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**Environmental Denial: Why We Fail to Change
Our Environmentally Damaging Practices**

Abstract

Despite readily available facts and figures regarding human-caused natural degradation, a large portion of the public still refuses to believe that the environment is suffering because of our actions. This refusal to believe, paired with a lack of environmental motivation, has become so evident that it recently attracted the attention of scientists and psychologists attempting to account for it from various perspectives. The disbelief in, for instance, climate change, is hard to explain without referring to a mechanism best described as “environmental denial”. Analysis shows that people may be prone to deny anthropogenic environmental damage because their personal identity, as well as the quest for meaning in their lives, depends upon a consumerist modus vivendi. Consciously or unconsciously faced with the dilemma of either accepting that this lifestyle endangers the life of the planet (as well as their and their children’s well-being), and thus accepting its consequences and the responsibility for change, or refusing to believe that the environmental degradation is occurring in the first place, they choose the latter option. This choice is also motivated by the lack of sound alternatives around which new, “greener” identities could be built. Thus any attempt at changing public opinion regarding anthropogenic environmental degradation, as well as any strategy that advocates putting an abrupt end to our environmentally damaging practices, is not likely to be successful if it neglects to provide new footing for identity-building.

Key words

environmental denial, social ecology, psychology of consumer behaviour, Erich Fromm

I. Introduction – the fate of Dr. Stockmann’s finding

In Ibsen’s *En folkefiende*, Dr. Thomas Stockmann, a popular citizen of a coastal town in southern Norway, discovers that waste products from the town’s tannery are polluting the water supply. What was once the “main artery of the town’s life-blood,” attracting numerous tourists and providing a considerable source of revenue for the region, becomes a “pest-house” and “poisoned sepulcher” when Dr. Stockmann discovers typhoid cases and gastric fevers in visitors. “What a mercy you discovered it in time,” exclaims his wife after the doctor presents his findings to his family. When Petra, his daughter, asks him how he thinks Uncle Peter – the town’s mayor – will respond to the news, Thomas Stockmann has no doubt: “I should think he would be very glad that such an important truth has been brought to light.” But after Peter reads his brother’s report of the dreadful findings, the mayor replies simply: “Hm!–.” To him, the findings and proposed costly solution are “a thing we might perhaps have to take under consideration some time later on.” The public too is unwilling to lend an ear to Dr. Stockmann, finally proclaiming him “an enemy

of the people.” The mayor downplays the seriousness of his brother’s findings at a public meeting, calling them “unreliable and exaggerated accounts of the sanitary condition of the Baths,” and when he presumes there is not a single person present who believes that the bad news should be spread around, the citizens unanimously confirm his thoughts, crying out: “No, no! Certainly not! We protest against it!”

The documentary film *Everything’s Cool*, directed by Judith Helfand and Daniel B. Gold and produced in 2007, tells a similar story with two telling differences: first, it is not a work of fiction, and second, it unfolds in the present day. The film follows the trajectory of Ross Gelbspan’s efforts to warn the public about global warming. Gelbspan, a journalist with the nickname “the Columbo of climate change,” “comes to believe that his decade of writings, interviews, public readings and policy discussions have come to nothing and he is more than ready to retire” (*Everything’s Cool*, 2007).

Contemporary efforts to change public opinion about environmental issues, the only factor capable of triggering much-needed changes, seem to be facing an obstacle similar to the fictional Dr. Stockmann’s. The phenomenon recently attracted the attention of scientists as well as psychologists. Psychologist Ben Newell and climate scientist Andy Pitman, for instance, conclude their recent paper “The Psychology of Global Warming” with the observation that “simply presenting the facts and figures about global warming has failed to convince large portions of the general public, journalists, and policy makers about the scale of the problem and the urgency of required action” (Newell and Pitman, 2010: 1012). A similar fact was noticed by Lynn T. White in his now famous paper from the journal *Science* about “The Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” Compared to Ibsen’s Dr. Stockmann, White was far less optimistic about the possibility of implementing adequate measures to mitigate unwelcome environmental effects, stating that “no one yet knows what we shall do” (White, 1967: 1204), and warning that “specific measures may produce new backlashes more serious than those they are designed to remedy if the fundamentals of our man-nature relationship are left unreflected upon” (ibid.). White was, however, very clear about one thing: “More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one” (ibid., 1206).

Indeed, it seems that the enlightenment-era belief in the transformational power of raw scientific data has been shattered, as people fail to change their minds and adopt appropriate behaviours even when relevant facts are clearly presented to them. It happens that environmental issues, like any other problem we face, are ubiquitously “socially constructed,” meaning that their perception depends on social factors, as J.A. Hannigan shows in his *Environmental Sociology*:

“Environmental problems do not materialize by themselves; rather, they must be ‘constructed’ by individuals or organizations who define pollution or some other objective condition as worrisome and seek to do something about it. In this regard, environmental problems are not very different from other social problems such as child abuse, homelessness, juvenile crime or AIDS.” (Hannigan, 1995: 2)

Thus the shift in attention in the environmental sciences from data-gathering to education and environmental motivation psychology, and to the examination of conditions and circumstances under which social change is likely to occur, is hardly surprising. Psychologists have proposed that “individuals have global helplessness beliefs when they are daunted by the enormity and the severity of the environmental situation” (Pelletier et. al., 1999: 2485).

Undoubtedly this factor plays a role in a complicated web of variables. But could environmental amotivation – the fact that we fail to change our beliefs and habits despite overwhelming evidence of their harmful effects – also have a dimension that transcends the working of helplessness beliefs? Citizens of Ibsen’s Norwegian town – especially its mayor – *knew very well* that something was undisputedly wrong with their baths: they just *did not want* to hear it. Could they have described the doctor’s findings as “unreliable and exaggerated accounts” because they *refused to acknowledge* them? In short: Is it possible that they found themselves in denial?

If the later supposition is true, and by a sound analogy, extended to cases occurring in the context of real environmental issues, then we could say that we are currently dealing with environmental denial; we fail to change our behaviour and beliefs because we *refuse* to acknowledge them. This might as well be the only sound way to account for the fact that only 57% of US citizens in 2010, when the scientific data and the message are unequivocally clear and omnipresent, believe in global warming (Leiserowitz et al, 2010 in: Newell and Pitman, 2010: 1004).

II. Coping with less-than-cheerful news

A decade ago, Pelletier et. al. (1999) identified several reasons for individuals’ lack of motivation in adopting environmentally protective behaviours. Pelletier et. al. quite rightly assumed that even if people do acquire the knowledge necessary to aid in preserving the environment, this knowledge “does not, by itself, represent a sufficient condition to ensure environmental action” (ibid., 2483). In Pelletier’s study, the general amotivation concept is composed of *global helplessness beliefs*:

“Within the context of the environment, we propose that individuals have global helplessness beliefs when they are daunted by the enormity and the severity of the environmental situation. [...] People who are in this state are unable to foresee how their contribution could bring about favorable outcomes on a large scale, and they eschew involvement in environmentally conscious actions” (ibid., 2486).

There are, however, more specific reasons for amotivation according to this study: ineffective strategies for producing desired outcomes, a lack of capacity on the individual’s behalf to implement such strategies, and an inability to sustain the effort needed for such implementation (although the latter proved not to display a significant relationship with helplessness beliefs) (ibid.).

Even if study conducted by Pelletier et al. is correct in many respects, one crucial question remains unanswered: Why is the number of climate change “believers” so low? Pelletier et al. may be correct in asserting that people feel helpless in bringing about change, but surely people can feel “global helplessness” *only after* they first believe in climate change and the undesirable state of the environment. But this is precisely what they seem to *not* believe, or even to deny outright.

At the beginning of the study, Pelletier states that “people have become more and more aware of the declining state of the environment and, as a consequence, have shown increased interest in environmental issues” (ibid., 2481). However, a decade later, the awareness of and interest in environmental issues still seems to be only marginally present. Their value is largely symbolic when it comes to large-scale international policy and decision making. And even if our media outlets seem saturated with “green” topics more than ever,

Julia Corbett, in her monograph, *Communicating Nature*, convincingly shows that supposedly green ads are in large part scams: Only 2% of TV and 9% of print ads with purportedly “green content” were truly “deeply green” in the sense of Naess’s Deep Ecology (Corbett, 2006: 155). It could be the case that we are superficially interested in environmental issues, but when it comes to taking more substantial action we seem to suppress this interest and avoid recognizing problems.

In short: Pelletier’s argument about helplessness beliefs as reasons for environmental amotivation sounds correct, but can be applied only to those who already believe in the severe consequences of human-caused natural degradation. However, this number seems alarmingly low according to recent polls, at least when it refers to climate change. Another possibility nevertheless remains: what if people, *after* experiencing feelings of helplessness, start *doubting* the veracity of scientific findings, eventually discarding them altogether? In this last scenario we would, however, still be dealing with environmental denial. We will return to this problem shortly.

In a more recent study, Pitman and Newell focused on four “classes” of psychological phenomena important in understanding climate change psychology (Newell and Pitman, 2010: 1004). These include sampling, framing, comprehension, and the process and perception of consensus-building.

‘Sampling’ refers to samples of evidence. Newell and Pitman maintain that people commit “attribute substitution,” substituting difficult questions with ones they find easier to answer. They also find events that occurred recently to be more salient than those which occurred in the more distant past. Biases in external samples of information are another important issue: for example, if we hear believers in climate change talking 50% of the time, we might infer that science is only 50% certain in this matter. Anchoring on irrelevant information is an additional problem: people will estimate the values of greenhouse gasses, for example, according to previously suggested values. If lower concentrations are suggested from the start, the audience’s estimate will likely be lower than if the same audience first hears a greater concentration value.

‘Framing’ deals with the way information is presented, and again we encounter psychological phenomena relevant to it, which is also the case with ‘comprehending’ (describing how constructing mental models affects the conceptual understanding of global warming) and with ‘consensus building’, where factors influencing public perception of how a consensus about climate change is reached are described (Newell and Pitman, 2010: 1004–1012).

Newell and Pitman also provide tables with advice how to better present relevant data so that they do not fall victim to all aforementioned weaknesses in human judgment. Their work is of great value for those who want to clearly present data and even steer communities towards environmental change. They rely on sound psychological findings and research which underlines cognitive mistakes and other psychological phenomena. Do these mechanisms, however, sufficiently explain why we fail to change our minds about the existence of climate change (and possibly other anti-environmental attitudes)? This could be questionable. Inferring that people do not change their minds in climate change debate because they do not pay close attention when scrutinizing the data and consequently make numerous mistakes when they think about it begs the question: why *do not* people pay closer attention? We could say that those errors occur spontaneously: that we are prone to make wrong inferences in the same way we turn our head in a certain direction when someone else is staring, or turning their head, in that direction. But the fact is that we can

also *avoid* making such mistakes if we want to. If this would not be the case, then no-one could reach sound conclusions. And if something as important as the healthy environment, necessary for normal living of our children and our own future well-being, is at stake it seems reasonable we would be cautious in our judgments. But even if making all the decisions connected with interpreting climatologic data would be too hard for most non-specialists, we still wouldn't be left in the dark. When the questions seem to be too elaborate for individuals to answer, we employ specialists with adequate education and certificates that try solving them for us. This is the case in medicine, mathematics, history, geography, etc., as well as in climatology and environmental science. If an individual wants to inform herself about what the majority of climatologists think about the climate change, then the information is only one click away. In other words: it seems that we do not really have to think very hard in order to reach a reliable conclusion about the existence of climate change. All we have to do is *listen*.

In the following thought experiment try imagining that after reviewing your medical history an assembly of MDs reaches a conclusion that you are soon to develop a deadly disease if you do not change your lifestyle. Into exactly how much detail about diagnostic procedure will you go before believing the physicians' statement? The doctors most probably will not have to adopt special data presentation, or rhetoric, in convincing you that you have to change your habits if you want to live longer than a couple of years. The news would immediately send shivers down your spine. It is true that the assembly might not be able to persuade you to change. That, however, is not because you would not trust their findings, but because you may find it too difficult to change. Nevertheless, it is possible to imagine that after a short period of time – even though the news did genuinely frighten you when you heard about it – you would start doubting the physicians' statements. But this, again, would not happen because you would find it too difficult to comprehend intricate relationships between events and understand the warnings about the terminal consequences of your lifestyle. On the contrary, you may start doubting the veracity of the scientific data *precisely* because you understand the consequences very well. Being caught between the inability to change your lifestyle and the dreadful facts about your future if you continue with it, you must do something to alleviate the mental torment of living in constant fear. And in this case the idea of future outlook is easier to change than the reality of habits. What happens with your judgment in this case is the result of the so-called mechanism of *cognitive dissonance*, which will be discussed later. Again, what is needed in the thought experiment to convince the patient of the connection between the lifestyle and the illness is not more data, or better presentation, but the ability of the patient to hear and listen to the truth.

Listening, however, is sometimes *hard*. This is especially the case when news is not very cheerful. In a *Washington Post* article Edward Lengel writes about a curious fact that Americans did not want to listen to the war stories of their soldiers after returning from the World War I, a conflict as severe in terms of US casualties as the Vietnam war:

“There are some stories that Americans would rather not hear. If war tales aren't thrilling, readers and armchair Napoleons aren't interested. The Civil War and World War II seem to lend themselves to good storytelling, as long as one avoids the ugly, depressing bits. They appear to have clear beginnings and endings, with dramatic heroes and villains. They move. World War I, by contrast, with its images of trench warfare and mustard gas, is not so easy to manipulate in a marketable manner. Popular historians consequently avoid it. As one trade publisher recently told me, World War I has 'poor entertainment value.' Attempts to discuss it, even with avid stu-

dents of military history, often end with the same comments that veterans heard back in 1919: ‘It’s all too dreadful.’” (Lengel, 2008: B03)

It is clear here that better presentation will not solve the problem of lending our ears to veterans’ memoirs. On the contrary: if one was to present the facts even more vividly, one would most likely stumble into an even greater disinterest. Acknowledging the dreadful facts about the WWI does not have anything to do with the matter of presentation or rhetoric but with the courage to face the truth. Could the same also hold true for acknowledging other news that is by no means cheerful: climate change and human caused environmental degradation?

III. Our undisturbed lives

Recently, Diethelm and McKee noted a curious connection between the refusal to acknowledge the effect of man-made CO₂ emissions on climate change and the refusal to acknowledge the occurrence of gruesome war events, such as the holocaust (2009: 2). Moreover, Diethelm and McKee see a whole range of peculiar phenomena, from the denial that HIV causes AIDS to the denial that smoking causes cancer, as well as the aforementioned two, as special cases exhibiting the general trait of *denialism*. Drawing from the Hoofnagle brothers, Diethelm and McKee define denialism as: “The employment of rhetorical arguments to give the appearance of legitimate debate where there is none, an approach that has the ultimate goal of rejecting a proposition on which a scientific consensus exists” (ibid.).

According to Diethelm and McKee there are five characteristic elements employed in denialism. First is the “identification of conspiracies,” in which denialists argue that the majority of scientists do not operate independently, and thereby produce biased results. Next is the use of “fake experts,” and also “denigration of established scientists and researchers,” as when “Exxon Mobil successfully opposed the reappointment by the US government of the chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change” (ibid., 3). The third element of denialism is “selectivity”: the exposure of isolated papers which challenge dominant views by pointing out flaws in their weakest supporting documents. This produces the illusion that the established view is less reliable than it really is. Fourth is the “creation of impossible expectations of what research can deliver,” such as when “those denying the reality of climate change point to the absence of accurate temperature records from before the invention of the thermometer” (ibid.). Fifth, Diethelm and McKee mention the “use of misrepresentation and logical fallacies.” Diethelm and McKee acknowledge that a certain “willingness” to look at the evidence as a whole is needed, as is an adherence to basic rules of academic debate, if the truth is to be discovered (ibid.). In the end they suggest that the tactics employed in denialism (e.g., the five elements just listed) be exposed as a means of deflating its rhetorical effectiveness.

Diethelm and McKee see the denial of a range of well-established scientific facts, including climate change, as a threat that should be recognized whenever we stumble upon it. They therefore provide clear examples of what can be identified as climate change denialism. However, what Diethelm and McKee’s research does not take into consideration is the fact that it is not just a few people with special interests who deny the existence of climate change and the degradation of our environment. Their line of thought seems to presuppose denialists to be individuals who manipulate scientific data and employ rhe-

torical figures in order to confuse the public about otherwise well-established truths and further their own interest. Such tactics further presuppose denialists to *know* the truth: one can create an illusion only if one knows it is not real. The use of such statements as “deliberate attempts to change the argument” (ibid.) points to this. Moreover, for Diethelm and McKee, the alleged motivations of denialists are: “greed, lured by the corporate largesse of the oil and tobacco industry,” and “eccentricity and idiosyncrasy, sometimes encouraged by the celebrity status conferred on the maverick by the media,” (ibid.) both of which indicate that denialists, deep down, do know the truth, but twist it in order to achieve their goal. Diethelm and McKee, however, also list “ideology or faith, causing them [the denialists] to reject anything incompatible with their fundamental beliefs,” (ibid.) an option that seems to be more open to the possibility that cognitive dissonance is at work. Nevertheless, Diethelm and McKee’s focus seems to be more on the scientific community; the theory they defend proposes that the ideas of a vast majority of scientists are hijacked by the rhetoric of a relatively small number of fake experts, ruthless capitalists, and religious fundamentalists. In this story, denialists are relatively isolated conspirators: “Denialists are usually not deterred by the extreme isolation of their theories...” (ibid.).

Diethelm and McKee’s research then, though valid and useful, does not account for the fact that a large portion of the public seems to wholeheartedly support the denialists. It is precisely this fact that seems the oddest and the most intricate: Why do we continue to disbelieve serious environmental warnings? In other words: Why are we more prone to listen to denialists than to the majority of scientists?

In the text “System Justification, the Denial of Global Warming, and the Possibility of ‘System-Sanctioned Change,’” Irina Feygina, John T. Jost, and Rachel E. Goldsmith seek to answer this question. Feygina et al. argue that “overcoming the apathy, denial, and resistance among people who are faced with evidence of environmental problems is imperative if we are ever to increase public willingness to act in ways that help rather than harm the environment” (Feygina et al, 2009: 1). What stands in the way of “attitudinal and behavioral change” is, for them, a “relatively widespread tendency to rationalize ‘the way things are’ and, in so doing, deny environmental problems...” (ibid., 2). For Feygina et al., the attention seems to finally be focused on an approach broad enough to cover the many intricate facts relating to environmental inaction, thereby sufficiently explaining our failure to adopt environmentally protective behaviours on a larger scale.

Feygina et al. detect the connection between “system justification” and the lack of pro-environmental attitudes. Drawing from previous research, they postulate that “people who hold culturally and economically conservative attitudes [...] and who generally subscribe to what researchers have referred to as the ‘dominant social paradigm’ are less likely than others to support pro-environmental causes” (ibid.). It seems only natural that for Feygina et al., the right strategy for generating environmental change will be to facilitate constructive social change by encouraging “people to perceive environmentalism as a way of upholding (rather than threatening) cherished societal institutions and practices” (ibid., 10). In more concrete terms, “the key, it seems, is to characterize pro-environmental change as ‘system-sanctioned,’ that is, as a desired, perhaps necessary, means of preserving the American way of life, and to communicate that it is, among other things, patriotic to defend and protect natural resources” (ibid., 10–11).

More precisely, for Feygina et al., environmental denial, which is seen as a “powerful barrier to environmentalism,” stems from the perceived incompatibility between “taking care of the natural world” on one hand and “upholding current social and economic practices and institutions” on the other, which is why “environmentalism is likely to provoke resistance and ideological defensiveness” (ibid., 10). And insofar as “much of the problem concerns *perception*” (italics in original), this perception is “potentially subject to revision” (Ibid.). The proposed revision of this perception involves eliminating the negative association between system justification and environmentally protective behaviour.

The work of Feygina et al. not only pinpoints with precision and clarity the reasons for our failure to engage in environmentally protective behaviours, but also explains the phenomenon in depth, accounting for many nuances which other research in the field has left unexplained. However, their reference to the “American way of life” in connection with patriotism indicates a focus which is predominantly on the U.S. Although such demarcations are needed in order to conduct credible and controlled empirical research, it nevertheless exhibits a limitation of the study. First, it leaves unexplained why people with fewer patriotic feelings, and those less eager to preserve the established social *mode de vie*, may still fail to adopt pro-environmental attitudes, even if on average they are more likely to support the cause of environmentalism. Secondly, people in countries less convinced of the correctness of the American dream and its ensuing way of life may still fail to adopt environmentally protective actions. Simply put, although system justification is an important factor in preventing people from engaging in more environmentally sustainable practices, it is most likely not the only one. People have a tendency to justify the status quo, to preserve the foundations of our socioeconomic system. But why do we cling to it so eagerly? What is really at stake?

Stoll-Kleemann, O’Riordan, and Jaeger’s paper “The Psychology of Denial Concerning Climate Mitigation Measures” (2001) may give further clues regarding this question, even though their thesis regards denial of mankind’s *ability to change*, and not climate change *per se*. Research conducted on a study group of randomly selected Swiss citizens revealed that “from the viewpoint of changing their lifestyles of material comfort and high-energy dependence, they regarded the consequences of possible behavioral shift arising from the need to meet mitigation measures as [...] daunting” (Stoll-Kleemann et al., 2001: 107). Drawing from the theory of dissonance, they found that, “for the most part, denial or displacement act powerfully to maintain the gap between attitude and behaviour with regard to climate change norms” (ibid., 111).

Cognitive dissonance, or *dissonance* in short, is a state in which two or more conflicting cognitions are held by the same individual. This incongruity between beliefs causes tension which needs to be resolved, usually forcing an individual to come up with new, more consonant, attitudes. Petty, Wheeler, and Tormala (2003) discuss such dissonance:

“In its original formulation, dissonance was described as a feeling of aversive arousal akin to a drive state experienced by an individual when he or she simultaneously held two conflicting cognitions. The resulting aversive arousal was hypothesized to instigate attempts to restore consonance among the relevant cognitions. Attempts to restore consistency typically involved very active thinking about the attitude object, and the end result of this thinking was often a change in the person’s attitude.” (Petty et al., 2003: 367)

Specific to climate change mitigation measures, Stoll-Kleemann et al. claim that “[i]nternal inconsistencies can occur between verbal expressions of behaviour in one setting and actual behaviour in another,” and that to avoid emotional unease because of the discrepancy, “People look for cues to justify continued behaviour in the face of a socialised moral norm to the contrary” (Stoll-Kleemann, 2001: 112).

A simple example can further illustrate what dissonance, and the resulting denial, might look like in the domain of environmental amotivation. Imagine an avid traveller wanting to consider himself an environmentally responsible citizen. Such an individual would hold the following beliefs:

Belief 1 (B1): I am an environmentally responsible individual.

Belief 2 (B2): I like travelling to distant places.

Since the belief that ‘travelling contributes to pollution’ (B3) would obviously cause inconsistency in the mindset of a person simultaneously holding B1, B2, and B3, it is likely that the individual would either try to avoid acknowledging B3, or try downplaying its importance (B3 – travelling contributes to pollution, *but only marginally*). It is likely, however, that a well-educated individual would endorse the veracity of B3. In this case denial would nevertheless be possible, but it is unlikely that it would refer either to B1 (virtually no one wants to consider himself irresponsible) or to B2. To deny the latter is unlikely if the individual’s love of travel occupies a central part of their life and identity. What is left then for the individual is the inclination to deny the incongruity of B1, B2, and B3. This could be accomplished by inserting another belief (B4): I recycle, and this offsets the pollution I cause when travelling (This strategy is an example of what Stoll-Kleemann et al. call a “metaphor of displaced commitment.”).

In their account of man’s refusal to acknowledge change, Stoll-Kleemann et al. found “the most powerful zone of denial” in “the perceived unwillingness to abandon [...] personal comfort and lifestyle-selected consumption and behaviour in the name of climate change mitigation” (Stoll-Kleemann, 2001: 113). Research in social psychology and related fields seems to indicate that people are prone to deny scientific data regarding the anthropogenic degradation of the natural world, or to deny the possibility of changing their environmentally damaging practices, because they seek to avoid the dissonance that would occur if they were to acknowledge either. This dissonance would occur because beliefs connected to lifestyle prove to be change-resistant to a considerable degree. Denial becomes the only way out of a cognitive impasse, a last attempt to relieve tension between conflicting cognitions. The refusal to listen to climate change experts, or to any optimistic or inspiring environmentalist agenda, arises out of concern that our way of life will be deeply disturbed if we *do* start listening. The origin of this inertia of beliefs, intimately intertwined with lifestyle, is an issue that needs further exploration.

IV. Entomological collection and my self

“There are few men who would not feel personally annihilated if a life-long construction of their hands or brains – say an entomological collection or an extensive work in manuscript – were suddenly swept away. The miser feels similarly towards his gold; and although it is true that a part of our depression at the loss of possessions is due to our feeling that we must now go without certain goods that we expected the possessions to bring in their train, yet in every case there remains, over and above this, a sense of the shrinkage of our personality, a partial con-

version of ourselves to nothingness, which is a psychological phenomenon by itself.” (James, 1992 [1892]: 176)

What William James described more than a hundred years ago is confirmed by the latest research in consumer behaviour: Allen, Fournier, and Miller describe a paradigm shift in consumer research which alters the emphasis from brands as information to brands as *meanings*: “Consumer products were recast from simplifying informational vehicles to meaning-rich tools for personal and social identity construction” (Allen et al., 2008: 784). Indeed, as Russell Belk sates in his seminal paper “Possessions and The Extended Self,” “a key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves” (Belk, 1988: 139). Moreover, it is not only possessing objects infused with meaning that is tightly bound with personal identity, but also the mere act of acquiring these “meaning-rich tools.” As Michaela Wänke explains, many consumer decisions are “highly identity-relevant insofar as they correspond to a larger set of values and beliefs and express important aspects of the self” (Wänke, 2009: 7).

Being a consumer and building one’s identity around objects and activities, is not just an incidental attribute of the contemporary individual. On the contrary, consumerism seems to have penetrated the innermost recesses of our being. It may be the case that due to specific social and even biological circumstances, modern humans have evolved into what Gilles Lipovetsky calls *Homo consumericus*. The consumerist lifestyle has filled a void previously occupied by religion and traditional forms of social organization and work, and which was vacated by these forms after they were largely swept away in the wake of industrial development. This, at least, is how Åke Daun accounts for consumerism’s fulfilment of some traditionally religious functions. Because “many of the ambitions which earlier provided direction to people’s lives now play a marginal role or have disappeared completely,” changes in private consumption “have provided people with a fifth type of ‘deferred satisfaction’” (Daun, 1983: 8–9). The “ambitions” that traditionally occupied the place now taken over by consumerism were the struggle for survival from day to day, religion, tradition (including a firm family structure), and ‘collective goals,’ such as various civil movements. However, “The combination of steady economic growth and technical development established realistic goals – both useful and worthless – of private consumption during the post-war period: larger and more modern housing, private homes, cars, larger cars, more modern furniture, more expensive interior decoration...” (Daun, 1983: 9–10), displacing previously held “ambitions” almost completely.

Consumerism proved to be a universal surrogate for a vast array of historical human activities because material possessions, and the process of acquiring them, represent – as Belk would have it – our “extended selves.” Because their role is so central to our identity, and because the act of consuming is, for the individual, a relatively undemanding process, the displacement of other (more abstract and complicated) “ambitions” in favour of the consumerist lifestyle is understandable. There is, however, something more to the consumerist take-over, a deeper emotional and existential explanation for consumerism’s displacement of previous modes of meaningful existence: a peculiar *fear of freedom*.

“Man – liberated from the necessities implied in the struggle for survival, religion, tradition and community – is now running away from this freedom into the trap of materialism. In this way he can experience the security of accepting the personality offered to him by the pattern of behaviour around him.” (ibid., 10)

Facing insecurity and the feeling of powerlessness imposed by the media, the bureaucracy of anonymous institutions, and transnational forces interfering with and regulating the individual's life, people find a safe haven in material consumption:

“A privately owned house and the material consumption associated with it provide a counterbalance for one's lack of influence over one's life in other contexts. There the illusion of individual freedom may continue to exist.” (Ibid., 11)

The fear of freedom that Daun discusses in his analysis was first described by Erich Fromm in his *Escape from Freedom*. In this popular monograph, Fromm depicts modern man as an isolated individual seeking refuge from his dreadful state in either authoritarianism or ‘automatism’:

“In discussing two aspects of freedom for modern man, we have pointed out the economic conditions that make for increasing isolation and powerlessness of the individual in our era; in discussing the psychological results we have shown that this powerlessness leads either to the king of escape that we find in the authoritarian character, or else to a compulsive conformity in the process of which the isolated individual becomes an automaton, loses his self, and yet at the same time consciously conceives of himself as free and subject only to himself.” (Fromm, 1969: 266)

The individualisation that first occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is, according to Fromm, explained by social, and foremost, economic changes. But the freedom thus gained is a double-edged sword, and comes at a considerable price:

“The individual is freed *from* the bondage of economic and political ties. He also gains in positive freedom by the active and independent role which he has to play in the new system. But simultaneously he is freed from those ties which used to give him security and a feeling of belonging ... By losing his fixed place in a closed world man loses the answer to the meaning of his life.” (ibid., 80)

The experience of the meaninglessness of existence is, however, an unstable state; according to Fromm, an individual cannot dwell in it forever. In the end, the state of existential isolation paralyzes an individual: “Unless he belong[s] somewhere...he [will] be filled with doubt, and this doubt [will] eventually paralyze his ability to act – that is, to live” (ibid., 36). Thus an individual “is anxious and tempted to surrender his freedom to dictators of all kinds, or to lose it by transforming himself into a small cog in the machine, well fed, and well clothed, yet not a free man but an automaton” (ibid., xii).

If this small cog in the consumerist machine wants to stay in place today, it must deny the existence of anthropogenic environmental degradation. If we were to seriously admit our responsibility for natural destruction and its full consequences while still considering ourselves “responsible citizens,” we would have to abandon our consumerist lifestyles founded on high energy consumption. This, however, is difficult, because our lifestyle is the basis of our identity, and consumption seems a safe and reliable embrace in the midst of our otherwise uncertain and insecure existence. “Bring a friend along on a shopping day, and get yourself a new outfit for dates and casual nights with friends,” says an online advice column, instructing readers on how to boost one's self-esteem after a break up (Essortment 2010). In an article about coping with stress, one website urges: “Do not reserve shopping for ... important ... occasions. Do it when you feel it will satisfy you and make you feel rewarded and cherished” (St. Botanica 2009). “Vigorous and growing consumption is,” as Albert Borgmann has it, “the chief indicator of a prosperous and self-confident community” (Borgmann, 2000: 418). Consuming, then, is un-

doubtedly the contemporary answer to the problems of insecurity, doubt, and consequently low self-esteem, with shopping malls and fitting rooms replacing cathedrals and confessionals. Indeed it seems that if we were to abruptly abandon consumerism, then we would most definitively suffer James' 'partial conversion of ourselves to nothingness.' If, in the contemporary world, man refused the behaviour of *Homo consumericus*, "he would be like a particle of dust and be overcome by his individual insignificance" (Fromm, 1969: 36). And so any threat to the existing lifestyle must be eliminated, and because the pronouncement of human-caused environmental degradation represents such a threat, it must be silenced through denial. The cognitive dissonance triggered by the simultaneous existence of consumerist urges, knowledge of their environmental consequences, and the desire to see oneself as a responsible and autonomous citizen, is a state similar in its instability to Fromm's sense of the meaninglessness of one's very existence. Because our lifestyles are harder to change than the belief that we are causing harm to the environment, it's much easier to deny the latter than to transform the former. "Human-caused natural degradation, then, does not exist, or is only a minor issue," is thus a conclusion we are prone to draw.

V. Conclusion – a new, greener bondage?

"My line is that we can try to change behaviour, but it might be more effective to change the conditions that encourage our behaviours," said David Uzzell, British environmental psychology professor, before he delivered the 2010 British Academy/British Psychological Society annual lecture (Hickman, 2010). What Uzzell said in this interview seems to be wholly in line with what I have described above: if something as important as our quest for the meaning of our existence is bound up with consumer culture, then a solution which simply advocates dropping our habits is doomed to failure. Consumerist habits cannot simply be abandoned, because the psychological state to which such a manoeuvre would push us would be highly unstable: "The individual cannot bear this isolation ... He is driven into new bondage ... he cannot bear to be alone" (Fromm, 1969: 282–283). We will continue fighting our environmental reality – or even worse: ignoring it – as long as there is nothing else on offer. If we are shown only the abyss into which we can fall, without the prospect of a nearby bridge which crosses it, we will continue to cling to the rock which safely supports us. Therefore it seems only reasonable to try to modify environmentally detrimental behaviours by offering – a *new bondage*. This is to say: the only way to bring about environmental change is to assume new identities by engaging in activities that are less damaging for the natural world. The only feasible way to modify behaviour is to start promoting activities from which new identities and a new search for meaningful existence can be constructed. This idea seems to be in line with what Feygina et al. propose when they state that we should "get rid of the negative association" between system justification and environmentally protective behaviour: what we should get rid of here is the negative association, conscious or unconscious, between living rich and meaningful lives and giving up consumer habits based in the consumption of material goods.

Does this, however, mean that we should encourage people to shop green? Uzzell seems to suggest precisely that: "Not focusing on turning lights off etc., but instead concentrating on things such as buying energy-efficient appliances" (Hickman, 2010). This, however, can be a tricky strategy, as it opens

doors for manipulation, obviously furthers consumerist culture, and socially excludes those people who cannot afford (the often more expensive) “green technology” (though it could be the case that green products will become cheaper as more people begin purchasing them). Manufacturing “green” products, moreover, seems to be an oxymoron; as W.E. Kilbourne says: “The only green product is the one that is not produced” ([Kilbourne in] Corbett, 2006: 157). Nonetheless, this strategy does seem to be the best short-term option available. It is naive to expect that the majority of the population will switch to a post-consumerist type of personality in a decade. If consumerism can indeed be compared to religion, we must simply bear in mind that it took well over a thousand years to secularize politics in order to grasp the difficulties involved in achieving an “aconsumerist” society. It would, then, be more realistic to hope to transform the current consumerist culture into a type of consumerism that necessitates far fewer natural resources than the existing one.

In his *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm illustrates a trajectory circumnavigating both authoritarianism and automatism:

“The only criterion for the realization of freedom is whether or not the individual actively participates in determining his life and that of society, and this not only by the formal act of voting but in his daily activity, in his work, and in his relations to others.” (Fromm, 1969: 300)

Extended to environmental issues, this means that citizens can find their footing in the green agenda by *actively* participating in its programs, relating with other like-minded individuals, and lessening their environmental impact with their everyday choices. For those less eager to participate in such activities, shopping for green(er) products will have to suffice, at least in the short run. Education, of course, will also be crucial in bringing about change. However, an education that focuses on simply sharing information, or even on scaring people with dark scenarios, will not suffice; what is needed instead is an education that can offer new identities and programs which people are able to identify with. Otherwise the denial of environmental issues will continue, no matter how thoroughly thought through the method of data-presentation.

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Tomaž Grušovnik

**Ekološko poricanje:
zašto ne uspijevamo izmijeniti prakse ugrožavanja okoliša**

Sažetak

Unatoč dostupnim podacima o ljudski uzrokovanom ugrožavanju prirode, velik dio javnosti i dalje odbija vjerovati da okoliš pati zbog naših aktivnosti. To odbijanje vjerovanja, u paru s nedostatkom ekološke motivacije, postalo je tako očito da je privuklo pozornost znanstvenika i psihologa koji ga pokušavaju razmotriti iz raznih perspektiva. Primjerice, nevjerovanje u klimatske promjene teško je objasniti bez pozivanja na mehanizam koji se najbolje može opisati kao »ekološko poricanje«. Analiza pokazuje da ljudi mogu biti skloni negiranju antropogenog uništavanja okoliša zato što njihovi osobni identiteti, kao i potraga za smislom njihovih života, ovisi o konzumerističkom modus vivendi. Svjesno ili nesvjesno suočeni s dilemom shvaćanja da ovakav životni stil ugrožava život na planetu (kao i njihovu dobrobit te dobrobit njihove djece), i time prihvaćanja posljedica i odgovornosti za promjenu, ili odbijanja vjerovanja da se uništavanje okoliša uopće događa, oni biraju ovu posljednju opciju. Ovaj izbor je također motiviran nedostatkom pouzdanih alternativa na kojima bi se novi, »zeleniji« identiteti mogli izgraditi. Tako je mala vjerojatnost da svaki pokušaj promjene javnog mnijenja o antropogenom uništavanju okoliša, kao i bilo koja strategija koja zagovara naglo prekidanje praksi koje ugrožavaju okoliš, budu uspješni ako ne nude nova uporišta za izgradnju identiteta.

Ključne riječi

ekološko poricanje, socijalna ekologija, psihologija potrošačkog ponašanja, Erich Fromm

Tomaž Grušovnik

**Ökologische Leugnung:
weshalb wir in der Änderung unserer umweltfeindlichen Praktiken versagen**

Zusammenfassung

Allen bereitwillig verfügbaren Tatsachen und Zahlen hinsichtlich der menschenbedingten Naturgefährdung zum Trotz verschließt sich weiterhin ein Großteil der Öffentlichkeit der Gewissheit, dass die Umwelt unter unserem Vorgehen zu leiden bekommt. Diese Einsichtsablehnung, gepaart mit dem umweltlichen Motivationsmangel, wurde derart offenkundig, dass sie das Augenmerk der Wissenschaftler und Psychologen auf sich gerichtet hat, die bemüht waren, sie aus diversen Blickwinkeln auszudeuten. Beispielshalber lässt sich der Unglaube an dem Klimawandel nur mühsam darlegen ohne Berufung auf den Mechanismus, der aufs Beste als „ökologische Leugnung“ bezeichnet wurde. Die Analyse deutet darauf hin, die Menschen seien geneigt, anthropogene Umweltschäden zu bestreiten, weil deren persönliche Identitäten samt ihrer Suche nach dem Sinn des Lebens auf den konsumorientierten Modus Vivendi angewiesen sind. Bewusst oder unbewusst dem Dilemma gegenübergestellt – entweder einzuräumen, ein derartiger Lebensstil setze das Dasein auf dem Planeten aufs Spiel (sowohl ihr eigenes Wohlbefinden als auch jenes ihrer Kinder) und daher dessen Konsequenzen bzw. die Verantwortlichkeit für den Umbruch zu akzeptieren, oder dagegen den Ablauf des Umwelt Niedergangs generell zu verneinen – entscheiden sie sich für die letztere Option. Eine solche Wahl ist desgleichen angeregt durch Knappheit an soliden Alternativen, um die frische, „grünere“ Identitäten aufgebaut werden können. Jedwedes Vorhaben, die öffentliche Meinung in puncto anthropogener Umweltbelastung zu beeinflussen, als auch jegliche Strategie, ein abruptes Ende der umweltschädlichen Verfahrensweisen zu befürworten, dürfte infolgedessen einen Misserfolg erleben, wenn sie es verfehlen sollte, neuen Boden für die Identitätserschaffung vorzubereiten.

Schlüsselwörter

ökologische Leugnung, soziale Ökologie, Psychologie des Konsumverhaltens, Erich Fromm

Tomaž Grušovnik

**Déni écologique: pourquoi ne parvenons-nous pas à changer les pratiques
de dégradation de l'environnement**

Résumé

Malgré les données disponibles sur la dégradation de l'environnement provoquée par l'homme, une grande partie du public refuse toujours de croire que l'environnement pâtit de nos activités. Ce refus de croire, qui va de pair avec un manque de motivation écologique, est devenu si évident qu'il a attiré l'attention de scientifiques et de psychologues qui tentent de l'examiner sous différentes perspectives. Cette défiance, par exemple face au réchauffement climatique, est difficile à expliquer sans faire appel à un mécanisme qui pourrait être le mieux décrit comme « déni écologique ». L'analyse montre que les gens peuvent être enclins à nier la dégradation de l'environnement parce que leurs identités personnelles, tout comme la quête du sens de leur vie, relève d'un modus vivendi consumériste. Confrontés, consciemment ou inconsciemment, au dilemme de soit accepter que ce style de vie met en danger la vie sur la planète – leur bien-être aussi bien que celui de leurs enfants – et ainsi d'accepter les conséquences et la responsabilité de changer, soit de refuser la croyance que la dégradation de l'environnement se produit du tout, ils choisissent cette dernière option. Ce choix est également motivé par le manque d'alternatives solides autour desquelles pourraient se construire des identités « plus vertes ». Ainsi, toute tentative de changer l'opinion publique quant à la dégradation de l'environnement anthropogène, aussi bien que toute stratégie prônant une cessation des pratiques qui nuisent à l'environnement, a peu de chances de réussir si elle n'offre pas de nouvel appui à la construction de l'identité.

Mots-clés

déni écologique, écologie sociale, psychologie du comportement consumériste, Erich Fromm