



How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate

Andrew J. Hoffman

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Climate change has become a controversial topic that remains divisive along political and ideological lines. Andrew Hoffman's *How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate* provides a comprehensive framework that examines how cultural values have influenced the climate change debate and calls attention to the forces that have polarized an otherwise scientific reality. The central thesis is that this debate is more about the clash of values than it is about science. Therefore, Hoffman examines the social and psychological forces that determine how Americans respond to climate change messages. His assessment reveals that group identity, the media, corporate interests, and even climate change advocates have contributed to the climate change schism. Despite the dismal prospect for resolving this schism, Hoffman urges the reader to have an open mind about his solution for breaching the divide.

Hoffman organizes his book into six chapters, exploring the climate change debate's vital dimensions in a compendious manner. Hoffman's book contains four essential themes: how the schism began, why it persists, how it applies to the individual, and the remedy to the issue. Readers interested in a specific topic, such as institutional resistance or the social psychology behind climate change, can easily navigate the book through the table of contents or chapter titles. Furthermore, Hoffman keeps his book relatable and straightforward for the reader by refraining from incorporating complex climate change science. Instead, he maintains a simple prose that focuses on sentiments that may resonate with the reader.

Hoffman begins his book by discussing the rhetorical war that resulted from the clash over climate change science's validity. This discussion is crucial for understanding why a schism exists in the first place, as Hoffman establishes that cultural values are at the center of this debate. He adroitly argues that the media's rhetorical war has pitted the ideological left and right against each other. The media and the internet contribute to the schism when they

deliberately filter and alter information. Hoffman states, “the media has this role as it makes sense of Washington’s rancour in a manner that conflates climate change with a host of issues that bear on our entire emotional and cultural makeup (p.22).” Hoffman asserts that intolerance, distrust, and fear are the product of this “spectacle of a sports match” (p.10). Hoffman believes these manipulations are why the public is confused and divided on an issue with a scientific consensus.

After explaining how the cultural schism was born, Hoffman compellingly explains how it persists in spite of the consensus of the scientific community. Hoffman’s social psychology argument rests on the premise that cultural identity can overpower scientific reasoning. Central to understanding his social psychology argument is his discussion of cognitive filters– the reflection of one’s cultural identity. Hoffman astutely observes that individuals will generally endorse the position that most directly reinforces their social group connections. Hoffman further develops his argument by identifying the “lenses” that cognitive filters utilize: “cultural cognition and motivated reasoning” and “bounded rationality and cognitive misers.” These significant variables are crucial to Hoffman’s argument. By succinctly establishing the narrative that individuals process information in a biased manner and through trusted sources, Hoffman aptly demonstrates why there is no social consensus on the issue. This robust framework directs the reader from the usual “us vs. them” mentality and into a more inclusive mind set.

Building on his discussion of cognitive filters, Hoffman recognizes that accepting climate change is formidable for deniers because it contrasts with their world view. In doing so, Hoffman manages to convey to the reader the application of cognitive filters. Here, the discussion develops further as Hoffman adds necessary depth to his argument. Not only is this critical for devising a solution, but it also shows how thoughtful and versed Hoffman is on the topic. By assessing the opposing world view, Hoffman creates a more effective value-based solution. Hoffman claims that solutions will require values of those that are more hierarchical and individualistic in their orientation (conservative), as well as those that are more egalitarian and communitarian (liberal) in nature (p. 61).

Hoffman is a climate change advocate, as he clearly states on multiple occasions throughout his book (p.25, p.78). Nevertheless, Hoffman asserts that it is imperative to move away from polarizing, judgmental, and condescending language (p.53). Despite his views on this controversial issue, he masterfully avoids contributing to the very schism he raises awareness

about and maintains a respectful tone throughout the book. Hoffman neither alienates his reader nor demands those of the ideological right to denounce their views. Instead of using science as a weapon, Hoffman resorts to tackling the value-based schism with trust and sensible tactics. Hoffman is to be commended for his respectful tone.

One critique of the book is that Hoffman does not offer solutions for the economic and political concerns that many conservatives may share. These concerns involve government and monetary intervention. This incomplete approach falls short of addressing these other concerns. Simply put, his approach is to speak sensibly, gain their trust, and people will understand. While this approach will not alienate readers, merely being respectful and “focusing on the middle” fails to address “big government” monetary and federal concerns deeply rooted in conservative ideology. Hoffman needs to provide more tangible economic solutions to persuade fiscal conservatives of the imperative need to act. This critique, however, does not take away from the book’s merits, as Hoffman provides a hopeful framework for changing climate change dialogue.

Despite this minor critique, Hoffman’s *How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate* is an excellent read. Hoffman’s book convincingly demonstrates that the climate change debate stems more from cultural values than science. The book provides thorough, intriguing research about why so many reject climate change science. Readers interested in learning how broader cultural forces shape the climate change debate should give this book a read.