How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate

The following is an excerpt from the book.

By Andrew J. Hoffman | Apr. 6, 2015

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120 pages, Stanford Briefs, 2015

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How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate is a concise and accessible presentation of the social science insights into why people accept or reject the science of climate change, and what to do about it. Building upon the award-winning Stanford Social Innovation Review article “Climate science as culture war,” this book presents evidence and research to help demystify the opposing cultural lenses through which science is interpreted. Its central message is that the social debate around climate change is no longer about carbon dioxide and climate models. It is about values, culture, worldviews and ideology. The public develops positions that are consistent with their preexisting values and with those held by others within the referent groups of which they are part. In this context, efforts to
present ever increasing amounts of data, without attending to the deeper values that are threatened by the conclusions they lead to, will only yield greater resistance and make a social consensus even more elusive. The book supports this argument by explaining the sources of organized economic and ideological resistance and extracts lessons from major cultural shifts in the past to engender a better understanding of the problem and motivate the public to take action. It makes a powerful case for a more scientifically literate public, a more socially engaged scientific community, and a more thoughtful mode of public discourse.

We have become, by the power of a glorious evolutionary accident called intelligence, the stewards of life’s continuity on earth. We did not ask for this role, but we cannot abjure it. We may not be suited to it, but here we are. —Stephen Jay Gould

I play in a casual summer golf league that is as much about beer-drinking banter as it is about hitting a golf ball. We don’t generally talk about work. But one day, Greg, a fellow golfer, asked me, “Hey, Andy, what do you do for a living, anyway?” I told him that I was a professor and that I studied environmental issues. He asked, “Do you mean like climate change? That’s not real, is it?” I told him that the science was quite compelling and that the issue was real. His next question was, “Are you a Democrat or Republican?” I told him that I was an independent. He replied, “So what do you think about Al Gore?” I told him that I thought Al Gore had called needed attention to the issue but that, unfortunately, perceptions of his partisan identity also helped to polarize the issue.

I think about that conversation often. Greg was not challenging my ideas; he was questioning my motives. He was trying to find out if he could trust me enough to listen to what I had to say, to figure out if I was part of his cultural community, his tribe. And I can imagine the hesitation he may have had in broaching this topic. Would I get condescending and give him a science lecture, challenging his lack of deep knowledge on the issue while asserting my own? Or would I begin to judge him and his lifestyle, critiquing his choice of car, house, vacation habits, or any one of the multitude of “unsustainable” activities that we all undertake? Or might I begin to pontificate on the politics of the issue, complaining of the partisan split on the issue and the corporate influence on our political system? These are all plausible and unpleasant scenarios that lead people to avoid this topic.

These conversations come up often enough—you’ve probably had one—that it is worth asking, What are we trying to get out of these discussions? Are we trying to change “hearts and minds,” or are we trying to make a point? Do we want to allow people a face-saving way to come to their own conclusions, or do we want to win, forcing them to acquiesce? The only solution that is sustainable in the long term, as explained by the research presented in this
book, is to engage people in a way that draws them towards an understanding they can embrace, not forcing them to renounce a set of beliefs we have deemed inappropriate. We cannot scold, lecture, or treat people with disrespect if we are to gain their trust; and trust is at the center of an effective theory of change. That trust will not be gained by bludgeoning those we engage. It can only be won through the art of persuasion and a recognition of the political landscape in which the cultural debate is taking place. A theory of change must include an understanding of the processes that are available for creating change and the true scope of the cultural challenge before us.

Recognize the Political Landscape

When I say climate change, what do you hear? As described earlier, some hear scientific consensus and the need for a carbon price. Others hear more government, extreme environmentalists, restrictions on freedom, restraints on the free market, and even a challenge to their notion of God. These are real concerns and they may all be triggered by this one idea. Solutions will only be found by recognizing this complex fabric and being able to speak to its full scope. Offered here are three central points to this recognition and the social movements that will be necessary to address it.

Focus on the middle. Within the public debate over climate change, we fix a disproportionate amount of attention on the extremes. On the one side, it’s all a hoax, humans have no impact on climate, and nothing is happening. On the other side, it’s an imminent crisis, human activity explains all climate change, and it will devastate life on earth as we know it. To fixate on these positions is to focus more on the competing worldviews that distort the scientific debate and engage in the pessimistic path, where competing sides are simply trying to win.

Instead, messaging on climate change must be focused on the consensus-based path and aimed at those who are open to discussion. Attention must center less on “the small minority of active deniers” and more on “the vulnerability of the majority to their influence.” The debate must engage the middle of the Six Americas—the Cautious, Disengaged, and Doubtful segments. In the words of Tony Leiserowitz of the YPCCC, “the proper model for thinking about the climate debate is not a boxing match, but a jury trial. We can never convince the die-hard skeptics, just like a prosecutor will never convince the defense lawyer, and doesn’t try. Rather, we should focus on convincing the silent jury of the mass public.”

To reach that middle, Cara Pike of the Social Capital Project argues for more capacity-building among the Alarmed and using them as a lever or motivator that will have a ripple effect through the rest of society.

Employ the radical flank. The ability of moderate, consensus-oriented change agents to operate is influenced by the presence of radical, conflict-oriented groups and actions
through what is called the “radical flank effect.” All members and ideas of a social movement are viewed in contrast to others, and extreme positions can make other ideas and organizations seem more reasonable to movement opponents. For example, when Martin Luther King Jr. first began speaking his message, it was perceived as too radical for the majority of white America. But when Malcolm X entered the debate, he pulled the radical flank further out and made King’s message look more moderate by comparison. Capturing this sentiment, Russell Train, second administrator of the EPA, once quipped, “Thank God for the David Browers of the world. They make the rest of us seem reasonable.”

So when writer and activist Bill McKibben founded 350.org, he deserved tremendous credit both for creating a social movement where others could not, and for helping to pull the radical flank further out on the political spectrum. McKibben created a movement out of a specific constituency (young people), framing an issue that affects them personally (their future will be altered), giving them a common enemy (fossil fuel companies), and establishing a tangible goal (divestment). The group scored a major victory in May 2014 when Stanford University became the first major university to divest its $18.7 billion endowment of stock in coal-mining companies. Many pundits dismissed the move as having no impact on the economics of coal. But that is not where the real impact of this move lies. It changed the debate over climate change by staking a position on the radical flank. Similarly, when Farmers Insurance filed a class action against nearly two hundred communities in the Chicago area for failing to prepare for flooding by arguing that the towns should have known that climate change would lead to this outcome,9 pundits argued that Farmers would lose the case. But the real effect, again, is staking out the radical flank. With these two actions, and others like them, the debate over climate change evolves and the revolutionary change described by Thomas Kuhn becomes increasingly possible.

The question then becomes, what kinds of anomalous events will precipitate a period of revolutionary change that will drive broad-scale cultural change? Or more to the point, how can events be utilized to drive the change that is necessary? Returning to Rahm Emanuel’s quip, how can we be sure to “never waste a good crisis”?

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