

Please Don't Buy Another Tote Bag

Plastic Bags and the Individualized Global Environmental Crisis

Taylor Tang

Abstract

Despite the global scale of the ecological crisis Earth currently faces, policymakers and corporations are increasingly favoring individualized approaches. In this paper, individualized responsibility is defined as the invented displacement of agentic capacity from those with systemic and institutional power to individuals, who do not have the capacity to respond to the structural causes of the global environmental crisis. Vancouver's 2022 plastic bag ban exemplifies several culminating fallacies common in individualized environmental narratives. Plastic bag bans encourage minor changes without addressing root causes for degradation such as overconsumption. They allow corporations to evade responsibility and permit them to create equally if not more destructive alternatives. Finally, they demonstrate ways in which states support policies that continue the depoliticization of environmental degradation by shifting the burden to individuals. Holding the individual responsible absolves corporations and states and ignores the realities of political power, resulting in ineffective and incremental progress. Policymakers must fulfill their responsibility to create structural solutions.

I. Introduction

Narratives promoting individualized responsibility continue to grow increasingly prolific and powerful. Actors at all levels from states to activist organizations have taken positions supporting proposals or campaigns which directly support changes made at the household or individual level, resulting in growing pressure to reduce carbon footprints through sustainable practices. One has to look no further than the annual “Earth Hour” espoused by the World Wildlife Fund, which asks individuals to not use electricity for one hour every year with the goal of encouraging climate action, for an example of the responsibility to ameliorate a global problem being placed in the hands of individuals.¹ This mistaken focus on the individual, cultivated through narratives such as the illusion of sustainable consumer choices, removes responsibility from key perpetrators of environmental degradation: corporations. Secondly, and most insidiously, this removes the burden from empowered actors such as states—who have the indirect ability to shape global environmental governance whilst directing governments’ own policies. It is both dangerous to our environments and politically naive to imagine that individuals have the type of power that would allow them to effect real change and alleviate the climate crisis.² It obfuscates the dangers of continued consumption by diffusing blame onto individuals. Rather than advocating for lower-impact consumption, corporations control a narrative that asks us to consider *different* but no less significant consumption.

The significance of this narrative shift cannot be underestimated: the danger this paper identifies is not solely the fact that these individualized measures are ineffective, but also their broader illusory suggestion that “subtle course corrections” will protect the environment without requiring major change.³ I argue that the deliberate burden shift from empowered actors such as states and corporations to individuals represents a dangerous greater trend of depoliticization and a fundamental misrepresentation of power within the environmental policy sphere, using the case of plastic bags in British Columbia. The scope of this paper is oriented towards the policy contexts of North America, given that this is the locale in which

¹ Kent, Jennifer. 2009. “Individualized Responsibility and Climate Change: ‘If Climate Protection Becomes Everyone’s Responsibility, Does It End up Being No-One’s?’” *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1, no. 3: 133.

² Maniates, Michael F. 2001. “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?” *Global Environmental Politics* 1 (3): 46.

³ Hawken, Paul. 2010. *The Ecology of Commerce: A Declaration of Sustainability*. Rev. ed. New York, NY: Harper Business: xii.

individualism thrives most prominently.⁴ The research is centered around the Canadian case of Vancouver British Columbia's 2022 decision to ban plastic shopping bags. The scope, therefore, does not include power dynamics *between* states; for instance examining the difference between the Global North and South in terms of burden-shifts of individualization, which has already been studied by environmental and international relations scholars over the past several years.⁵ However, this case acts as a micro example of a global crisis and emergent norm. I use primary sources including provincial legislation and secondary academic literature to investigate the shifting relationships between corporations, states, and individuals in relation to plastic bag usage.

First, this paper will begin by establishing how individualization of responsibility occurs through socialization and norm diffusion. Second, it will evaluate the ways in which this deliberately eschews imposing blame on corporations. Third, it will analyze the ways in which this blame-shifting is also visible through state actions, returning to the specific example of plastic bag usage in British Columbia. The paper concludes by offering a brief analysis of ways in which states can move towards a re-politicization of the environment.

II. Individualization's Impotent Processes

To begin, we must establish how individualisation becomes such a potent force, and one which individuals seem to so readily accept. By analyzing this process through a structural lens, we can identify the complex interplay between social and political institutions that promulgates individualisation through socialization and norm diffusion. Although it seems a broad and ephemeral concept, individualization of responsibility begins quite clearly and early through institutions such as schools. There is certainly an irony in individualization being imposed and reproduced in the individual by "modern institutions."⁶ We can look to the several examples of individualization Michael Maniates identified as occurring through schools in his foundational 2001 work. He cites primary-school campaigns aiming to save recycling centers, as well as his daughter's book *The Berenstain Bears Don't Pollute*, which promotes recycling and consuming

⁴ As discussed by a wide variety of American political science scholars, for instance Robinson, Scott. 2021. *John Locke and the Uncivilized Society: Individualism and Resistance in America Today*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.

⁵ See: Dauvergne, Peter. 2008; 2010. *The Shadows of Consumption: Consequences for the Global Environment*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press., for an examination of the ways in which environmental consequences are shifted onto poorer nations, in particular the overview provided in Chapter 1.

⁶ Beck, Ulrich. 2007. "Beyond Class and Nation: Reframing Social Inequalities in a Globalizing World." *The British Journal of Sociology* 58 (4): 681.

environmentally friendly products, as being “prime example[s],” of individualization of responsibility.⁷ These individualization processes are part of the greater primary socialization process and therefore occur through the same institutions. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu situates socialization within his notion of habitus, a “homogeneous system of dispositions” which produces similar practices, or habits.⁸ This emphasizes the power of the temporal primacy of socialization—early childhood influences become embodied preferences, subconsciously allowing the individual to continue preferring individualized responses later in life once they become active participants in the political and capitalist systems. This recurring focus on minor changes to existing habits is a shrewd policy decision, especially given that research shows approximately 45% of individuals’ daily behavior is “repeated, [...] and usually in the same context”.⁹ Individuals are primarily influenced by their habitus, their daily practices which they adopt early on, and their circumstances of birth. Thus we see that from a very early age, individuals are socialized into habits of individuality with respect to the environment.

Individualization is also deeply linked to consumerism. As Maniates remarks, a significant amount of individualized environmental recommendations are linked to consumerist and therefore capitalist practices.¹⁰ It is self-evident that in order to have an object to recycle, one must first obtain and consume a recyclable object. The act of consumption itself becomes habitual: deeply embedded into the individual consciousness—as Maniates remarks, Americans seem to see themselves as consumers first, and citizens second.¹¹ Changing individuals’ consumption habits is a necessary step forward for climate action, and significant efforts must be made on behalf of actors with agenda-setting power. One example of this can be observed through activists leveraging media to begin norm diffusion processes for environmentally friendly ideals. We can see, for instance, the case of an emergent anti-microbead (minuscule beads of plastic found most often in cosmetic products) norm, resulting in the gradual decline in microbead usage in cosmetics since 2014, demonstrated through corporate pledges to “phase [them] out,” and even an outright ban from the U.S. government.¹² Daily

⁷ Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree”: 37.

⁸ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1979 (2010). Translated by Nice, Richard, and Bennett, Tony. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. London New York (N.Y.): Routledge: 101.

⁹ Wood, Wendy and David T. Neal. 2009. “The Habitual Consumer.” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 19 (4): 579.

¹⁰ Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree”: 33.

¹¹ Maniates: 37.

¹² Dauvergne, Peter. 2018. “The power of environmental norms: marine plastic pollution and the politics of microbeads,” *Environmental Politics*, 27:4, 580.

judgments and values are expressed through consumer choices, such as the simple decision not to purchase products with microbeads. Murray Bookchin, an American political philosopher and social ecologist, argues that this is rooted in the mid-20th century commodification of the psyche and of everyday life.¹³ Although Bookchin is perhaps excessively vehement when he claims that society is shredded and “selfhood is [...] pulverised,” he is not incorrect to draw the connection between selfhood—or rather, the lack of—and consumerism. In other words, the practices of individuality suggested by corporations or states are often linked to consumerist practices, therefore further tying the solution to the problem itself in an ill-advised feedback loop.

A relevant example of this is the ongoing debate surrounding the use of plastic shopping and grocery bags. An anti-plastic bag norm has been observed by scholars such as Jennifer Clapp and Linda Swanston, who have identified the rapid emergence of the norm and its varied policy implementations globally.¹⁴ In early 2022, nine cities in British Columbia, including major hubs of Vancouver, Richmond, and Surrey, passed bylaws banning retailers from providing plastic bags to shoppers.¹⁵ In doing so, they joined more than 70 cities across Canada that have adopted similar initiatives, including British Columbia’s capital city of Victoria, whose ban on their usage came into full force in 2021.¹⁶ This ban also includes “compostable” shopping bags, indicating that the ban is more forceful than, for instance, what the plastics industry lobbied for with regard to the microbead ban in the U.S., where activists argued that the loophole of “compostable” made the ban ineffective.¹⁷ ¹⁸ That said, as of 2023 consumers can still purchase paper bags for a fee of \$0.25, which, according to city bylaw, must be composed of a minimum of 40% recycled content and labeled as such, or a reusable bag for \$2, which must be manufactured to withstand a minimum of 100 uses.¹⁹ Beginning in December 2023, the

¹³ Best, Steven. 1998. "Murray Bookchin's Theory of Social Ecology: An Appraisal of "the Ecology of Freedom"." *Organization & Environment* 11 (3): 346.

¹⁴ Clapp, Jennifer & Linda Swanston. 2009. "Doing away with plastic shopping bags: international patterns of norm emergence and policy implementation," *Environmental Politics*, 18:3: 316.

¹⁵ Griffin, Kevin. 2021. "Disappearing plastic bags: Vancouver to join other B.C. cities banning them in 2022." *Vancouver Sun*.

¹⁶ Griffin, "Disappearing plastic bags."

¹⁷ "Single-Use Item Reduction Strategy." 2022. City of Vancouver. Accessed March 17, 2022.

¹⁸ Dauvergne, "The power of environmental norms": 588.

¹⁹ "Single-Use Item Reduction Strategy." 2022. City of Vancouver.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/plastic-bag-bans-latest-vancouver-fee-increase-1.6681970>.

Canadian federal government will also ban the use of plastic bags nationwide, following the City of Vancouver's policies.²⁰ Due to the relative recency of the policy in Vancouver, the city has not released clear data on the results of the plastic bag ban, although the City of Victoria estimates having used approximately 17 million plastic bags annually prior to the implementation of their ban, which does at least illustrate the existing volume of plastic bags in circulation.²¹ This example is a typical case of an extremely minor and individualized change being framed as a significant victory for environmental protection. A policy that still requires the cycle of consumption in order to exist thwarts its own goals before it begins by eliminating the possibility of more radical and effective change and tying itself to the status quo of individual consumption. To imagine that individuals remembering to bring a reusable grocery bag will lead to a dissolution of grand-scale plastic overuse is politically naive. Individualizing an inherently consumerist practice by placing the active burden in the hands of the consumer—to either pay for a reusable bag or remember to bring their own bags—is again demonstrative of this insidious illusory capacity of these subtle changes that permit individuals to behave in manners much the same, with the peace of mind that perhaps this micro-change will have a significant exponential effect.

III. Corporations Aiding and Abetting

Moreover, corporate sustainability policies further contribute to narratives of individualization by promoting ostensibly more sustainable consumption options, which incorrectly gives the appearance of individual agency and capacity to ameliorate the global environmental crisis through consumption patterns. It has become a near-requirement in this day and age for companies to pursue sustainability policies, and most do—frequently under the guise of corporate social responsibility (CSR).²² One has to look no further than the thousands of environmentally friendly new policies espoused by branches of giants such as Google through Google Sustainability, or Nike's Move to Zero Climate Change Initiative. However, we should not pretend that there are no ulterior motives for these stances; nor that they are even close to enacting the necessary structural change. Narratives of CSR and greenwashing practices are

²⁰ CTV News. "Canada's single-use plastic ban: Sales of bags, takeout containers, cutlery set to end." Last modified June 30, 2021. <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/canada-s-single-use-plastic-ban-sales-of-bags-takeout-containers-cutlery-set-to-end-1.5955423>.

²¹ "Plastic Bag Bylaw Comes Into Effect Today." 2021. City of Victoria News & Events. Accessed March 17, 2022.

²² Dauvergne, Peter. 2008; 2010. *The Shadows of Consumption*: 210.

highly significant contributors to individualizing and depoliticizing environmental responsibility, by promoting the illusion of consumers as having the active capacity to assuage the environmental crisis; rather than reducing the consumption cycle altogether.

Bookchin defines capitalism as the “totalizing system of economics,” which abstracts the economy from social life and a “sense of moral restraint,” and instead deifies economic growth as a goal in its own right.²³ In a talk delivered in 2013, American economist Michael Porter suggested that one of the key reasons NGOs and activist groups have not historically been able to effect substantive environmental change is due to a lack of ability to address problems at a large enough scale—a capacity that only mega-corporations have in our modern landscape.²⁴ While Porter unconvincingly uses this theory to posit that businesses should be the key actors we look to in order to resolve social (in our case, ecological) problems, businesses still operate with an entirely different capacity and coercive power than other actors such as states or NGOs. We might simply take the classical Weberian definition of power as the “probability that an individual in a social relationship can achieve his or her own will,” or Dahl’s definition as simply influence over the actions of others.²⁵ ²⁶ Most political science scholars agree, however, that power has an agentic capacity; in that it is active and makes a deliberate choice.²⁷ If we take those definitions of power, we might assume that it is the individual who has the power in these consumption habits, such as whether or not to bring a reusable shopping bag. On the contrary, that would be a shallow interpretation of the meaning of power, ignoring broader power relations between the individual and the consumer. Individualizing responsibility places the appearance of agency, and therefore blame, in the hands of consumers—when in reality, consumer choices are not scaled to enact real environmental change.

Returning to our case study of plastic versus reusable bags, tote bags have become incredibly popular as a perceived sustainable option over the past several years. The stylish and seemingly sustainable virtue-signaling alternative quickly became an omnipresent accessory—

²³ Best. 1998. “Murray Bookchin’s Theory of Social Ecology”: 345.

²⁴ Porter, Michael. 2013. “Why business can be good at solving social problems” TED, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iIh5YYDR2o&ab_channel=TED: 4:13.

²⁵ Warren, Mark E. 1992. “Max Weber’s Nietzschean Conception of Power.” *History of the Human Sciences* 5, no. 3: 20.

²⁶ Dahl, Robert A. 1957. “The Concept of Power.” *Behavioral Science* 2 (3): 201.

²⁷ Lucas, Joseph R. 1966. *The Principles of Politics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press: 57.

one that denotes the individual as someone who practices so-called green habits and also makes them a free billboard for corporations to signal their own sustainable values.²⁸ As noted previously, reusable bags in Vancouver must be graded for 100 uses. This guideline is evidently not meant as a firm number for the individual, but as rather an indication to retailers and manufacturers that they must produce functional bags. However, the shockingly low figure does illustrate a broader point quite succinctly. Asking consumers to use a reusable bag, and in particular, asking them to use it a specific number of times, suggests that this is an environmentally-friendly way to perpetuate existing consumption habits. Contrarily, the grim reality shows that according to a 2018 study by the Ministry of Environmental Protection of Denmark, reusable grocery bags (a cotton tote) must be used a minimum of 20,000 times to offset their production impact.²⁹ To offset the production impact of the tote bag, one would need to use that same bag *daily* for 54 years.³⁰ This exemplifies the extent to which corporate narratives of sustainability permeate and inform individuals, who then become signifiers and therefore burden-bearers of sustainability. Well-intentioned individuals become co-opted into a virtue-signaling advertisement scheme, which allows corporations to appear sustainable; contributing equally but differently to global environmental degradation.

IV. Absolving the State

Individualization policies allow states to shift off the burden of environmental policy, by depoliticizing state actions in favor of requiring and politicizing individual action. Depoliticization, as the word itself would suggest, is also deeply intertwined with state action (or lack of). Bookchin conceptualizes the state as a sort of “parasitic” apparatus, drawing on and hybridizing various social and political institutions.³¹ Much of identifying depoliticization is complex work, as it tends towards a critique of negative action: there is less that we can clearly point to as phenomena of depoliticization, as it is by definition a *lack* of politicization that we are concerned by. Political actors, by failing to act, have shifted control of the narratives of sustainability to other actors—those with scale and power, i.e. corporations, but also to individuals, who simply do not have the capacity to bring change. The environmental crisis

²⁸ Cook, Grace. 2021. “The Cotton Tote Crisis.” The New York Times.

²⁹ Bisinella, Valentina, et al. 2018. “Life Cycle Assessment of grocery carrier bags.” Ministry of Environment and Food of Denmark, Environmental Protection Agency. Environmental Project no. 1985: 17.

³⁰ Cook, “The Cotton Tote Crisis.”

³¹ Best, “Murray Bookchin’s Theory of Social Ecology”: 345.

becomes depoliticized as it simultaneously becomes individualized, both processes symbiotic and reliant upon each other, although not solely influenced by each other. Ironically, the “elevation of environmental concerns to the status of global humanitarian cause” operatively removes the agentic capacity and the policy burden from states: instead allocating it arbitrarily to individuals.³²

With the case of the plastic bag ban, this shift represents greater policy movements towards “circular economies,” a term describing the goal of a graphically circular—in lieu of linear—economy, wherein the “reduction, recycling, and reuse of resources” are expressed through aspirational zero waste ideas.³³ Policies based on minuscule reinventions of consumption—or, in our case, which seek to slightly alter the life cycle of plastics—fail to address the overconsumption of plastic in the broader sense. In asking the consumer to replace plastic bags with paper or otherwise reusable bags, the state charges individuals with the responsibility to avoid polluting, diminishing its own responsibility.

In reality, banning plastic bags is a fractional change, entirely misaligned with the scale and structural solutions required to address the environmental crisis. It may be kinder to imagine that states—Canada, specifically—are doing the best they can, with what information they have available to them. Instead, evidence suggests that despite the well-established body of literature and research pointing to the need for structural solutions, the City of Vancouver and broader Canadian governance have deliberately continued to pursue individualized approaches. A report delivered to Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) in 2019 provides five sets of recommendations for interventions that could be used to address the problem of plastic pollution. Within the executive summary, it clearly states that “incremental changes” are not a viable way to reach the targeted 90% plastic waste recovery.³⁴ Even hedged within the specific set of conditions set out in the report—to move towards a circular plastic economy—the predictions are dire and call for significant interventions, including creating a stable end-demand

³² Swyngedouw, Erik. 2011. “Depoliticized Environments: The End of Nature, Climate Change and the Post-Political Condition.” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 69: 255.

³³ Mah, Alice. 2021. “Future-Proofing Capitalism: The Paradox of the Circular Economy for Plastics.” *Global Environmental Politics* 21 (2): 122.

³⁴ Petigny, Jérôme, et al. 2019. “Economic Study of the Canadian Plastic Industry, Markets, and Waste: Summary Report to Environment and Climate Change Canada.” Environment and Climate Change Canada, Government of Canada: v.

for recycled products and extending the lifetime of plastic goods.³⁵ As the federal policy-making agency with agenda-setting power for Canada, the ECCC report should theoretically be reflected through all levels of government, and yet the plastic bag ban in Vancouver is misaligned with the scope of the interventions suggested to the ECCC. The intervention of switching from plastic to paper/reusable is an incremental change, framed as a significant one, and placed in the hands of the individual consumer.

V. Conclusion: Moving Towards A Re-Politicization

It is clear that the narratives of individualisation will continue to grow in prominence, so long as there is a lack of sincere structural efforts on the behalf of policymakers to act with the power and responsibility they possess. The depoliticization of the environmental crisis shows “little signs of abating,” and continues to contribute to the disempowerment of individuals through illusory narratives of choice.³⁶ Increasingly, as Maniates pointed out in 2001, individuals hold central the need to become environmentally-friendly consumers and ignore their potential to “develop political muscle sufficient to alter institutional arrangements that drive a pervasive consumerism.”³⁷ He suggests that collective action and grassroots mobilization—movements stemming from local contexts and activists—is one way to advocate for the type of structural solutions that must be undertaken. The flawed issue framing has also left many of these narratives vulnerable to the heavy corporate influences of CSR. Additionally, the privatization of the environmental crisis threatens the credibility of environmental organizations and diminishes their organizing capacity to act in the way Maniates advocates for.³⁸ How then, might we imagine ways to re-politicize the crisis? Elizabeth DeSombre aptly suggests structural solutions: to set up systems which make it possible for individuals to become more eco-friendly, without relying on them to take control of that agentic power that they lack. She suggests more regular bus schedules, or collecting garbage and recycling on the same date, with the goal being to make environmentally conscious infrastructure more convenient.³⁹ Although many of these policy solutions still rely on the individual’s actions, the nature of interventions such as these

³⁵ Petigny et al.: v-vi.

³⁶ Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree”: 34.

³⁷ Maniates: 34.

³⁸ Bookchin, Murray. 1989. “Death of a Small Planet: It’s Growth That’s Killing Us.” *The Progressive*; reprinted in *Anarchy Archives*: 22.

³⁹ DeSombre, Elizabeth R. 2018. “Individual Behavior and Global Environmental Problems.” *Global Environmental Politics* 18 (1): 9.

places a higher burden on the state than simplistic and individualized policies such as plastic bag bans. Solutions such as banning cars within major city thoroughfares altogether—a solution in the early stages of adaptation in major metropolises, for example, the recently proposed ban on motorized traffic in 75% of Hackney, London—would make a significant normative shift towards a state-level assumption of responsibility.⁴⁰ Solutions such as outright traffic bans would go further in re-politicizing the state's role in addressing the global environmental crisis.

While this essay is largely critical in tone of both corporate and state interventions, it is not meant to suggest that these interventions are entirely worthless. Reducing plastic use is of course still a worthwhile endeavor with positive outcomes, and minor habit changes are more feasible to enact in the current political landscape. We only have to look at the Irish case, which observed a 90-95% reduction in plastic bag usage after a tax was introduced.⁴¹ Moreover, it would be remiss of this paper to imply that individual responsibility is not a useful force: differentiated here from the invented and disingenuous responsibility placed on the individual through 'individualism.' However, as Belgian scholar Erik Swyngedouw states, "proper political interventions are irredeemably violent engagements".⁴² While this perhaps challenges our understanding of what the role of the state should be, it nonetheless states clearly the type of scale and capacity we require from environmental interventions, and that is lacking from these pallid, individualized policies currently enacted and examined in this paper. It is both untrue and unfair to paint individuals as "personally responsible" for the ecological crisis on the basis of their consumption.⁴³ While on the surface it is disempowering to realize the small role individuals can play in alleviating the global environmental crisis, it is necessary to expose the reality of where power lies in order to effectively address environmental degradation through both narrative change and policy work.

⁴⁰ "London LTNs: Plans to ban through-traffic from most Hackney roads," BBC News. January 26, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-64408468>

⁴¹ Clapp & Swanston, "Doing Away With Plastic Shopping Bags": 320.

⁴² Swyngedouw, "Depoliticized Environments": 261.

⁴³ Bookchin, "Death of a Small Planet": 23.

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