

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

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If nothing else, Mohatmas Gandhi is charismatic¹. In the United States, his name is synonymous with the virtues of peaceful self-mastery and the possibility of do-it-yourself revolution. In the leftist, semi-rural town in which I live, this pacifist is an informal mascot; stickers donning a silhouette of his gaunt, grinning visage occupy the rear bumper of Volvos, Volkswagen vans, and biodiesel hatchbacks. The violet stickers which bear Gandhi's face also contain one of his most widely reiterated remarks: "Be the change you want to see in the world." This statement is elegant in its simplicity, encapsulating Gandhi's mission of revolution through kindness and peaceful means; however, this statement also encapsulates a problem of contemporary politics. The bumper sticker borrowing Gandhi's likeness and words lend spiritual authority to a deep-seated American inclination toward individualized politics, an inclination which is reflected in the statement "Governments have failed us. Is it now down to individuals to halt climate change?". Governments may or may not have failed us; I will grant such a proposition for argument's sake. I wish to focus on the second part of the topic, that it might be the responsibility of individuals to determine the course of climate change.

The perfection of lifestyle politics, the living of of the green life par excellence, is an attractive and oft-cited method for curbing global warming. "If only every individual could ride a bike instead of driving, bought locally grown produce and products, then we would stop emitting carbon and climate change would be obliterated," goes the battle cry of green lifestylelists. However, as Michael Maniates points out, lifestyle politics mistakenly "...embraces the notion that knotty issues of consumption, consumerism, power and responsibility can be resolved neatly and cleanly through enlightened, uncoordinated consumer choice (45)." This neat resolution, roughly comparable to the idyllic "what if they threw a war and nobody came?",

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remains far from the ugly truth. In the United States, for instance, individuals (i.e. the private sector) directly control only 32.4% of the nation's energy; the remaining balance of energy consumption belongs to industry, commerce, and non-individual transportation (Gardner & Stern 258). U.S. consumers have little direct control over business and industrial decisions, and thus retain little power in influencing the majority of energy consumption. Accordingly, the perfection of lifestyle politics is unlikely to produce any significant impact on climate change. The fate of climate change cannot likely be determined by buying our way out of the problem; correspondingly this individual cannot be responsible for the course of climate change.

And although attractive in its seeming ability to democratically reflect individuals' desires, lifestyle politics may exclude values which cannot be expressed in terms of merchandise. As Sagoff notes, we are essentially conflicted about our own values; we may ethically reject a Disneyland built in formerly preserved wildlands, but nevertheless attend the park once it is built. To simplify Sagoff's argument, within our own lives we all play different roles which reflect different values and principles; it is not just that political conflicts exist *among* us, conflicts exist *within* us. And although once in the consumer role we may become self-interested resource maximizers, this role may take an ethical backseat to our publicly-minded role.

This suggests that individuals can act in at least one other capacity than market manipulator: a citizen within a community. In the space I have, I cannot explicitly draw out the citizen I have in mind, and I furthermore will not attempt to outline a political system within which such a citizen would operate. My aim here is to use this citizen as a model for an individual operating within a community. Roughly, I have in mind the classic republican citizen, who was not just a rights-bearer, but ideally also an integral, active component in political life (Kymlicka 288-289). This citizen is, above all else, actively public-spirited. She will necessarily

operate within larger neighborhoods, communities, groups, and organizations; it is her definition to operate within a larger public. If any individual is likely to determine the course of climate change, it is this citizen, and it is because of her engagement with others.

This unified action is more likely to produce change for several reasons. The uncoordinated choice of thousands to purchase hybrid vehicles will not likely send any kind of coherent message to automobile manufacturers or gain the consumer any leverage; more likely, it entrenches industry's power because it puts all solutions squarely on the shoulders of auto manufacturers. It leaves consumers without any option for products which might be less profitable but more desirable. Compromise, innovation, and real leverage are left outside consumers' reach. Even assuming uncoordinated consumer action could affect a given business' bottom line, an adequate, accurate feedback mechanism for the transmission of consumer demands may not exist. If such a mechanism did exist, it would surely not be as effective as an organized boycott with a stated purpose. So even if uncoordinated effort could be successful in stopping climate change, it would likely entrench industry power and inaccurately reflect preferences.

Organized effort, on the other hand, has historically been a leverage point for change. Many social problems of the twentieth century have been affected precisely because of such group action. Lifestyle politics may wish to push insulated, individualized choices as effective checks on greedy business, but market-based incentives for change have most often come about through organized effort. Consider, for example, the strides made for California's migrant farmworkers famously associated with Cesar Chavez in the 1970's. It was not through a multitude of insulated consumer choices that the farmworker movement was successful, but rather through strategic calls for boycott made by United Farm Workers. Large organizations

such as the San Francisco Bartender's Union, the Catholic Church, and universities throughout California heeded the UFW's call for boycott, and succeeded in paralyzing the California grape industry. This provided the leverage the UFW needed for negotiation with grape growers (Jenkins 290-292). The UFW marks just one example of how organized social movements have shaped history. If it is the responsibility of any individual to determine the course of climate change, it is this citizen within a community.

But this citizen has lost much of what makes her "an individual." At the point that people band together to form groups oriented toward the solution of problems, such agents symbolically abandon their individuality and become *part of* an organization. Certainly, individual persons, as members of those organizations, are necessary components. But, as the adage holds, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The UFW is no more a collection of individuals than is the United States Congress. Each organization enjoys particular benefits of its collectivity than no one individual member enjoys on her own: the UFW can organize massive boycotts and receive corresponding support; the US Congress can legislate. Both organizations have the opportunity to produce long-term, large-scale change, albeit through different means, but only *as organizations*. Both organizations are composed of, but not the same as, its individual members.

So organized communities are neither government, which has the authority to legislate and penalize, nor are they "a bunch of individuals." They exist somewhere in between, or even outside of, these poles. Thus the statement "Governments have failed us. Is it now down to individuals to halt climate change?" is obscured by the implied dichotomy of government vs. individual. This dichotomy masks the possibility of social movement organizations, or else reduces them to their smallest component: the individual. It separates the complexity of the political process into neat compartments which are either seemingly unalterable (the

government) or infinitely manipulable (the individual self). Thus, depending on where one locates responsibility for climate change's fate, the most readily apparent options are to do nothing in light of tremendous futility (government responsibility) or to do everything in light of absolute control (individual responsibility). The issue of climate change becomes either the failing of that nasty, monolithic government or a personal crusade requiring courageous sacrifice of ascetic proportions. When halting climate change is framed in terms of government or individual, many may choose to avoid the issue at all for want of a meaningful way to participate which does not inscribe blame and guilt on every car and driver on the road. This dichotomy makes a difficult political problem even more difficult by making lifestyle alteration - an unattractive, guilt-ridden proposition for many - the most readily identifiable participatory means for those not involved in the government.

Climate change may be resolvable via individual citizens uniting to find solutions. However, it is not the individual, as an individual, who will bring about this change, but rather the combined, unified effort of many working with governments, business, and other political sectors. This unified effort transcends privatized lifestyles and insulated choices, thereby transcending the dichotomy of government or individual. As Gandhi would say, "be the change you want to see in the world," as community members.

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