Review

Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life

Kari Marie Norgaard. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011. 304pp.

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The "denial" which is Norgaard's focus is not the climate change denial (which may be more accurately described as scepticism) which we hear from right-wing politicians: in particular, her participants have no interest in deceiving others, but many motivations to deceive themselves. The residents of "Bygdaby," a pseudonym for a real Norwegian community, are at the front line of climate change—many of their local industries depend on snow and ice, of which the supply has steadily declined—and they are aware of its impact. However, while registering the effect on activities such as skiing and ice fishing, these residents effect not to think about the cause or wider impact of such phenomena.

The first point of interest is the typology of "denial" employed here. Norgaard draws from Stanley Cohen's (2001) varieties of denial: literal, interpretive and implicatory. The residents of Bygdaby, she argues, are engaging in implicatory denial, in which the facts are not denied but "the psychological, political or moral implications that conventionally follow" (Cohen 2001: 8) are minimised.

Norgaard is clear from the outset that the problem in Bygdaby is not one of ignorance: rather, the residents have access to the facts about climate change and regularly express concern about its effects. The key question she poses here is why this awareness does not translate into the residents taking action—the rationale, in other

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words, behind the implicatory denial. Her investigation into this lack of action produces some fascinating insights into what is arguably a far wider problem.

The main reason behind the implicatory denial appears to be a deficiency on the residents' part in processing the "raw" (57) information about climate change—the "history of local weather events" (57) and the widespread belief that it was a "serious problem" (57)—and subsequently applying political analysis to the problem. Hence, Norgaard describes Bygdaby as "a landscape where the possibility of climate change is both deeply disturbing and almost completely submerged, simultaneously unimaginable and common knowledge" (xix). The processing gap, she found, hinges on a number of factors, including emotion (individual and collective) and cultural self-perception.

The latter factor is rooted in a general Norwegian sensibility in which values such as antimaterialism, thrift, egalitarianism and—vitally—closeness to nature are highly rated. Such a sensibility is necessarily damaged by the admission firstly that tackling climate change requires efforts that are not being satisfactorily made, and secondly that the problem cannot entirely be blamed on outside forces (the United States is frequently referred to as an offender by Norgaard's participants) and is to some extent a local responsibility.

At the emotional level, Norgaard alludes to a strong component of simply "not wanting to know" (8) about climate change and its causes and effects. Here, she argues, the key factor is the powerful emotions engendered by the topic, which cause Bygdaby's residents to close their minds in ways which are counterproductive to improving the situation. The "feelings of helplessness and despair" (57) brought into play by serious consideration of climate change blocked the transmission of information, and coalesced into a form of social control in which ideas that limit the potential for change are readily accepted. For example, the younger generation do not receive the environmental message clearly, because—in a town where the effects of climate change are clearly visible—their teachers "had a hard time connecting the issue to students" lives and struggled with the sense that this information was somehow 'too much'" (55). What young residents learn in this scenario is that, while it is historical record that (for example) the ski season becomes shorter each year, the reasons for this are not an appropriate topic for conversation.

Almost inevitably, this reluctance to discuss the issues has an impact at the political level. Noorgard's analysis of the local and regional political processes has shades of Steven Lukes' (1986) second face of power, known as non-decision making.

Noorgard reports, registering surprise, that climate change was not discussed in local council or Labour Party meetings during her time in Bygdaby. Of particular note is the absence of the topic from a council subgroup with an explicit environmental focus. Hence, because discussion of climate change invokes fear, such discussion is avoided and climate change thus becomes a non-issue in political terms.

While Norgaard's study is largely focused on a small town in Norway, there are wider implications to be drawn from examining the role of emotion in attitudes to climate change. The fear which drives non-discussion of the topic in Bygdaby is unlikely to be an isolated phenomenon, but rather one which manifests itself in a variety of ways and impacts on public engagement with the issues. Poortinga *et al* cite a number of studies suggesting that public awareness of climate change is lower than would be ideal given the urgency of the issue. In the United States "about one in three believe that global warming is caused mostly by natural changes in the environment" (Poortinga *et al* 2011: 1016), while a 2009 Eurobarometer poll indicated that 30% of Europeans and 44% of British nationals agreed that "emissions of carbon dioxide have only a marginal impact on climate change" (ibid.).

In conclusion, Norgaard paints a fascinating picture of how one community engages (or does not engage) with climate change, and in doing so raises a number of issues which warrant exploration beyond that community.

REFERENCES

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