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CLIMATE DENIAL AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF INNOCENCE: RE-PRODUCING TRANSNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL PRIVILEGE IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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**Abstract:** Global climate change is experienced very differently across race, gender, class and nationality. Wealthy people in the Global North who generate the most carbon emissions have been apathetic regarding climate change, considering it a low priority in relation to other social problems. Meanwhile climate impacts are felt most acutely by women of color in the Global South. In today's globalized risk society such perceptions of near and far, immediate or abstract are politically charged social constructions. How do privileged people with knowledge of climate science re-create a sense of safety in the face of troubling events and information? What is the significance of their constructions of risk and concern in reproducing transnational power relations along the lines of race, gender and class? This paper is part of a larger project that uses ethnographic observation and interviews in a rural Norwegian community I call 'Bygdaby' to understand why globally privileged people perceive climate change as relatively unimportant. Here data are reanalyzed with emphasis on the relationship between the cultural production of denial and the maintenance of global privilege. I describe how for people in Bygdaby knowledge of climate change threatened a sense of order and innocence. People were aware of climate change but simultaneously re-created a sense that "everything was fine." Normalization of climate change occurred by using "tools of order" to recreate order and security and "tools of innocence" for the "construction of innocence." In the course of normalizing a troubling situation, residents simultaneously reproduce transnational environmental privilege. The construction of denial and innocence work to silence the needs and voices of women and people of color in the Global South, and thus reproduce global inequality along the lines of gender, race and class.

**Keywords:** global climate change; social organization of denial; construction of innocence; transnational privilege

Global climate change is now altering the biophysical world around which human social systems are organized (IPCC 2007, NRC 2011). Yet the impacts of changing ecological conditions including unstable weather patterns, sea level rise, intensification of wildfire and increased storm intensity are experienced very differently by communities around the globe. As illustrated by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, or the need to relocate disappearing island nations in the South Pacific, the impacts of extreme weather events associated with climate change are disproportionately borne along the lines of gender, race and class, both within and across national boundaries (Parks & Roberts, 2006; Sweetman, 2009; Bullard & Wright, 2009; IPCC, 2007). As a result, the ecological changes that undermine social activities and infrastructure simultaneously reproduce gender, racial and class inequality in complex ways depending on social context

(Lane & McNaught, 2009; Carmin & Agyeman, 2011; Baer & Singer, 2009; Taylor, 1997; Terry, 2009; Buechler, 2009).

Furthermore, race, class and gender shape people's concern about climate change on the one hand, and their contribution to the problem via carbon emissions on the other. People in nations with higher carbon emissions are not only less likely to be impacted by direct effects of climate change, but they are also less likely to show concern regarding climate change (Dunlap, 1998; Sandvik, 2008). For example, Norwegian scholar Hanno Sandvik reports a negative association between concern and national wealth and carbon dioxide emissions, and describes a "marginally significant" tendency that nations' per capita carbon dioxide emissions are negatively correlated to public concern. Sandvik writes, "the willingness of a nation to contribute to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions decreases with its share of these emissions" (2008:333).

Such trends highlight the fact that in today's globalized risk society, perceptions of near and far, immediate or abstract are politically charged social constructions. How do privileged people with knowledge of climate science recreate a sense of safety in the face of troubling climate events and information? What is the significance of their constructions of risk and concern in reproducing transnational power relations along the lines of race, gender and class? This paper draws upon a larger project that investigates how and why globally privileged people resist information about climate change using ethnographic observation and interviews in a rural Norwegian community I call 'Bygdaby' (see Norgaard, 2011a). In this larger study I describe how people in this community were aware of climate change, but simultaneously re-created a sense that "everything was fine." I then draw upon theory from sociology of emotions and culture to construct a theory of socially organized denial to describe the condition in which people simultaneously "know and don't know" about climate change. In the present paper, I evaluate the material and symbolic significance of both climate change denial and a phenomenon I call 'the construction of innocence' in terms of their role in reproducing global material and ideological power relations along the lines of race, class and gender. I re-analyze this existing data with particular attention to the question of transnational environmental privilege. In the community of Bygdaby information about climate change was troubling along two particular dimensions: it disrupted people's sense of security and order, and their sense of innocence. In the course of normalizing a troubling situation through 'tools of order' and 'tools of innocence', residents simultaneously reproduce transnational privilege.

## **CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: BEARING THE BRUNT OF A CHANGING CLIMATE**

Although the changing climate will eventually impact everyone, it has already begun to precipitate the most extensive and violent impacts to date against the poor, women and people of color of the globe (Sweetman, 2009; World

Bank, 2010; Collectif Argos, 2010; Parks & Roberts, 2006). These groups of people contribute least to carbon emissions, making climate change clearly an issue of global environmental justice (Parks & Roberts, 2006, Anguelovski & Roberts, 2011). Unequal effects manifest differently around the world according to geography, as well as the particular intersection of sexism and racism within different social contexts. Unequal impacts can be both acute during crisis events such as flooding or hurricanes (Fothergill & Peek, 2004; Blaikie et al. 1994), or ongoing over long periods of time as is for example the case with extended droughts. Thus on the one hand, women working in subsistence activities face particular vulnerabilities due to long term changing flood and climate regimes (Morton, 2007), while African American women post-Katrina have faced more difficulty securing loans to rebuild businesses and homes than their white counterparts (Bullard & Wright, 2009; Bates & Green, 2009).

Not all of those who are most impacted live in the Global South. Race, gender and class radically shape experiences of communities within nations of the Global North as well. For example, indigenous communities in the US and Canadian Arctic are on the front lines of direct impacts from climate change (Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, 2004). Arctic indigenous communities face more direct impacts due to combinations of ecological and social factors including their location in the Arctic where changes are occurring more rapidly, due to more intact cultural ties to land such that people retain subsistence activities and culture and social structure are organized around conditions of the natural world (Trainor et al., 2009). Within indigenous communities, women may face added burdens in the form of increased ‘reproductive labor’ of maintaining family and community cohesion as when entire island communities are displaced by storm surge and relocated to the mainland (see Oxfam, 2011). Thus, the particular effects of climate change re-organize gender and racial community relations in unique and often complex ways.

### **CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE GLOBAL NORTH HIGH EMISSIONS, POLITICAL APATHY AND CLIMATE SKEPTICISM**

The high concentrations of carbon dioxide that have so altered our planet’s atmosphere have been generated by the nations of the Global North. Twenty percent of total world carbon emissions come from the United States alone. Despite the extreme seriousness of global climate change, there has been meager public response in the way of social movement activity, behavioral changes or public pressure on governments within the wealthy industrialized nations who generate the bulk of carbon emissions and whose economic and political infrastructure affords them the greatest resource for responding (Brechin, 2008; Lorenzoni & Pidgeon, 2006). Yale scholar Anthony Leiserowitz who has conducted extensive work on public opinion on climate change notes that “Large majorities of Americans believe that global warming is real and consider it a serious problem, yet global warming remains a low priority relative to other national and environmental issues and lacks a sense of urgency” (2007).

Even within the high emitting nations of the Global North the inverse relationships between emissions and concern holds true. In July 2009, the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes released a comparative study of 19 countries that showed Americans were near the very bottom of the pack in their sense of how much emphasis their government should put on climate change. Zahran and co-authors (2006) found that citizens residing in U.S. states with higher emissions of climate gasses are somewhat less likely to support climate change policies. O'Connor et al. (2002) found that higher income negatively affected participants' willingness to take voluntary actions such as driving less. An inverse relationship between wealth and concern is also reported in Riley Dunlap's 1998 cross-national research, but with a smaller sample of nations. Dunlap notes that "despite the lower levels of understanding among citizens of the poorer nations in our study (Portugal, Brazil and Mexico), residents of these nations typically express more concern over global warming than do those in the more affluent nations (Canada, U.S., Russia)" (1998:488).

Furthermore, within these high emission nations, the little data that exist appear to extend this inverse relationship between concern and carbon footprint across race, class and gender. In a recent study of gender differences in climate change in the United States Aaron McCright finds that, "Women express more concern about climate change than men do. A greater percentage of women than men worry about global warming a great deal, believe global warming will threaten their way of life during their lifetime, and believe the seriousness of global warming is underestimated in the news (2010:78-79). Although the data are rarely reported, women also tend to have smaller carbon footprints than do men. German policy analyst Meike Spitzer describes differences in the carbon footprint between women and men in Northern countries. Spitzer describes how men use less public transportation than do women, drive personal vehicles longer distances and more often for personal trips than do women. While much attention has pointed to the disproportionate carbon footprint of citizens of the Global North, and to the gendered impacts of climate change (especially for women in the Global South) almost no attention has been paid to the disproportionate carbon footprint between women and men in the global north (Spitzer, 2009).

Meanwhile in their study on race and perceptions of climate change Leiserowitz and Akerlof (2010) find that "Hispanics, African Americans and people of other races and ethnicities were often the strongest supporters of climate and energy policies and were also more likely to support these policies even if they incurred greater costs" (p. 7). Finally, it should be noted that the 'climate skeptic' movement (whose followers and key advocates are predominantly male, white and from the United States), outright negates the seriousness of climate change, and thus the claims and experiences of poor women of color in the Global South (Jacques, 2009; McCright, 2010).

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 (Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Poortinga & Pigeon, 2003). Especially for urban

dwellers in the rich and powerful Northern countries climate change is seen as “no more than background noise” (Brechin, 2008; Lorenzoni & Pidgeon, 2006). 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. Much research has presumed a lack of information to be the limiting factor in this equation. These studies emphasized either the complexity of climate science or political economic corruption as reasons people do not adequately understand what is at stake. Yet as Read et al. (1994) pointed out more than a decade 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. And while such ‘information deficit’ explanations may explain part of the story, 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. In contrast to existing studies that focus on the public’s lack of information or concern about global warming, my own work has illustrated how holding information at a distance is actually an active strategy for people as they negotiate their relationship with climate change. That is to say people had a variety of methods available for normalizing or minimizing disturbing information. These methods can be called strategies of denial (Norgaard, 2011a, 2011b).

## **CLIMATE DENIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRIVILEGE**

This linkage between climate denial and environmental justice draws our attention to the concept of “environmental privilege” (Park & Pellow, 2011; Lievanos, 2010; Pulido, 2000; Freudenburg, 2005; Norgaard, 2011a). The intersection of environmental justice and privilege is an extremely important concept that is only now beginning to receive attention. Most scholarly work on privilege examines gender, race or class privilege, while most environmental justice work “studies down,” examining the experiences of people who are structurally disadvantaged rather than those with privilege. In contrast, this project looks at the lived experiences of privileged actors who reap the benefits of global environmental inequality. Raoul Lievanos defines environmental privilege as “the taken-for-granted structures, practices, and ideologies that give a social group disproportionately high level of access to environmental benefits” (2010). In their important new book length engagement with this concept, Park and Pellow write that “environmental privilege results from the exercise of economic, political and cultural power that some groups enjoy, which enables them exclusive access to coveted environmental amenities such as forests, parks, mountains, rivers, coastal property, open lands and elite neighborhoods. Environmental privilege is embodied in the fact that some groups can access spaces and resources which are protected from the kinds of ecological harm that other groups are forced to contend with everyday” (2011:4).

For people of color living on low lying islands or struggling from flooding or drought, the key questions of the moment may be how to effectively organize to bring attention to their plight and justice to their lives. For middle class white environmentalists living in wealthy industrialized nations like myself, the key questions related to climate change have to do with the production of social inaction and denial: why are so many of us in the Global North so willing to ignore climate change in our daily lives? How do people manage to ignore disturbing information about climate change and essentially live in denial?

Park and Pellow describe environmental privilege emerging from “the exercise of economic, political and cultural power” (2011:4 [my italics]). Culture is implicated in the reproduction of social relations, but exactly how does this work? How do privileged people create a positive sense of self, normalcy and even sense of their innocence, in the face of knowledge of their high carbon footprints? In fact, societies develop and reinforce a whole repertoire of techniques or “tools” for ignoring disturbing problems. Using Anne Swidler’s (1986) model of culture as a tool kit and Jocelyn Hollander and Hava Gordon’s (2006) thirteen tools of social construction, I have described how people create a sense of everyday reality using features of everyday life as tools. It is significant that what I describe as “climate denial” felt to people in Bygdaby (and, indeed, to people around the world) like “everyday life.” The sense of climate change as a distant problem for which other people are responsible was produced through cultural practices of everyday life. This focus on denial and the construction of innocence looks at the lived experience of privileged people, examining not only the “what” of environmental privilege, but the “why” and the “how.”

## **METHODS: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE INVISIBLE**

This paper uses data from a larger eight month ethnographic study on the role of cultural context in how people experience global climate change that combines 46 interviews and media analysis (Norgaard, 2011a). The people I spent time with lived in a rural community in Western Norway of about 14,000 inhabitants. November brought record high temperatures and severe flooding in Oslo and a number of other major cities. Snowfalls were late across most of Norway. The local ski area opened in late December with 100% artificial snow—a completely unprecedented event. Bygdaby did not get its first snow until late January—some two months later than expected. As a participant observer I attended to the kinds of things people talked about, how issues were framed, and especially noted topics that were not discussed. During the winter of 2000-2001 unusual weather patterns were connected with global warming in both media and public minds. I watched regional television news and read the local and national newspapers, again paying attention to what was both present and missing, and how the information presented was framed. Interviews were focused on what it felt like to live in Bygdaby, how people created a sense of community, and the relationships between the community and the outside world. If global warming was not raised as an issue (as it often was not), I asked first what people thought about the

recent weather (which was widely described as abnormal), and followed with more specific questions. For this paper data were re-analyzed with an emphasis on denial as connected to transnational environmental privilege.

## A TROUBLING WINTER

The issue of global warming was clearly salient for Norwegians, on both the local and national levels during the time period of my research (June 2000 - June 2001). In Bygdaby casual comments about the weather—a long accepted form of small talk—commonly included references to unusual weather, shaking of heads and phrases like klimaendring or climate change.<sup>1</sup> As a sociologist I was drawn to what I saw as a paradox: that is, the idea of climate change was simultaneously very disturbing and yet almost invisible. Climate change appeared to be at once unimaginable and common knowledge. My observations and conversations with Bygdaby<sup>2</sup> residents do not support the idea that they were ignoring climate change either because they naively didn't know about it or were simply unconcerned. On the contrary, community members did seem to be informed and concerned about climate change. But it was clearly an uncomfortable topic. While people were generally aware of the facts of how climate change might affect Norway, they did not go about their days wondering what things would be like for their children, whether these could be the last years ice fishing could take place in Bygdaby, or whether their grandchildren would be able to ski on real snow. They spent their days thinking about more local, manageable topics. Mari described how, “you have the knowledge, but you live in a completely different world.” Other community members described this sense of knowing and not knowing, of having information but not thinking about it in their everyday lives. Another young woman, Vigdis 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.” Another man held his hands in front of his eyes as he explained “people want to protect themselves a bit.”

Leon Festinger's (1957) powerful concept of cognitive dissonance describes “dissonance” as a condition that emerges when an actor has two thoughts (cognitions) that are inconsistent. This dissonance is an unpleasant condition that people seek to resolve, often through changing one of their cognitions. In the next section I will describe how cultural avoidance strategies were directed towards two basic fears: those associated with security and concerns for the future, and those connected to guilt and feelings of responsibility for the problem. Using Ann Swidler's concept of culture as a “tool kit” of available resources I describe how the preservation of order and security and the construction of innocence are processes that were embedded in everyday life. Members of Bygdaby had

available what I call “tools of order” and the “tools of innocence.” Tools of order were used to reaffirm a threatened sense of ontological stability, while tools of were used to create distance from responsibility and assert the rightness or goodness of actions. Tools of order worked to achieve what Susan Opatow and Leah Weiss call ‘denial of outcome severity’ while tools of innocence work to assert “denial of selfinvolvement” (Opatow & Weiss, 2000).

## **ORDER AND SECURITY**

There is a feeling of intense order in the streets of Bygdaby. Houses are mostly the same size and style and freshly painted. Cobblestoned streets are cleanly swept. The surnames of the residents, and the names of the streets and neighborhoods are hundreds of years old. There seems to be a proper and appropriate way to do everything from decorating your home, to cooking dinner (certain foods on Saturdays or Sundays) or going for a hike (wear a red parka). Cultural homogeneity has united Norway in many ways, creating a common community as the entire nation sits down at 7 p.m. every night and experiences the same television newscasters cover the same news. In the words of one woman, a friend of mine not from Bygdaby:

You always know what to talk about if you met someone, you say something about the TV program that was on last night cause everybody saw it. Of course that isn't as true now that we have more stations.

Despite the greater variety of channels in recent years, most Norwegians continue to sit down to watch the same news and television programming at the same times across the country. This cultural homogeneity creates a sense of stability and order. This sense of an ordered world provides a great deal of what Anthony Giddens (1991) calls ontological stability and provides a rich source of meaning. Life has a pattern, it is ordered, known, controlled. As Ann Marie, one resident in her early 50s explained, the sense of order provided a strong sense of meaning and community that could be rich and reaffirming:

When I lived in California, it was wonderful to come back to Bygdaby and feel that there were people and houses around here who have been here for hundreds of years. The farms, the land, the names of the farms, the names of the people. I felt rooted and I felt that there was a calm and stability and we had, whether it would be music or food or clothing, or traditional festive outfit-it had meaning. And it just felt wonderful.

“Ontological security refers to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (Giddens, 1991:92). Yet large scale environmental problems such as global warming threaten these individual and community senses of continuity of life. What will Norwegian winters be like without snow? What will happen to farms in the community in the next generation? Robert Lifton writes of an increasing, “amorphous but greatly



troubling sense that something has gone wrong with our relationship to nature, something that may undermine its capacity to sustain life” (1982:21). If the climate continues to warm, how are people going to survive in fifty years?-in one hundred? Thinking about climate change was difficult for people because it brought up fears connected to ontological security. In the words of Arne, a farmer in his mid-40s:

I think it’s a bit worrisome to lose one’s roots, or lose connection with, yes, with the generations and with a place.

Øystein a father who served on the city council also expressed the concern that climate change is deeply threatening to one’s sense of the continuity of life as he explains that it is possible that in as few as a hundred years the earth’s ecosystem will be too degraded to support human life:

... we have now come so far that we have begun to see that environment that can mean to protect or not to protect the environment we are living in, you know, 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? Now people are beginning to see that something is happening with nature because we haven’t taken environmental questions seriously enough.

Ulrich Beck describes the present phase of modernization as a “risk society,” one that is characterized by a “growing embeddedness of risk in the public consciousness” (1992). Beck describes how in modern societies the use of scientific technologies has created large scale social and environmental risks which cannot be understood without scientific expertise.

## **SIMPLICITY AND INNOCENCE**

A second contradiction or “problem” posed by climate change is related to accountability. Stereotypical characterizations of Norwegians emphasize a simple, nature loving people who are concerned about equality and human rights. The pages of travel guides and magazines, museum displays, and the official webpages of the Norwegian government describe Norway as a spectacular land of mountains and fjords, of winter darkness, and summer midnight sun. The community of Bygdaby might visually have stepped right out of any of these guides. A great example of natural beauty, it is nestled in a valley amid steep mountains, with the town beside a lake. It forms a picturesque example of a rural town embedded in nature.

Equality is a strong social value in Norway (Jonassen 1983). Many scholars believe that equality has a long history in Norway, stemming from, among other things, the mountainous regions’ limited ability to support large farms (Borchgrevink and Holter 1995). Without doubt, humanitarian concerns and equality between classes and sexes have been expressed as central aims of Norway’s government policy since World War II. Despite current political trends, Norway retains a highly developed welfare state and a generally high quality

of life for all citizens (i.e., good access to health care, high human rights, low poverty and unemployment rates). When compared with other nations, Norway has relatively little social stratification by race, sex, or class. Norwegians award the Nobel Peace Prize every December; their Constitution Day parade consists of children rather than the military; and they lead the world in per capita contributions to humanitarian aid to developing countries. Norwegian leadership in international conflict resolution is reflected in the country's hosting of the Middle East peace talks that became known as Oslo Accords.

However, as much as some of the egalitarian and nature loving stereotypes fit, such images exist in sharp contrast to many everyday features of social life in Bygdaby. The people of Bygdaby believe in equality but live their "simple," "equal" lives in extreme wealth compared with most of the world-including their immediate neighbors in Russia. Despite their self-portrayals as simple, humble, and backward, Norwegians are on the whole a very wealthy people who, in addition to leading the world in per capita donations of humanitarian aid, work in a sophisticated and savvy manner to maintain their global economic and political status.

In Norway cultural values of environmentalism, simplicity and equality increasingly contradict political economic realities. And these contradictions have a particular salience when it comes to climate change since Norway is one of the nations of the world that has benefited most from oil production. High levels of wealth, education, idealism and environmental values together with a petroleum based economy-makes the contradiction between climate knowledge and social inaction particularly visible in Norway. Norwegians themselves are aware that their situation is not so straightforward as the stereotypes portray.

Yes, if you take for example this with cars, we drive a lot of cars, in my family that is. We go on vacation and we go shopping, and my partner drives work every day. And I drive often up here (to his office) myself. It gives us flexibility and so forth. And then we experience . . . we don't like it. We feel that we must do it to make things work in a good way, on a practical level, but we have a guilty conscience, a bit of a guilty conscience.

Norway has moved from a position of environmental leadership (setting a goal of stabilization of carbon dioxide emissions), to one of political and economic conservatism. Despite its reputation for environmental leadership, Norway has tripled its production of oil and gas in the past ten years. Under the Kyoto Protocol, Norway promised to limit greenhouse gas emissions to a maximum of one percent above 1990 levels. Instead, at the time of my stay in 2001, total Norwegian carbon dioxide emissions were 42.4 million metric tons-an increase of 7.2 million tons or 20 percent from the 1990 level of 35.2 million tons (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2002). Norwegian researchers Eivind Hovden and Gard Lindseth note that "Norway, an already wealthy and highly developed country, built a very significant fortune in the 1990s from the very activity that has made stabilization of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions next to impossible" (2002:163). By 2008, the emissions figure had climbed to 53.8 million tons. This critique is echoed by

Norwegian climate policy analyst William Lafferty and colleagues. In their review of progress on sustainability, the authors note that despite Norway's early international leadership on the issue under Gro Harlem Brundtland, as of 2006 "the Norwegian Sustainable Development profile is long on promise and short on delivery" (2007:177). Lafferty and colleagues point directly to the role of oil wealth in the shifts in national policy: "In our view, a major reason for this 'reluctance' is the increasingly dominant role of the petroleum sector in the Norwegian economy. The impact of the petroleum economy on the will to pursue sustainable production and consumption in Norway has been massive. The prospect of steadily increasing state revenues from petroleum and gas activities has directly 'fueled' the politics of both 'business as usual' and increasing welfare benefits" (2007:186). As of 2008, the oil and gas industry accounted for 26.6 percent of the Norwegian carbon dioxide emissions. Former Norwegian Minister of the Environment, Børge Brende has expressed how, "Norway is one of the countries in the world that has benefited most from fossil fuels. This gives us a special responsibility in the politics of climate change, especially with respect to poor countries."

## **RESOURCES IN THE 'CULTURAL TOOL KIT'**

Fears about the future stability of the world, and guilt regarding one's contribution to the situation are troubling conditions that psychologists tell us people are motivated to avoid. And indeed, as described earlier, people largely did. But if people managed to construct a sense that climate change was a distant problem that would affect other people long before it reached them, or create a sense that responsibility for the problem lay in other quarters, how exactly did they do it? Strategies of denial and the construction of innocence were varied and widely embedded in culture and everyday life experiences. I identified conversational tactics, emotion norms, norms of attention with respect to space and time, and social narratives that were each used to normalize the implications of global warming by producing a sense of order and/or innocence (see Table 1). In the mid 1980's Ann Swidler put forward a new framework for theorizing a causal role of culture in social action. Swidler describes how, "Culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or "tool kit" (1986:273). Culture shapes social action not through providing guiding values, but through providing cultural components or "chunks of culture" (ibid, p. 283) that can be used as tools to construct "strategies of action." Such a "tool kit" may contain "symbols, stories, rituals and world-views which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems" (ibid, p. 273). For example, "Publicly available meanings facilitate certain patterns of action, making them readily available, while discouraging others" (ibid, p. 283). I use Swidler's metaphor of the tool kit of available resources to describe how the production of order and construction of innocence were achieved through particular tools of order and tools of innocence.

It is not possible to provide detailed examples of the full range of strategies and practices I observed for distancing oneself from information or responsibility outlined in Table 1. Instead I will give a few examples of tools of order and tools of innocence.

## **TOOLS OF ORDER**

If exposure to information about climate change was threatening, tools of order worked to reinstate a sense of order and security. I observed a variety of tools of order including maintenance of conversational control by focusing on facts rather than feelings, and examples of skirting around disturbing information by joking.

Another tool of order was to focus on the past-what one community member described to me as finding a haldepunkt or “anchoring point.” People in Bygdaby have a remarkable sense of place, local identity, and collective history. At one point in time, Bygdaby was isolated from the rest of the world. But now isolation, local focus, and emphasis on tradition are being actively maintained through a multitude of cultural practices. Torbjørn, a man in his thirties who was originally from the community but had moved away, explained that the emphasis on tradition in Bygdaby serves as a haldepunkt or anchoring point for people in the face of changing times. He pointed out the use of traditional images in advertising and many so-called traditions are in fact very new. I mentioned earlier the fact that even many of the designs of the bunads (local traditional costumes) are recent, and at least some sections of the cobblestone streets of Bygdaby had been recently added because people liked them. Hobsbawm and Ranger describe “the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes” ([1983] 1992:6) . On the one hand, the disjuncture between scales of time and place in Bygdaby makes the problem of climate change seem distant. On the other hand, we can see the construction of this sense of time and place as a strategic response to the needs of the present, as a strategy for managing troubling emotions associated with changing times. If traditions are indeed invented for the needs of the present generation, it would seem that in the face of uncertain futures and a confusing wider world, ideas of tradition and links to the past serve as an anchoring point in changing times and provide a sense of security that at least some people believe helps them to deal with the larger world.

Finally, I observed people re-asserting a sense of order and security through the use of a slew of narratives about “how things really are in Norway.” I call these narratives of Mythic Norway. Narratives of Mythic Norway were often produced by the national government and were present in both media stories and individual conversations. Many of these were connected to landscape and Norwegian nature. People from Bygdaby had a great deal of pride in their mountainous land and their ability to survive in it. Mountains can not only be seen as physically defining Norway (since most of Sweden does not have mountains and a larger portion of Norway does), there was the sense for many

that Norwegians were special because of the relationships they have had with the mountains:

Norway's national identity gradually took the form of a lifestyle characterized by closeness to, respect for and love of nature, particularly the subarctic mountain landscape requiring great courage, strength and endurance from those who have to survive in it. Danes and Swedes were in this light refined and decadent city people, and the image of the thoroughly healthy, down-to-earth, nature-loving Norwegian was established as a national symbol (Eriksen, 1996).

Thomas Hylland Eriksen describes five elements of national identity that are highlighted in public discourse: egalitarian individualism, honesty and sincerity, a connection with rural life, relationship to nature and the image of "unsophisticated but practically minded" farmers (1993). Images of and public discourse on nature and national identity become "tools" that individuals have at hand that served to reinstate a threatened sense of stability and security in timeless nature.

Hiking and skiing in Bygdaby were widely popular. The act of hiking or skiing connected people to the wider nature, to a sense of human cultural past and continuity (since one often travels through areas that were formerly seters or "mountain farms"). In the face of the fears that community members had about climate change, the state of the world and what the future might bring, being in the mountains provided a sense of reassurance that all was well. Emphasis on closeness to nature, whether in language, images or via the activities of going hiking and skiing, served as a haldepunkt, an anchoring point in the face of uncertainty. Thus hiking and skiing were not only recreational activities, but practices that were loaded with cultural meanings that recreated a sense of stability and order in the face of fears of future climate scenarios or threatened sense of ontological stability.

## **TOOLS OF INNOCENCE**

While tools of order tools of order consisted of a variety of background cultural practices from narratives to range of spatial and temporal attention, tools of innocence were more observable in narratives that were used in particular moments in conversation. Narratives that served to construct a sense of the innocence of Norwegians (both individually and collectively) included the sense of being close to nature, of Norway as a small, insignificant nation, of how Norwegians suffered in the past and an emphasis on how the actions of Americans were so much worse.

### **Mythic Norway**

Emphasizing a connection to nature served as a tool of order for community members. It also served as a tool of innocence. The idea of a connection to nature

plays off of romantic associations of nature with purity and innocence, thereby working to reinforce a sense of a native or natural environmentalism that worked directly against the image of Norwegians as miljøsvin or “environmental swine.” In the face of global climate scenarios and Norway’s increasing carbon dioxide emissions, images of Norwegians as close to nature and “natural environmentalists” provide a reassurance of “original innocence” and serve to legitimate Norwegian actions and place in the world. Similarly, emphasis on egalitarianism and humanitarianism contradicts information on the ways in which Norwegian wealth and high standard of living perpetuates and displaces environmental problems onto others. Emphasis on simplicity locates Norwegians as “down to earth,” humble, and modest provide a contrast to the fact of increasing consumption. Finally, an emphasis on a rural connection, like the emphasis on relationships with nature, plays on romantic associations of nature with purity and innocence as well as bringing to mind images of simplicity.

To imply that the people of Bygdaby were close to nature was to imply that despite their rising materialism, petroleum development and wealth, they too were pure, naturally good, even “natural” environmentalists. Joar, a community member involved in the anti EU movement used the Norwegian “love of nature” as a basis for Norwegian opposition to the EU:

Of course we have so much nature. And you know that many Norwegians love nature and feel that it is clean and nice and we like this idea of being environmentally friendly as opposed to black smoke and filth from factories.

In the modern context romanticism, with its glorification of nature as pure and a refuge from the ills of modern society, still holds. Norwegian social anthropologist Brit Berggreen describes how, “For many reasons, Norway has stuck to the selfimage of the independent and innocent individual, almost grown out of Norwegian soil, rain and fresh air . . .” Relationships to the land have been described as the basis for a “native” environmentalism (Reed & Rothenberg,, 1993).

### **“We Have Suffered”**

A second tool used to deny self involvement and thereby construct a sense of innocence was the narrative I call, “We Have Suffered.” The fact that residents of Bygdaby have suffered, or at least endured significantly challenging political and economic circumstances in the past is certainly a reality. Norwegian wealth is relatively new. People in their forties and older today had experienced the very rapid rise in wealth in the nation since the 1970’s. Furthermore, during World War II the town was both bombed and occupied by Nazis. Older generations remember the experience of occupation and the period of reconstruction after the war. The memory of having suffered can play out in terms of having paid ones dues, of rightfully having earned the comforts now available. It can imply a sense that “we made it, why can’t you.” The latter view especially, erases unequal and extractive political economic relationships between Norway and the

rest of the world. The subtext of such stories was that Norwegian wealth had been rightfully earned.

This tool came up one afternoon as three of us were sitting around a small table in Bygdaby's newest and most modern café. Lisbet and Åse were members of an international human rights organization in town and were active writing letters on behalf of political prisoners from around the world. Poverty and wealth are salient themes not only due to Norway's emphasis on egalitarianism, but because Norwegian wealth is very much a product of oil development. I asked about the lack of poverty in Bygdaby, and what it was like for them to know about the degree of poverty elsewhere in the world. Åse answers that Norway hasn't been rich all that long:

Åse Norway hasn't been rich so very long, you know. I have experienced the rise in wealth.

Lisbet Yeah, I know about going from hand to mouth.

Kari Oh, really?

Lisbet Oh yes. I began working in 62. And there wasn't much in the beginning, no. And when I took my education, I had almost nothing. But I did get a study loan. And that was good I had a job because I had to pay it back, you know? But I don't know, myself. I have a feeling that they are afraid to use up the rest of the oil money. Of course we have a lot of money. But I don't have to look long at the television before I understand how good we have it here. And I have traveled a bit too, so I know how good things are here for us, in terms of material things.

Åse But I think-I feel a bit bad for the Russians, I think its completely gruesome what's happening there.

Lisbet There are many who are helping them, especially in the North.

Åse Of course they are such a huge country.

Lisbet Yes, and how rich they could have been.

Åse Yes, and what has happened generation after generation. That things should be better, better in the future and so forth, and then ...

Lisbet On the other hand, there are people in Norway also who don't have so much to play around with either today. They don't have much money today either.

Åse I think that there aren't so many who are suffering, not who really suffer. Not with lack of food. But its like, its like there isn't anything that is good enough for us anymore. Everyone wants things and everyone wants a nice car and everyone wants it right now. And if they don't have it, those who don't have it, then they are poor.

Here Åse and especially Lisbet used a number of conversational tactics to rationalize or normalize Norwegian wealth as compared with poverty in Russia.

In addition to raising the issue that Norwegians have suffered and been poor in the past, they mention that in Norway there is suffering too. This serves to minimize the degree of difference between Norway and Russia and thereby the sense that there is something wrong. They also mention that Russia was such a large country, one that could have been rich. The subtext of this statement seems to imply that, “its not our fault if they have messed up their opportunities.”

### **“Norge Er Et Lite Land”-Norway is a Small Country**

A third tool of innocence was to emphasize Norway’s small size in relation to the rest of the world. This tactic worked to minimize the degree of responsibility the nation had for global warming (and other global environmental and social justice issues). The phrase Norway Is A Little Land, is one I encountered throughout my time in Bygdaby, usually at moments expressing Norwegian powerlessness in relation to Europe or the United States, but also at moments when Norway’s relationship in world problems such as global warming was under question. The phrase conveyed the sense that no matter what they did, whether Norwegians did the right thing or the wrong thing, it would be a “drop in the bucket.” This phrase justified Norwegian behavior with the implication that Norway is such a small country that what happens there doesn’t matter anyway. While it is often conveyed a genuine sense of powerlessness, this discourse worked to let people off the hook, by creating the sense of “why bother.” The subtext of this phrase read, “We are only 4.5 million people, what we do here doesn’t really matter anyway.”

Joar and I had been discussing his opposition to Norway joining the European Union. When I asked him what role he thought Norway should have in the world, Joar began his reply using the notion of Norway being small as a way of implying that there may not be much role for it to play because Norway is so small, it is almost meaningless.

Kari But what kind of a role do you think that Norway should take internationally?

Joar Internationally?

Kari Yes, in relation to other countries. What relationships would you think would be good for Norway to take?

Joar Well, we are of course a very small country, almost without meaning-if you think economically we are completely uninteresting.

Kari But Norway has lots of oil compared with other countries.

Joar Yeah, yeah, okay. We are in fact almost at the level of Saudi Arabia. But it of course an advantage to be meaningless. It doesn’t really matter for us to argue.

Kari Without?



Joar Without them getting mad at us, because we are so meaningless. And in that connection, we are a bit you know, peaceful, right. We have been involved in both the Middle East and . . . (here he refers to the Oslo Accords and his second example is not spoken, just given as a gesture of the hand for emphasis).

Note that as the conversation continued he used Norway's small economy as the example of why Norway's carbon footprint was meaningless. When I asked him about Norway's oil he suddenly, "remembered" the fact that Norway is, after Saudi Arabia, the second largest oil exporter in the world! Then he explains the strategic advantage of being "meaningless," that other countries don't bother to get upset with Norway. At the end of the passage he added to the construction of Norway as a nation not worth getting upset with by drawing on the sense of Norway as a "peaceful nation" (referring presumably to the peace prize as well) and their involvement in the Oslo Accords. In being small, meaningless and peaceful, he was constructing in our conversation a sense of Norwegian innocence that is very prevalent.

I believe that it is important to recognize that these narratives are prevalent because they reflect a need people felt to explain themselves. These narratives testify to the fact that Norwegians do value social and environmental justice, they do think about these things on a global level, otherwise their behavior would not be questionable and they would have no need to justify it.

## CONCLUSION

### **Innocence, Order and the Reproduction of Transnational Environmental Privilege**

I have described how for the people of Bygdaby, information about climate change threatened a sense of the stability and order of life, challenged self and national conceptions of Norwegians as good environmental neighbors, and furthermore how these powerfully unpleasant conditions were normalized through social practices that emphasized order and security on the one hand, and innocence on the other. Thus the invisibility of climate change in daily life was socially produced using tools of order and tools of innocence. As a result, information from climate science was known in the abstract, but disconnected from, and invisible within political, social or private life.

Public silence in the face of climate change is not unique to this one town in Norway. Indeed, there is evidence that people around the world experience deep fears regarding climate change, struggle to make sense of guilt, and in many cases normalize their inaction through a variety of cultural tools and narratives. Social commentators across Europe describe publics who are "sleepwalking," "apathetic," or "in denial." Renee Lertzman writes in *The Ecologist* that "public apathy is fast becoming one of the hottest topics in environmental circles. It would appear that people do not seem to care or be moved to action in the face of urgent ecological threats. Running a close second to apathy is the topic of

denial; the stunning way in which people can literally deny or pretend things are not as they are, creating enormous barriers and psychological blocks for making necessary change” (2008, see also Lertzman & Norgaard, 2011).

What is the significance of climate change denial in reproducing material and ideological transnational power relations along the lines of race, class and gender? Nearly all environmental justice research highlights the experiences of groups who are structurally oppressed rather than those who are structurally privileged. The ability to ignore climate change may not automatically be perceived as a form of privilege. But climate change precipitates profound conditions of environmental injustice. When environmental consequences such as sea level rise or catastrophic drought are displaced onto less privileged people, when exposure to risks and decision making power are inversely correlated, and when the information people cannot cope with is about the consequences of Norwegian oil production and carbon dioxide emissions, differences concern and perceptions of the immediacy of climate change reproduce material power relations across gender, race and class and between the Global North and Global South. Ultimately, Norwegians’ (and of course American’s) lack of concern, and their sense of climate change as an abstract problem, serves ideologically to maintain their privilege as people who benefit most, and suffer least from high carbon emissions.

Why should we bother to engage with the concept of environmental privilege? Both the complexity of climate change science, and the changing organization of space and time make the global reproduction of race, class and gender inequality increasingly complex and difficult to understand. It is easy to see power operating when key political and economic decision makers negotiate contracts with Shell, British Petroleum, and Exxon and when representatives of nation-states negotiate emissions-trading strategies. Yet the people I spoke with in Bygdaby played a critical role in legitimizing the status quo by not talking about global warming even in the face of late winter snow and a lake that never froze. In normalizing the status quo, the construction of denial and innocence work to silence the needs and voices of women and people of color in the Global South, and thus reproduce global inequality along the lines of gender, race and class. Given that Norwegian economic prosperity and way of life are intimately tied to the production of oil, ignoring or downplaying the issue of climate change serves to maintain Norwegian global economic interests and to perpetuate global environmental injustice.

If we are to really grapple with the how and why of the reproduction of environmental privilege we must take seriously the experiences of privileged social actors themselves. Taking seriously their experience means acknowledging the complexity and difficulty of occupying this social location. While privilege, may act like a breeze at one’s back, making life easier, people in privileged situations also experience the complex and ambivalent mental and emotional landscape of denial, with all of its feelings of guilt, responsibility and hopelessness. Despite being in positions of power, privileged people may feel very powerless. People occupying privileged social positions encounter “invisible paradoxes,” awkward, troubling moments which they seek to avoid, collectively pretend not to have

experienced (often as a matter of social tact), and forget as quickly as possible once they have passed.

Global capitalism is currently producing wider divides between the material conditions of the lives of haves and have-nots, and closing gaps in space and time, bringing privileged people ever closer to the worlds of those we exploit through cheap airfares and quality digital internet images. Through the active production of a safe, secure mental world through tools of order and innocence, environmental problems are kept invisible to those with the time, energy, cultural capital and political clout to generate moral outrage in a variety of ways. Wastes and hazards are exported to other nations, other places, other populations. Privileged people are protected from full knowledge of environmental (and many other social problems) by national borders, gated communities, segregated neighborhoods and their own fine-tuned yet unconscious practices of not noticing, looking the other way and normalizing the disturbing information they constantly come across. Ecological collapse and climate change seem fanciful to those in the “safe” and “stable” societies of the North as we buy our fruits and vegetables from South America, our furniture from Southeast Asia and send our wastes into the common atmosphere. In this way social inequality itself works to perpetuate environmental degradation. From this new context emerge new dimensions of invisibility, denial and innocence. Privileged people know their carbon footprints are high, they know many of the reasons why this is so, and some of the global environmental justice implications of their actions.

Ultimately, the phenomenon of climate denial further underscores the need for what Val Plumwood describes as the “ecological self” which is an ethic which extends recognition to all the “others” in the dualistic system. As the impacts of climate change continue privileged people around the world will be faced with more and more opportunities to develop or reformulate their “moral imagination” and “imagine the reality” of what is happening, or to construct their own innocence from the beneficial resources of their culture’s particular self-affirming toolkit.

## NOTES

1. While is important to understand that weather and climate are different, in this community the unusual weather was widely associated with climate change.
2. This is a pseudonym for the actual place. The word ‘Bygdaby’ in Norwegian is an expression that describes a community that is halfway between a rural hamlet “bygd” and city or “by.” I use the term ‘Bygdabyingar’ to describe the residents of Bygdaby.
3. This is the Norwegian spelling of America.

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