

Membership Dues The Two-Edged Horse: Fear and Fame*

Membership dues are rarely neutral. They arrive bearing two riders on the same horse. One rider is fear, of exclusion, loss of status, professional invisibility, or regulatory non-alignment. The other is fame, the promise of legitimacy, belonging, voice, and institutional amplification. Together, they gallop through the quiet corridors of professional life, rarely questioned, almost always complied with. This is the paradox of dues: a financial ritual that pretends to be administrative but functions as symbolic power.¹

Dues as a Submission Contract (Disguised as Participation)

At face value, dues are transactional, pay to belong. In reality, they are relational and hierarchical. Institutions and associations do not merely collect dues; they curate submission gradients across cadres—student, associate, professional, fellow, corporate member. Each level reflects not just capacity to pay, but willingness to submit to differentiated authority.² The higher the cadre, the higher the dues. Yet paradoxically, the deeper the submission. Senior members often submit not out of fear of exclusion, but fear of irrelevance. Junior members submit out of aspiration. Institutions thrive on both, embedding professional identity within structured systems of control and recognition.³

But here lies the unspoken question: at what point does participation become compliance, and compliance become quiet coercion?

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¹ Marion Fourcade, 'Ordinalization: Lewis A. Coser Memorial Award for Theoretical Agenda Setting 2014' (2016) 34 (3) *Sociological Theory* 175–195; Mariana Mazzucato, *The Value of Everything: Making and Taking in the Global Economy* (London: Allen Lane, 2018) 318.

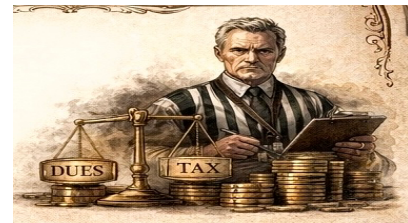
² Mirko Noordegraaf, 'Protective or Connective Professionalism? How Connected Professionals Can (Still) Act as Autonomous and Authoritative Experts' (2020) 7 (2) *Journal of Professions and Organization* 205–223.

³ Julia Evetts, 'Professionalism in Turbulent Times: Challenges to and Opportunities for Professionalism as an Occupational Value' (2011) 27(1) *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling* 8-16

Authority Without Contest Is Not Authority—It Is Habit

Institutions often assume moral authority over dues simply because they have existed long enough to stop being questioned. Longevity replaces legitimacy. Precedent replaces explanation. Rarely do associations ask, why this amount? Why this structure? Why this cadence? Why this burden across unequal economic realities?

Instead, dues become ritualized certainty, an annual reenactment of obedience disguised as continuity. When members do not question dues, it is not always trust. Sometimes it is fatigue. Sometimes it is fear. Sometimes it is hope that fame will follow compliance. This pattern reflects what contemporary institutional theorists describe as the persistence of symbolic practices maintained for legitimacy rather than demonstrated value.⁴



Tax: The Officiating Authority With No Romance

Taxation enters this ecosystem as the most honest actor. Unlike institutions, tax authorities do not promise prestige. Unlike associations, they do not sell belonging. Their sole objective is discharge, often controversial, always compulsory. Tax exposes the truth that institutions prefer to obscure: money is power, and power demands accountability.⁵

When dues intersect with tax obligations, institutions are forced to answer uncomfortable questions, is this revenue or contribution? Is this service or symbolism? Is this value creation or value extraction? Tax does not care about mission statements. It cares about classification, disclosure, and consequence. Contemporary economic scholarship increasingly highlights this tension between productive value and institutional rent-seeking.⁶

In this sense, tax becomes the referee, revealing whether dues are tools of governance or instruments of unchecked authority.

⁴ Patricia Bromley and Walter W. Powell, 'From Smoke and Mirrors to Walking the Talk: Decoupling in the Contemporary World' (2012) 13 (1) *Academy of Management Annals* 1-48.

⁵ Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Economics of the Public Sector* (4th ed., W.W. Norton, 2015).

⁶ William Lazonick, 'Profits Without Prosperity' (2014) *Harvard Business Review* available at <https://hbr.org/2014/09/profits-without-prosperity> accessed 20 January 2026.

Fear Pays Faster Than Value (But Fame Lasts Longer)

Institutions that rely on fear loss of certification, delisting, silence, often enjoy short-term compliance. Payments arrive on time. Questions do not. Institutions that rely on fame, clear value, intellectual capital, real advocacy, build slower but stronger loyalty. Payments arrive with conviction. This distinction aligns with modern compliance theory: individuals obey systems either out of coercion or because they perceive them as legitimate and fair.⁷ The danger lies in confusing the two. Fear-funded institutions grow brittle. Fame-funded institutions grow resilient.

Before paying dues, members across all cadres should pause and ask:

1. What authority am I recognizing with this payment?
2. What value is tangible, and what value is symbolic?
3. Is my submission voluntary, aspirational, or coerced?
4. If dues were optional, would this institution still matter?

And perhaps the most subversive question of all, who is accountable to whom once the dues are paid?

Dues Are Never Just Dues

Membership dues are not merely financial instruments. They are psychological contracts, governance tools, and signals of power alignment.⁸ They can elevate institutions or expose them. They can empower members or quietly domesticate them.

Fear and fame will always ride the same horse. The responsibility, both institutional and individual is to decide who is holding the reins.

On the altar of collective reflection, if membership dues were restructured purely around demonstrable value and transparent accountability, which institutions would thrive and which would quietly disappear?

⁷ Jason Sunshine and Tom R. Tyler, 'The Role of Procedural Justice and Legitimacy in Shaping Public Support for Policing' (2003) 37 (3) *Law & Society Review* 513 - 547.

⁸ Denise M. Rousseau, *Psychological Contracts in Organizations: Understanding Written and Unwritten Agreements* 1995 (SAGE Publications, 2013) 635-639.