

Normalizing the Unthinkable

Climate Denial and Everyday Life

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Beachgoers at Jacob Riis Park in the Rockaways, Queens, New York, before being inundated by Hurricane Sandy.

Photo by Ken Gould.

In early January 2013 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced that 2012 was the warmest year ever recorded in the United States. In fact, in 2012 every single state in the continental United States had recorded above-average annual temperatures. The average temperature for the contiguous United States was a full 3.2°F above the 20th-century average, and 1.0°F above the previous national record, which had been set in 1998. This should come as no surprise: For nearly three decades natural and physical scientists have provided increasingly clear and dire assessments of how climate change will alter the biophysical world around which human social systems are organized. I took an entire course on climate change as an undergraduate student in 1990, just two years after James Hansen's congressional testimony on the seriousness of climate change made the front page of the *New York Times*. Recently, new

temperature records have been coupled with extreme weather events such as Hurricane Katrina, Superstorm Sandy, and the widest tornado on record that hit Oklahoma in May 2013.

Yet despite these heat records, extreme weather events, and urgent warnings from the scientific community, climate change has remained like a proverbial “elephant in the room.” Climate scientists may have identified global warming as the most important issue of our time, but for urban dwellers in the rich and powerful Northern countries climate change is still mostly seen as “no more than background noise.” For evidence of this disjuncture in the United States one need look no further than the titles of stories released by Gallup on their website reporting the results of their annual Environment Poll: “World’s Top-Emitters No More Aware of Climate Change in 2010,” “Fewer Americans, Europeans View Global Warming as a Threat” (2011) and “In U.S., Global Warming Views Steady Despite Warm Winter” (2012). Even after Hurricane Katrina hit, the March 2006 Gallup headline read, “Americans Still Not Highly Concerned About Global Warming.” The category of climate change did not even make it onto the list of the Pew Research Center’s annual January survey of national domestic priorities for the Government and Congress until 2007, some 24 years after the first front-page story in the *New York Times*!

While “apathy” in the United States is particularly notable, this gap between the severity of the problem and its lack of public salience is visible in most Western nations. Indeed, no nation has a base of public citizens that are sufficiently socially and politically engaged to effect the level of change that predictions of climate science would seem to warrant. Instead we are confronted with a series of paradoxes: As scientific evidence for climate change pours in, public urgency and even interest in the issue fails to correspond. As events from Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy to pine bark beetle infestations in Colorado and melting permafrost in Alaska reveal, changing climatic conditions will increasingly jeopardize state economic resources, exacerbate social inequality, alter community structures, and generate new patterns of economic and social conflict (see Lesson 14). How is it possible that predictions of major threats to social infrastructure such as sea-level rise, increased wildfires, and flooding fail to mobilize public response? What can explain the misfit between scientific information and public concern? Are people just uninformed of the facts? Are they inherently greedy and self-interested? These are the questions that chart the course of my work, which concerns not the outright rejection of climate science by so-called climate skeptics but the more pervasive and everyday problem of how and why people who say they are concerned about climate change manage to ignore it.

For nearly 20 years the main explanation for public silence from the scientific community has been that the public just doesn’t understand the seriousness of what is unfolding—in other words, that lack of information is the limiting factor in public nonresponse. The thinking has been that “if people only knew the facts,” they would act differently. Psychological and “science communication” studies emphasized the complexity of climate

science, while sociologists described political economic corruption as reasons people do not adequately understand what is at stake. Researchers have described the problem of “faulty mental models,” lamented the confusion between global warming and ozone depletion, investigated the role of media framing, and described how understanding global warming requires a complex grasp of scientific knowledge in many fields.

For example, psychologists Grame Halford and Peter Sheehan wrote, “With better mental models and more appropriate analogies for global change issues, it is likely that more people, including more opinion leaders, will make the decision to implement some positive coping action of a precautionary nature” (1991, p. 606).

On the sociological side, scholars have identified the fossil fuel industry influence on government policy, the tactics of climate skeptic campaigns, how corporate control of media limits and molds available information about global warming, and even the “normal” distortion of climate science through the “balance as bias phenomenon” in journalism. Many scholars have now traced the process of how the fossil fuel industry and conservative think tanks have challenged the scientific consensus on climate change by “manufacturing uncertainty,” altering government documents, and launching political attacks on key climate scientists. The climate skeptic movement has been mostly organized from the United States. Corporate associations including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the American Petroleum Institute together with conservative think tanks including the Heartland Institute, the CATO Institute, and the Marshall Institute have played key roles in this process (see Lesson 5). Interestingly, according to research by McCright and Dunlap (2011b), acceptance of climate change also varies by gender and race, with conservative white men being more likely than other Americans to subscribe to “denialist views.”

The climate skeptic movement in particular has played a powerful role in the distortion of public understanding of climate change just in the past 10 years. Note that explanations for public nonresponse that highlight corporate media and climate skeptic campaigns also implicitly direct our attention to a lack of information as the biggest barrier to engagement, though for different reasons. Certainly there are cases when the public may either lack information or be outright misinformed, but are these issues the limiting factor behind greater public interest, concern, or political participation? Clearly knowledge is necessary to generate public response, but is knowledge sufficient? As Read and colleagues pointed out two decades ago, only two simple facts are essential to understanding climate change: Global warming is the result of an increase in the concentration of carbon dioxide in the earth’s atmosphere, and the single most important source of carbon dioxide is the combustion of fossil fuels, most notably coal and oil. So how can it be that people around the world fail to understand these basic facts? And while such “information deficit” explanations are indispensable, they do not account for the behavior of the significant number of people who know about global warming and express concern, yet still fail to take any action.

While there have been many surveys and public opinion polls on climate change, there have been almost no in-depth, qualitative or ethnographic studies of how people actually experience climate change. I arrived in Norway with a concern about global warming and an intention to conduct research on how the environmentally progressive Norwegians made sense of it. Norway was not only a place I had spent significant time growing up in, but also a nation I admired for its strong environmental and humanitarian values. Plus, the Norwegians have substantial wealth, which can be an asset, at least in making technological changes. Since the time I first lived in Norway as a teenager, I had been fascinated by the extent of progressive environmental policy and awareness there. Now I returned with my comparative sociological lens to ask questions that at the time could not be addressed in my own country, the United States. Indeed, at the time the United States was the only country in the world where, thanks to extensive counter-campaigns by the oil industry and the George W. Bush administration, one quarter of the population still questioned whether global warming was actually occurring.

If any nation can find the ability to respond, it must be in a place such as this, where the population is educated and environmentally engaged. That winter and spring I spent a lot of time attending public meetings, reading the newspapers, talking with people on the street, and generally watching and listening to what was going on. I conducted 46 interviews with a range of community members. As it happened, there was unusually warm weather during the 10 months I spent in the community. November brought severe flooding. The first snowfall did not come until late January, some two months later than usual. By then, the winter was recorded as Norway's second warmest in the past 130 years. The local ski area opened in late December only with the aid of 100% artificial snow, a completely unprecedented event with measurable economic impacts on hotels, shops, taxi drivers, and others in the area. The local lake failed to freeze sufficiently to allow for ice fishing. Small talk commonly included references to "unusual weather" and to "climate change," accompanied by a shaking of heads.

It was not just the weather that was unusual that winter. As a sociologist, I was perplexed by the behavior of the people as well. Despite the clear social and economic impacts on the community, there was no social action in response to the warm weather. Nobody wrote letters to the local paper, brought the issue up in one of the many public forums that took place that winter, made attempts to plan for the local effects of climate change, put pressure on local and national leaders to develop long-term climate plans or short-term economic relief, decreased their automobile use, or even engaged their neighbors and political leaders in discussions about what climate change might mean for their region.

People could have reacted differently to that strange winter. The shortened ski season affected everyone in the community. In the words of one taxi driver, "It makes a difference if we move from five months of winter tourism to only three. It affects all of us, you know, not just those up on the mountain. It affects the hotels, the shops in town, us taxi drivers, we notice it too." Why

didn't this awareness translate into social action? Throughout modern history, people have used a variety of strategies to draw attention to problems in their communities, such as staging marches and boycotts and writing letters to newspaper editors and political leaders. What might people have done differently? Community members could have done any number of things to express a sense of concern, from raising the issue in one of the many local political meetings to writing letters in the newspaper, developing plans for how their community might respond, or, at the very least, talking with one another about what climate change might mean for their community in the next 10 to 20 years.

Indeed, in other parts of the world that year reactions to climate change *were* different. Severe flooding in England that November was linked to climate change by at least some of the affected residents. People from affected communities in England traveled to the climate talks at The Hague to protest government policies. Since that time, several cities in the United States have taken action against the federal government over global warming. And although one cannot tie weather events *per se* to climate change, the fact that increased hurricane intensity is one clear outcome of climate change has led residents in Mississippi who are now homeless as a result of Hurricane Katrina to file a lawsuit against oil companies for their role in climate change. The residents of this town could have taken similar actions, rallying around the problem of the lack of snow and its economic and cultural impacts. But they did not.

"WE DON'T REALLY WANT TO KNOW"

That season global warming was frequently mentioned and people in the community seemed to be both informed and concerned about it. Yet at the same time I noticed that it was an uncomfortable issue. People were aware that climate change could radically alter life within the next decades, yet they did not go about their days wondering what life would be like for their children, whether farming practices would change, or whether their grandchildren would be able to ski on real snow. They spent their days thinking about more local, manageable topics. Vigdis, a college-age student, told me that she was afraid of global warming but that it didn't enter her everyday life:

I often get afraid, like—it goes very much up and down, then, with how much I think about it. But if I sit myself down and think about it, it could actually happen, I thought about how if this here continues we could come to have no difference between winter and spring and summer, like—and lots of stuff about the ice that is melting and that there will be flooding, like, and that is depressing, the way I see it.

In the words of one person who held his hands in front of his eyes as he spoke, "people want to protect themselves a bit." Other community members

in Norway described this sense of knowing and not knowing, of having information but not thinking about it in their everyday lives. As one young woman told me, "In the everyday I don't think so much about it, but I know that environmental protection is very important." As a topic that was troubling, it was an issue that many people preferred to avoid. Thus community members describe climate change as an issue that they have to "sit themselves down and think about," "don't think about in the everyday," "but which in between is discouraging and an emotional weight." Since members of the community did know about global warming but did not integrate this knowledge into everyday life, they experienced what Robert Lifton calls the *absurdity of the double life*, a phrase I adapt in coining the term *double reality*. In one reality was the collectively constructed sense of normal everyday life. In the other reality existed the troubling knowledge of increasing automobile use, polar ice caps melting, and the predictions for future weather scenarios. In the words of Kjersti, a teacher at the local agricultural school in her early thirties: "We live in one way and we think in another. We learn to think in parallel. It's a skill, an art of living."

What was happening in that community, and indeed what we can all observe in the public silence on climate change in United States and elsewhere, was not a rejection of information *per se* but the failure to integrate this knowledge into everyday life or transform it into social action. British sociologist Stanley Cohen calls this **implicatory denial**: "the facts of children starving to death in Somalia, mass rape of women in Bosnia, a massacre in East Timor, homeless people in our streets are recognized, but are not seen as psychologically disturbing or as carrying a moral imperative to act . . . Unlike literal or interpretive denial, knowledge itself is not at issue, but doing the 'right' thing with the knowledge" (2011, p. 9).

THREE DISTURBING EMOTIONS

Both my research in Norway and follow-up work in the United States describes how for many people thinking seriously about climate change evokes a series of troubling emotions. There is *fear about a future* with more heat waves, droughts, and increased storm intensity. There is *fear that our present political and economic structures* are unable to effectively respond. And for many there is *guilt* since Americans are among the main contributors to global climate emissions and Norwegians' high standard of living comes directly from their oil income. Finally, many people described a sense of not knowing what to do. Ultimately, sufficiently reducing global climate emissions is beyond the level of individual action. But neither national nor international efforts have been successful either. Awareness of this generates for many a feeling of *helplessness*. Younger people, especially in the United States, have suggested that anger is a fourth emotion that should be considered.

How we respond to disturbing information is a complex process. Individuals may block out certain information in order to maintain coherent meaning systems (e.g., cognitive dissonance), desirable emotional states, a sense of self-efficacy and to follow **norms of attention**, **norms of emotion**, and **norms of conversation**. The denial metaphor of the elephant in the room is useful because it reminds us that ignoring a serious problem is not easy to do. Ignoring the obvious can be a lot of work. In her work on apathy in the United States, sociologist Nina Eliasoph observes, "We often assume that political activism requires an explanation, while inactivity is the normal state of affairs. But it can be as difficult to ignore a problem as to try to solve it, to curtail feelings of empathy as to extend them . . . If there is no exit from the political world then political silence must be as active and colorful as a bright summer shadow" (1998, p. 6). How did people manage to outwardly ignore what was happening in the community? Did they manage to ignore it inwardly as well?

Eviatar Zerubavel argues that society organizes patterns of perception, memory, and organizational aspects of thinking. In other words, what people pay attention to, think about, remember, and more are in large part a matter of what we have been socialized to notice, think about, and remember. These things are also a function of what people around us are paying attention to, thinking about, and remembering. These cultural norms are in turn attuned to specific political economic relations. Governments and media outlets shape the collective thought process through direct censorship, of course, but much more often this happens through the process of framing stories, distraction, public rituals, and other seemingly more benign techniques. My own work has examined this. Thus, alongside the serious threat to democracy posed by capital's control of the production and dissemination of knowledge (e.g., the fact that increased corporate control of media limits and molds available information about global warming, and corporate-funded research centers generate conflicting knowledge) is another phenomenon that reinforces public nonresponse: how people cope with the information that *does* become available. Overt and more readily identifiable processes such as manipulation and control of information set the stage for the less visible (and to date less studied) process of socially organized denial that I describe here.

The concept of denial is generally considered the domain of psychology. But the information individuals find disturbing, and the mechanisms they employ to protect themselves from such information, may also be analyzed within the context of both social interaction and the broader political economy. Social context itself can be a significant part of what makes it difficult to respond to climate change. Sociologists remind us that notions of what is normal to think and talk about are not given, but are socially structured. Although individual people experience the disturbing emotions of fear, guilt, and helplessness, the act of denial is not individual; rather, it is something that people do together as a community. Again, I draw upon the work of sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, who coined the term "**socially organized denial**." It is by paying simultaneous attention to individual

responses and social context that we can begin to analyze people's reactions to global warming in reference to the larger political economy. Drawing next from my ethnographic data from Norway, I will describe how people use a variety of methods for normalizing or minimizing disturbing information, what can be called "strategies of denial."

Community members *collectively* held information about global warming at arm's length by participating in cultural norms of attention, emotion, and conversation, and by using a series of cultural narratives to deflect disturbing information and normalize a particular version of reality in which "everything was fine." For example, they tried not to think too far into the future, tried to avoid scaring one another or "being too negative," and often emphasized how "Norway is such a small country anyway" and "at least we're not as bad as the Americans." I have since done comparative work in the United States, where many of the feelings about climate change, as well as tactics of normalizing it, are similar to what I found in Norway—except that the "bad guys" are the climate skeptics and the Chinese.

CULTURAL DENIAL

People in the community managed to keep climate change at a distance from their safe everyday lives by following established cultural norms about what to pay attention to, feel, and talk and think about in different contexts. I categorized these as "cultural denial." From the perspective of sociology of cognition, people learn to think through socialization into different "thought communities." At the same time as they feel "just like everyday life," these culturally prescribed norms of attention reflect a particularly insidious form of social control. While outright coercion is a serious matter, it is also more easily recognized, identified, and, in (so-called) democratic societies, condemned. As Cohen notes, "Without being told what to think about (or what not to think about), and without being punished for 'knowing' the wrong things, societies arrive at unwritten agreements about what can be publically remembered and acknowledged" (2001, pp. 10–11). For example, to avoid emotions of guilt, fear, and helplessness, people in the Norwegian community I studied changed the topic of conversations, told jokes, tried not to think about climate change, and kept the concept off the agenda of political meetings. When disturbing ideas about climate change entered the conversation, people used a series of cultural narratives to deflect those ideas and to normalize a particular version of reality in which the scary problem of climate change was not occurring.

Thus information about climate change disappeared into daily life for reasons that were more culturally diffuse. For example, simply upholding norms of attention with respect to space made the lack of snow and warm temperatures seem less significant (depolticized in part because connections to unusual weather events elsewhere were not made), while following

norms of attention with respect to time encouraged community members to not think too far ahead into the future, hence minimizing the extent to which the implications of immediate events are forecasted. Cultural norms of emotion limited the extent to which community members could bring strong feelings they privately held regarding climate change into the public political process, which in turn served to reinforce the sense that everything was fine.

INTERPRETIVE DENIAL: COMBATING GLOBAL WARMING BY INCREASING CARBON DIOXIDE

A second, more explicit example of socially organized denial happened through narrative interpretation. Community members used a variety of social narratives, some produced by the national government, to deflect responsibility for and legitimate Norwegian climate and petroleum policy. I observed three types of narratives: **selective interpretation**, **perspectival selectivity**, and **claims to virtue**. According to Rosenberg (1991, p. 135), in the case of selective interpretation, to the extent that they are able, “people tend to assign those meanings to events that will produce the desired emotions.” In this case, community members had a set of “stock stories” about who they were. By portraying Norwegians as close to nature, egalitarian, simple, and humble, these narratives of national identity served to counter the criticism and doubt Norwegians face with regard to climate and petroleum policies. Notions of “Mythic Norway” were portrayed in official government images and drawn upon by advertisers and everyday people in the town. References to Norwegians as humanitarian and egalitarian were common in the national press, and we bought “Norwegian Mountain Bread” complete with an image of a person skiing in the mountains on 400-year-old ski equipment at our local store.

People also normalized information about global warming using what Rosenberg calls perspectival selectivity: “the angle of vision that one brings to bear on certain events” (1991, p. 134). For example, people may manage unpleasant emotions by searching for and repeatedly telling stories of others who are worse off than they are. Three narratives in this category—“Amerika as a Tension Point,” “We Have Suffered,” and “Norway Is a Little Land”—served to minimize Norwegian responsibility for the problem of global warming by pointing to the larger impact of the United States on carbon dioxide emissions, stressing that Norway has been a relatively poor nation until quite recently, and emphasizing the nation’s small population size. For example, multiple newspaper articles in the national papers in the winter and spring of 2001 mentioned that the United States emits 25% of total greenhouse gas emissions while accounting for only 4% of the global population. While obviously the United States must be held accountable for its emissions, framing the figure in terms of total emissions and population

makes the difference between the United States and “little Norway” appear greatest. When looking at per capita emissions in each country, the contrasts are not so large. Perspectival selectivity was used to create what social psychologists Susan Opatow and Leah Weiss (2000) call “denial of self-involvement.” These narratives are discussed in more detail in the book that I published based on this research called *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions and Everyday Life*.

A third interpretive strategy is in the vein of what historical psychologist Robert J. Lifton calls “claim to virtue.” He coined the phrase to describe how the Nazi doctors in concentration camps who gave Jews lethal injections interpreted their genocidal actions in terms of compassion. From the doctor’s perspective, their acts were compassionate because, by killing people who were ill (or who might become ill), they were able to prevent the spread of disease in the camps. Through the claim that unjust acts are actually working toward the opposite end as they appear (in the case of the doctors, saving the Jews rather than killing them), these actions are made acceptable. Two such claims to virtue were in use that winter with respect to climate change. Although the Norwegian government speaks urgently of the need to reduce emissions of climate gases, they were at the time involved in two projects that do exactly the opposite: building two new natural gas facilities and expanding the petroleum sector by increasing oil development. Both actions have been justified by switching the focus from national targets and measures (as specified under the Kyoto Protocol) to emphasizing climate change as an *international* problem and attempting to meet Norwegian climate commitments by *trading* climate gas emissions rather than reducing actual output.

“GAS PLANTS ARE BETTER THAN COAL”

Beginning in the early 1990s, the Norwegian government in combination with oil and gas companies began presenting a series of justifications for the development of new natural gas facilities: As natural gas produced less carbon dioxide than coal, Norway could sell this excess energy to other nations and actually be helping overall global emissions (see Lesson 9). Thus, although the government acknowledges that Norway’s emissions of climate gases must decrease, it has used a claim to virtue to argue that the building two new natural gas plants, thereby *increasing* Norway’s contribution to climate gases, was actually helping to solve the problem of global warming. However, as Norwegian researchers Hovden and Lindseth pointed out: “While it is claimed that these would be offset by reductions elsewhere, this does not change the fact that emissions from Norwegian gas-based power would increase the CO₂ emission reductions that Norway would have to complete in order to fulfill its international obligations” (2004, p. 158).

"INCREASING PRODUCTION OF NORWEGIAN OIL WILL HELP THE CLIMATE"

A second example, the justification for increasing national oil production, follows a similar pattern. Norway had increased production of oil and gas threefold in the preceding 10 years, dropped its plan of a national carbon dioxide emissions stabilization target, and shifted from a focus on national strategies (mandated under the Kyoto Protocol) to a focus on international efforts. Within the new international perspective, the government has argued that "since Norwegian petroleum products are not the dirtiest in the international market, Norwegian oil and gas production is good climate policy internationally" (Hovden and Lindseth, 2004, p. 153). Hovden and Lindseth (p. 152) describe how

Miljkosok, an environmental cooperative forum consisting of the petroleum industry, the government and various interest groups and organizations, produced a report in 1996 that in effect, concluded that Norwegian oil production was environmentally benign. The arguments were a) that a cut in Norwegian production would increase the price of oil on the world market, which would make coal more competitive, and, most importantly, b) that as Norwegian petroleum production has fewer emissions per unit of oil produced, it was environmentally preferable to the oil produced by other countries. The unavoidable conclusion was that Norway should increase its Continental Shelf activity, as this would, in sum, be beneficial with respect to the global emissions of CO₂ and NO_x.

Thus, by shifting attention from the national level (on which Norway is retreating from the Kyoto Protocol and other earlier reduction goals) to the international (in which Norway produces "cleaner" oil than other nations), the Norwegian government claims that increasing oil production is the best thing it can do for the global climate, even though these activities increase carbon dioxide emissions and are in direct opposition to their agreement under the Kyoto Protocol!

The interpretive strategies of selective interpretation, perspectival selectivity, and claims to virtue worked together to reinforce one another. For example, selective interpretation and perspectival selectivity gave a background picture of Norwegian environmentalism and innocence, whereas claims to virtue were linked to particular contested climate and petroleum activities such as the expansion of oil and gas production or plans of carbon trading.

CONCLUSION

The view from this one town in Norway portrays global warming as an issue about which people cared and had considerable information, but one about which they didn't really want to know and in some sense didn't know *how* to know. I have traced the three disturbing emotions of guilt, fear of the future and helplessness, as well as how people normalized the idea of climate

change in order to avoid these emotions. I describe how people changed the topic of conversations, told jokes, tried not to think about it, and kept the concept off the agenda of political meetings all by following the “rules” of normal behavior. Weaving these pieces together, I follow an arc of power that moves from the microlevel of emotions to the mesolevel of culture to the macrolevel of political economy and back again. According to my data both from Norway and from the United States, thinking about global warming is difficult for community members because it raises troubling feelings, feelings that go against a series of cultural norms. And these norms are in turn embedded in the particular social context and economic circumstances in which people live. Thus, in contrast to psychological and survey research that studies human perceptions of climate change on an individual level, I locate these emotional and psychological experiences in both *cultural* and *political-economic* contexts. As a result of this emphasis on cultural, economic, and social contexts, my approach shifts from an “information deficit” model, in which the public fails to respond because of a lack of information, to a “social organization of denial” model, in which the public on a collective level actively resists available information. As a result, what happened in this one town, and indeed what we can all observe in the public silence on climate change in the United States and elsewhere, was not a rejection of information *per se* but the failure to integrate this knowledge into everyday life or transform it into social action.

One implication of socially organized denial of climate change is that as individuals we must struggle to imagine the reality of our current situation. In writing on the threat of global nuclear war, a problem that now seems infinitely more manageable than climate change, Lifton described many of the same difficulties we face in coming to terms with climate change. He wrote of our “fragmented awareness,” how “we have no experience with a narrative of potential extinction,” and how therefore we “cling to a desperate conventionality.” He pointed out that the emotion of fear inhibits our ability to break through “illusions” to “awareness.” And at stake in our “struggle for awareness” is the fact that “the degree of numbing of everyday life necessary for individual comfort is at odds with the degree of tension, or even anxiety that must accompany the nuclear awareness necessary for collective survival.” He noted that with the appearance of nuclear weapons, imagining the reality of our situation became “uniquely difficult, and at the same time, a prerequisite for survival” (1982, pp. 117, 108, 5).

Can such socially organized denial be overcome? And if so, how? With socially organized denial, the question becomes not how better to educate and inform the public, but the circumstances under which people are able to move beyond a sense of helplessness, guilt, or fear of the future and take actions that are in their collective, long-term survival interest. Climate change requires large-scale reduction of emissions, but our current political economic structure is intimately embedded in our petroleum-based economy (see Lessons 7 and 9). We need democratic engagement and response, yet individuals retreat out of a sense of helplessness. Part of what makes people

feel helpless at present is an assessment of this very serious problem in a context where nobody else is acting, an assessment that political actions are socially unacceptable or politically unfeasible, and a sense that larger international efforts are even more unlikely. How can we escape this circular pattern? Must we go into the streets? Probably a lot more people do need to march with signs down the main streets of every town in the United States, Norway, and around the world in order to break the cycle of invisibility regarding climate change (see Lessons 16 and 18). But for those with different instincts, there are many other things that can and must be done to make climate change visible and to show each other and our political leaders that we demand action.

If socially organized climate denial is a cycle held in place by individual fear and silence, complicit cultural norms, and a state logic based on fossil fuel extraction and economic profit at any politically acceptable cost, then this cycle can be interrupted at multiple points. In any political struggle there are key strategic possibilities. In our present times of rapid social change such strategic moments will continue to emerge, and we can be ready for them. More generally, individuals can get involved in the many ongoing local, regional, and national political efforts. Social theorists like Hannah Arendt remind us of the importance of power from below: Even talking about climate change with family and friends is an important way to break the present cultural silence. Although they are not enough in isolation, local efforts to make climate change visible in one's community, to plan for coming changes in water supplies and energy use, and to reduce emissions at the county and regional levels that are based on existing community ties and sense of place and identity may provide a key for breaking through climate denial from the ground up. There is already a global movement building for communities to uncover how climate change is manifesting in their local contexts. Local political renewal cannot be enough on its own, but it may be the important next step for individuals in breaking through the absurdity of the double life and for renewing democratic process. As people participate in thinking about what is happening in their own place and how they will respond, they will begin to see why the facts of climate change matter to them and to develop a sociological imagination at the same time as they reconnect the rifts in time and space that have constructed climate change as a distant issue. Working together may over time create the supportive community that is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for people to face large fears about the future and engage in large-scale social change. Facing climate change will not be easy, but it is worth trying.

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