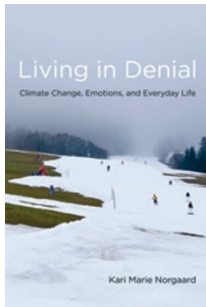


# A town called Bygdaby



**Living in Denial:  
Climate Change,  
Emotions, and  
Everyday Life**

by Kari Marie Norgaard

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The charge of ‘denialist’ has the potential to raise the temperature of any discussion of climate change by a few degrees. It is usually invoked by those who are frustrated either with criticisms of the trustworthiness of climate science or else with obfuscation about the desirability of taking action on climate change. It is also a claim that often triggers equally vehement claims of climate change ‘alarmism’, the result being a collapse of discussion into the simplistic binary trope of good versus evil.

It is therefore refreshing to read an account that treats climate change denial as an object of serious study. In *Living in Denial*, American academic Kari Marie Norgaard explores the sociological dimensions of denialism. She does so by moving the spotlight away from the overheated polemics of American or European media discourse, and instead turns it on a small rural Norwegian town that goes by the pseudonym of Bygdaby. This backwater community of 10,000 Norwegians becomes Norgaard’s laboratory in which she explores the ways scientific evidence, personal experience, collective belief and cultural practice interact to lead to what she calls the social organization of climate change denial.

Norgaard’s approach is radically different to the trite moralizing that characterizes many of the exchanges that commonly take place on blogs about denialism and alarmism. As with all good systematic enquiries, she engages both with theory (in this case sociological and psychological) and with empirical evidence, allowing theory to shape evidence and evidence to re-shape theory. Her ethnographic evidence is gathered during a year — one that includes the mild and snow-poor winter of 2000 to 2001 — in which she lives as a member of Bygdaby town. She observes and participates in cultural activities such as sheep slaughtering

and collective story-telling, and listens to the hopes and fears expressed in this unassuming community. She paints a picture of how a modest rural Norwegian society engages with the idea of climate change and how its people interpret it through their individual and collective world-views.

Through her direct observations, Norgaard helps us to better understand the cultural constraints that lead to quietism concerning climate change — the absence of social activism and public action. Norgaard attributes this lack of response to the phenomenon of socially organized denial, in other words the fact that information about climate science is known in the abstract, but is disconnected from political, social and private life.

*Living in Denial* adds to the small but rapidly growing body of anthropological and sociological work on human-induced climate change. Collectively, this work is starting to reveal how citizens in diverse cultures make sense of climate change for themselves, rather than simply imbibe what scientists say climate change is and means. Norgaard’s study adds to this literature a rich and textured illustration of two important truths about how the idea of anthropogenic climate change works in the human world.

The first is that science alone cannot impose meaning on any physical phenomenon. Scientific evidence — whether about climate change or about the human genome — is always contextualized and interpreted through cultural filters. The meaning of a scientific fact is not for science to define. The second truth is that with our psychological and cultural heritage we find it very hard to engage imaginatively and emotionally with largely invisible and globally mediated risks such as anthropogenic climate change. In this respect, Norgaard’s study is valuable for her deep emphasis on “the feelings that people have about climate change and the ways in which these feelings shape social outcomes”.

*Living in Denial* is not for those who are looking for some secret key to unlock social action on climate change in the industrialized world. Norgaard has no time for the deficit model of communication in which people are bullied into action by sheer weight of information. Instead she offers an almost compassionate view of denialism as emerging from what Yale law professor Dan Kahan, and before him anthropologist Mary Douglas, has called the cultural cognition of risk. Norgaard

moves the analysis of denialism to another level. The problem of climate change is not really about climate change at all; rather “[climate change] provides a window into a wholly new and profound aspect of the experience of modern life”. When engaging with the idea of anthropogenic climate change, people find new contradictions emerging between knowledge, values and actions — and they also find that there are no easy ways of resolving them.

Yet from this vantage point of understanding, Norgaard’s own prognosis for climate change seems surprisingly parochial. Her call for a “fierce return to the local” and for bottom-up community mobilization seems inadequate for the task in hand. Although such responses may account for the community sensibilities and individual emotions Norgaard has astutely observed in Bygdaby, they leave untouched the much larger political and macroeconomic structures by which the lives of twenty-first-century humans are constrained.

One paradox of *Living in Denial* is that it reveals a distinctive local culture that seems resilient to the narrated threat of climate change. Cultural practices and collective beliefs in Bygdaby stabilize community life rather than unsettle it. They allow the social organization of denial to emerge as a form of resistance to external global-scale challenges. This perspective challenges the positive valency that has recently been attached to the idea of resilience. Rather than being a desirable property of communities, cultural resilience may in fact become subversive by disabling radical forms of social and political change.

Here is where the real challenge of climate change rests, for denialists and activists alike: deciding who is culturally authorized to lead the charge for re-thinking and re-inventing social life in what is now inescapably a globalized and deeply interconnected world. It used to be kings and priests. Modernity then tried politicians and scientists. We now seem to be trying celebrities and bloggers. But who would the citizens of Bygdaby trust to lead them out of the land of slavery and denial? □

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