

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Hoffman, Andrew. *How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. 110 pp., \$12.99 paper (9780804794220)

In view of the scientific community's increasingly dire predictions about the long-term consequences of global warming, the lack of urgency accorded to this crisis throughout much of the affluent world suggests the need for an expanded notion of climate change denial. Indeed, as Kari Marie Norgaard (2011) argues, denial in this broader sense pertains not simply to a refusal to accept the scientific consensus about anthropogenic climate change, but to an evasion of the full moral, social, political and economic implications that flow from an acceptance of the science. The relatively low level of climate-oriented social movement mobilization and ecologically motivated political action in most Western nations, she believes, bespeaks a broader "social organization of denial" in which we all are implicated in different ways.

Over the past several years, a number of sociologists have entreated their own discipline to cast aside its own brand of denial. Until quite recently, as Constance Lever-Tracy (2008: 445) has emphasized, few sociologists outside of environmental sociology itself have contributed significantly to the climate change debate, even though its implicit premise – the need for fundamental change to prevailing social structures, activities and values – goes to the core of sociology's concerns. Instead of playing "minor fiddle" to the natural sciences and economics, John Urry (2009: 98) argues, sociologists need to take up their rightful place in climate change discussions unfolding within and beyond the academy, recognizing that "[l]ife on the planet needs us even if we have been very slow in knocking on the door."

Andrew J. Hoffman's latest book is a welcome addition to the expanding body of academic literature addressing the complex social and cultural dynamics of today's climate crisis – factors which are often under-appreciated by climate scientists, environmental activists and policy-makers alike. Aimed not at scholars per se, but at an educated general audience whose views on the climate crisis might be enhanced by the insights contained in this literature, this short volume does not present original empirical research or offer much in the way of theoretical innovation. What it does offer is a very engaging and accessible

summary and distillation of “the large and growing body of research in sociology, psychology, and other social sciences about why people accept or reject the science of climate change” (vii).

While the scientific consensus surrounding global warming continues to strengthen, Hoffman argues, this has not led to a comparable degree of social consensus about the crisis and how to address it. Indeed, he suggests, urgent appeals for action from the physical sciences have signally failed to inspire political and institutional change, with public debate devolving into an overheated rhetorical battle between entrenched camps that only amplifies popular confusion. In this context, Hoffman asserts, social scientists have a special obligation to leave their comfortable academic niches and help to reshape the public’s understanding of the climate crisis.

In the early part of his book, Hoffman draws upon well-established concepts within social psychology to argue that overcoming public resistance to climate action is not simply a matter of providing people with more scientific information, but of addressing the deeper ideological, cultural and social filters through which they receive and process such information. Lacking the ability to independently evaluate arcane scientific ideas and models, and influenced by competing sources of cultural authority, most people tend to relate to climate change through the prism of their prior ideological commitments, personal experiences and forms of tacit knowledge. The operation of such cognitive filters typically leads us to seek out information about climate change that accords with our pre-existing beliefs, bolsters our cultural identity and ontological security, and aligns us with the values of the social groups with which we identify. As a consequence of such types of “motivated reasoning” and “cultural cognition,” Hoffman notes, the public debate over climate change – particularly in the contemporary U.S. – can effectively lose its moorings in science, becoming the symbolic flashpoint for a broad “cultural schism” in popular attitudes toward the free market, the role of government, patriotism, religion,

In an environment of pervasive hostility and distrust, Hoffman suggests, open scientific inquiry and democratic deliberation over the public good cede place to narrow partisanship, demagoguery and emotionally based groupthink, all of which sharpen pre-existing divides and make climate action less plausible. Instead of waiting for one side to capitulate fully to the other, he asserts, or expecting technology to resolve the climate crisis on its own, we need to embark upon a “consensus-based path” focused on developing a common language and discovering potential points of political convergence. While his hope for a consensus that can somehow harmonize vastly different ideological frameworks, polit-

ical goals and material interests is improbable, he does acknowledge that formidable obstacles lay in the way of those treading along this “path.” Given the inertia for change created by today’s fossil-fuel dependent built environment and lifestyles, “efforts to change cultural views on climate change must include changing the vast institutions and infrastructure of our economy and must be prepared to deal with resistance from those who benefit from them” (5). One measure of this resistance has been the rise of what Hoffman calls the “climate change countermovement,” whose array of corporate-funded think-tanks, advocacy groups and publishing-houses have done much to amplify public doubt within today’s shifting media landscape.

While the ineffective political response to the climate crisis to date may seem to be a cause for despair, Hoffman argues, history demonstrates that progressive change is always possible. The level of collective resolve and international cooperation required to tackle this crisis may be unprecedented, he suggests, but certain historical analogies – such as the struggle to abolish slavery – show that consensus for systemic social change can be built even when this requires deep shifts in the dominant culture and faces strong push-back from elites. Although collective organization for environmental reform today is quite weak, historical change can often be abrupt and non-linear. Climate-induced crises and other precipitating events may not be able to initiate such change in themselves, but they can create strategic openings for environmental advocates to begin reframing public debate and driving new forms of political action. In the short-term, Hoffman suggests that such advocates should focus primarily on swaying the relatively uncertain and cautious “middle” of the political spectrum, framing climate change in relation to that group’s existing values and interests, while allowing the “radical flank” of the environmental movement to continually push to expand the realm of political possibility.

While this effort to reach out and speak to people “where they are” is commendable in some ways, Hoffman downplays the degree to which the happy middle he seeks has been defined by two rather asymmetrical extremes. Whereas the climate change countermovement brazenly disregards science and regards any effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as an assault on economic liberty, the opposite “extreme” – the mainstream environmental movement in Hoffman’s formulation – tends to, in Naomi Klein’s words, “paint a picture of global warming Armageddon, then assure us that we can avert catastrophe by buying ‘green’ products and creating clever markets in pollution” (Klein, 2011). In this scenario, catering to the mythical middle promises to lead not to incremental progressive change, but to even more watered-down and ineffect-

ive policies than we've seen to date, designed not to mitigate the climate crisis but to protect the very interests and ideologies most responsible for it.

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