



REVIEW

Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change

by George Marshall

New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014. 272 pages

reviewed by **Stephan Lewandowsky**

There are many ways of knowing. Scientists derive knowledge from analysis of evidence; the faithful derive meaning from ancient scrolls and myths; and all of us know a good story when we hear one. Those different approaches to seeking meaning or knowledge often sit uneasily with each other. George Marshall's book is a rare and welcome exception: in it, this gifted communicator takes the reader on a breathtakingly fast-paced journey through science, religion, spirituality, and—above all—the great human narratives that define our time and our relationship with the challenge of climate change.

The book's central quest is to understand why humankind has thus far failed to address the greatest physical and existential threat it has ever faced. Marshall seeks answers not only from social and natural scientists, but also from the people who refuse to accept the fact that our globe is warming from greenhouse gas emissions. His stories of encounters with those people form some of the more fascinating chapters of the book. There is the gun-toting Tea Party member from Texas in a car "so huge that you need to lower a step before you can even climb inside," who hates everything about climate change, in particular Al Gore and the United Nations. There is Myron Ebell, of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, who sees climate change as a means for the political left to institute more government control and reduce people's living standards.

And then there is Shell. Marshall tells the story of his visit to the oil giant's headquarters with characteristic humor: his untied shoe laces trigger the risk detectors of the receptionist ("you could trip up and have an *accident!*"), as does his careless approach to climbing stairs (shoe laces presumably now tied) without holding on to the handrail ("you might trip and have an *accident!*"). And as if those risks weren't frightening enough, Marshall's leaking pen triggers further concern about a possible spill (spill?) and damage to his clothes. All of this in the headquarters of a company whose business model constitutes the "most dangerous activity in human history."

These anecdotes are building blocks of a chilling story about human inaction in the face of a global risk. They are interleaved with another set of fast-paced stories about the social science that explains the cognitive processes that underlie the denial of climate change by a sizable segment of the public. We hear about Dan Kahan's work on "cultural cognition"; that is, the notion that people interpret risks within their dominant cultural framework. In consequence, some people perceive a greater risk from the inevitable regulatory implications of any solution to climate change, whereas others find a price on carbon less

frightening than droughts, heat waves, floods, and sea level rise. Marshall surveys a large amount of relevant social science—virtually all of which he captures accurately—but he does it without abandoning his gifted story telling. We therefore learn that Kahan is a great fan of the Crazy Nastyass Honey Badger on YouTube, and that Nobel laureate Dan Kahneman expresses his pessimism about climate change over a “seemingly bottomless bowl of tomato soup.” And who would not want to be reassured that sex is entirely carbon-neutral in a chapter that deals with the short-term cost of mitigation?

Personalizing science and scientists in this way is the sign of artful story-telling, and indeed Marshall’s book kept me captivated from the first to the last page.

The rapid-pace story-telling does come at a cost, however. Notwithstanding several brief summary chapters, I found the grand narrative of the book difficult to discern along the way, and it took some effort to unpack the key points from the cornucopia of anecdotes.

I extracted four key points from Marshall’s book. First, he convincingly shows why our basic human cognition predisposes us to ignore or deny climate change. Second, he enumerates the many narratives that climate activists have sought to create around climate change, and how they have all failed to capture the public’s imagination or propel us towards action. Third, he recognizes—correctly, in my view—that the same cognitive apparatus that predisposes us towards ignoring climate change can also enable us to rise to the challenge.

This is not nearly as paradoxical as it might appear at first glance. For example, it is well known that people tend to underestimate their future financial needs, and that therefore many of us might be confronted with poverty in our retirement. But precisely because this cognitive weakness is so well known, many societies have instituted countermeasures that range from tax breaks on retirement savings to mandatory employer contributions to pension plans. Many people can therefore retire with financial dignity notwithstanding our collective human frailties.

Marshall’s final key point is that in order to ensure a future of dignity for our planet and its inhabitants, we must create a narrative around climate change that invokes “sacred values.” Sacred values are at the core of our culture: defending our children is one such sacred value. Likewise, America’s national parks are considered sacred—it’s difficult to imagine that Yellowstone would ever be offered for sale.

I agree with Marshall that moral and ethical values must take center stage in the response to climate change: It is a question of values and morality whether it is permissible to let Pacific island nations sink below the rising seas. It will come as little surprise that much of the literature on the ethics of climate change considers cutting emissions to be morally mandated. For example, philosopher John Nolt (2011) has likened climate change to slavery and racism because it involves the domination of future generations. Those future generations are innocent of any harm to us and do not have a say in their fate, but they are nonetheless bearing the harm from our collective actions that we are now in the position to recognize as being morally wrong.

However, although Marshall opens the door to a powerful moral argument, I felt that he only took a brief peek at the opportunities afforded by his “sacred values,” in a chapter with a collection of brief ideas about what might “dig us out of this hole.” The underlying

tenor of those recommendations is infused with appeals to diversity, openness, and—at least tacitly—a concern with avoiding further polarization.

In my view, those recommendations do not exploit the full power that is offered by the “sacred value” narrative. If our values mandate action on climate change, then we must also recognize that the political and economic forces that are arrayed against such action are violating those values. Although Marshall is well aware of the existence of denial, he stops short of recognizing its full pragmatic and moral import. Many of the environmental narratives that Marshall identifies as having failed, such as the iconic polar bear campaign launched by Greenpeace, failed not just of their own accord but also because the forces arrayed against acting on climate change did their best to make them fail.

If we accept a moral case for climate action, on which I wholeheartedly agree with Marshall, then we must also accept a moral case to tackle organized denial and to understand it for what it is—namely, an endeavor that may (intentionally or not) lead to the domination of future generations in a way not altogether dissimilar from slavery.

Marshall’s stimulating book provides a platform to chart any number of possible future actions. Putting aside political pragmatics, I would extend his work by focusing on sharpening—rather than attenuating—the inevitable and unbridgeable moral conflict between acting on climate change and denying its existence.

The most revered American of the 20th century is Martin Luther King Jr, according to a Gallup poll of Americans (Newport 1999). King is universally remembered for leading a movement that was based on the “sacred values” of human dignity, liberty, and equality. It is less well known that he was a polarizing figure.

In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail”—now a highly anthologized masterpiece—in which he responded to his “moderate” critics’ call for patience, King made it quite clear that polarization over his views was not only inevitable but also necessary to achieve his goals. King’s recognition that “justice too long delayed is justice denied” takes on particular meaning in the context of climate change, where delay (of mitigation) is tantamount to denying not just justice but the very livelihood of millions of people who may be displaced by climate change.

Polarization is unfortunate, uncomfortable, and discomfiting. But when a US Senator writes a book that refers to climate change as a “hoax” and a “conspiracy” (Inhofe 2012), then that polarizing act does not call for acquiescence or compromise, but for the recognition that polarization may be an inevitable consequence of a conflict between core human values. The nuances of cultural cognition that Marshall so ably reviews may explain polarization but they cannot overcome it by the niceties of “reframing” and “culturally appropriate” messengers alone.

The ethicist Clive Hamilton recognized this some time ago when he issued a call for environmental radicalism and noted that the future battle over climate change will not be a place for the faint-hearted (2011). It is indeed difficult to conceive of a solution to the climate challenge that will sidestep polarization and—quite probably increasingly ugly—political and ideological battles. Like the civil rights movement of the 1960s, those battles

may require deep courage rather than nuanced cognition about whether polar bears are a good icon for climate “communication.”

Moral and political courage are not without precedent in American politics. Another one of the most revered Americans of the 20th century is President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In an address at Madison Square Garden in 1936, Roosevelt noted that “Government by organized money is just as dangerous as Government by organized mob. Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today. They are unanimous in their hate for me” (Roosevelt 1938:568). In a highly polarizing gesture, Roosevelt famously added: “and I welcome their hatred.”

Perhaps (to echo a different speech of Roosevelt’s) we need to fear the fear of polarization more than polarization itself.

I am unsure how many other readers of Marshall’s book would come to the same conclusion about how to proceed from here. But I am sure that all readers will be stimulated into thinking more deeply about the greatest story of our times, and how to meet its challenges.

REFERENCES

- Hamilton C. 2011 6 May. Environmentalism: The case for radicalism. *Shaping Tomorrow’s World*; [accessed 29 Dec 2014]. <http://www.shapingtomorrowworld.org/HamiltonRadicalism.html>
- Inhofe J. 2012. *The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future*. Washington DC: WND Books.
- Newport F. 1999. Mother Teresa voted by American people as most admired person of the century. *Gallup*; [accessed 2015 Jan 9]. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/3367/Mother-Teresa-Voted-American-People-Most-Admired-Person-Century.aspx>.
- Nolt J. 2011. Greenhouse gas emission and the domination of posterity. In: Arnold DG, editor. *The Ethics of Global Climate Change*. New York: Cambridge University Press. p 60–76.
- Roosevelt FD. 1938. Campaign address at Madison Square Garden, New York City. *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D Roosevelt*, vol 5. New York: Random House. p 566–573.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephan Lewandowsky is Professor of Cognitive Psychology at the University of Bristol. His areas of research include the public understanding and acceptance of science, particularly with regard to climate change.

AUTHOR’S ADDRESS

Stephan Lewandowsky
School of Experimental Psychology and Cabot Institute
University of Bristol
12A Priory Road
Bristol BS8 1TU
United Kingdom
stephan.lewandowsky@bristol.ac.uk



Copyright 2015 by Stephan Lewandowsky; licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>