

# “I’m Changing the Climate, Ask Me How!”: The Politics of the Anti-SUV Campaign

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Sport utility vehicles (SUVs) have taken America by storm.<sup>1</sup> Drive around the block or glance at any parking lot and it will become clear that the size of our personal vehicles is expanding almost as fast as our waistlines. Yet the popularity of SUVs has created a backlash among a diverse set of unexpected allies, including Christian evangelicals, Hollywood celebrities, members of a radical environmental group called the Earth Liberation Front, and individual Internet activists. Sport utility vehicles—and their drivers—are accused of being un-Christian, destroyers of the environment, aids to terrorists, road hogs, and just plain ugly and rude. Anti-SUV campaigners are beginning to transform these complaints into requests for policy changes: they are asking auto manufacturers to redesign SUVs so that they are safer and more fuel efficient, lobbying Congress to close tax loopholes that encourage SUV sales, and urging consumers to think seriously about their vehicle choices and needs. Some of these changes are in the works, while others, such as getting Americans to choose smaller vehicles, are difficult to imagine. As one com-

<sup>1</sup> Sales of these large, truck-like passenger vehicles comprise up to 25 percent of total U.S. vehicle sales. David Crary, “Americans both love, hate SUVs,” *Daily Iowan*, 30 January 2003, accessed on the website of the Daily Iowan online at <http://www.dailyiowan.com/news/2003/01/30/>, 21 August 2004. The percentage of total vehicle sales cited depends on whether “crossover” SUV models are included in the calculation. (Crossover models are built on a car chassis rather than a light-truck frame, but are designed in the SUV style.) Half of the vehicles on the road today are SUVs, trucks, and minivans. Mary S. Cooper, “SUV Debate,” *CQ Researcher*, 16 May 2003, 449–472. Despite a dip in sales in 2005, sales rebounded in 2006. Keith Naughton, “Gripping About Gas Prices ... in a New SUV,” *Newsweek*, 22 May 2006, 44.

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mentator said, “What a lot of protestors are missing is that Americans have a deep psychological connection to the SUV. American automotive life is about mobility and freedom. SUVs give you freedom, in a psychological sense, one that isn’t necessarily rational, but is emotional.”<sup>2</sup>

The anti-SUV campaign is another example of the politicization of private citizen behavior, a topic recently reviewed by Rogan Kersh and James Morone in their analysis of the politics of obesity. The campaign resembles the public health movements investigated by Kersh and Morone and other so-called “moral reform movements.”<sup>3</sup> Like the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and fatty foods, the consumption of SUVs has been problematized in both moral and utilitarian terms by a small group of activists who express alarm at the growing popularity of these vehicles. Just as Temperance activists tried to shame drinkers into abstaining from alcohol in the nineteenth century, some anti-SUV activists use moral claims to urge SUV drivers to give up their “sinful” vehicles. These moral claims are joined by scientific, utilitarian arguments concerning the dubious safety of SUVs and their negative impact on the environment, just as anti-smoking groups marshal evidence about the harmful effects of smoking on human health.

While the similarities between the anti-SUV campaign and other moral reform movements in the United States are several, I argue that the campaign does not fit the typical mold of earlier moral crusades in important ways. First, the anti-SUV campaign reverses the class politics that underlies other efforts to control private behavior. Many accounts of moral reform movements emphasize the class and status politics associated with these campaigns, noting their tendency to demonize the behavior of the lower classes and institute reactionary policies for controlling threatening minority populations. The anti-SUV campaign, however, targets the behaviors and lifestyles of the upper middle classes. Like the anti-fur campaigns of the animal rights movement, the anti-SUV campaign suggests that “morality politics” is not the exclusive terrain of conservative political movements. A second difference between the anti-SUV campaign and other moral reform movements concerns the tactics used to convey the campaign’s central moral message. The anti-SUV campaign relies to a great extent on humor, shame, and a sense of play, rather than the politics of fear.

It is too early to evaluate the political effectiveness and policy success of the anti-SUV campaign in any definitive way. Nevertheless, we can assess the challenges the campaign faces as it attempts to change consumer behavior. I

<sup>2</sup> Michael Marsden, quoted in Julie Guthrie, “Car Wars: Growing Coalition Challenges Morality of SUVs,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 January 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Rogan Kersh and James Morone, “How the Personal Becomes Political: Prohibitions, Public Health, and Obesity,” *Studies in American Political Development* 16 (Fall 2002): 162–175; Alan Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

argue that the anti-SUV campaign confronts fundamental tensions in American political culture around issues of consumption generally and the role of the automobile in American life in particular. While critical of consumption, the anti-SUV campaign is situated in a political economy highly dependent on the consumer, and confronts a consumer culture organized around the mantra of “choice.” The theme of consumer choice poses an especially potent challenge to the anti-SUV campaign, inasmuch as it targets one of the most powerful symbols of American freedom and individuality: the automobile. An investigation into the politics of the anti-SUV campaign, then, provides a lens with which to examine the challenges that American political culture poses to social movements, particularly those that focus on popular consumption habits.

In the first section of the paper, I provide an overview of the anti-SUV movement.<sup>4</sup> This discussion offers a brief history of the campaign, analyzing its origins and the windows of opportunity that have led to its expansion. Next, I examine the anti-SUV campaign in light of its similarities to and differences from other attempts in American politics to govern private behavior. The paper concludes by using the anti-SUV movement to explore tensions and contradictions within American political culture around issues of consumption.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ANTI-SUV CAMPAIGN

The modern-day sport utility vehicle dates to the early 1980s, when General Motors, Ford, and Jeep introduced new models of SUVs to the American consumer, marketing them as sporty alternatives to the family station wagon. But during the 1980s, consumers flocked to minivans rather than SUVs; the 1990s was the decade of the sport utility vehicle. According to one observer, SUVs “fit the bill” during a time when stocks were high, interest rates and unemployment were low, and gas was cheap. Americans, buoyed by the strong economy, “sought vehicles reflecting their optimism.”<sup>5</sup> And optimistic they were. SUV sales nearly quintupled from 1990 to 2001; larger SUVs and luxury models, in particular, captured increasing shares of the automobile market.<sup>6</sup> In 2002, for example, sales of luxury SUVs rose 12 percent in an otherwise disappointing automobile market.<sup>7</sup>

As sport utility vehicles transformed the look of America’s highways and streetscapes, a small but vocal minority of non-SUV drivers began to raise objections to what they saw as unnecessary, aggressive, and dangerous vehicles.

<sup>4</sup> I occasionally use “movement” to describe the anti-SUV campaign, but do so loosely. The anti-SUV campaign is not a full-fledged social movement in the way that scholars understand the term.

<sup>5</sup> Cooper, “SUV Debate,” 463.

<sup>6</sup> Keith Bradsher, *High and Mighty: SUVs—The World’s Most Dangerous Vehicles and How They Got That Way* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 240.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory White and Joseph White, “The Extreme SUV,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 July 2002.

The movement arose from two different locations. The first protests were posted on the World Wide Web in the late 1990s, in the form of angry websites with names like “The Ultimate Poseur’s Sport Utility Page,” “SUV Backlash,” and “I Hate Your SUV.” This largely individual, anarchic anti-SUV campaign was initiated by drivers who had had negative personal experiences with SUVs and SUV drivers.<sup>8</sup> Internet chat rooms provided a forum in which people could voice their anger and recognize that they were not alone in their aversion to SUVs. The anti-SUV campaign, then, easily tapped into the everyday grievances of potential supporters and provided a way for these individuals to feel solidarity with others.<sup>9</sup>

These individual and spontaneous forms of protest preceded a more organized and public backlash in 1999; at that time, the Sierra Club lent organizational weight to the anti-SUV campaign when it publicly renamed the Ford Excursion (Ford’s largest SUV at the time) the Ford Valdez. The Union of Concerned Scientists, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and Friends of the Earth followed suit, connecting SUV issues to their climate change, pollution, and energy campaigns.<sup>10</sup> These organizations have promoted both legislative and technological solutions to the SUV problem, calling on Congress to increase fuel economy standards for light trucks and SUVs, and urging automobile manufacturers to design safer and more fuel-efficient vehicles.

The SUV issue was not only adopted by established environmental organizations, but also gave rise to new groups whose sole focus was on sport utility vehicles. In October 2000, the anti-SUV website, [changingtheclimate.com](http://changingtheclimate.com), offered activists an opportunity to deliver their anti-SUV message directly to consumers. Internet activist Robert Lind of San Francisco encouraged opponents of SUVs to download bumper stickers reading “I’m Changing the Climate, Ask Me How!” and affix them directly on offending vehicles. Guerilla actions against SUVs continued with the founding of Earth on Empty in 2001, an organization that credits itself with ticketing one million SUVs with

<sup>8</sup> I refer to this component of the movement as the “Internet” campaign and its participants as “Internet” activists, to distinguish it from the more organized anti-SUV campaigns of environmental groups and other established interest organizations (who also have Internet websites, of course). Most research on Internet activism focuses on the role of the Internet in political campaigns and elections. See, for example, Steve Davis, Larry Elin, and Grant Reeher, *Click on Democracy: The Internet’s Power to Change Political Apathy into Civic Action* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> On the role of anger and emotions in social movement mobilization, see Ronald R. Aminzade and Doug McAdam, “Emotions and Contentious Politics” in Ronald R. Aminzade, Jack A. Goldstone, Doug McAdam, Elizabeth J. Perry, William H. Sewell, Jr., Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilley, eds., *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, eds., *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Friends of the Earth has a separate website that contains information on SUVs as part of their “Roadhog Reduction Campaign,” accessed at <http://www.suv.org>, 23 June 2006. Keith Bradsher criticizes the environmental movement for failing to lobby against SUVs sooner than they did. See Bradsher, *High and Mighty*, 77–79.

fake traffic citations in five hundred different cities, charging SUV drivers with contributing to a “hostile and unhealthy environment for everyone.”<sup>11</sup>

Reports of more serious vandalism against SUVs started surfacing about the same time as news of these more benign actions spread. In June of 2000, environmental activist Jeffrey Luers was charged with first degree arson for setting fire to three SUVs at a car dealership in Eugene, Oregon.<sup>12</sup> In 2002, forty SUVs were targeted by vandals in Virginia. And in early 2003, a Ford truck dealership in Pennsylvania was set on fire, allegedly the work of the Earth Liberation Front, an underground network of environmentalists known for destroying property.<sup>13</sup>

By 2002, the anti-SUV campaign was in full swing. In February, the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) launched its “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign, adding a religious voice to the crusade against sport utility vehicles. EEN is a member of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, an umbrella group of Christian and Jewish faith-based groups committed to social justice and environmental protection. While the “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign was the target of several jokes and parodies, it also attracted significant media attention. According to EEN, over four thousand media stories have featured the campaign, including national television programs such as *60 Minutes*, *Good Morning America*, and CNN’s *Crossfire*.<sup>14</sup> By November 2002, EEN had secured a meeting with the CEO of the Ford Motor Company, Bill Ford, as well as with top executives at General Motors.

In September of 2002, *New York Times* journalist Keith Bradsher published a treatise against sport utility vehicles, *High and Mighty: SUVs—The World’s Most Dangerous Vehicles and How They Got That Way*. Bradsher’s book was akin to Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation*, the bible of the anti-obesity movement published just a year earlier. Both condemned industry for its manipulative marketing strategies and harmful products. Bradsher also turned a critical eye on consumers, using market-based research from the automobile industry to characterize SUV drivers as insecure, vain, self-centered, and individualistic.<sup>15</sup> *High and Mighty* supported both the more organized anti-SUV campaign’s claims about the safety and environmental impact of sport utility vehicles, as well as the Internet campaign’s focus on the personal failures of SUV drivers.

The California recall election in 2003 shifted the anti-SUV campaign into high gear. Gubernatorial candidate and former conservative columnist Arianna Huffington criticized candidate Arnold Schwarzenegger for the fact that he

<sup>11</sup> Earth on Empty, accessed at <http://www.earthonempty.org>, 6 November 2003.

<sup>12</sup> “Sign-on Letter of Support for Jeff Leurs,” accessed at <http://www.freefreenow.org/singon.html>, 9 July 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Guthrie, “Car Wars.”

<sup>14</sup> Evangelical Environmental Network, “What Would Jesus Drive?” accessed at <http://www.whatwouldjesusdrive.org/intro.php>, 9 July 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Bradsher, *High and Mighty*.

owned half a dozen military-style Hummer vehicles, the most revered and reviled of all SUVs. Huffington subsequently took advantage of other recent political events: she argued that driving an SUV was tantamount to supporting terrorism. Mimicking anti-drug ads that featured everyday citizens “admitting” their sponsorship of terrorism due to their purchase of illegal drugs, Huffington’s ads were similarly scripted. One ad began, “I helped hijack an airplane. I helped blow up a nightclub. So what if it gets eleven miles to the gallon? I helped our enemies develop weapons of mass destruction. What if I need to go off-road? I helped teach kids around the world to hate America. I like to sit up high.”<sup>16</sup> President George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq provided another window of opportunity to anti-SUV activists: one sign seen at anti-war marches read, “If War is Inevitable, Start Drafting SUV Drivers,” while bumper stickers found on an anti-SUV website read, “I Drive a ... Weapon of Mass Consumption,” “Let the Terrorists Win: Drive an SUV,” “Driving a Gas-Guzzler is NOT Patriotic,” and “Drive an SUV, Drive With Saddam!”

The two strands of the anti-SUV movement—referred to here as the Internet campaign and the environmental campaign—offer distinct definitions of the SUV problem. Internet activists complain largely about the driving and parking woes associated with the increased numbers of SUVs on the road. Although they pay some attention to safety concerns, their grievances are mainly of a personal nature. Environmental groups, on the other hand, focus on the negative externalities associated with sport utility vehicles. Their most important claim is that the poor gas mileage of SUVs contributes to increased CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, adding to the U.S.’s already high contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions. A second complaint aims at the off-road capabilities of SUVs: land conservation groups in particular object to driving off-road, because it degrades natural habitats and decreases the quality of nonmotorized recreational activities. Because the two wings of the movement advance different claims, their solutions to the SUV problem diverge. Environmentalists focusing on climate change might drop their objections to SUVs if Detroit were to produce more fuel-efficient SUVs. Internet activists, however, are unlikely to be satisfied with such technological changes, inasmuch as their concerns are tied more to the size of the vehicles than to their gas mileage.<sup>17</sup> Where the two strands of the movement overlap is in their condemnation of SUVs as symbols of conspicuous consumption. Both the Internet campaign and segments of the environmental movement adopt populist rhetoric denouncing the consumption habits of SUV drivers. Here, their solutions converge: large, luxury SUVs should be rejected in favor of less ostentatious vehicles.

<sup>16</sup> The Detroit Project, “Talking Heads,” accessed at <http://www.thedetroitproject.com/ads/default.htm>, 5 January 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the different problem definitions and policy preferences of the two strands of the anti-SUV campaign.

To date, the anti-SUV backlash has been surprisingly successful, given its small size and scant resources. One sign of success is the sheer publicity generated by the campaign. As noted above, the “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign has attracted mainstream media attention, as have other anti-SUV actions and advocacy groups. The *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *BusinessWeek*, *Time Magazine*, and *The New Yorker* are some of the mainstream media outlets that have covered aspects of the anti-SUV campaign.

A second indication of success is the increasingly organized nature of the campaign. What started out as complaints by individuals on the Internet has evolved into a largely uncoordinated but more organized movement. A number of groups have emerged whose sole focus is on SUVs, while several established environmental groups have tacked an anti-SUV component onto their existing campaigns. In fact, this increased organization led to a counter-campaign by the automobile industry, which launched a pro-SUV organization in 1999. The “Sport Utility Vehicle Owners of America” is organized as a non-profit consumer group, claiming to be “the voice of and advocate for SUV owners from unfounded attacks by special interest groups and unwarranted government regulation.”<sup>18</sup>

The issues raised by the anti-SUV campaign have made it onto the public and governmental agendas, albeit not as a priority or as highly salient for either agenda. Mainstream media coverage suggests the anti-SUV campaign’s entry onto the public agenda, while the popularity of anti-SUV websites implies some minority attention to the campaign.<sup>19</sup> With respect to the government agenda, several bills have been introduced in the House and the Senate to improve the gas mileage of SUVs, minivans, and pickup trucks, but to date, none have passed. For example, in April of 2003, the House defeated a proposal by Representative Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY) and Representative Edward Markey (D-MA) that would have eliminated the disparity in fuel economy standards between cars and light trucks by 2010. More recently, however, pressure has been building in Congress to raise corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) standards because of rising gas prices in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.<sup>20</sup> The Bush administration, in an apparent attempt to pre-empt further congressional action, proposed to increase the fuel efficiency of SUVs, minivans, and trucks by an

<sup>18</sup> Sport Utility Vehicle Owners of America, “About Us: Driven to Inform, Protect and Serve,” accessed at <http://www.suova.com/about/>, 18 June 2004.

<sup>19</sup> The Ultimate Poseur Sport Utility Page (accessed at <http://poseur.4x4.org/>, 15 July 2004) claims it gets an average of four hundred individual (unique) visits to its website each day. The website has been mentioned on the cover of *USA Today*, in mainstream news magazines, and was featured on *NBC Nightly News* and mentioned on National Public Radio’s popular *CarTalk* program. Earth on Empty’s campaign received popular recognition when a *Doonesbury* cartoon character began ticketing SUVs.

<sup>20</sup> Under current corporate average fuel economy standards, an automaker’s light truck fleet (which includes SUVs) must average 21.6 miles a gallon, compared with 27.5 for passenger car fleets. Even several Republicans once reluctant to change the law support increased corporate average fuel economy standards. Julie Eilperin, “Resistant Lawmakers Now Back Higher Gas Mileage Standards,” *Washington Post*, 4 May 2006.

average of about two miles per gallon over four years. These policy initiatives are no doubt due to a combination of factors, not wholly the result of the anti-SUV campaign. But the anti-SUV campaign's focus on the special status of SUVs and light trucks under the CAFE standards has generated some pressure on Congress and the administration to remove this loophole. At the very least, Democrats have taken notice of the anti-SUV campaign: the 2004 Democratic National Platform Committee Report alludes to the movement when it states, "We support the American people's freedom to choose whatever cars, SUVs, minivans, or trucks they choose, but we also believe American ingenuity is equal to the task of improving efficiency."<sup>21</sup>

In 2003, the safety concerns voiced by anti-SUV activists gained a great deal of legitimacy when the head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Jeffrey Runge, said that he would not let his son drive an SUV known for a high rollover rate "if it was the last one on earth."<sup>22</sup> The agency later announced nonbinding recommendations to improve SUV safety, in keeping with the Bush administration's preference for voluntary solutions over regulatory ones. Nevertheless, Runge's public condemnation of SUVs worried Detroit automakers. As *BusinessWeek* reported, Runge's criticisms "dovetailed with those of the increasingly vocal anti-SUV crowd."<sup>23</sup> In what was billed as a "historic voluntary commitment," the Detroit automakers later agreed to redesign SUVs to reduce rollover vulnerability and also to minimize harm to other vehicles that collide with SUVs. Although industry has generally taken the safety concerns about SUVs more seriously than environmental matters, Detroit has recently introduced more environmentally friendly SUVs; at the 2004 North American International Auto Show, Chrysler, General Motors, and Ford Motors unveiled hybrid versions of their large trucks and SUVs. As one observer of the auto industry put it, "GM [General Motors] would never admit that its advanced technology plans are a response to outside pressure, but partly they are."<sup>24</sup> The vice president of communications at General Motors admitted that while the anti-SUV campaign does not seem to be affecting sales of the vehicles, "that doesn't mean we aren't taking it seriously."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Further evidence that Washington DC has taken notice of the anti-SUV campaign is that *The CQ Researcher* devoted an entire issue to the SUV debate. See Cooper, "SUV Debate."

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Lorrain Woellert, "The Sport-Utility Critic Detroit Can't Dismiss," *BusinessWeek*, 17 February 2003, 43.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* More recently, state attorneys general have launched an ad campaign urging SUV owners to drive more safely. The \$27-million-dollar campaign is funded from a settlement with Ford Motor Company, who was charged with running deceptive advertisements about the alleged safety of its SUVs. See Patti Bond, "Ads Aim to Tame Wild and Woolly SUV," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 1 February 2005, 1A.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Howes, "Quantum Leap to Hybrid SUVs in World Market Will Take Time," 7 November 2003, accessed on the website of *The Detroit News Online* at <http://detnews.com/2003/insiders/0311/07/b01-318733.htm>, 19 August 2004.

<sup>25</sup> John N. Frank, "SUVs-Automakers Need to Drive Home Information on SUVs," *PR Week*, 3 March 2003.



Despite General Motors' claim to the contrary, evidence suggests that the anti-SUV campaign may be impacting sales of sport utility vehicles. By 2003, sales of SUVs had leveled off at about 3 million vehicles per year.<sup>26</sup> More recently, sales of large SUVs have been declining, compared to the record-high sales levels in the late 1990s. In January and February of 2005, sales were down 31 percent and 21 percent, respectively, from the same time period in 2004. Even industry analysts admit that higher gas prices are not the only culprit: "Analysts say the era of the big SUV may be over for another, more important reason: The SUV just isn't hip anymore."<sup>27</sup> The excessiveness of the vehicles is not the only problem: as sport utility vehicles have migrated into suburbs, they have been slapped with the derogatory label of "soccer dad" vehicles.<sup>28</sup>

### THE ANTI-SUV CAMPAIGN AS MORAL REFORM MOVEMENT

At first glance, Todd Bradley, a software engineer living in Boulder, Colorado in the twenty-first century has little in common with the upper middle class women who rallied against liquor consumption in the early part of twentieth-century America. But like the Temperance activists before him, Bradley has attempted to change the personal consumption habits of his fellow citizens. Campaigns aimed at changing consumption patterns have a long history in the United States. The Puritans established sumptuary laws in the seventeenth century that directed people to reject certain goods, both for the purpose of conserving resources as well as for ensuring a stable class system, whereby no one "pretended" to be of a class above them by consuming its signature goods.<sup>29</sup> During WWI and WWII, the government urged citizens to curb their consumption of sugar, shoes, and other products so that resources could be used for the war effort, and rationed some items—like automobile tires and gasoline—outright.<sup>30</sup> Present-day efforts to regulate consumption are most obvious in the anti-obesity and anti-drug campaigns, both of which castigate people's consumption choices and habits.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Cooper, "SUV Debate," 452.

<sup>27</sup> Rick Haglund, "Sales of Bigger SUVs Shrink," 20 March 2005, accessed on the website of *The Times-Picayune Online* at <http://www.nola.com/business/t-p/index.ssf?/base/money-2/1111386307275350.xml>, 25 March 2005.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Cynthia Harrison, "The 'City on a Hill' Cliché: Puritans' Winthrop Was No Advocate of Liberty," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 January 1989, 8. See also Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> According to Daniel Horowitz, WWI economic planners hoped that war-time consumer restraints would lead to more permanent changes in consumption patterns, while WWII budget experts considered rationing and economic planning as only a temporary necessity brought on by war-time conditions. Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Kersh and Morone, "How the Personal Becomes Political," 162–175.

The regulation of consumption is at the heart of many “moral reform projects,” defined by Alan Hunt as practices “whereby some social agents problematise some aspect of the conduct, values, or culture of others on moral grounds and seek to impose regulation on them.”<sup>32</sup> Moral reform projects that focus on consumption politicize what is sometimes assumed to be private behavior. Smoking, drinking, and driving a sport utility vehicle can be constructed as personal choices, but moral reform campaigns politicize such activities by arguing that they threaten the moral standing of individuals and society while also contributing to wider public problems. The anti-SUV campaign is a recent example of a consumption-oriented moral reform project: it shares with other campaigns a strong moralizing discourse, a focus on regulating one’s own behavior and that of others, and a political strategy that demonizes “users” and the responsible industry. At the same time, the anti-SUV campaign reminds us that moral reform projects are not homogenous. Different strands of a campaign might employ moralistic rhetoric to a greater or lesser degree, advocate mainly for personal restraint over government regulation, and focus more or less on individual versus industry culpability.

The anti-SUV campaign’s most direct link to other moral reform movements is its explicit and implicit moral appeals. The underlying moral character of the anti-SUV movement is obvious in the EEN’s “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign. The campaign states outright that “transportation is a moral issue,” claiming that the “Risen Lord Jesus cares about what we drive.”<sup>33</sup> Even nonreligious anti-SUV groups and activists make moral appeals. The Detroit Project urges drivers to consider the societal impacts of their vehicle choice by asking, “What is your SUV doing to the world?” while Earth on Empty suggests that SUV drivers are morally culpable by issuing phony traffic tickets to SUV owners—a symbol of law-breaking and criminal activity. Randy Cohen, the ethics columnist for the *New York Times Magazine*, was straightforward in his moral condemnation of SUV drivers: “If you’re planning to drive that SUV in New York, pack a suitcase into your roomy cargo area, because you’re driving straight to hell.”<sup>34</sup>

While many environmental campaigns have used moralistic rhetoric to urge citizens to make wise consumer choices, to recycle, and to support wider efforts to improve the environment, rarely has the rhetoric been so pointed in its condemnation of individual behavior. The anti-SUV campaign, especially the Internet wing of the movement, suggests that there is something inherently wrong or bad about purchasing and driving a sport utility vehicle. Not only is the decision to purchase an SUV portrayed as a personal moral failing, but the act of driving one is seen as contributing to the further moral degradation of

<sup>32</sup> Hunt, *Governing Morals*, ix.

<sup>33</sup> Evangelical Environmental Network, “WWJDrive Campaign Summary,” accessed at <http://www.whatwouldjesusdrive.org/resources/summary.php>, 9 July 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Randy Cohen, “Departure Delays,” *New York Times Magazine*, 2 May 1999, 29.

SUV owners. Such claims are reminiscent of other moral reform projects, such as the anti-smoking and anti-drug crusades, which condemn the “users” as well as the consumer item itself. Users are morally culpable for their choices, and these choices further degrade users because of the behavioral effects of the condemned product. Anti-SUV Internet activists imply that the height and size of the vehicles enhance a pre-existent selfishness and arrogance—the tendency to “look down upon others”—on the part of SUV owners.

A second similarity between the anti-SUV campaign and other moral reform movements is the implicit desire to govern or impose regulation on others. Anti-SUV activists hope to change the behavior of consumers through direct moral appeals and through government regulation.<sup>35</sup> Some anti-SUV activists attempt to shame drivers into giving up their SUVs, others appeal more positively to their sense of morality, and organized environmental groups are urging the auto industry and pressuring the government to make SUVs safer and more fuel efficient. Their solutions to the SUV problem, in other words, involve a mix of state-centered and non-state-centered actions. In this way, the anti-SUV campaign resembles other moral reform movements that call for both personal responsibility and state regulation to curb the unwanted and undesirable behavior.

But the anti-SUV campaign is not only concerned with governing the behavior of others: it also seeks to govern the self. Self-governance is a key feature of moral reform projects, concerned as they are with the need for individual self-control and self-mastery over iniquity. The self-governance aspect of the anti-SUV campaign is evident in electronic discussions about SUVs in which individuals applaud their own self-restraint when it came to choosing a vehicle. The confessor might admit to once owning an SUV or reveal that she had considered buying one, but might claim that she soon “saw the light” and decided to buy a smaller vehicle. Another type of confessional story is contributed by an SUV owner himself, who claims that he actually needs an SUV, unlike a “housewife” who uses it to “haul groceries and take her kids to ballet classes.”<sup>36</sup>

Making distinctions between different types of SUV owners is a hallmark of both the anti-SUV movement and moral reform movements more generally. The Internet activists admit that there are some “deserving” owners—those who use SUVs for their intended purpose of going off-road, hauling heavy

<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault claims that both state and non-state actors engage in governing: governing does “not cover only the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection, but also modes of action, more or less considered, which were designed to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others.” Michel Foucault, “The Subject and the Power” in Herbert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 221.

<sup>36</sup> Montag, “Liberals Hate SUVs,” accessed at <http://www.chatarea.com/Votecomers.m2004237>, 1 July 2004.

cargo, or towing boats and trailers. The vitriolic rhetoric is reserved for the alleged majority of owners who have little need for an SUV's large engine, four-wheel drive, and towing capacities.<sup>37</sup> These categories of drivers carry an implicit class and gender distinction—deserving drivers are rural farmers and rugged sportsmen, while the undeserving drivers are suburban “soccer moms.”

Finally, the anti-SUV campaign resembles other projects aimed at politicizing private behavior in that it, too, demonizes both “users” and the responsible industry. Kersh and Morone consider the process of demonizing to be an essential part of how private actions become politicized.<sup>38</sup> But who is demonized—users or industry—and to what degree matters a great deal politically. In the anti-SUV campaign, the two strands of the movement emphasize different targets, suggesting some tension within the anti-SUV campaign. Established environmental organizations and other advocacy groups largely focus their criticisms on the automobile industry and the government. Many have gone out of their way to distance themselves from the personalized rhetoric on the alternative anti-SUV websites. For example, EEN states, “We make no judgments about individual decisions concerning vehicles,” while Huffington's Detroit Project simply states, “We do not want to demonize anyone.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike individual Internet activists, these groups are trying to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. Many of their supporters drive SUVs or have considered buying one: a recent poll of readers of *Sierra*, the magazine of the Sierra Club, shows that 27 percent of its readers own SUVs.<sup>40</sup> Organizational concerns require that established interest groups (particularly membership-based groups) do not assign culpability to individual drivers. Their solutions, therefore, are public ones involving technological and policy changes.

The Internet activists and the less organized, Web-only anti-SUV groups operate under fewer organizational constraints, and are more prone to target the drivers themselves. While they tend to mimic the rights arguments of the mainstream environmental groups—namely, that people have the right to drive what they want—their rhetoric demonizes SUV drivers to a much greater extent than does that of their allies in the environmental movement. In part, this is because Internet activists focus on their personal frustrations with SUVs and SUV drivers.

<sup>37</sup> Many in the environmental wing of the anti-SUV movement would reject the idea of “deserving” owners, as they oppose using SUVs to go off-road. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

<sup>38</sup> Kersh and Morone, “How the Personal Becomes Political,” 164.

<sup>39</sup> Evangelical Environmental Network, “Our Opinion on Recent Vandalism,” accessed at <http://www.whatwouldjesusdrive.org/opinion.php>, 9 July 2004; The Detroit Project, “Frequently Asked Questions,” accessed at <http://www.americansforfuel-efficient-cars.org/readmore/faq.htm>, 9 July 2004.

<sup>40</sup> Jennifer Hattam, “Sierra Readers, by the Numbers,” *Sierra*, January/February 2005, 48. Bradsher also notes that supporters of mainstream environmental organizations are susceptible to the marketing of SUVs as “outdoorsy” vehicles. He quotes Kevin Mills, a campaigner at Environmental Defense, who admitted that some groups felt that “to vilify SUVs was to alienate your members. It feels like you are blaming them instead of the companies.” Bradsher, *High and Mighty*, 78.

This individualistic critique prompts Internet activists to focus on the failings of SUV drivers rather than on government policy or on the activities of the automobile industry. Consequently, the extreme moralizing rhetoric is found more often in the Internet wing of the campaign than in the environmental one.

While the focus on the individual is notable, moral reform movements rarely limit their concern to the harms done by (and in some cases to) the individual “sinner.” Rather, moral reformers often catalogue the various externalities associated with individual behaviors. Indeed, this is one of the keys to politicizing private citizen behavior: the condemned activity is dangerous not only to the person engaging in it, but also to society at large.<sup>41</sup> The spillover effects might be the higher national health costs associated with an increasingly obese population, as charged in the anti-obesity campaign, or the decay of our inner cities caused by increasing drug use. Hunt argues that such utilitarian arguments became increasingly common in moral reform movements “as moral discourses became detached from taken-for-granted religious frameworks.”<sup>42</sup> The environmental wing of the anti-SUV campaign is particularly explicit about detailing the externalities associated with driving sport utility vehicles, but they are not unique among moral reformers in linking personal behavior to public costs.

#### HOW THE ANTI-SUV CAMPAIGN DIFFERS FROM OTHER MORAL REFORM MOVEMENTS

The anti-SUV campaign, while it shares many of the characteristics of other moral reform projects, is notably different in at least two respects. First, the class and status themes underlying it are reversed. Unlike the public health movements described by Kersh and Morone and the moral reform projects described by Hunt, the anti-SUV campaign attacks the lifestyles and status-seeking behavior of people in the upper middle classes who can afford sport utility vehicles. The anti-SUV campaign, like the anti-fur campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s by animal rights activists, demonstrates that moral reform movements are not aimed only at lower classes and ethnic minorities, but can target the affluent and elite. Indeed, the anti-fur campaign struck an especially powerful moral tone, based on a popular aversion to animal cruelty and the increasingly accepted notion that animals have the right to live free of suffering.<sup>43</sup> Because fur has long been associated with wealth, the importance of the anti-fur campaign extended beyond its implications for animal rights; it

<sup>41</sup> See Kersh and Morone, “How the Personal Becomes Political,” 162–175.

<sup>42</sup> Hunt, *Governing Morals*, 7.

<sup>43</sup> In a 1995 public opinion survey, 59 percent of respondents agreed that it was “always wrong” to use animals for fur, while 38 percent strongly agreed that animals have as much a right to live free of suffering as humans. David Masci, “Fighting Over Animal Rights,” *CQ Researcher*, 2 August 1992, 673–696. For more on the moral claims of the animal rights movement, see Lawrence Finsen and Susan Finsen, *The Animal Rights Movement in America: From Compassion to Respect* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), especially chapter six.

was also a critique of the lifestyles of those who could afford and chose to wear fur.<sup>44</sup> Critics saw fur, like SUVs, as an ostentatious display of wealth and as an unnecessary (and cruel) purchase for which many substitutes were available.

A second distinguishing characteristic of the anti-SUV campaign is its use of humor, sarcasm, and ridicule to stigmatize sport utility vehicles and their owners. Many moral reform projects rely on fear, anxiety, and racial or ethnic prejudice to mobilize the public and policymakers. Even the anti-fur campaign, while innovative in its framing of the issue and in its direct action strategies, struck a sober tone. The anti-SUV campaign, in contrast, melds serious discussions of the environmental and safety problems associated with SUVs with more lighthearted repartee. The widespread use of humor in the anti-SUV campaign suggests that moral reform projects can communicate a serious moral message in ways that do not exaggerate the danger posed by a certain activity or segment of the population.

### *Class and Status in the Anti-SUV Campaign*

Movements aimed at regulating personal behavior, such as Prohibition, the anti-abortion movement, and the drug wars are typically associated with conservative ideologies. Moral reform movements, preoccupied as they are with “decency, diligence, gravity, modesty, orderliness, prudence, reason, self-control, sobriety, and thrift”<sup>45</sup> easily become platforms from which to denigrate particular ethnic groups, women, and the less well off. They also provide opportunities for disciplining these groups through official and unofficial means. Kersh and Morone find enduring American tensions around race and class in several of the public health cases they investigate: “At least three of the cases (drugs, drink, and sex) feature a powerful racial component. Add class and ethnicity to the mix and it is difficult to find any exceptions to the rule: American prohibitions demonize the poor and weak.”<sup>46</sup> While such movements might originate with everyday citizens, these citizens are often in the middle or upper classes. And their targets are not people in their own class or ethnic group, but “outsiders” whose behaviors need modifying. Hunt also highlights the class-based nature of many moral reform movements and related projects aimed at reforming popular culture: “There is rarely a period in which the recreations and pastimes of the poor, of the working population, or of some socially visible minority have not been the target for the moralization and projects of governance by some other section of the population.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> On the history of fur and anti-fur campaigns, see Julia B. Emberley, *The Cultural Politics of Fur* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>45</sup> Hunt, *Governing Morals*, 13–14.

<sup>46</sup> Kersh and Morone, “How the Personal Becomes Political,” 164.

<sup>47</sup> Hunt, *Governing Morals*, 14. Examples of efforts to reform popular culture can be found in previous eras as well as the present one. Hunt mentions efforts in early modern England to repress pagan rituals and festivals; current examples include suppression of urban cultural forms such as rave parties.

The anti-SUV movement does not mirror the class and race politics described above. While anti-SUV activists appear to be mainly white and from the middle classes, their targets are other relatively well-off Americans. Put simply, it is not the “recreations and pastimes” of the poor that are at issue, but those of the wealthy. For the Internet activists, class and lifestyle criticism is overt. References to “latte sipping” executives, sitting in traffic on their leather seats with cell phones in hand, are common. One opponent, “Bad Jim,” writes in an E-mail exchange that “SUVs are primarily yuppie-mobiles. It isn’t the average working-class type who buys a Ford Expedition or Lincoln Navigator.”<sup>48</sup> The “recreations” of SUV drivers are also a target for criticism. Anti-SUV activists castigate owners for using their SUVs to go to the mall or to commute from their subdivision; several Internet opponents of SUVs promote more “rugged” recreational activities while scorning the consumption-oriented, suburban activities of mainstream America.

Class and status themes are also voiced by owners of SUVs, some of whom defend their consumer choices on Internet chat rooms. For proponents, the anti-SUV activists are simply envious; one contributor to the Ultimate Poseur website chat room charges, “I think you [responding to a previous message] may just be bitter because you probably cannot afford even an entry level SUV.”<sup>49</sup> Pro-SUV activists also comment on the lifestyle preferences of their opponents: Karen De Coster, author of an Internet article titled “I Hate SUV Haters,” claims that “SUV Haters are likely the impractical types that have prissy ‘for looks only’ furniture in the house that is too darn uncomfortable to sit or lay [*sic*] on.”<sup>50</sup> Lifestyle choices become the stand-in for a variety of other divisions: among rural, urban, and suburban sensibilities, partisan and ideological leanings, and socioeconomic standing. The focus on lifestyle choices might be due to what many social scientists claim is a uniquely American aversion to framing issues in class terms.<sup>51</sup> It is also the case that since both critics and users come from the same general socioeconomic class, class provides an incomplete way of distinguishing the reformers from those who need to be reformed. Lifestyle choices provide a means of drawing boundaries and are grounds for criticizing the habits and sensibilities of upper middle class suburbanites.

<sup>48</sup> Bad Jim, posted E-mail, 19 February 2004, accessed at <http://calpundit.com/archives/003310.html>, 1 July 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Ultimate Poseur Sport Utility Page, “Hate Mail,” accessed at <http://www.poseur.4x4.org/Negative.html>, 18 June 2004.

<sup>50</sup> Karen DeCoster, “I Hate SUV Haters,” accessed at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/decoster/decoster70.html>, 1 July 2004.

<sup>51</sup> On the lack of class conflict in the U.S. and the prevalence of status politics, see Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

### *Humor and Sarcasm in the Anti-SUV Campaign*

Moral reform movements are serious business. According to Hunt, supporters of these campaigns are “mobilized and drawn into action by the passionate conviction that there is something inherently wrong or immoral about the conduct of others.”<sup>52</sup> Because moral discourses advocate clear standards of right and wrong, campaigns based on them can be rigid and doctrinaire. Such campaigns, in demonizing both the users of the offending product and the industry behind it, evoke images of dangerous classes and deceitful business people. As Kersh and Morone note, the American drug wars are rooted in racial and ethnic fears: “a sinister ‘other’ lurks behind reform efforts, fuelling regulatory and prohibitionist efforts.”<sup>53</sup> Reformers consciously draw on such fears to mobilize the public and policymakers. It is no wonder that repressive policies are born from such efforts: public fears are best allayed by harsh criminal sanctions.

The anti-SUV movement, while it uses moralizing rhetoric and demonizing imagery, is less reliant on the politics of fear than other moral reform movements. Anti-SUV activists are passionate, but they have embraced a rather different political strategy and orientation to express their convictions: they use humor, sarcasm, and ridicule to convey their message about sport utility vehicles. As “The Ultimate Poseur Sport Utility Page” states outright, “The goal of this page is to expose the ridiculous SUV trend to help stop it, and have some laughs while we’re at it!” Several websites mock particular SUV models, dubbing the Land Rover “The Land Runover,” branding the Hummer, “Dummer” and the Hummer2 “HummerDinger2.” Another example comes from Huffington’s Detroit Project, which produced a humorous animated cartoon during the California recall election showing then-candidate Schwartzegger running out of gas as he drives his Hummer to Sacramento. In short, anti-SUV websites contain cartoons, humorous bumper stickers and slogans, comical T-shirts, and even songs and poems parodying SUVs, even as the text on the sites solemnly catalogues the health and environmental impacts of SUVs. While both wings of the anti-SUV campaign use humor, environmental groups more often combine the humor with serious discussions of the negative environmental impacts of SUVs and our transportation system more generally.

Humor, sarcasm, and ridicule have long been used in politics. Political candidates and politicians, political parties, and social movements use humor to disarm critics, establish an ideological or partisan position, and expose an opponent’s biases, ineptitudes, oppression, and pretentiousness, among other things.<sup>54</sup> Certainly, the anti-SUV campaign is not unique in its use of humor.

<sup>52</sup> Hunt, *Governing Morals*, ix.

<sup>53</sup> Kersh and Morone, “How the Personal Becomes Political,” 164.

<sup>54</sup> Don L.F. Nilsen, “The Social Functions of Political Humor,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 24 (Winter 1990): 35–47. See also Hans Spier, “Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power,”



But the strategy is notable when viewed in the context of moral reform movements generally, many of which mobilize fear and threats rather than employing humor to convey their message. The anti-SUV campaign's ability to use humor rests in part on the class dynamics described above. Because critics of SUVs and their targets are both from the middle or upper middle classes, sarcasm, ridicule, and humor aimed at SUV drivers is politically acceptable. The lack of an obvious racial component to the SUV debate also sanctions this strategy: minorities are not the target of ridicule, but the majority white population.

In sum, the anti-SUV campaign, because it differs from the typical moral reform movement in terms of its class dynamics and its communication and mobilization strategies, is more progressive in its politics than the moral reform movements described by Hunt and the public health movements examined by Kersh and Morone. The anti-SUV campaign does not carry the ominous racial and class connotations found in other reform movements. It does not, in Horowitz's words, "rest ... on self-righteous judgments of people who are simply trying to make ends meet."<sup>55</sup> While some anti-SUV activists might properly be accused of being self-righteous, they turn their attention to people who are doing far better than just making ends meet. And by employing humor in the service of making their criticisms and appeals, anti-SUV activists minimize the possibility that draconian policy measures will be enacted to address the SUV problem. But the anti-SUV movement confronts important tensions and contradictions in American political culture, posing a challenge to the campaign.

### AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE AND THE ANTI-SUV CAMPAIGN

Sarah Jain, professor of anthropology at Stanford, argues that sport utility vehicles represent "the inability of Americans to make a connection between consumption decisions and their social impact."<sup>56</sup> Jain, like many of the anti-SUV activists, suggests that most Americans have tunnel vision, consuming products with little thought to how their individual decisions, when combined with those of millions of others, create public problems such as dirty air, clogged highways, and climate change. One goal of the anti-SUV movement is to point out these connections to consumers, hoping that knowledge will lead to behavior changes. Todd Bradley, in explaining why he created his anti-SUV

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*American Journal of Sociology* 103 (March 1998): 1352–1401; Diane Martin, "Balancing on the Political High Wire: The Role of Humor in the Rhetoric of Ann Richards," *Southern Communication Journal* 69 (Summer 2004): 273–288.

<sup>55</sup> Horowitz, *Anxieties of Affluence*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Patricia Leigh Brown, "SUV Road Warriors Fight Back Backlash," 8 February 2003, accessed on the website of the *International Herald Tribune Online* at <http://www.iht.com/articles/86098.html>, 5 January 2005.

website (one of the original Internet sites), said that he hoped it would prod people to think about the implications of their consumer choices and help them make better ones.<sup>57</sup>

The anti-SUV campaign faces a much greater problem when trying to spread their message to consumers, however. American political culture has long been ambivalent about consumption, and the anti-SUV campaign reflects this ambivalence. On the one hand, it contains critiques of consumption, affluence, and luxury that have their roots in earlier eras and in prominent intellectual traditions. At the same time, the anti-SUV campaign is embedded in an economy driven by consumption, a politics that equates citizenship with consumption, and a culture that encourages individuals to create their identities through the purchase of consumer products. The anti-SUV campaign does not resolve or overcome the tensions it confronts; rather, it tries to walk a thin line between these ambiguous traditions.

### *The Anxieties and Assurances of Affluence*

American unease with consumption has a long history, evident in early American religious, political-cultural, and economic thought. Puritan thinkers in the eighteenth century shunned gratuitous consumption and luxury goods for their incompatibility with Christian teachings about modesty and humility before God. Secular anxieties about consumption revolved around themes of the virtuous citizen, whose time should be spent doing hard work and pursuing meaningful activities that enhanced the self and the community. Conspicuous consumption and the pursuit of luxury items were seen as threatening one's personal virtues and a society's public spirit.<sup>58</sup> The economic arguments against consumption were voiced in classic American liberal thought, which considered excessive consumption to be detrimental to the economy because it took capital away from production.<sup>59</sup> Most people in the nineteenth century shared this producerist worldview; the consumer and consumption were treated as necessary evils, something to control so that production—the chief driver of the economy—would not suffer. In the late nineteenth century, Yale sociologist William Graham Sumner epitomized this thinking, denying the consumer a legitimate political identity by equating “consumer” with a non-productive citizen.<sup>60</sup>

These anti-consumerist themes were echoed in the twentieth century. During the World Wars, limited consumption was once again considered

<sup>57</sup> Todd Bradley, in a telephone interview with the author, 8 August 2004.

<sup>58</sup> Horowitz, *Anxieties of Affluence*, 2–3.

<sup>59</sup> Kathleen Donohue, *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 15–16.

a civic duty and the sign of a virtuous citizen. One government campaign urged citizens to “Produce & Conserve, Share & Play Square,” a testament to the lingering influence of the producerist worldview.<sup>61</sup> In the 1960s, anti-consumption sentiments reached their pinnacle, as counter-cultural movements rejected mass consumer culture and the mindless pursuit of material goods. Their critique had the intellectual backing of writers like John Kenneth Galbraith, who made a connection between private affluence and public poverty. The more money people spent on “mauve and cerise, air-conditioned, power-steered, and power-braked automobiles” the fewer resources were available for public goods such as schools, parks, and clean air.<sup>62</sup> Galbraith called on the government to enact public policies to curb consumption and increase public spending, including a national tax on consumption. At the end of the twentieth century, anti-consumption movements were still alive and well: Horowitz cites the voluntary simplicity movement, the World Trade Organization/anti-globalization protests, and “culture jammers” who reject “hype, commercialism, and commodity fetishism” as some of the most “impassioned, morally charged critiques of consumer culture” in our times.<sup>63</sup>

While anti-consumption themes have a long tradition in American political, economic, and cultural thought, much of the time they have been overshadowed by a celebration of the consumer and consumption. The producerist worldview gave way to a consumerist one beginning in the late nineteenth century, when several economists proposed that it was the consumer, not the producer, who was the driving force in the economy.<sup>64</sup> In the 1940s and in the decades following WWII, consumers enjoyed an exalted place in American political and economic thought, as post-war mass consumption validated consumer-centered economic theories and promised an end to scarcity for many Americans. Market researchers George Katona and Ernest Dichter praised the affluent consumer for her contribution to “economic growth, democracy, and social stability.”<sup>65</sup> The consumer not only ensured an expanding economy, but allegedly protected it from wildly fluctuating inflation and other economic ills. The act of consuming, moreover, represented a positive psychological experience for the individual who expressed himself through material goods. Such consumers were optimistic and forward-thinking, and thus essential to a democracy that relied on individual initiative and rested on a collective hope for the future.<sup>66</sup> Cohen has dubbed the second half of the

<sup>61</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 62.

<sup>62</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 192.

<sup>63</sup> Horowitz, *Anxieties of Affluence*, 252.

<sup>64</sup> Donohue, *Freedom from Want*, 41–72.

<sup>65</sup> Horowitz, *Anxieties of Affluence*, 48–49.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

twentieth century the “Consumer’s Republic,” an era in which our economy, culture, and politics were “built around the promise of mass consumption, both in terms of material life and the more idealistic goals of greater freedom, democracy, and equality.”<sup>67</sup>

In post-September 11 America, this pro-consumerist outlook has changed little. While there was some hope immediately after the terrorist attacks that Americans might reevaluate their lifestyles and opt for a more simple life in which family, volunteering, and civic engagement trumped the individual pursuit of material well-being, such a sea change has not happened. President Bush’s call to the nation to go shopping in the wake of the attacks was in keeping with the idea that consuming was a patriotic act; to contribute to societal well-being, a person needs to do little more than satisfy his or her individual material desires. In this respect, the President echoed theorists from the 1930s who equated consumption with the public interest, setting the stage for a definition of citizenship based on our consumer identities. As Kathleen Donohue explains, “The equation of *consumer* with *public interest* ... went a long way toward rooting civic identity in the consumer. Once the public interest had been defined in terms of a consumer interest, it did not require much of an intellectual stretch to define *the people* in terms of their consumer identity.”<sup>68</sup>

### *Confronting the Contradictions: Ideas about Consumption in the Anti-SUV Campaign*

The anti-SUV campaign has arisen from these varying ideas about the consumer and consumption, and reflects both of these traditions. Although an anti-consumerist ideology prevails, the campaign has not entirely wrested itself from the pro-consumerist society in which it is rooted. The anti-SUV campaign has had to contend with ambiguities found *within* anti-consumerist thought, in addition to addressing pro-consumerist values and institutions. In trying to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate uses of SUVs, the campaign has encountered a problem in anti-consumerist thought more generally: How do we draw the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable consumption? Is “inappropriate” consumption mainly a quantitative concept, or a qualitative one?

*Appropriate and inappropriate consumption.* The anti-SUV campaign contains an explicit critique of luxury, affluence, and conspicuous consumption.

<sup>67</sup> Cohen, *Consumer’s Republic*, 7.

<sup>68</sup> Donohue, *Freedom from Want*, 105. For an excellent analysis of how the basis for citizenship in America during the twentieth century became grounded in consumerism, see Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

As noted above, many Internet activists reference the affluent lifestyles of SUV owners, the luxury features of the latest SUV models, including leather interiors and heated seats, and their high price tags. As one contributor to an anti-SUV chat room writes (responding to a pro-SUV posting), “*The masses* are getting SUVs because they need to haul stuff? Since when are SUVs the vehicles of the people?”<sup>69</sup> Another website refers to SUVs as “gluttonous trophy cars,” while an E-mail posting calls SUV owners “profligate wasters.”<sup>70</sup>

Anti-SUV activists are most uncomfortable with people who buy vehicles with features that they do not need and do not use. The four-wheel drive capacity of many SUVs is a particular point of contention for Internet activists. These activists point to marketing research that indicates only about 5 percent of SUV owners take their vehicles off-road. Some individuals complaining on the Internet appear personally offended by this statistic, charging it makes a “mockery of the off-roading sport.” Others note that few SUV owners actually use them to tow boats or trailers: “I rarely see any SUVs towing trailers except jumbo utes like Expedition and Suburban,” writes one contributor to an anti-SUV chat room.<sup>71</sup> Todd Bradley, creator of SUV Backlash, agreed that the problem is that for the majority of people, SUVs are the “wrong tool for the job.”<sup>72</sup>

The anti-SUV activists do not condemn all or even most consumption. Rather, they focus on buying more than one needs, understood in practical and functional terms (not quantitative terms). Yet Americans routinely buy computers with far more capacity than is needed, houses that are larger than necessary, and other consumer items that have little functional value at all. These consumer items have not generated a reaction on the scale of the SUV backlash, and in fact they seem to worry most people very little. Anti-SUV activists would argue that SUVs produce more negative externalities than these other consumer items, and thus are properly singled out.<sup>73</sup> But critics of the campaign note a lack of attention to other luxury cars and gas guzzling vehicles, such as heavy pickup trucks and even minivans.

One answer as to why the anti-SUV movement does not address vehicles other than SUVs is that they have largely adopted a qualitative definition of

<sup>69</sup> Curtiss Leung, E-mail posting 19 February 2004, accessed at <http://www.calpundit.com/archives/003310.html>, 1 July 2004.

<sup>70</sup> Stop SUVs.org, accessed at <http://www.StopSUVs.org>, 8 July 2004; Montag, E-mail posting, 4 March 2004, accessed at <http://www.chatarea.com/Votecomers.m2004237-2>, 1 July 2004.

<sup>71</sup> Ultimate Poseur Sport Utility Page, “Love Letters,” accessed at <http://poseur.4x4org./Positive.html>, 18 June 2004.

<sup>72</sup> Bradley, interview, 8 August 2004.

<sup>73</sup> Of course, our housing choices also create significant environmental externalities. According to *Sierra* magazine, “More than half of the materials consumed worldwide are used in construction, and 45 percent of the world’s energy is used to heat, light, and ventilate our buildings.” Homes in the United States were 38 percent larger in 2002 than in 1975. Marilyn Berlin Small, “Better Homes and Garbage,” *Sierra*, January/February 2005, 28–30.

inappropriate consumption. In other words, they are not worried about *how much* is consumed but by *what* is consumed. And in this respect, the “what” is a very specific consumer item; the campaign singles out a particular class of vehicles and even specific makes and models. The lack of attention to quantitative aspects of consumption limits the scope of the anti-SUV critique, which in the end is somewhat narrow. After all, many of the problems attributed to SUVs—clogged highways, dirty air, and climate change—are affected most significantly by the *amount* of miles driven by Americans, not by the particular cars we choose to drive. At least one commentator on the anti-SUV movement recognized this limitation upon the recent unveiling of hybrid SUVs:

Unfortunately, while greater fuel efficiency is certainly welcome, such modifications do little to counteract the many other negative consequences of our driving addiction. Even a zero emissions Sports Utility Vehicle will continue to contribute to urban sprawl, social alienation and resource depletion. ... Sure, it's easy to place all the blame on SUV's [*sic*] but does it really matter all that much how big or wasteful an individual vehicle really is? ... Excess is excess.<sup>74</sup>

The singular focus on sport utility vehicles masks a much greater transportation problem in the United States. The transportation “problem” encompasses a host of issues, including a lack of mass transportation alternatives, urban and suburban sprawl that guarantees our dependence on automobiles, and inequalities in transportation choices. A more comprehensive critique would embrace a broader understanding of the transportation problem. And these critiques do exist. The “de-vehicularization” movement is advanced by several advocacy groups that focus on weaning Americans from dependence on the automobile. These groups include the World Carfree Network, an “international network of carfree proponents from around the world”; the Surface Transportation Policy Project, which works to ensure “safer communities and smarter transportation choices”; the National Alliance of Public Transportation Advocates, an organization seeking increased federal funding for mass transportation; and a variety of state and local transit groups who advocate car-free cities and better local transit.<sup>75</sup> This movement has not captured the imagination of the public to the same extent as has the anti-SUV campaign, whose very allure might depend on its narrow focus and potent symbol.

<sup>74</sup> “Weapons, Death & Tofu: Finding Nirvana in an SUV,” *New Renaissance* 11 (Spring 2003), accessed at <http://www.ru.org/114-SUV.htm>, 23 June 2006. To be fair, many environmental organizations express broader concerns about our transportation problems and the related issue of urban sprawl. The environmental movement has also lobbied for higher gas mileage standards for all vehicles, not only SUVs. My point here is that the popularity of the anti-SUV campaign at times drowns out these larger critiques.

<sup>75</sup> See the World Carfree Network at <http://carbusters.org>, the Surface Transportation Project at <http://www.transact.org/who.asp>, accessed 30 June 2006; and the National Alliance of Public Transportation Advocates at <http://www.napta.net>, accessed 30 June 2006.

The anti-SUV movement does have the potential to raise broader issues associated with our transportation problems. The sport utility vehicle, after all, is merely a symbol of our dependence on the automobile and of the supremacy of America's car culture. But the danger in building a movement around a compelling symbol is that the symbol itself may become the primary focus of the campaign, while the broader concerns it represents fade into the background. In condemning only the SUV, we risk overlooking America's deeper transportation problems. For example, the anti-SUV campaign has little to say about the transportation problems of the poor. A car-centered society perpetuates the cycle of poverty by limiting the mobility and thus the job opportunities of those who cannot afford to own a vehicle. As Jane Holtz Kay remarks, "The car culture has ... become an engine of inequity, raising high the barriers of race and class. Transportation that is difficult at best, nonexistent at worst, darkens their lives in myriad ways and adds to the financial and social inequity that they suffer."<sup>76</sup>

In short, the anti-SUV campaign confronts a long-running problem in anti-consumerist thinking: how do you distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate consumption? The campaign has largely relied on a qualitative definition of inappropriate consumption, and has had difficulty drawing a bright line between acceptable and unacceptable consumption. But the anti-SUV campaign's shortcomings are not solely the result of ambiguities within anti-consumerist thought: pro-consumerist thinking, so ubiquitous in our society, has found its way into the anti-SUV campaign.

*Pro-consumerist ideas in an anti-consumerist movement.* One reason the anti-SUV campaign struggles with defining appropriate and inappropriate consumption is that pro-consumption values have permeated American society. Indeed, the consumer has reached an unprecedented position of power in the American economy, politics, and society. Fully two-thirds of our gross domestic product is attributable to our aggregate consumption. The automobile industry in particular has long been an important engine in the domestic economy, and SUV sales now produce half of the profits that automakers earn. The American consumer has been credited with spending our way out of the 2001 economic recession, due in part to the automobile industry's post-September 11 interest-free loans. (Ford's "Keep America Rolling" advertisements directly played to the idea that consumers were at the heart of the economic recovery.) Consumers also have a good deal of political clout. The consumer movement of the 1960s and 1970s provided consumers with a powerful new discourse—that of rights—and a potent set of political tools, including boycotts and lawsuits. Finally, our society has been built around and

<sup>76</sup> Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America and How We Can Take It Back* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 36.

caters to the consumer. Our car culture, in fact, is directly tied to consumption: a third of our miles traveled go to consumption-related activities and to family chores.<sup>77</sup>

Given the exalted place of the consumer in American political culture, it is not surprising that the anti-SUV movement is unable to escape the discourse and values embodied in pro-consumption ideology. Consumption not only carries positive connotations, but is intimately tied up with fundamental American political values and principles. Madison Avenue has capitalized on America's love of liberty by promoting a connection between freedom and consumer choice. Industries that have come under attack by anti-consumption campaigns often counter with appeals based on the principle of choice. For example, in the mid-1980s, the fur industry established an industry trade group, the Fur Information Council, whose main counter-message to the anti-fur campaign one year was "Freedom of Choice." The Council attempted to raise public fears by linking the anti-fur campaign to a broader agenda aimed at banning other consumer items, such as meat and wool products.<sup>78</sup> More recently, the Center for Consumer Freedom has attacked the animal rights and anti-obesity movements through a media and Internet campaign centered on the notions of consumer choice and freedom. Their website warns that a "growing cabal of 'food cops,' health care enforcers, militant activists, meddling bureaucrats, and violent radicals who think they know 'what's best for you' are pushing against our basic freedoms."<sup>79</sup>

The anti-SUV campaign is engaged in a framing contest that is common to other movements that politicize private behavior. One set of frames emphasizes choice, freedom, and personal responsibility. This frame argues that it is a matter of individual choice to drive a sport utility vehicle, drink alcohol, or eat fatty foods and a matter of individual responsibility to accept the repercussions of these choices. The alternative frame emphasizes the wider societal costs of these individual decisions. In the case of buying and driving a sport utility vehicle, anti-SUV activists emphasize the costs to other drivers who are unlucky enough to get into an accident with an SUV, the costs to children in the form of higher asthma rates from increased pollution, and the costs to the environment from increased greenhouse gas emissions, among other externalities. While their message has resonated with some portions of

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>78</sup> Jenny C. McCune, "Consumer Activism Means Big Business," *Management Review* 79 (December 1990): 16–19. In the late 1980s, the fur market experienced a downturn. Pelt prices dropped, several furriers declared bankruptcy, and a few American department stores stopped selling fur coats. The animal rights movement claimed a victory, while the fur industry blamed the lackluster sales on other factors. See Finsen and Finsen, *Animal Rights Movement in America*, 115–116.

<sup>79</sup> The Center for Consumer Freedom is sponsored by the restaurant and food industry. See "What is the Center for Consumer Freedom?" accessed at <http://www.consumerfreedom.com/about.cfm>, 25 July 2005.



the public and with select policymakers, the frame of personal choice and responsibility is difficult to overcome.<sup>80</sup>

Indeed, the anti-SUV campaign confronts even more serious challenges when it comes to combating the frame of individual choice than do other consumer campaigns, inasmuch as automobiles are a preeminent symbol of freedom in America. America's interstate highway system, combined with high rates of automobile ownership, offers an unprecedented level of mobility to many Americans. And the ease of mobility, combined with the value of individual freedom, has translated into what many perceive as a *right* to mobility.<sup>81</sup> Popular culture—the films *Easy Rider* and *Thelma and Louise* come to mind—romanticizes life on the road and suggests that the personal motorized vehicle offers an escape from oppressive societal mores and personal circumstances. For women, the automobile promised a certain kind of geographical liberation. No longer would women be confined to the home, but would be able to leave behind—both literally and figuratively—their domestic confinement.<sup>82</sup>

Limiting Americans' consumer choices and our freedoms is never a popular stand to take, and anti-SUV activists take pains to acknowledge the right of people to drive any vehicle they choose. As noted, the 2004 Democratic National Party Platform supports “the American people's freedom to choose whatever cars, SUVs, minivans, and trucks they choose . . .” while the Ultimate Poseur Sport Utility Page offers this disclaimer: “We are not trying to tell you what to buy; that's your freedom and your decision.” The leader of a San Francisco area group called “Don't Be Fueled! Mothers for clean and safe vehicles” goes so far as to call herself “pro-vehicle choice,” mimicking the rhetoric of the pro-choice movement regarding abortion.<sup>83</sup> Anti-SUV activists seem unable to embrace a solution that would limit the freedom of the consumer. One exception is a group of activists in Los Angeles who are trying to prohibit SUVs from driving on local residential roads by using an existing city bylaw that bans vehicles over six thousand pounds.<sup>84</sup> Most anti-SUV activism, however, offers only a limited set of policy tools. Activists promote stricter fuel efficiency standards and additional regulations to improve the safety of SUVs, but outright bans or heavy taxes to discourage the consumption of SUVs are rarely considered. Rather, solutions—such as consumer education

<sup>80</sup> For an analysis of how these frames play out in public health politics, see Rogan Kersh and James A. Morone, “Obesity, Courts, and the New Public Health,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law* 30 (October 2005): 839–868.

<sup>81</sup> See Joseph F. Coughlin, “The Tragedy of the Concrete Commons: Defining Traffic Congestion as a Public Problem” in David A. Rochefort and Roger E. Cobb, eds., *The Politics of Problem Definition: Shaping the Policy Agenda* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 138–158.

<sup>82</sup> See Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Mark Clayton, “To Boost U.S. Security, An Energy Diet,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 September 2004.

<sup>84</sup> P.J. O'Rourke, “‘Axels of Evil’: The Backlash Grows,” *Sunday Times* (London), 17 October 2004.

and technological advances—that do not impose on the right of the consumer to freely choose what to drive and that do not limit her personal mobility are advocated.

## CONCLUSION

In May 2003, British Member of Parliament Norman Baker asked leaders in the car industry to stop advertising SUVs as appropriate urban and suburban vehicles. According to Baker, he was “besieged by angry constituents” who were frustrated because the large vehicles blocked the narrow streets in his district.<sup>85</sup> The Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, soon joined the anti-SUV chorus, describing SUVs as “bad for London” and calling SUV owners “complete idiots.” His recent proposal was to double the daily congestion fee (the equivalent of nine U.S. dollars) for sport utility vehicles. In Paris, the City Council recently passed a nonbinding resolution threatening to ban “the scandalous vehicles” from parts of the city. French Green Party politicians are proposing to affix stickers on the doors of SUVs that read “This is dangerous for the planet,” or “I am stupid, I have an SUV.”<sup>86</sup> And the French government has tried to levy a heavy “sin tax” on the vehicles in order to stem the increase in sales of SUVs. The anti-SUV movement, originating in the United States with a handful of Internet activists, has spread across the Atlantic in the matter of a few years.

The expansion of the anti-SUV movement both here and abroad suggests that it has hit a nerve with the public. It has tapped into people’s everyday experiences, and has linked these grievances to larger moral and political concerns. Its supporters include evangelical religious clergy, mainstream environmental organizations, and self-described “non-activists” who argue against SUVs on the Internet.<sup>87</sup> Like other projects aimed at politicizing private behavior, the anti-SUV campaign uses a mix of moral and utilitarian arguments to question the consumption choices of a class of individuals in society. It is aimed at the affluent, and castigates an upper-middle class suburban lifestyle, suggesting that “morality politics” is not the exclusive terrain of the Republican Party or the Christian right. Indeed, moral claims, long a part of American politics and discourse, are made on both the political right and left and can target the elite as well as the marginalized. The recent campaign on college campuses to reduce the use of sweatshop labor, and efforts in the 1980s

<sup>85</sup> Nicholas Rufford, “Stop the 4 x 4 Heavy Mob!”, 25 May 2003, accessed on the website of *The Times Online* at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk>, 7 August 2004.

<sup>86</sup> National Public Radio, *Weekend Edition*, 25 July 2004.

<sup>87</sup> Todd Bradley, creator of the “SUV Backlash” website, said in a telephone interview with the author that he did not consider himself an activist, and that when it comes to politics, he is a rather passive voter. Telephone interview, 24 August 2004. Creators of the Ultimate Poseur Sport Utility Page explain that they started the website in 1997 “as a fun hobby site, not to fight for a cause or force some agenda.” Ultimate Poseur Sport Utility Page, accessed at <http://poseur.4x4.org>, 18 June 2004.

to urge colleges and universities to divest from South Africa are additional examples of what we might call “liberal moral reform projects.” Further research might compare the politics of liberal and conservative moral reform projects, with an eye toward understanding their similarities and differences.<sup>88</sup>

The anti-SUV campaign has successfully raised questions about the growing trend toward larger and more polluting vehicles, and is prompting auto manufacturers to redesign SUVs to make them safer and more fuel efficient. But the campaign confronts an ambiguous set of ideas, rooted in a history and a political economy that both valorize consumption and raise concerns about the potential for excessive, unnecessary, and dangerous consumption habits. Given the central role of the automobile in our economy and society, and its importance as a symbol of freedom and choice, any policies in the United States aimed at sport utility vehicles are unlikely to involve the sort of bans, fines, and taxes being considered in some European countries. This stands in contrast to other campaigns that politicize private behavior, such as anti-drug and anti-smoking movements, which often result in “all-out prohibitions and zero-tolerance policies.”<sup>89</sup> Such policies are almost unthinkable when applied to sport utility vehicles. The drivers of SUVs, after all, may be inconsiderate and selfish, but have yet to be seen by the general public as endangering society in a significant way. Class and race once again are relevant here: SUV drivers are largely middle and upper middle class whites, whose behaviors are rarely subject to such draconian or criminalizing policies.\*

<sup>88</sup> For an analysis of how liberals and conservatives conceptualize morality, see George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>89</sup> Kersh and Morone, “How the Personal Becomes Political,” 175. Keith Bradsher, author of *High and Mighty: SUVs—The World’s Most Dangerous Vehicles and How They Got That Way*, is one of the few to advocate more draconian policies aimed at SUV drivers. He suggests that stiffer penalties should apply to drivers who hurt others in accidents because of negligence: “Prosperous families might think twice about choosing the Suburban over the minivan,” he writes, “if they thought that a jury would be more likely to send them to prison for manslaughter after a deadly crash if they were in an SUV that they did not need.” Bradsher, *High and Mighty*, 417.

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