



FROM ACTIVISM TO ALIENATION: THE PARADOXES OF BEING AN ECO-CITIZEN

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Abstract: - In France today, the different public authorities in charge of protecting and/or managing the environment rely heavily on the term “eco-citizen”, which is also broadly wielded in the media and political discourse. From a set of recommendations, it becomes an order that is based on a normalizing process which codifies social behaviour and directs the way individuals participate in a collective project. Several national surveys conducted in France and Europe point up the shared acceptance of this codification which appears to individuals as a means to combat on a personal level the negative collateral effects of our development model. We will argue that this approach is an ideological mask that presents repair tactics as capable of transforming relations of production. Such practices are actually alienating for individuals insofar as their eco-citizen behaviour allows the development model to reposition itself and incorporate new markets. Individuals are as such dispossessed of the radical scope of their actions and lose control of the object for which they became involved in the first place.

Keywords: Sociology, environmental ideology, eco-citizenship, activism, alienation

Introduction: Our research into environmental issues has consistently revealed the increasing adherence of individuals to the discourse of sustainable development and their involvement as eco-citizens through the adoption of environmentally conscious behaviour and

attitudes (Aspe *et.al.*, 2003; Jacqué *et. al.*, 2004; Jacqué *et.al.*, 2009). What does this tell us? Firstly, and this has been confirmed by different French and international research on the topic (Dobré, 2003; Greffet and Morard, 2011; OECD, 2011; Planchat, 2007; Roy, 2006), that the “environment” is now a more and more broadly accepted “cause”; and also, that this type of individual behaviour offers a broad array of options that allow individuals to get involved based on their desires, the degree to which they want to participate and their interests. Indeed, such behaviour may target people’s means of

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transportation, accommodation, consumption of organic products, use of recyclable or recycled products, water or energy savings, etc. The different approaches are not necessarily combined or done concurrently by the same individuals, but they give each person the agency to feel like they are part of a common cause without being bound by the constraints of hegemonic thought. In France, this behaviour is now referred to in public policy as “eco-citizen practices”; these are similar to terms like “greening household behaviour” (Brown, 2014) and “environmental attitudes” (Dunlap et. al., 2000; Feinberg and Willer, 2013). “Eco-citizens” are as such basically citizens that partake in at least one activity considered to “protect the environment”. The institutional legitimacy that comes with the title comforts individuals in the well-founded nature of their behaviour and in their sense of belonging to a broader group. The development of such practices points up how the political and ideological institutionalization of behaviour has worked to gradually engulf environmental protest (Aspe and Jacqué, 2012). It is important to distinguish between practices that aim to green capitalist growth, as critically analysed by Marxist authors, and ecological critiques of capitalism (Benton, 1996; Vogel, 1998; Foster, Clark and York, 2010; Moore, 2011). Indeed, the greening of growth is by no means involved in constructing an ecologically sustainable society; rather, it is part of the thrust behind capitalist development, of which the exploitation of natural resources is a primary driver (Schnaiberg et. al., 2003; Gould et. al., 2004; Jones 2011).

It is in this critical perspective that we will examine the notion of eco-citizenship here and point up the paradox that it produces: on the one hand it offers a moral framework for the expression of individual/collective relations in a highly fragmented social context, and on the other hand it enables the rise of a management approach to environmental issues which, rather than challenging the dominant forms of natural

resource exploitation, actually ensures the perpetuation of the development model that is at its root and even pushes towards the emergence of new markets. It is as such that the eco-citizen practices outlined in public recommendations tends to channel the desire of individuals to take environmental action and normalize it in an overarching implementation framework.

We will analyse the discourse and practices of eco-citizenship as a contemporary expression of the tension between utopia and an ideology that enables the expression of ecological concern but which is alienating at the same time, meaning the end result is constructed as “foreign” from the individuals involved.

1. Eco-citizenship and public policy: normalizing activism

Training and informing eco-citizens is becoming a central tenet of environmental public policy. Information campaigns conducted by the French Agence de l'eau (Water agency), Agence de la maîtrise de l'énergie (Energy management agency), the Direction régionale de l'environnement, l'aménagement et le logement (DREAL, former DIREN—Regional directorate for the environment, planning and housing), as well as local authorities all recommend an important step before implementing their policies: training eco-citizens. The list of initiatives offered by the websites and brochures of these organizations can be divided into two groups: those that aim to help manage the environment (e.g., recycling waste, reducing emissions, saving water and energy) and those that target consumer action (buying better and differently). The lists of actions proposed are mostly related to the context of everyday life: *“Taking a sustainable development approach to everyday life means taking charge of my choices and actions: equipping my home to save water; choosing showers over baths; buying products that are sustainably farmed, fair trade, etc.; buying in-season foods; using energy-efficient appliances; reducing waste through recycling; insulating my home; driving differently,*

etc.”¹; “*Save water, maintenance your water softener; Use ecological detergent*”². For these organizations, training eco-citizens basically means informing about “best practices” and behavioural norms adapted to a management approach to the environment in which “*the user is the imponderable upon which everything rests*” (Charvolin, 2000: 275, translated here). Institutional recommendations as such provide a set of references that outline a prototype for “responsible” citizens, something that individuals can adapt to their liking and thus conform to an ethic that is increasingly shared: protecting the environment.

The codification of eco-citizen behaviour is the result of a management-based approach to the environment which involves taking a normative and prescriptive approach to relations with the environment. The institutional legitimacy of those in charge of environmental management is based on a positivist conception of natural resources which requires a countable and quantifiable objectivation of their use. The “sustainable development” indicators produced notably by the Service d’observation et statistiques (SOeS–Department of observation and statistics) of the French Ministry of ecology, sustainable development and energy and by international bodies like the OECD are presented as a tool for improving the “environmental efficiency” of current methods for exploiting natural resources. Implementation of Agenda 21, enacted by the 1992 Rio Declaration, resulted at the national level in the creation of statistical tools to gauge the

efficiency of environmental policy measures. “*Indicators of sustainable development need to be developed to provide solid bases for decision-making at all levels and to contribute to a self-regulating sustainability of integrated environment and development systems*”³. The environment is now a field with broadly standardized measures; this has resulted in a sector-based segmentation of types of public involvement and in a technical and management-based approach to ecological issues. Incentive-based economic tools play an increasingly large role in public policy measures and notably work to promote “sustainable growth”. “*In a market economy, it is necessary to identify the levers on which incentive action will be pertinent, efficient and economically justified compared to other options. Public policies orient behaviour without having a negative effect on competitiveness. This involves examining the environmental impact of fiscal measures in different sectors and searching for economic tools that enable environmental goals to be reached at least-cost*” (Deveaud, 2006: 455, translated here).

Implementing a management model for the environment in turn makes it legitimate to address ecological problems from an economic angle by presenting the approach as an essentially technical and pragmatic solution. This process is described in the literature as “ecological modernization” and is presented by its proponents in the social sciences as a “reforming” and “optimistic vision” of the relationship between environmental protection and growth (Mol et. al., 2009). It is argued that the process of industrialization through technological innovation needs to be supported by reforms to political institutions in order to allow economic and social actors greater involvement in ecological modernity (Leroy and van Tatenhove, 2000; Mol, 1997). In this context, changing lifestyles, changes in the way

¹ Ministry of the environment and sustainable development, *Quels sont mes gestes pour le développement durable* (“How can I help with sustainable development”), available online: <http://www.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/Quels-sont-mes-gestes-pour-le.html> «développement durable», consulted on 3 March 2015, translated here.

² Agence de l’eau (Water agency), *Water-saving Campaign*, http://www.sauvonsleau.fr/jcms/e_8179/le-cpie-du-haut-doubs-lance-la-campagne-l-eau-au-cour-de-la-vie#.VP7AcmbrrbLU, consulted on 3 March 2015, translated here.

³ United Nations, Agenda 21, Chapter 40, <http://www.un.org/earthwatch/about/docs/a21ch40.htm>, consulted on 1 April 2015.

people consume and changing environmental values have become factors in the sociology of the environment that allow the degree of social acceptance of current forms of environmental management to be measured (Bozonnet, 2010; Mol, 2010; Spaargaren and van Vliet, 2000).

The different management schemes implemented in the name of sustainable development all have one thing in common: a technical management approach to the environment that encourages sustained economic growth. Hence, the recycling industry was created to address the issue of waste production; the pollution management market was developed to solve problems related to air and water pollution; the implementation of pollution-removal technologies also promotes economic development.

National and international surveys point up that a large majority of individuals feel concerned or very concerned about environmental issues: nine people out of ten say they are prepared to act for the environment (Planchat, 2007; OECD, 2011). The most tangible form of this concern for the environment is expressed through recycling—eighty percent of French citizens say they recycle at least one type of waste—, as well as attempts to limit water and electricity consumption (Bigot and Hoibian, 2014). The French further claim to be increasingly aware of how their lifestyle affects the environment; sixty-two percent say they adapt their lifestyle to “do what is right for the environment” (Bigot and Hoibian, 2010; Greffet, 2011). Most people also believe that environmentally friendly behaviour has a positive impact or is at least necessary; taking such steps is seen as a way of helping the environment and 70% of French citizens believe that their actions “help the environment” (Roy, 2006). A study conducted in ten OECD member states confirms these findings: 95% of those interviewed felt that individuals can help improve the environment through their actions (OECD, 2011).

Yet closer analysis of so-called environmental behaviour reveals that such declarations are

more a broadly accepted statement than an example of the radical transformation of lifestyles. The study conducted by IFEN into “French environmental practices in 2005” attempts to “provide a detailed account of how households factor the environment into their everyday behaviour” (Roy, 2006: 7, translated here). Using the findings from several years of research, the author indicates that “*While the environment is not the most important topic (unemployment, poverty and exclusion, and insecurity are listed as more important), the surveys indicate that an increasing share of the population claims to be aware of this topic through the concerns expressed and the actions people claim to take or are prepared to take*” (Roy, 2006: 8, translated here). The “green behaviour” commonly shown in the “environmental profile” of households can be divided into three categories. The first involves adherence to management-based approaches: did the people interviewed recycle and, if yes, what and how? Then come actions to “save”, meaning focused on water or electricity consumption; and, lastly, “economic” practices that involve buying “green” products (e.g., organic food and energy-efficient lighting). Adherence to these different practices is presented as an indicator of awareness about environmental issues which allows an “environmental profile” of households to emerge (Greffet, 2011).

In addition to labelling a certain number of practices “environmental behaviour”, there is a new discourse surrounding the types of action taken by French citizens to protect the environment. Among the practices analysed by the IFEN surveys, those related to efforts to save are more common among workers and employees than among executives. For example, efforts to save energy and water or to power off the television are determined above all by the income and socio-professional status of those interviewed (Greffet, 2011). Conversely, practices that cost more, like consuming organic food or buying energy-efficient appliances, are undertaken by people of higher socio-economic

status and those with higher income (Poupat, 2011). Practices driven by very different thinking are as such indistinctly grouped together, including economically-inspired attempts to save on the one hand and attempts to consume in an environmentally friendly manner on the other hand. The survey does not mention the meaning behind the actors' behaviour, although we can suppose that ultimately each party is free to reframe their behaviour as driven by socially valued environmental concern.

It is now broadly accepted that each individual needs to do a little and what they can to improve the current state of the environment. This contemporary commitment to the environment combines both a quest for individual well-being and involvement in a common cause. "Everyday actions" are as such undertaken in the name of an environmental ideal without any connection to their actual, measurable ecological impact; rather, they are based on confidence in the dominant institutional discourse. The socialization of individuals via the acquisition and adoption of eco-citizen practices has resulted in turning individual behaviour into a symbol of political action (Aspe, 2001). By hinging social recognition on ecological issues, the socializing framework of sustainable development plays a normative role by integrating individuals; it is also an attempt to redefine and gain recognition for the symbolic and political role of individuals.

Although individuals adhere to the sustainable development project through their behaviour as eco-citizens, many remain critical nonetheless of the proposed solutions. Indeed, the majority of French citizens are sceptical about the efficiency of management approaches and believe that current lifestyles necessarily have a negative impact on the environment. Given the dominant discourse underscoring the lack of greening behaviour in France, it is also hard for individuals not to participate or to distance themselves from prevailing recommendations for tackling environmental issues. The promotion of individual action through eco-

citizen behaviour is a continuation as well as a radicalization of management models which, by leveraging people's legitimate desire to act, form a kind of modern exercise of power. Following on from research by Vincent de Gauléjac (2009) into the organization of work, we believe that in harnessing people's desire to act, eco-citizenship is a further example of the extension of the management model into the realm of protest. The individuals who give environmental meaning to their efforts to save things like resources and energy generally do so with a desire to change the dominant forms of consumption and production; and yet in some respects they become locked into the management mindset that perpetuates these types of organization.

2. Disengaged activism: towards alienation

2.1. The de-politicization of environmental issues

We use "alienation" in the Marxist sociological sense to mean the loss of control over an object with which individuals believe they are engaged: "Under these economic conditions this realization of labour appears as loss of realization for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation. So much does the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement that the more objects the worker produces the less he can possess and the more he falls under the sway of his product, capital. The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien" (Marx, 1844: 57-58). Along this line, we believe that the eco-citizen ideology promoted in public policy works to warp the very essence of the involvement it advocates.

Environmental management is presented by those responsible for it as an alternative

sustainable development project; paradoxically, however, it is based on the de-politicization of environmental issues. Pollution management (water, air and waste treatment) as well as reduction schemes (reducing greenhouse gas emissions, promoting clean energy, etc.) are based on the economic and technical management of environmental objects. Indeed, unlike “ecological thinking” which is committed to pointing up the different economic, social and political causes leading to the destruction of environments and resources, a management approach to environmental topics can be summed up as technical management of the consequences of current lifestyles and production methods. From the perspective of political ecology, economic growth is based on a process of disconnect between mankind and nature that is responsible for turning desires into consumer needs (Illich, 1973). That is why ecological issues cannot be reduced to the sole conservation of natural resources but rather involve a critique of the social relations at the root of the consumption/production pair. *“That is why we must begin by posing the question explicitly: what are we really after? A capitalism adapted to economic constraints or an economic, social and cultural revolution that abolishes the constraints of capitalism and, in doing so, establishes a new relationship between the individual and society and between people and nature? Reform or revolution?”* (Gorz, 1980: 4). The current assimilation of management-based approaches to the environment and ecological thinking bestows legitimacy on the dominant means of development behind the process at work destroying natural resources. *“The unexpected return of ‘development’ through the sustainable lens actually serves as a Trojan horse that surreptitiously reintroduces to critical and even anti-productivist thought the economic growth of predatory and eco-destructive material production once thoroughly rejected. The radical critique of development is the shibboleth*

of truly alternative thinking” (Latouche, 2003: 18, translated here).

The management of waste, water, air and natural resources has essentially become an economic and technical affair; all reference to ecological reasoning exists only and at best to establish thresholds for the destruction of resources and to assess the efficiency of their handling.

The recycling of waste is a prime example of this process. Similar to measures taken in the field of water management in the 1970s, the implementation of recycling in the 1990s was based on the development of an economic market for waste management: infrastructure for the storage, transportation and treatment of waste. For the private firms that provide recycling services, waste is an economic good that encourages the growth of new economic sectors. The handling of environmental problems posed by waste is based on an economic response that uses technological innovation—here, recycling techniques—to justify its management of the problem. More broadly, the search for solutions to environmental problems is only very marginally based on ecological knowledge; rather, it is driven by the power of technological innovation in the ecological field. Thus, the thinking goes: climate change is happening, let’s create new automotive and energy technologies; biodiversity is being destroyed, let’s create gene banks (Aubertin et. al., 2008). By developing new markets based on environmental innovation, the response to environmental problems has resulted in new ways of consuming industrial products. The exponential growth of the “eco-activities” sector over the past ten years highlights the increasing role of the environmental sector in economic growth (Cugny-Séguin, 2006; Kamp, 2013; Micollet, 2014; Poupat, 2007; Vittek, Couderc and Gonçon, 1999). This is how a sort of de-politicization of environmental issues has occurred; preference has been given to technical management solutions that offer a normative framework for addressing ecological problems.

The economic recession of 2009 resulted in a collapse in demand for recycled raw materials. Turnover in French recycling firms dropped by 33% compared to 2007⁴. The extent to which recycling activities are affected by market fluctuation, even if this is offset by the removal services paid for by municipalities, underscores the hegemonic nature of this market solution to the detriment of thought and action driven by more ecologically-based reasoning. The raw materials market crisis “*is felt today across the entire planet. In China, millions of workers, whose jobs involved sorting waste from rich countries, lost their jobs overnight. In Europe and North America, paper, metal and recyclable plastic stocks are piling up*”. The crisis facing the recycling sector underscores the intrinsic tie that binds it to maintaining a system of consumption and mass production. The “eco-citizen” act of recycling is in this sense reduced to an economic act of generating raw material for recycling firms; by getting individuals involved, the environmental value of the act gives credence to the industrial principle of recycling. It would as such be difficult in the midst of a decline in demand for recycled raw materials, as Carlos de Llanos, director of the technical and environmental department at Eco-emballages has noted, to “*ask people to recycle more or less depending on the state of the economy*”⁵. In this context, the eco-citizen’s responsibility becomes an economic duty to support the recycling sector. An ecological approach to the treatment of waste would require a significant reduction in packaging and, therefore, also in the number of firms that remove and process such packaging. But such logic creates the same dilemma that opposed ecologists and industrialists in the early 1990s: choosing between the environment and jobs!

⁴ **Le Monde**, La logique du recyclage est fragilisée par la crise que traverse ce secteur (“The logic behind recycling is undermined by the crisis confronting the sector”), 24 March 2009, translated here.

⁵ *Ibid.*

2.2. Being an eco-citizen: activism that alienates

In a management-based approach to the environment, policies conducted in the name of sustainable development are primarily based on expert know-how that works to politically neutralise the techniques involved (Beck, 1986). The difficultly debatable nature of such technical measures is based on the belief that science and technology are able to create progressive solutions (Giddens, 1994; Forsyth, 2013). In this sense, the management measures taken in the name of sustainable development by no means break with either the production modes or modes of thought that are based on the development of “*ecologically rational techniques*” (Visvanathan, 1991: 381).

By improving green technology, sustainable development is presented as a framework that encourages the promotion of an alternative means of development. With regard to waste management, for example, the discourse warns of the excessive quantity of waste produced and calls on individuals to be aware and responsible for their waste production; the implicit message is that it is the consumer who produces waste and not the manufacturer of goods. French government policy on waste following the Grenelle de l’environnement as such aimed to reduce household waste at the source by 7%. “*The policy on waste was directly shaped by the work of the Grenelle de l’environnement. It is based on the principle recalled by all civil society representatives that ‘the best waste is that which is never produced’.* Indeed, all waste is both a net loss in terms of materials and a potential pollutant. The goal of the national policy is to pursue and ramp up the decoupling of growth and waste production”⁶. The hoped for reduction will occur alongside the perfecting

⁶ Ministry of ecology, sustainable development and the sea, La politique des déchets 2009-2012 (“Waste policy 2009-2012”), available online: <http://www.cancer-environnement.fr/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=H9oDGei4wTE%3D&tabid=91&mid=498>, consulted on 3 March 2015, translated here.

of recycling techniques and sectors, as well as through improvements to the environmental quality of packaging. The principle of upcycling waste to give it a “new life” is presented as an alternative solution that allows for a break with production modes that constantly require more raw materials. And yet, when the recycling industry turns waste into an economic good, it loses its status as a “forsaken thing” and becomes an ecologically acceptable economic good.

By presenting itself as a way of mastering our system of consumption, the reuse of waste ensures the viability of this system. Current waste management as such goes against ecological reasoning since it makes handling environmental problems the driver of a system of industrial development that is actually at the root of the problem. Focusing action on “waste” is a way of ensuring that the usefulness of the original goods produced and of the market system that requires they be both necessary and short-lived is never questioned: *“The acceleration of obsolescence, which goes hand in hand with the declining sustainability of products and the ability to repair them, is becoming the best way to increase sales volumes. It requires firms to continuously invent new needs and desires, to bestow on goods symbolic, social, erotic value in order to disseminate a ‘culture of consumption’ based on customization, conspicuousness, rivalry and jealousy”* (Gorz, 2008: 76, translated here).

Eco-taxes strongly encourage the renewal of household appliances; “ecological bonuses” encourage people to change cars; water and energy “savings” encourage people to buy and install technical devices that reinforce the system of mass consumption. As such, under the guise of alternative development, management measures in the field of the environment actually work to bolster and renew consumption, without challenging the form and end result of production. Anything else would be thinking that exceeds the *“ethical contradictions of our lifestyles”* (Rochefort, 2007; Barnett et. al.,

2011) and would challenge the utilitarian underpinnings of our society and require a *“decolonization of our economic imagination”* (Latouche, 2012). The development of goods and services focused on sociability can give new meaning to production and, in doing so, to social relations. That is why de-growth (*“décroissance”*) movements advocate for the informal trading of services, pooling of goods and creation of mutual help networks (Flippo, 2005). *“In this context, usefulness is not intrinsic to the consumption or acquisition of rare things or products, but rather to the ability of humans to reproduce sociality, show their generosity and realize their creativity”* (Insel, 2006: 24, translated here). Ecological critiques of consumption point up the process that fragments lifestyles and argue that it is this process that needs to be addressed by alternative projects to collectively redefine production goals.

While there is an inherent desire in eco-citizen behaviour to limit consumption, the end result remains rooted in a perpetuation of individualized lifestyles. Acting for the environment is part of a shared collective goal and its translation into eco-citizen behaviour functions as a moral in the Durkheimian sense of the term insofar as such ecological morality gives meaning to the action and role of each individual in a collective project. The principle of eco-citizenship is based on the idea that each individual can act for the common good at their own level; it gives moral value to the increasingly individualized nature of our societies. *“Being an eco-citizen means limiting your everyday impact on the environment. Are you planning on renovating your home? Are you looking for information to help you become a better consumer, to better manage your waste, to change your habits at home or at work? We have numerous explanations and advice to help you make your everyday life more environmentally friendly”*⁷. The discourse of

⁷ ADEME, Espace Ecocitoyen (Eco-citizen section), <http://www.ademe.fr/particuliers-eco-citoyens>, consulted on 3 March 2015, translated here.

eco-citizenship offers a privileged platform for the reconciliation of individualized lifestyles and collective means of involvement. The allure of this notion is also rooted in contemporary social hopes for a renewal of civil activities that involve both promoting individuals and encouraging the connections that those individuals have with their environment. Eco-citizenship as such zeroes in on people's desire to take environmental action; and yet by expressing itself within the context of environmental management, it alienates individuals insofar as their participation encourages the dominant forms of natural resource exploitation and perpetuates a lifestyle based on the consumption model that it is supposed to combat. Eco-citizen behaviour is presented as a means to "repair" the consequences of our system of development, but it is actually one of its drivers. This means of involving individuals in the economic system via the promotion of their civil participation is becoming a dominant norm; those who do not partake are in turn excluded from the group. Eco-citizen behaviour can as such become alienating insofar as by participating in the dominant forms of environmental management, individuals lose control over the political scope of their actions and are diverted from the goal of their activism.

Conclusion

The tension between alienation and true activism in eco-citizen behaviour is particularly salient when thinking about ecology as a political project. Eco-citizen behaviour is based on an accommodation of contemporary lifestyles justified by the choices that individuals have in their everyday lives. The training of eco-citizens is as such largely based on calling on people to do things like "choose public transportation over private cars", "choose to recycle", "extend the life cycle of products", etc. which involve the possibility of making significant choices for the environment. And yet one of the major contradictions within this type of proposal is that

the potential alternatives are practically impossible given the individualized context of lifestyles that are based on the widespread standardization of individual access to consumer goods. This generalization makes obsolete the existing collective solutions and pushes towards their gradual disappearance. Indeed, how can public transportation be logically renewed in agglomerations that have spread and been planned to enable the greatest number of people to drive cars. How can we curb consumption when the social organization of production actually aims to increase it?

Calls for de-growth, the promotion of social relations and dematerialized forms of social life nevertheless constitute an alternative sphere for experimentation based not on management techniques but rather on "eco-friendly" techniques that encourage the creation of exchange-based groups. The political challenge in gaining social recognition for such ecological thinking is not necessarily getting people on board; rather, it is the risk of it being diverted from its principles in favour of management measures whose overall goals largely escape the individuals that promote them.

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