the environmental characteristics of products and producers, for instance, governments

can substantially reduce the costs faced by consumers when pursuing environmental consumer activism. Furthermore, consumers, themselves, are more likely to pass on environmental information if it is reliable, and easily accessible, and thereby exponentially increase their impact.

The impact of improved information can easily be noticed when watching the concern of large, visible[13] companies with respect to their environmental image in the eyes of consumers. Likewise, consumers do have environmental information on some products that they directly associate with environmental impacts, or that are visible because of the size of required financial investment, infrequency of purchase. Yet, few products carry sufficiently informative eco-labels that provide comprehensive, comparative, reliable, and yet easily accessible facts on their environmental characteristics. Likewise, the percentage of businesses that are in the limelight to such an extent that consumers have easy access to information on their environmental performance is small. Even for those in the limelight, typically, the consumer does not have sufficiently comprehensive and reliable information.

Thus, the task to provide comprehensive and accurate information that is easily accessible at the same time is a challenge.[14] The identification of the relevant indicators, the gathering of the information, the monitoring and enforcement of requirements regarding its accuracy require substantial institutional investments, especially in a global economy. Furthermore, the current regulation of the international economic system, personified in the WTO, places limits on the information that governments can require from producers. These limits would need to

[13] This visibility is often a function of a previously negative environmental image, of course.
[14] The provision of information on the environmental characteristics of products is not just a question of its presence or absence of that information. The manner of provision, its accessibility both in terms of location and comprehension, its aggregation of environmental indicators without loss of meaningfulness, its simplicity without creation of cynicism all require careful design of the information "provider," be it an eco-label or other mechanism.

be challenged or carefully circumvented. Still, the information strategy is the easiest and in the short-term most promising one of the strategies available to reduce the collective action problems associated with environmental consumer activism.

The analysis of the role of information in increasing the potential for environmental consumer activism, thus, leads to another plea for better eco-labeling and better international environmental business standards (for a discussion of the shortcomings of ISO14000, for instance, see Clapp 1998).[15] The benefit of the information strategy results from its lack of intrusiveness. Providing the consumer with relevant information on products and producers ensures the principle of consumer sovereignty held in high esteem by liberals, which, however, current conditions with respect to the lack of information severely violate. Having better information on the environmental performance of business, both in terms of its comprehensiveness, accuracy, and accessibility, would greatly enhance the ability of consumers to voice environmental preferences through the market place. Furthermore, as pointed out above, consumers would be more likely to communicate that kind of information amongst themselves, and thereby exponentially increase their potential influence.

The more difficult task with respect to communication is to improve communication channels in society, both horizontally and vertically. This strategy can be pursued through attempts at better social interaction, integration, and participation. The same applies to strategies to improve social cohesion, and trust. Clearly, education, social equality, and a balanced income distribution play some role

[15] In addition, the information – if provided – needs to be usable for consumers as well. In other words, consumers need to have the choice between alternatives of varying environmental desirability to use the information to signal environmental preferences through the market. Besides the provision of information, governments, therefore, still need to take their role in supporting research and possibly even initial production – until economies of scale have been reached – of environmentally superior goods.

in pursuing these objectives. However, books can and have been written on how to best achieve these objectives, be it under the terminology of consumer activism or social capital, and still, the last word has yet to be spoken. Therefore, this paper will not pursue the discussion on how to enhance social interaction, integration, and participation in further detail, but limit itself to pointing out the potential for environmental consumer activism created by an enhancement of the above.

Finally, the potential for environmental consumer activism could be increased through a change in the societal conditions identified as determinants of consumption. A change in the societal causes of competitive consumption, for instance, has the potential to reduce the collective action problems associated with environmental consumer activism. If, for instance, the need to prove status through material consumption could be reduced, less disincentives for individual down-shifting would exist. This could be achieved in several ways. An increase in social stability and balance, a focus on quality of life rather than income, would likely translate into a less competitive nature of society, so that the achievement of status would not be quite as important.[16] Alternatively, if the predisposition of society to prove status through material consumption could be reduced, this would have the same effect. Thus, by providing opportunities to achieve status through means other than ownership of property, the collective action problems associated with environmental consumer activism could be reduced as well.[17] Recognition for contributions to the public good, for instance, could be done more publicly, officially, and publicized more widely.

[16] To totally forego the question of status will likely seem utopian to many readers, since societies across space and time seem to have known some kind of hierarchy. However, the extent of the self-interested struggle for status clearly varies across societies.

[17] This argument is not meant to suggest the desirability of a return to all previous indicators of status. Feudal hierarchies clearly do not provide a preferable social positioning system for individuals trapped in the lower categories.

Similarly, it would be possible to change the attributes identifying satisfiers of certain needs. What if, for instance, the most fuel efficient rather than the fastest car provided status? Such changes would dramatically improve the potential for environmental consumer activism. Thus, changes in social values clearly have the potential to decrease the collective action problems associated with environmental consumer activism. Again, these changes are difficult to achieve and take time. Given the potential impact and the political necessities and benefits, however, educational and informational efforts, in this respect, however, should be extremely worthwhile.

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