

Societal Attributes Needed to Move Beyond Denial

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How Sociologists Think . . .

- Micro – individual psychology, individual experiences, emotions (*Agency*)
- Meso -- culture, social interactions, social norms, discourses
- Macro – economy, political structure, democratic and legal structures (*Structure*)
- Sociology as a discipline interested in the relationship between “Structure” and “Agency” (*most sociologists focus on one “level”*)
- The ability to think across these levels and integrate them is called the “sociological imagination” C.W. Mills

Paradox:

- Dramatic alterations to ecological systems identified by climate scientists
- Significant social consequences
- Urgency and consensus increase throughout 1980s and 1990s



**Yet for the public climate change is
“no more than background noise”**

Why are people so “apathetic?”

Majority of research presumed information was the limiting factor in public non-response.

- “If people only knew”
 - complex science
 - media framing
 - media corruption
- “If people only cared”
 - Individualism
 - Greed



Climate changes poses two new challenges to civil society and democracy.

- Climate skeptic movements undermine the centrality of facts and science as the basis for democratic organization (“extreme” views of political right)
- The phenomenon of “climate apathy” or “social inertia.” The invisibility of climate change as a pressing social problem (widespread pervasive across society).

Stanely Cohen's three varieties of denial:

- Literal denial: “it isn't happening”
- Interpretive denial: “It is happening, but its not what you think...”
- 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” (Cohen p. 9).



What percentage of Americans participate in “implicatory denial”?

- Krosnick's study 2009 73% say serious.
- Gallup 2011: 48% worry “not much or not at all about global warming” (as compared to other environmental problems).
- Rough estimate implicatory denial = 50% or more of US population.

What looks like “public apathy. . .”



*is socially organized denial. Our failure to engage
is active and collectively produced*

Why Norway?



In Bygdaby the possibility of global warming was both deeply disturbing and almost completely invisible, simultaneously unimaginable and common knowledge.



Climate change as an issue people had to:

“sit themselves down and think about,”

“don’ t think about in the everyday,”

“in between is discouraging and an emotional weight.”



They experienced what Robert Lifton calls the *absurdity of the double life* (1982), a phrase I adapt in coining the term *double reality*.

“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.”



The Why of Denial:

“People want to protect themselves a bit.”



A series of Troubling Emotions

- Guilt
 - Individual and national identity
- Fear of the future
 - Ontological security
- Helplessness
 - Self efficacy, identity

“We go on vacation and we go shopping, and my partner drives to work every day. We feel that we must do it to make things work on a practical level, but we have a guilty conscience, a bit of a guilty conscience.”



Guilt



“I find that there is a kind of guilt because the way we live, culturally the way we’ve been raised, is so contrary to our ideals in a lot of ways. You can be against global warming to a certain extent, but we’re still heating our homes and driving our cars and shipping our food long distances. It’s really hard to live in a social context and be aligned with your beliefs on the environment.”

Fear of the future

“We have now come so far that we have begun to see that to protect or not to protect the environment we are living in, in one hundred years it’s possible that the environment will be damaged to the point that it isn’t possible to live on earth any more, you know?”



Fear of the future

- “When I heard Bill McKibben speaking, and they talk about the tipping point, fear comes in with helplessness, ‘Oh my god, there is nothing. . . .’ I found out, you know, we’re 50 years away from the worst; we haven’t even felt the effect of what we are doing now. It makes me think, ‘We can’t do anything, it’s already beyond help,’ and then there’s the fear.”
 - American Student

Helplessness

- “I think that there are a lot of people who feel that no matter what I do I can’t do anything about that anyway.” (Norwegian)
- “That’s, like, where I feel the most helpless; it’s like I know all this stuff, I have all this information, [but] what the hell do I do with it? I don’t know where to turn, I don’t know who to talk to. Yeah, I can write my congressman a letter, but in all honesty . . . I am not sure that one person can make such a difference.” (American)

Efficacy, Information and Concern

- People stopped paying attention to global climate change when they realized that there is no easy solution for it.
- Many people only judged problems as serious if they thought they could be effectively acted upon.
 - Krosnick, Jon, Allyson Holbrook, Laura Lowe and Penny Visser 2006 “The Origins and Consequences of Democratic Citizen’s Policy Agendas: A Study of Popular Concern about Global Warming” Climatic Change 77:7-43.

- Increased levels of information about global warming has a negative effect on concern and sense of personal responsibility.
- Respondents who were better informed about climate change felt less rather than more responsible for it. Furthermore, “in sharp contrast with the knowledge-deficit hypothesis, respondents with higher levels of information about global warming show less concern” (120).
 - Kellstedt, Paul, Sammy Zahran and Arnold Vedlitz 2008. Personal Efficacy, the Information Environment, and Attitudes Toward Global Warming and Climate Change in the United States Risk Analysis 28(1): 113-126.

Individual and National identity

- **“Various self-theories suggest that people's self-conceptions are valued and protected and that a low self-evaluation (on criteria that matter) is an uncomfortable condition which people are motivated to avoid.”**

Geckas and Burke(1995).

- Climate Change poses threats to both individual identity and national identity.

Emotion affects cognition

- Individuals may block out or distance themselves from certain information in order to maintain coherent meaning systems, desirable emotional states or a sense of self-efficacy.
- Sociology is relevant for the study of denial because it draws our attention to the ***political dimension of emotions*** such as guilt.
- Sociology also matters for the ***process*** of ignoring . . .

The Social Organization of Denial: Weaving Emotion, Culture and Political Economy

Denial is not individual but
collective



Cultural Tool Kit Part One: Cultural Norms of Attention, Emotion and Conversation

Social norms of attention, conversation and emotion are powerful, albeit largely invisible social forces that shape what we actually do think and talk about and feel. . .

Selective attention

- “We Can’ t Dig Ourselves into Depression, Right?”
Controlling Exposure to Information
- An activist described how she reads very little of the details, that it is in fact “better not to know everything.”
- “you have the knowledge, but you live in a completely different world.”



“I don’t allow myself to think so far ahead”

- “It’s terrible to think of, that we live so well while others live in such miserable circumstances. Of course it’s very good to have a comfortable life . . . I enjoy it . . . but I feel so bad about the others. I have a guilty conscience, that’s why I try not to think about it, keep it at a distance . . .”

Cultural Tool Kit Part Two: Telling Stories of Mythic Nations

- ‘Americka’ as a Tension Point
 - “We’ re not as bad as the Americans”
- “Norway is a little land”
- Emphasis on national identity
 - Connection to nature, purity, rural life, simplicity



Claims to Virtue

- “Gas plants are better than coal”
- “Norwegian oil is cleaner”



Table 5.2

Relationship Between Emotions, Emotion Norms and Emotion Management Strategies with Respect to Global Warming in Bygdaby

Emotion	Emotion Norm	Emotion Management Strategy
Fear, helplessness	Be optimistic, maintain control	<i>Selective attention</i> Controlling exposure to information Not thinking too far ahead Focusing on something you can do
Guilt, identity	Be proud of Norway (managing spoiled identity)	<i>Perspectival selectivity</i> Not as bad as the Americans Norway is a small country anyway

Table 4.1

Conversation Norms and Climate Change in a Variety of Settings in Bygdaby

Small talk	Weather, casual comments
Educational settings	Be optimistic
Social contexts	Time to relax, take shelter from the wider world
Political settings	Local focus, preset agendas
Interviews	Deeper emotions expressed, yet with discomfort— still a bit “off topic”

Table 4.3

Conversational Tactics and Strategies of Emotion Management

Humor

Knowing the facts

Controlling exposure to information

Shifting attention elsewhere

Finding a *haldepunkt* in local community, tradition, and past history

Focusing on something you can do

Emotion, cognition and political economy

- Oil and gas production increased threefold in the ten years prior to my time in the field. In 2008, the oil and gas industry accounted for 26.6 percent of the national carbon dioxide emissions.
- Eivand Hovden and Gard Lindseth: “Norway, an already wealthy and highly developed country, built a very significant fortune in the 1990s from the very activity that has made stabilisation of CO₂ emissions next to impossible” (2002, 163).



As of 2011, Norway was the world's sixth-largest oil exporter and the second-largest exporter of natural gas

- Norwegian wealth comes from oil production via state operated oil company and taxation scheme.
- Norway's state petroleum fund worth \$570 billion US\$ in 2011
- 34% of national revenues from petroleum industry



The construction of political silence

- Micro – individual psychology, individual experiences, emotions
- Meso -- role of culture, emotions as socially structured, conversation norms, emotion norms, cultural tool kit, discourses
- Macro – Norwegian political economy shapes emotions, discourses

Climate Denial: What is at stake?



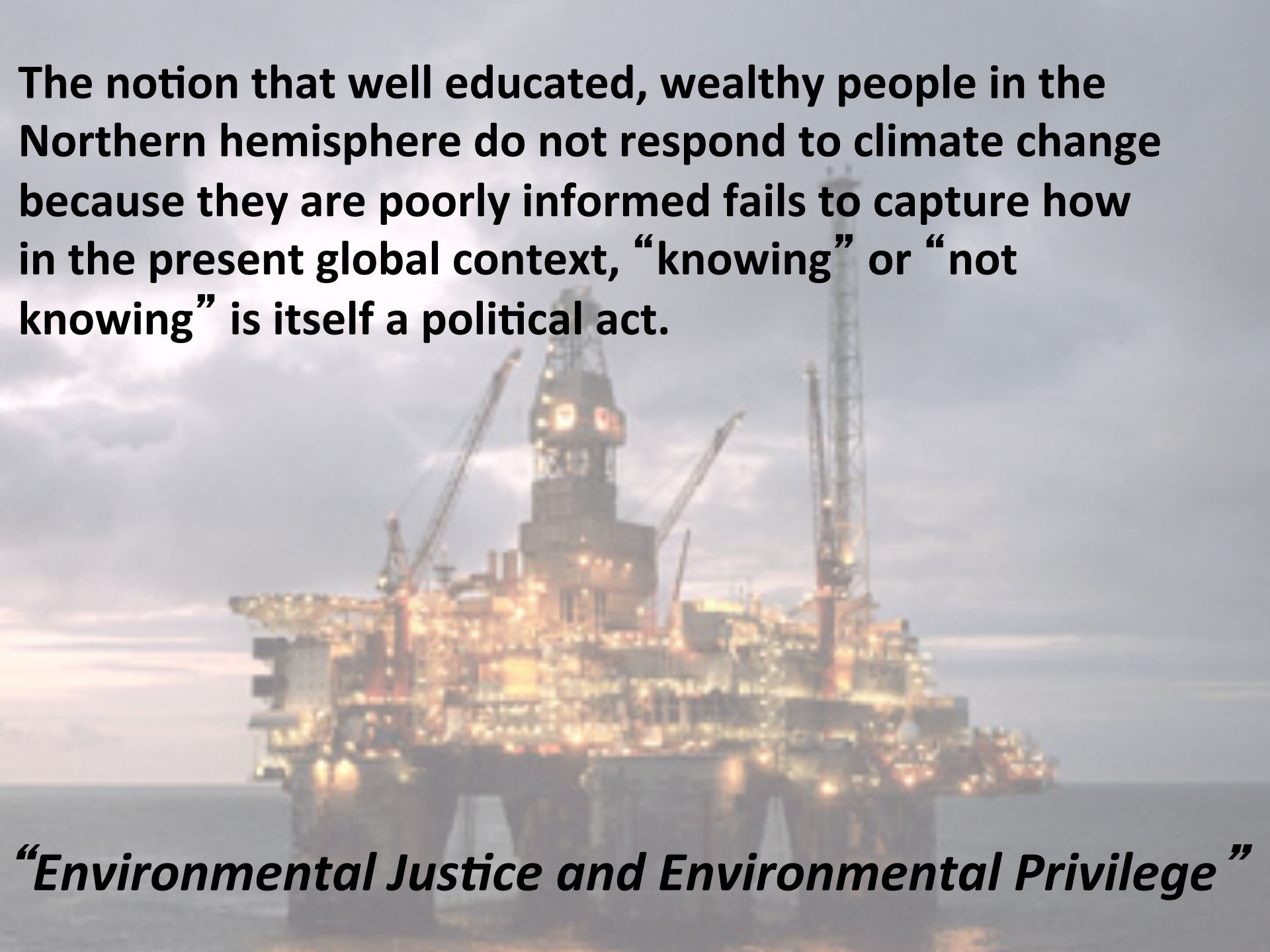
- Significance of literal denial immediately understood: oil companies and segments of the public are disputing facts. Facts matter for democratic decision making.
- Significance of socially organized implicatory denial more difficult (not caught on in the media).
 - Implicatory denial points to less visible influences of state and corporate influence on public perception, acquiescence.
 - More insidious ways that cultural practices produce conformity and people comply with the status quo, against their own long term interests.
- Implicatory denial flies in the face of the idea that “the facts matter.”

Climate Denial and Privilege

- Citizens of wealthy nations who fail to respond to the issue of climate change benefit from our denial in economic terms.
- We also benefit by avoiding the emotional entanglement and identity conflicts that may arise from knowing that one is doing “the wrong thing.” Socially organized denial connected to privilege and has important implications for environmental justice.

The notion that well educated, wealthy people in the Northern hemisphere do not respond to climate change because they are poorly informed fails to capture how in the present global context, “knowing” or “not knowing” is itself a political act.

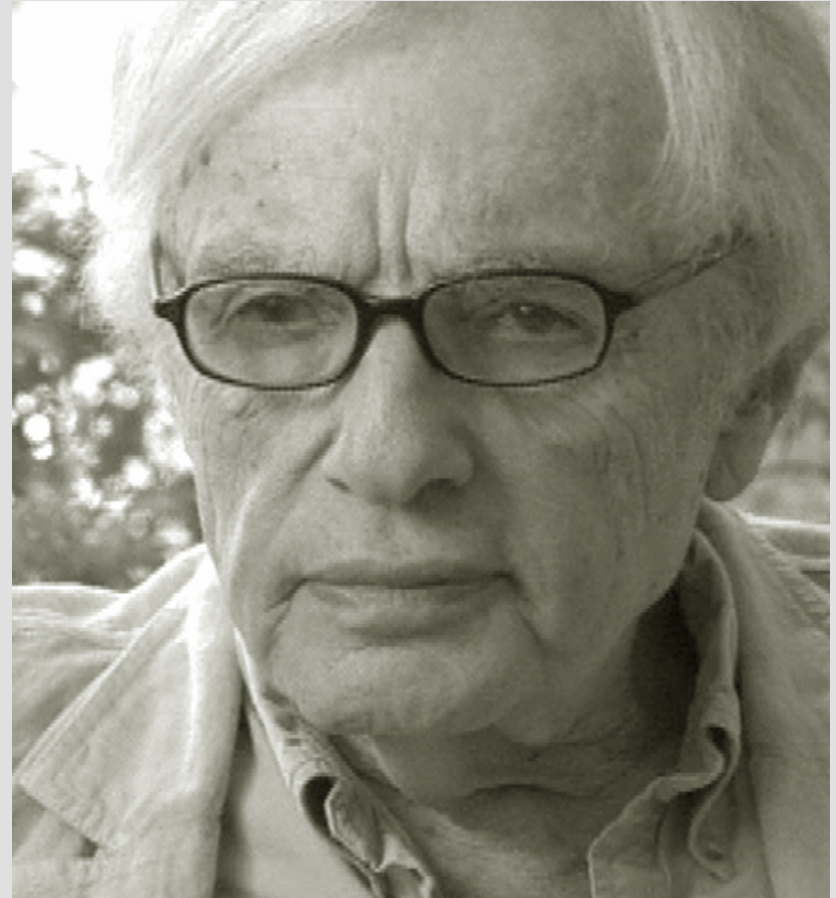
“Environmental Justice and Environmental Privilege”



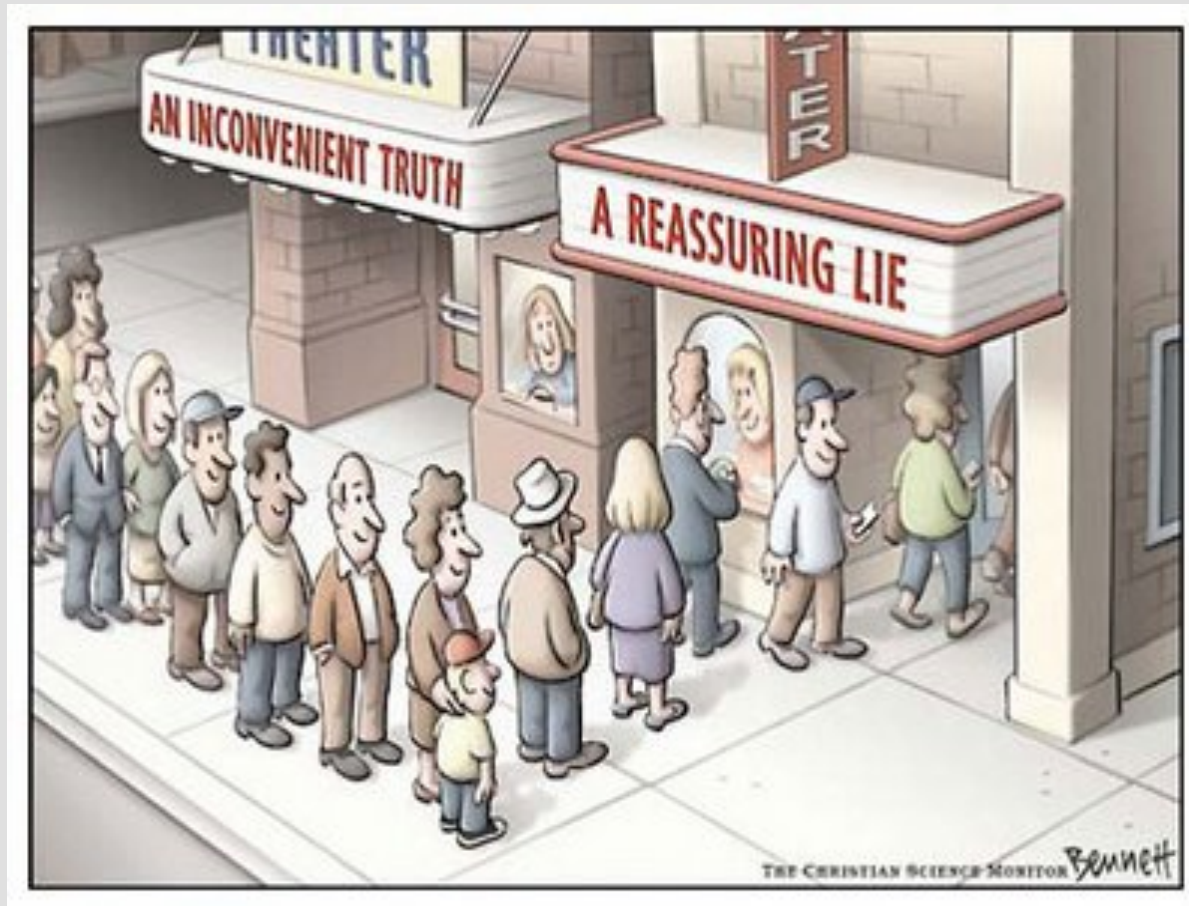
Robert J. Lifton

What are the personal consequences for each of us?

“The absurdity of the double life profoundly affects our thinking, feeling, identity, sense of empowerment, political imagination and morality. “If at any moment nothing might matter, who is to say that nothing matters now?” 1993, 23



How might we move beyond denial?



Move Beyond Individuals

- Must address social structure
 - Individual beliefs, values, behaviors strongly influenced by the context of their economic, political circumstance (e.g. creation of consumption as a behavior)
 - “Structure” is how society works: emissions, energy sources, political and media messages are controlled by powerful political actors. Need to understand leverage points, etc.
- Need to work with the interplay of the individual, culture and political economy in the production and maintenance of denial.

Move Beyond Consumption, Think in Terms of Democracy

- Dominant focus is still on individual consumer behavior.
 - “Social Fact” Emile Durkheim 1895
 - Will not be a leverage point.
 - Need to think much bigger.
 - Webb, J. 2012 “Climate Change and Sociology The Chimera of Behavior Change Techniques” *Sociology* 46(1): 109-125.
 - “Is Green Consumption Part of the Solution?” pp. 594-608 in John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, & David Schlosberg, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, Oxford University Press, 2011.
- People alienated within present system – even those who appear to have the good life feel disempowered.
- Reclaim democratic process.

Think in terms of where we want to go

- What would workable local, regional, national and international levels of policy and political action look like?
- Generate real discourses about what to do



Social Context Matters:

Engage People within Local Communities

- Local contexts provide:
 - Examples of climate change as a real issue with local short and long term impacts (changes in asthma rates, water supplies, fire threat).
 - Planning and responding is an end in itself (even if you feel discouraged about the odds of long term)
 - Other people with whom one can work together, break isolation, Hannah Arendt “power springs up between men”
 - Having others people to work with who share concerns, seeing that climate change is real and has impacts in one’s own place may be a way to leverage broader engagement on climate change.
- Must Engage Change at all Levels
 - Norgaard, K. R. Brulle and R. Haluza-DeLay “Climate Change and Cultural Inertia” 2012

Questions?

