

Spring 5-18-2019

Nordic and American Social Capital and its Effects on Climate Change Adaptation

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Nordic and American Social Capital and its Effects on Climate Change Adaptation

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Abstract

The Nordic nations often rank among the most climate-prepared countries in the world, especially in regards to their rapid switch to renewable energy. In contrast, climate change legislation has faced an uphill battle in the United States, where environmentalists and activists meet with climate change denialism and widespread reluctance to change energy consumption habits. This thesis argues that the gap between American and Nordic adaptation arises in large part from difference in *social capital*. In the United States, a recent decline in social trust and increase in individualism endanger adaptation efforts, creating a culture of consumerism and widespread reluctance to adapt. This decline in trust and collective action is encouraged by a polarized media, which provides a foothold for climate change denialism. Meanwhile, in the Nordic region, exceptional levels of social trust encourage collective action. Local populaces are well-informed by their media outlets, which are relatively unpolarized and are held to high standards by the citizenry and local governments. Wealth of social capital is the crucial ingredient to climate change adaptation in developed societies; although both the USA and the Nordic countries have the financial capacity and technological resources to go green, Nordic social cohesion has provided the public support necessary to *implement* climate policy.

Introduction

The phrase “Nordic exceptionalism” turns up nearly fifteen thousand results on Google. Although we credit these miniscule northern nations for their minimalist furniture, fjords, and cozy “hygge” culture, outsiders especially envy them for their strides in climate change adaptation. When UK journalist Helen Russell started a new life in Denmark, she soon discovered that “being eco-friendly... is seen as a basic duty and something you do to be a part of Danish society.”¹ Russell may have been unnerved when her new neighbors confronted her for improperly sorting her trash,² but the run-in was evidence that Nordic populations and governments share a commitment to climate policy.

Citizens of other Nordic nations are just as likely to accept (and abide by) the government climate change policies of their home countries. In the 2018 Climate Change Performance Index, Sweden was the highest ranked country (although it took the “4th” spot—the top three positions were left blank because no countries scored “very high.”)³ Finland and Norway followed close behind, with Denmark scoring 17th.⁴ The four included Scandinavian nations scored exceptionally high in renewable energy, trailing only Latvia and New Zealand.⁵ Where the nations faltered, however, was in energy use: Denmark was the only Nordic nation to make the top twenty, ranking thirteenth, while Finland weighed in at an abysmal forty-ninth place, with “very low” performance.⁶

¹ Helen Russell, *The Year of Living Danishly: Uncovering the Secrets of the World’s Happiest Country* (London: Icon Books LTD, 2015), chap. 1, Overdrive.

² *Ibid.*

³ “Climate Change Performance Index 2018,” Climate Change Performance Index, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://www.climate-change-performance-index.org/>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

This pitfall is consistent with a less reported aspect of Scandinavian climate impact: although Nordic nations are at the forefront of renewable energy adoption, they still burn a lot of fuel. The World Bank found that Scandinavian CO₂ emissions per capita are far lower than American emissions, but still formidable: while the USA consumed a colossal 16.5 metric tons per capita in 2014, Norwegian residents consumed a concerning 9.3 metric tons.⁷ Sweden, with a much diminished 4.5 metric tons per capita,⁸ can credit a decreased carbon footprint to a successful transition to renewable energy: as of 2015, fossil fuels only accounted for a quarter of Swedish energy consumption.⁹ Of the OECD member states, Iceland consumed the highest amount of energy per capita as of 2017.¹⁰ Most of this energy is channeled into Iceland's industries (81 percent of Icelandic electricity use is in metal production), and fossil fuels are generally foregone in favor of renewable energy sources.¹¹

It takes a lot to keep the Nordic nations running. Transportation is longer due to a spread-out, sparse population distribution, while cold winters necessitate extra heating.¹² Multiple trades much like Iceland's metal industry require high energy consumption, and even more energy is required to maintain the Nordic lifestyle— contrary to what Scandinavian minimalism trends might lead you to believe, the region's inhabitants are active consumers.¹³

Here's where Nordic "exceptionalism" comes into play. Given the high energy use and demands of Scandinavian nations, renewable energy must be continuously improved and

⁷ "CO₂ emissions (metric tons per capita)," World Bank, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ "Fossil fuel energy consumption (% of total)," World Bank, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.USE.COMM.FO.ZS>.

¹⁰ Timothy Bird, "Nordic Action on Climate Change," Nordic Council of Ministers, <http://dx.doi.org/10.6027/ANP2017-766>, 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Timothy Bird, "Nordic Action on Climate Change," 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*

incorporated into public and private life. The standards that Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Iceland set for their own energy use are steep, but they are remarkably adept at meeting them. In 2016, for the same carbon dioxide emissions, Nordic nations were producing five times as much electricity as the average nation.¹⁴ As of 2015, roughly 58 percent of Norwegian energy consumption was renewable,¹⁵ and in 2017 over forty percent of Danish electricity was wind powered.¹⁶ Finland hopes to produce 80 percent less greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, and by the same year Iceland hopes to reduce emissions by at least 50 percent.¹⁷ Sweden leads the pack with its climate goal: by 2045, the nation expects to completely eliminate greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁸

Given that the Nordic nations additionally enjoy low poverty rates, suffer minimal income inequality,¹⁹ and consistently dominate the World Happiness Report (Finland took the top slot from Norway in 2018)²⁰ it seems likely that successes in Nordic climate adaptation could be linked to the overwhelming wealth of Nordic social capital. What *do* Nordic social arrangements have to do with climate change adaptation, and what are Nordic populaces doing differently from the United States? How individualist are the United States and the Nordic nations, and how does that advantage or disadvantage our fight against the climate change threat? Does the way we interact with our media and the extent of our social trust affect our climate response?

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “Renewable energy consumption (% of total final energy consumption),” World Bank, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.FEC.RNEW.ZS>.

¹⁶ Magnus Hornø Gottlieb and Grøn Milepæl, “Danmark sætter ny rekord i vind,” *Dansk Energi*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.danskeenergi.dk/nyheder/danmark-saetter-ny-rekord-vind>.

¹⁷ Timothy Bird, “Nordic Action on Climate Change,” 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Income inequality (indicator), OECD, 2019, <http://doi.org/10.1787/459aa7f1-en>.

²⁰ Patrick Collinson, “Finland is the Happiest Country in the World, Says UN Report,” *Guardian*, March 14, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/14/finland-happiest-country-world-un-report>.

Literature Review: Social Capital and Trust

The way members of a society relate to one another—including the populace’s relationship with the media, degree of societal individualism, and social trust—is largely determined by degree of *social capital*. Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama create their own visions of this broad concept, the under examined advantage of well-connected societies that could prove monumental in the fight against climate change. While Putnam warns against the possible dangers of social capital, a double-edged sword that can be used to unite or damage a society, Fukuyama sings its praises as an economic boon and considers human networking a deciding factor in national wellbeing.

Robert Putnam

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam defines social capital as “connections among individuals:” the networks built between members of a society that create cultural norms of trust and reciprocity.²¹ Putnam’s social capital can be formed through family ties, membership in civic organizations, workplace interactions, and even over the internet.²² Putnam’s definition places the concept of social capital in conversation with that of civic virtue: social capital provides the relations and networks that make members of a society conduct themselves morally.²³ Overall, Putnam’s social capital can be split into two categories: *bridging* social capital, which unites members of diverse social groups and affiliations (exemplified by the Civil Rights Movement)

²¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 19.

²² Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 21.

²³ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 19.

and *bonding* social capital, which builds solidarity by uniting member of homogenous groups (exemplified by the ethnic fraternity).²⁴

Among social capital's many benefits is the creation of social trust. Complex networks of human relationships allow individuals to build reputations, which Putnam considers the "foundation of trust in a complex society."²⁵ In large part, reputations and trust rely on norms of *reciprocity*. These norms, reinforced by the unspoken rules of social connection, can simply involve exchanges between individuals, in which one party expects direct compensation for a favor.²⁶ However, more central to social trust are the norms of *generalized* reciprocity generated by social capital. These norms speed societal processes just as currency streamlines economic activity: rather than exchanging favor for favor, expecting immediate compensation, we aid each other knowing that the favor will someday be repaid by another individual.²⁷ In Putnam's vision, humans are bonded by these unspoken rules of conduct, a complex web of mutual obligations that binds society as a whole and facilitates trust.²⁸

However, Putnam is quick to point out that social capital can be used for purposes contrary to the public welfare. Urban gangs and societal elites can manipulate their social capital.²⁹ Ultimately, these groups repurpose their extensive networks to *damage* a community's trust and reciprocity, the very benefits with which we generally associate social capital.

Francis Fukuyama

²⁴ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 22.

²⁵ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 21.

²⁶ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 20.

²⁷ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 21.

²⁸ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 20.

²⁹ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 19.

In *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, Francis Fukuyama cites James Coleman's definition of social capital: "the ability of people to work together for common purposes in groups and organizations."³⁰ To Fukuyama, social capital is more than a boon: it's an essential relief to human burden, soothing the "acute sense of unease" he believes humans feel without social norms to connect them to their neighbors.³¹ Where Putnam warns that social capital has its drawbacks, Fukuyama credits it in large part for the successes of prominent nations. Rather, he criticizes organizations and societies that *limit* the formation of social capital. Fukuyama blames socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union for wiping out civil society and Confucianism in societies like Taiwan, Singapore, and China for an emphasis on family ties, which he believes limit the formation of inter-citizen trust necessitated by economic transactions and strong corporations.³²

According to Fukuyama, the importance of social capital relates to the growing role of *human capital* in modern society. Physical capital—the possession of tools and resources—is less and less valuable to modern economies and cultures; instead, true value lies in human capability and knowledge.³³ Social capital, our "ability to associate with each other," is an often underestimated strain of human capital.³⁴

In particular, Fukuyama believes that social capital plays a central role in national wealth: although we tend to view the economy as an isolated phenomenon, independent of cultural influences and operating under its own set of rules, Fukuyama points out that each and every

³⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and The Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 10.

³¹ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 6.

³² Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 56.

³³ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

economic activity requires the “social collaboration of human beings.”³⁵ Thus, social capital and trust make for economic efficiency and success: during economic exchanges, individuals collaborate with each other only when they feel that they have established a trust-based connection.³⁶ Fukuyama makes a bold claim: degree of societal trust can make or break a nation.³⁷ To Fukuyama, all strong economies share one trait: a population pulled together by the ties of social trust.³⁸

³⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 6.

³⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 8.

³⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 7.

³⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 9.

Nordic Social Capital: Trust and *Janteloven*

Janteloven

Stay in Scandinavia for awhile, and you might pick up on a unique set of cultural norms, a group of unwritten rules that supposedly structure Nordic societies. The Law of Jante centers around the idea that distinguishing oneself or placing oneself on a pedestal is embarrassing and undesirable.³⁹ When Londoner journalist Helen Russell moved to Denmark with her husband, who began to work with Lego, she was bemused to discover that the company mantra was “Lego over ego.”⁴⁰ In the office, no one was congratulated for putting in extra hours and labor to stand out—to the contrary, they might be encouraged to improve their efficiency.⁴¹ Russell’s husband was encountering the far-reaching Law of Jante, which reveals itself yet more notably in Norwegian schools, which have been criticized for neglecting to give star pupils special treatment.⁴² It’s worth noting that *Janteloven* is often disavowed by Scandinavians or declared a relic of the past; half of the respondents to a 2008 newspaper survey in Denmark considered *Janteloven* a term that unsuccessful people overused to cover for their own inadequacies.⁴³ However, when asked if *Janteloven* was a modern feature of Danish life, about 75 percent of those surveyed believed it was.⁴⁴ When asked what brought out *Janteloven* disapproval,

³⁹ Eric Gordy, "Conformity: The Lock-in Effect of Social Ties," in *Global Encyclopaedia of Informality, Volume 1: Towards Understanding of Social and Cultural Complexity* (London: UCL Press, 2018), 255.

⁴⁰ Russell, *The Year of Living Danishly*, chap. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Gordy, "Conformity," 257.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Gordy, "Conformity," 258.

respondents indicated that success and education weren't societal triggers, but rather ostentatious displays of wealth, such as plastic surgery and expensive vehicles.⁴⁵

The Finnish Educational Exceptionalism: *Janteloven* at Work

If there's one nation you can trust to provide a quality education, it's Finland—an academic dreamland where playtime is never undervalued, teachers are encouraged to experiment in the classroom, and homework is approaching obsolete.⁴⁶ Much like *Janteloven*, Finnish schools operate under the assumption that no one individual should receive better treatment than another; college education is free, and private schools don't exist.⁴⁷ Finnish teachers are well-educated, but the secret to their success lies in a *Janteloven*-style educational policy of cooperation over competition.⁴⁸ Critics may worry that encouraging schools and teachers to improve together rather than to compete will remove opportunities for talented students to excel. The success of the system, however, proves that egalitarian education doesn't have to mean universal mediocrity: Finland consistently tops world education rankings.⁴⁹

Testing for *Janteloven*

In 2014, Bromgard et al. tested the presence of *Janteloven* among Norwegians by showing participants photos of a person expressing pride and comparing their reactions to those

⁴⁵ Gordy, "Conformity," 258-9.

⁴⁶ Chris Weller, "8 Reasons Finland's Education System Puts the US Model to Shame," *Business Insider*, December 6, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/finland-education-beats-us-2017-5>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

of American respondents.⁵⁰ The respondents were asked to label the subject with various traits, which were in turn grouped into positive and negative characteristics (including “annoying,” “schadenfreude,” and “smug” for negative traits, and “friendliness,” “trust,” “loyal,” and “honest” for positive ones).⁵¹ Norwegians ascribed negative traits more readily to the image than did Americans, and were additionally less likely to ascribe positive traits.⁵²

Social Trust

When Helen Russell took to the Danish streets, she was shocked like many visitors before her to see prams left outside of cafes, babies and all.⁵³ Nordic society enjoys a stunning wealth of *social trust*, revealed as much by unlocked bicycles in the streets of Copenhagen as by its rankings in trust surveys.⁵⁴ Copenhagen native Anette Sørensen in 1997 discovered the rarity of this trust exceptionalism when she left her child in a stroller in front of a New York City restaurant as she sat inside.⁵⁵ Sørensen was outraged when her decision landed her in prison for 36 hours, later proclaiming that her parenting methods were a demonstration of Danish *tillid*, or trust.⁵⁶ About the response she received from the American police force, Sørensen complained that Americans “live in fear.”⁵⁷ But what makes Nordic society trusting enough to leave children out on the streets, a practice that Americans consider child endangerment?

⁵⁰ G. Bromgard, D. Trafimow, and C. Linn, “Janteloven and the Expression of Pride in Norway and the United States,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 154, no. 5 (September-October 2014): 4, <http://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2014.914884>.

⁵¹ Bromgard, Trafimow, and Linn, “Janteloven and the Expression of Pride,” 4.

⁵² Bromgard, Trafimow, and Linn, “Janteloven and the Expression of Pride,” 4-5.

⁵³ Russell, *The Year of Living Danishly*, chap. 8.

⁵⁴ Russell, *The Year of Living Danishly*, prologue.

⁵⁵ Raquel Laneri, “I Went to Jail for Leaving my Baby Outside a Restaurant,” *New York Post*, November 25, 2017, <https://nypost.com/2017/11/25/i-went-to-jail-for-leaving-my-baby-outside-a-restaurant/>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Nordic Trust Exceptionalism

To determine the level of *social trust* in a population, surveyors ask individuals if they consider people to be generally trustworthy.⁵⁸ The results tell us how a population sees itself—do respondents consider their fellow man to be fundamentally immoral and untrustworthy, or reliable and ethically motivated?⁵⁹ In recent decades, social trust has exploded in the Nordic nations. In 1979, less than half of Danes trusted their neighbors.⁶⁰ As of the 90s, Scandinavia was already the region with the highest social trust.⁶¹ In 2009, the number of Danes who agreed that people were fundamentally trustworthy had rocketed to 79 percent.⁶² In 2014, the European Social Survey ranked several European nations' social trust, revealing a median score of about five out of ten.⁶³ Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden took the top spots— all four scored between six and seven.⁶⁴ These tremendous strides come at a time when many countries are experiencing losses in social trust.⁶⁵ Social trust has proven to be such a uniquely Nordic asset that the Nordic Council of Ministers has dubbed it *Nordic Gold*.⁶⁶

Nordic Trust: Seeking an Explanation

⁵⁸ Kim Mannemar Sønderskov and Peter Thisted Dinesen, “Danish Exceptionalism: Explaining the Unique Increase in Social Trust Over the Past 30 Years,” *European Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (December 2014): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcu073>.

⁵⁹ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold: Nordic Council of Ministers Analysis Report,” 21, <http://dx.doi.org/10.6027/ANP2017-737>.

⁶⁰ Sønderskov and Dinesen, “Danish Exceptionalism,” 4.

⁶¹ Rafael La Porta et al., “Trust in Large Organizations,” National Bureau of Economic Research, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w5864.pdf>.

⁶² Sønderskov and Dinesen, “Danish Exceptionalism,” 4.

⁶³ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold,” 13.

⁶⁴ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold,” 14.

⁶⁵ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold,” 15.

⁶⁶ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold,” 10.

The source of Nordic trust exceptionalism is heavily debated, but it seems likely that it lies in a combination of factors. High levels of social trust are commonly credited to transparent institutions, welfare states, homogenous populations, quality education, civilian associations, and even certain religious profiles.⁶⁷ Since social trust is so hard to source, researchers debate whether Nordic trust is a new phenomenon or a long-held cultural characteristic.⁶⁸ Theories that attempt to explain the sources of social trust are divided in two camps: *social* explanations, which credit civil society participation and networking, and *institutional* explanations, which credit institutions for the socioeconomic conditions they create.⁶⁹ Delving into Nordic history and culture, it soon becomes apparent that numerous explanations can be found for trust exceptionalism.

Trust: A Nordic History

Some believe that Nordic trust exceptionalism can be tracked back beyond living generations to the age of the Vikings, pointing to the trade of the era as evidence of social capital.⁷⁰ However, studies show that trust has varied greatly between contemporary generations; as newer generations age and take the older generations' place in Danish society, they become *increasingly* trustful.⁷¹ This change, a shift that occurred after the war, is too recent to be credited to the Vikings. Instead, some theorists point to Nordic populations' membership in voluntary associations.⁷² In the 19th century, Nordic popular movements emerged, creating voluntary

⁶⁷ Ulf Andreasson, "Trust—the Nordic Gold," 14.

⁶⁸ Sønderskov and Dinesen, "Danish Exceptionalism," 1.

⁶⁹ Ulf Andreasson, "Trust—the Nordic Gold," 14.

⁷⁰ Ulf Andreasson, "Trust—the Nordic Gold," 15.

⁷¹ Sønderskov and Dinesen, "Danish Exceptionalism," 2.

⁷² Ulf Andreasson, "Trust—the Nordic Gold," 7.

democratic associations that united populations through reciprocal bonds of trust.⁷³ The Nordic state worked in conjunction with associations; they are subsidized by tax dollars and supported by their governments, regardless of whether or not the association itself supports the state.⁷⁴ This relationship simultaneously builds the state's reputation for transparency and allows the association to build social capital and trust.⁷⁵ Additionally, the association works as a tool for the state; through membership, a Nordic individual can shape politics in their own country.⁷⁶ Civil society participation remains strong; historically popular associations are being pushed out by the popularity of new groups, including sports, culture, environment, and politics-focused groups.⁷⁷

Education

A common explanation given for plentiful social trust is quality education. Among datasets of Danish respondents who were asked to affirm or deny that “most people can be trusted,” a higher education background made a respondent's probability of answering affirmatively rise from 0.58 to 0.93.⁷⁸ Scandinavian education has been much-lauded in recent years, drawing supporters through unconventional methods ranging from limited homework⁷⁹ to “forest schools,” kindergartens held partially in the woods.⁸⁰ In 2015, PISA results saw trust superstar Denmark rank 12th, 18th, and 21st in math, reading, and science, respectively.⁸¹ Norway ranked 19th, 9th,

⁷³ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold,” 9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold,” 16.

⁷⁸ Sønderskov and Dinesen, “Danish Exceptionalism,” 15.

⁷⁹ Weller, “8 Reasons Finland's Education System Puts the US Model to Shame.”

⁸⁰ Timothy D. Walker, “Kindergarten, Naturally,” *Atlantic*, September 15, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/09/kindergarten-naturally/500138/>.

⁸¹ Abby Jackson and Andy Kiersz, “The Latest Ranking of Top Countries in Math, Reading, and Science is Out — and the US Didn't Crack the Top 10,” *Business Insider*, December 6, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/pisa-worldwide-ranking-of-math-science-reading-skills-2016-12>.

and 24th in the same categories; Sweden pulled in at 24th, 17th, and 28th; and Finland excelled at 12th, 4th, and 5th.⁸² Although positive, these results seem insufficient to fully explain trust exceptionalism to the degree observed in the Nordic nations.

Quality Institutions and Protestantism

Another common theory used to explain the strength of Nordic social trust is the presence of quality institutions and a lack of hierarchical religious practice. A 2015 Eurostat ranking of trust in public institutions across thirty-three European countries placed Finland second, immediately followed by Norway, and Sweden.⁸³ Although Iceland lagged at 14th, trust was overall higher than the average surveyed across OECD EU nations.⁸⁴ These rankings are justified: of the Nordic nations, four ranked among the top ten least corrupt globally in the Transparency International index; Iceland lagged not far behind at 14th of 176.⁸⁵ Trust in institutions should only increase as these public institutions become increasingly effective in servicing the population as part of the welfare state; theoretically, in a society serviced by institutions that are strong, incorrupt, and effective, a populace will feel better supported by its government and societal trust will increase.

⁸⁶ The strong institutions present in Nordic nations to service the welfare state combine with a history of Protestantism to raise societal trust. Authors like Putnam suspect that hierarchical religions like Catholicism *discourage* social trust by tamping down on network-based social capital.⁸⁷ Due to the hierarchies created by these religions, “vertical bonds of authority” take

⁸² Jackson and Kiersz, “The Latest Ranking of Top Countries.”

⁸³ Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, “Trust,” accessed January 27, 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/trust>.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold,” 17.

⁸⁶ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold,” 7.

⁸⁷ La Porta et al., “Trust in Large Organizations.”

precedence over (and prevent the creation of) “horizontal bonds of fellowship” that link populations and establish social trust.⁸⁸ The very *public institutions* of a nation are warped by the presence of a hierarchical religion in a society; better judiciaries, bureaucracies, civic society, and infrastructure are all associated with a lack of prominent hierarchical religions.⁸⁹ In contrast, the five Nordic nations are all historically Protestant.⁹⁰ This non-hierarchical religion can be partially credited for the quality and transparency of Nordic social institutions, as well as subsequent social capital and social trust.

Homogeneity

An additional theory for the success of Nordic social capital and trust is the degree of *homogeneity* in the population. The Nordic nations have ethnically homogenous populations with relative income equality and linguistic homogeneity.⁹¹ With these traits come an increased wealth of social capital. An equal economic playing field decreases motivation to be dishonest or untrustworthy⁹² and prevents class resentment,⁹³ while ethnic homogeneity prevents ethnic conflict.⁹⁴ However, the Nordic region is changing; globalization has brought immigration, economic inequality, and political division northward.⁹⁵ These shifts make for an increasingly

⁸⁸ La Porta et al., “Trust in Large Organizations.”

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Jan Delhey and Kenneth Newton, “Predicting Cross-National Levels of Social Trust: Global Pattern or Nordic Exceptionalism?” *European Sociological Review* 21, no. 4 (2005): 320, <http://www.jstor.org/avoserv2.library.fordham.edu/stable/4621213>.

⁹¹ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold,” 17.

⁹² Sønderskov and Dinesen, “Danish Exceptionalism,” 7.

⁹³ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold,” 21.

⁹⁴ Sønderskov and Dinesen, “Danish Exceptionalism,” 7.

⁹⁵ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold,” 18.

heterogeneous population that may find social cohesion and trust more difficult to maintain than ever before.⁹⁶

The Nordic Populace and the Media

A Regional Media Culture

Although the Nordic nations have differing media structures and cultures, they tend to operate under certain common principles.⁹⁷ Because of these commonalities, Trine Syvertsen et al. dub the Nordic media model the *Media Welfare State*.⁹⁸ This model features prominent public service institutions with a strong following, exceptionally high readership,⁹⁹ and an audience that still tends to access its news directly, rather than through social media, search engines, or aggregators.¹⁰⁰ One of the reasons the Nordic media model works so well is because of a conscious, involved government with a deeply embedded respect for freedom of speech.¹⁰¹ This government input has allowed for the success of public broadcasters like YLE in Finland¹⁰² and DR and TV2 in Denmark.¹⁰³ When asked which news sources they'd used in the last week, 72

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Trine Syvertsen et al., *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/nmw.12367206.0001.001>.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Lauren Kirchner, "Seven Lessons Scandinavian Media Can Teach Us," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July 2, 2012, https://archives.cjr.org/behind_the_news/seven_lessons_scandinavian_med.php.

¹⁰⁰ Nic Newman, "Overview and Key Findings of the 2018 Report," Digital News Report, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/overview-key-findings-2018/>.

¹⁰¹ Trine Syvertsen et al., *The Media Welfare State*.

¹⁰² Esa Reunanen, "Finland," Digital News Report, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/finland-2018/>.

¹⁰³ Kim Christian Schröder and Mark Ørsten, "Denmark," Digital News Report, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/denmark-2018/>.

percent of Finnish respondents had used YLE in some capacity.¹⁰⁴ In Denmark, 62 percent of respondents had used DR, while 61 percent had used TV2.¹⁰⁵

Despite the monopolies public service institutions maintain over media production, much of Scandinavian media culture relies on outside influence, particularly from the United States and the rest of Europe.¹⁰⁶ Anglo-American influences, including film, music, and TV, form the gateway to the outer world;¹⁰⁷ in Norway, between 50 and 80 percent of the material that audiences watch is American.¹⁰⁸ Although the Nordic nations move rapidly towards a more globalized media, local news and influences remain prominent influences. Despite competition, state-funded media organizations maintain impressive readership and have become a central feature of local culture.¹⁰⁹

Trust and the media

One of the easiest ways to gauge the Nordic populations' relationship to their media is in their *trust*. Nordic media outlets are facing a crowd that's difficult to please. Although Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark are time and time again listed among the top countries in the world for freedom of the press,¹¹⁰ Nordic audiences' high media consumption makes them

¹⁰⁴ Reunanen, "Finland."

¹⁰⁵ Schröder and Ørsten, "Denmark."

¹⁰⁶ Ib Bondebjerg, "Scandinavian Media Histories, a Comparative Study: Institutions, Genres and Culture in a National and Global Perspective," *Nordicom Review* (September 2002): 61, <http://www.nordicom.gu.se/en/tidskrifter/nordicom-review-1-22002/scandinavian-media-histories-comparative-study-institutions>.

¹⁰⁷ Bondebjerg, "Scandinavian Media Histories," 62.

¹⁰⁸ Bondebjerg, "Scandinavian Media Histories, 72.

¹⁰⁹ Bondebjerg, "Scandinavian Media Histories, 70.

¹¹⁰ Kirchner, "Seven Lessons Scandinavian Media Can Teach Us."

critical of their news sources.¹¹¹ When an audience expects quality, a provider has to deliver. The pressures of audience accountability have helped to transform the Nordic media landscape into one of careful *self-regulation*.¹¹² State-led efforts to hold journalism accountable to the people have paid off: the Nordic public tends to trust public broadcasters more than other news sources and institutions, and pays more for online news than populations of other regions do.¹¹³

In Finland, where politics and media are relatively unpolarized, trust in media is highest. Finland came in first of 37 countries ranked by the 2018 Digital News Report, with 62% of Finnish respondents confirming that they trusted news overall.¹¹⁴ In contrast, Sweden ranked quite low, at 23rd out of the 37 countries; only 41 percent of respondents trusted the news, despite an impressive rate of 26 percent of the population paying for online news.¹¹⁵ In Denmark, 56 percent of respondents trusted the news in general, with little variation between public and private media providers.¹¹⁶ In Norway, that figure sank to 47 percent—the most distrustful respondents tended to belong to the political far-right.¹¹⁷ Before the 2017 elections, concerns arose in Norway as to the possible interference of fake news, causing the birth of the fact-checking site Faktisk.no.¹¹⁸

Nordic media groups have confronted this skepticism head on with extensive self-regulation, intended to hold them accountable to their audience and prove them bias-free.¹¹⁹

¹¹¹ Robert Söderling, “The Nordic Media Landscape,” *Retriever*, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://www.retriever-info.com/the-nordic-media-landscape/>.

¹¹² Kirchner, “Seven Lessons Scandinavian Media Can Teach Us.”

¹¹³ Newman, “Overview and Key Findings of the 2018 Report.”

¹¹⁴ Reunanen, “Finland.”

¹¹⁵ Oscar Westlund, “Sweden,” Digital News Report, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/sweden-2018/>.

¹¹⁶ Schrøder and Ørsten, “Denmark.”

¹¹⁷ Hallvard Moe and Hilde Sakariassen, “Norway,” Digital News Report, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/norway-2018/>.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Kirchner, “Seven Lessons Scandinavian Media Can Teach Us.”

These institutions range from press councils that review reader criticism to frequent surveys and analyses that measure party bias and reception.¹²⁰ The Nordic nations emphasize government transparency, meaning that whistleblowers and journalists are well protected by shield laws.¹²¹ In Sweden, the Principle of Public Access requires complete transparency of government communications, court records, and other documents.¹²² Protections of journalists, combined with an extensive institutional network holding them accountable to the people, allow the Nordic media to maintain its extensive readership despite high audience standards.

Changing Tides

Despite the success of public broadcasters and the high standards Nordic media outlets are held to, recent years have seen media consumption become more and more politically polarized. Audiences now tend to draw from commercial media outlets as well as public ones.¹²³ In 2018, European public service broadcasters were frequently accused of partisanship, and in March the right-wing Danish government made a five-year plan to cut public broadcaster DR's funding by a fifth.¹²⁴ In Sweden, a polarized media is likewise emerging. Stunting funding for reliable public service outlets may seem counterproductive given fears about fake news, but about 10% of internet-using Swedes read each of four of the most prominent partisan news sites every week, most of which are right wing.¹²⁵ Similarly, in Finland, about one in 20 respondents had accessed

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Nic Newman, "Overview and Key Findings of the 2018 Report."

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

MV-Lehti in the last week, a partisan site that opposes immigration and criticizes traditional news sources.¹²⁶

The Myth of American Individualism

Are Americans Individualists?

One of the American media's most powerful impacts on US social arrangements is the fostering of *individualism*. The 2000 World Values Survey asked respondents to rank the extent to which they could determine their futures through personal "freedom of choice and control."¹²⁷ A sizable 44 percent of the American population answered a 9 or 10.¹²⁸ American society values personal autonomy and personality, holds individuals accountable for their actions, and resents state control.¹²⁹ Americans consider nepotism distasteful¹³⁰ and consider themselves in possession of a 'real self' separate from and superior to the face they bring to social interactions.¹³¹ When we split the world into 'collectivists' and 'individualists,' we tend to regard Japan and the United States as the pinnacles of collectivism and individualism, respectively.¹³²

Individualistic Collectivism

¹²⁶ Reunanen, "Finland."

¹²⁷ Claude S. Fischer, "Paradoxes of American Individualism," *Sociological Forum* 23, no. 2 (June 2008): 365, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2008.00066.x>.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Fischer, "Paradoxes," 363.

¹³⁰ Fischer, "Paradoxes," 364.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Francis Fukuyama, "Social Capital and the Global Economy: A Redrawn Map of the World," *Foreign Affairs* 74 (September/October 1995), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1995-09-01/social-capital-and-global-economy-redrawn-map-world>.

However, this individualist identity may be skin deep; authors like Francis Fukuyama believe that Americans have strong group associations, collectivist tendencies that distance them from being a truly individualistic society.¹³³ Fukuyama seeks to redefine the stereotypical “American individualist,” noting that Americans share communitarian social values that reveal more powerful collectivist ties than we tend to expect of them. Rather than compare the US with Japan, the poster child of collectivism, Fukuyama points out the *commonalities* between the two, including an affinity for membership in and creation of voluntary associations.¹³⁴ Americans are staunch defenders of loyalty in relationships, often rely on churches and religions to determine their ethical stances, and are generally patriotic.¹³⁵ When compared to populations of other sizable Western countries, Americans are more inclined to respect the decisions of their employers and to advocate for obedience to the law over personal morality.¹³⁶ In fact, the degree to which Americans espouse collectivist social values makes Williams label them conformists.¹³⁷

Claude S. Fischer believes that the conventional conception of American individualism is “egoistic and asocial,” and suggests that instead American values center around “covenantal, social voluntarism.”¹³⁸ Williams chalks American ‘individualism’ down to a strong individual personality, an aversion to state meddling and a desire for economic freedom—Americans don’t operate according to the “every man for himself” mentality we expect from them.¹³⁹ Rather, they reveal underlying collectivist values in their voluntarism and group loyalty.¹⁴⁰ Americans tend to

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 367.

¹³⁶ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 366.

¹³⁷ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 367.

¹³⁸ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 363.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 368.

show more investment in friendships than their European counterparts do, and they join more organizations.¹⁴¹ When French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 19th century, he was impressed to find a wealth of associations, noting that “Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations.... Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.”¹⁴² The US has continued this long history of extensive civil society and voluntary organization membership into modern times; Americans have always been deeply involved in their churches, schools, and charities.¹⁴³

The Individualist Nature of American Group Association

American “group” culture is one of paradox. Collectivism and individualism coexist in civil society: the individual is valued as an autonomous entity, but is expected to freely make and honor group associations.¹⁴⁴ Leaving is always acceptable;¹⁴⁵ when the group fails to provide personal fulfillment to the individual, they will choose another. This ease of group transference is best demonstrated by the frequency of religious conversion.¹⁴⁶ Americans feel free to change these commitments and to use them to further personal needs; however, they also tend to view group loyalties as *contractual*.¹⁴⁷ Since a member can choose to leave a group as they wish, if they choose to stay they are expected to respect the rules and expectations of group membership.

¹⁴¹ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 366.

¹⁴² Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 48.

¹⁴³ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 50.

¹⁴⁴ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 369.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 368.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ This combination of personal autonomy and group cohesion is especially evident in American views towards marriage; divorce is permissible and reasonable, but before a marriage ends both spouses are expected to remain faithful.¹⁴⁹ Once an American chooses to join a church or a club, to start a family, or to marry, they are held to their decision and expected to honor the commitment made to the collective.¹⁵⁰

The Dying Art of Association

The unique American brand of individualistic collectivism is dissolving—social capital is endangered by speedily declining rates of association.¹⁵¹ As the baby boomers age and younger generations mature, a generation gap in community involvement becomes increasingly pronounced.¹⁵² Younger Americans are less likely to work for political parties, sign petitions,¹⁵³ or even to take an active interest in public affairs than their predecessors.¹⁵⁴ Involvement in non-political avenues of community life decreased at a comparable rate.¹⁵⁵ Americans may not have been staunch individualists before, but they're certainly on track to fulfilling their lone wolf image;¹⁵⁶ membership in top associations increased throughout the early 20th century, reached its peak in the early 60s, and began a steady decline after 1969.¹⁵⁷ Putnam warns that we are losing our advantage in social capital, relying on cold, hard economic wealth to carry us forward.¹⁵⁸

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Fukuyama, "Social Capital and the Global Economy."

¹⁵² Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 34.

¹⁵³ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 41.

¹⁵⁴ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 36.

¹⁵⁵ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 42.

¹⁵⁶ Fukuyama, "Social Capital and the Global Economy."

¹⁵⁷ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 55.

¹⁵⁸ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 40.

Fukuyama suggests that Americans reevaluate their stance on collectivism: at the roots of the problem lie a refusal to recognize American association for the asset that it is.¹⁵⁹

Social Trust

Perhaps the most concerning effect of declining association in America is the subsequent decline in *social trust*. Social trust is cyclically related to civil society: just as trusting your neighbor will encourage you to join him at the local bowling league, joining the league will help you to trust other strangers in the future. These kinds of connections between strangers are the valuable results of wealth in *networking social capital*.

Networking social capital is made up of a series of norms of trust and reciprocity in a populace;¹⁶⁰ in the United States, these norms allow the individual to exchange religions and group identities with ease. Fukuyama believes that social trust is endangered by America's recent shift towards individualism. Surveys of American trust affirm his fears: the General Social Survey, which measured trust in the American population from 1972 to 2014, saw the number of respondents who believed that "most people can be trusted" decrease from 46 to 31 percent in forty years.¹⁶¹ Yet more worrying is a subsequent increase in antistatist sentiment: the OECD finds a strong link between social trust and trust in institutions.¹⁶² In 2018, studies show Americans trusted their government less than ever before,¹⁶³ expanding on what Fukuyama considers a "strong antistatist tradition."¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 10.

¹⁶⁰ W. Neil Adger, "Social Capital, Collective Action, and Adaptation to Climate Change," *Economic Geography* 79, no. 4 (October 2003): 392, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30032945>.

¹⁶¹ Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, "Trust," accessed January 27, 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/trust>.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 51.

America has always profited from its social capital, able to form social cohesions and civic organizations between strangers.¹⁶⁵ Because of this capability, Fukuyama characterizes the United States as a traditionally “high trust, group-oriented society.”¹⁶⁶ However, as community involvement breaks down, churches lose members, and divorce rates increase,¹⁶⁷ societal trust dissolves. Fukuyama worries that American democracy itself is in danger along with its social capital: as societal distrust becomes increasingly prevalent, litigation and mass imprisonment become more frequent.¹⁶⁸ Americans are paying the price of attaining the individualism they so identify with.

Pitfalls of Individualistic Collectivism

The *individualism-collectivism* dichotomy present in American society has its downsides. Since Americans believe strongly in the freedom of choice behind group association, twice as many Americans as Europeans hold the poor accountable for their situation and attribute poverty to laziness.¹⁶⁹ Additionally, since Americans see the groups they belong to as avenues through which to advance personal goals,¹⁷⁰ they are prone to *social loafing*, or skirting their duties when they can get away with the negligence. In 1989, a study compared rates of social loafing among

¹⁶⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 54.

¹⁶⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 10.

¹⁶⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 51.

¹⁶⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 10.

¹⁶⁹ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 365.

¹⁷⁰ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 368.

American and Chinese managers.¹⁷¹ Americans were more effective when held accountable for their work, whereas their Chinese counterparts performed well even without accountability.¹⁷²

Segregation and Group Tensions

One glaring exception to the nature of American group association is the social construction of racial identity: although Americans choose their partners, clubs, political parties, and religious associations, they are placed at birth into racial groups. Centuries of systematic oppression of peoples of color, particularly Black Americans, have created a segregated society in which White Americans are generally surrounded by White communities and interact minimally with Black Americans.¹⁷³ Political sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes the new face of American racism: White Americans claim “colorblindness” in order to mask the pain of the Black American experience and to hold on to the benefits of White privilege.¹⁷⁴ Racism has become less detectable and more palatable in the USA, but continues to contribute heavily to segregation through racial group association.

Segregation and discrimination in American society additionally damages the social trust of targeted groups. Orlando Patterson’s 1999 study of American trust revealed that the least privileged of Americans were also the least trusting. In the American trust divide, African Americans were less trusting than any other ethnic group and poor Americans were less trusting

¹⁷¹ P. Christopher Earley, “Social Loafing and Collectivism: A Comparison of the United States and the People's Republic of China,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (December 1989): 577, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2393567?seq=13#metadata_info_tab_contents.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Kerri Ullucci, review of *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Urban Education* 31, no. 5 (September 2006) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085906291929>.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

than rich ones.¹⁷⁵ The results suggested to Patterson that social distrust is primarily propagated by “anxiety and insecurity.”¹⁷⁶ His theory was further supported by the gender gap in American trust rates—American women are often less trusting than their male counterparts, a discrepancy that is far less common elsewhere in the western world.¹⁷⁷ If insecurity fuels distrust, it’s little wonder that groups that have faced centuries of oppression should experience more of it than those that have received race-based privileges.

Consumerism and the American Media

As Americans lose their social capital, their relationship to the media exacerbates the problem, contributing to a culture of consumerism. Americans like to keep their cell phones up to date and take out credit card debt on trendy cars that bear little resemblance to the puny energy savers Norwegians favor. If there’s one thing Americans like more than fast food and summer camp, it’s the accumulation of *stuff*. Marie Kondo’s book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* sold over 1.5 million copies in the USA.¹⁷⁸ Negative reviews complained that they didn’t need a guru to teach them how to spring clean, but most disagreed; one eager Amazon reviewer confesses to a “tortured relationship with stuff” and claims Kondo’s minimalist method can “finally kick the clutter habit.” Every year, foreign onlookers are stunned by footage of Black Friday, as hordes of frenzied shoppers trample each other in pursuit of discounted gadgets and gizmos. But what drove the US to accumulate a consumerist mentality in the first place?

¹⁷⁵ Jan Delhey and Kenneth Newton, “Who trusts?: The origins of social trust in seven societies,” *European Societies* 5, no. 2 (2003): 96, <http://doi.org/10.1080/1461669032000072256>.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Delhey and Newton, “Who trusts?” 100.

¹⁷⁸ “KonMari Books,” Sunmark Publish!ng, accessed January 27, 2019, <http://www.mariekondobooks.com/>.

To understand this culture of instant gratification, look no further than the development of American advertising, the creation of what author Tim Wu terms “the attention merchants.”¹⁷⁹ These media developers seek to harness the commercial profits of human attention.¹⁸⁰ American news and entertainment media have long been intimately connected to this play, providing the perfect combination of sustained interest and source credibility to advertise.

The US media is intimately connected to advertising and commercial motives: American advertising and news developed alongside each other. In 1833, American opportunist Benjamin Day created the world’s most popular newspaper, *The New York Sun*.¹⁸¹ Day’s product was the first “penny paper;” he used advertising to slash newspaper prices.¹⁸² Production costs were met not by the readership’s penny but by the advertiser’s dime, allowing Day to amass nearly 20,000 readers in two years.¹⁸³ American interests could now be monetized, intimately intertwining media sources with commercial backers.

The media-advertising machine exploded in Britain with the outbreak of World War I, which necessitated impassioned masses of supporters.¹⁸⁴ In the USA, propaganda became a way of life, as Uncle Sam was co-opted for recruitment posters and cinema-goers participated in the Four Minute Man program, delivering short speeches in support of American war involvement.¹⁸⁵ Mobilization messages spread through posters, print, the motion picture, telegraph, cable, and wireless.¹⁸⁶ Soon, corporations found that they could co-opt the propaganda campaign, using

¹⁷⁹ Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), introduction, Overdrive.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, chap. 1, Overdrive.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, chap. 3, Overdrive.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

advertising to build customer loyalty and showcase their products.¹⁸⁷ The results were striking. Between 1923 and 1929, American consumption spending increased by 25 percent.¹⁸⁸ As brands exploded, shaping American tastes and establishing customer loyalties, new medias formed and were adapted to the growing advertisement industry.

The Cult of the Individual

American advertising can additionally be blamed for the American “individualism” myth. Because of carefully targeted ad campaigns, the US began to view itself in the 60s as a culture of personalities,¹⁸⁹ rather than one of collectivism and social capital. When a wave of countercultural movements presented a threat to American consumerism, waging an ideological war against the capitalist system, advertising adapted to the times by bringing countercultural crowds into the consumerist machine.¹⁹⁰ TV shows and ad campaigns targeted marginalized groups and individualized their content to suit specific audiences.¹⁹¹ In the 60s, Pepsi ran ads that targeted young ‘rebels,’ encouraging them to “think different” and consider themselves the “Pepsi generation.”¹⁹² Tim Wu credits this shift for making individualism “the dominant American ethos, even of capitalism itself.”¹⁹³ The later advent of social media would only aid the rise of targeted content. Advertisers are increasingly able to use the data from Google and Facebook to sell products to *individuals*,¹⁹⁴ rather than to the generic “Average American” they

¹⁸⁷ Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, chap. 4, Overdrive.

¹⁸⁸ Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, chap. 4, Overdrive.

¹⁸⁹ Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, chap. 12, Overdrive.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, chap. 16, Overdrive.

used to target. The American social identity of staunch individualism was purposefully manufactured by the media and its close relationship with advertising dollars. American consumption habits reflect on the individualistic hope to stand out from the crowd—a desire that has been deliberately honed by advertising.

The Chickens and Eggs of Media Polarization

Just as the American media’s close knit relationship with advertising drove Americans to lust for the latest shoes, cars, and gadgets, this same relationship drove the media to levels of polarization unheard of in the Western world. Breitbart, a far-right website watched by 19 percent of American conservatives in 2017,¹⁹⁵ runs headlines like “Hillary Clinton’s Muslim Brotherhood Problem” and “Birth Control makes Women Unattractive and Crazy.” Meanwhile, liberal website BuzzFeed¹⁹⁶ has made a “definitive ranking” of Clinton’s pantsuits and a gif-laden article entitled “13 Signs You And Your Birth Control Are Meant To Be.” Media in the USA is a battlefield, and consumers are expected to choose sides.

Philip Bump of the Washington Post questions the source of American media polarization, labeling the phenomenon a “chicken-egg” issue.¹⁹⁷ What came first: the divide between parties, or the divide between media outlets? If attention merchants are to blame, the same money-hungry forces that dragged our attention to the latest refrigerators, shiniest toy bikes, and sleekest cars likewise drew our attention to the most polarizing of news sources.

¹⁹⁵ Brett Edkins, “Report: U.S. Media Among Most Polarized In The World,” *Forbes*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brettedkins/2017/06/27/u-s-media-among-most-polarized-in-the-world-study-finds/>.

¹⁹⁶ numbers

¹⁹⁷ Philip Bump, “How Polarization and Splintered Media are Fostering a World of Doubt,” *Washington Post*, November 13, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/11/13/how-polarization-and-splintered-media-are-fostering-a-world-of-doubt/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.992b6711d64f.

Drama sells; even the far-right darling Fox News was beat at its own game in 2016.¹⁹⁸ Former head Roger Ailes explained the 2011 departure of incendiary commentator Glenn Beck by labeling Beck's attacks on Obama and liberals a "branding issue:" when the 'drama' became too much for the public's tastes, Fox eased leftwards.¹⁹⁹ The choice would cost them, however; during the 2015 to 2016 election season, Breitbart took first place in the media popularity contest in Facebook and Twitter presence, and was linked to more than any other media source.²⁰⁰ In the American media game, being moderate is being irrelevant.

Consequences of Media Polarization: Climate Change Denial

Despite a near universal scientific consensus as to climate change's human origins, a 2018 Yale survey found that just 49 percent of respondents considered themselves "extremely or 'very' sure that global warming is happening."²⁰¹ One in five respondents discredited the phenomenon entirely.²⁰² This process of denial-based polarization has been made possible through the workings of a conglomeration of organizations and individuals who *profit* from American ignorance of the effects of climate change. Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap dub this grouping the "denial machine," an American phenomenon that has begun to spread internationally.²⁰³ The denial machine is primarily pushed forward in the American media by two

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ Anthony Leiserowitz et al., "Climate Change in the American Mind: March 2018," Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, April 17, 2018, http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/climate-change-american-mind-march-2018/?utm_source=Yale+Program+on+Climate+Change+Communication&utm_campaign=b463d6d370-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_04_16&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_de6cdfce82-b463d6d370-326524889.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, "Cool Dudes: The Denial of Climate Change Among Conservative White Males in the United States," *Global Environmental Change* 21, no. 4 (October 2011): 1171, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.06.003>.

forces: conservative think tanks, or CTTs, and their “contrarian scientist” supporters. CTTs receive their funding from affluent conservative philanthropists and fossil fuel corporations,²⁰⁴ and use media platforms to spread their ‘alternative’ creed.²⁰⁵ They are often more trusted than the corporations they represent,²⁰⁶ perhaps owing to their contrarian scientists, who receive the benefits of media attention and CTT sponsorship in exchange for their public denunciation of climate change science.²⁰⁷ The “balancing norm” of US news media puts an emphasis on spotlighting both sides of an issue, even one with a scientific consensus like the existence of climate change.²⁰⁸ Despite representing a discredited minority in the scientific community, CTTs receive enough airtime to sway vast segments of the American public and to create a national epidemic of climate change denial. The results of these efforts— a combination of CTT intervention and media manipulation— is an American view of climate change that is increasingly polarized.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁴ Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright, "Organized Climate Change Denial," in *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 148-149.

²⁰⁵ Dunlap and McCright, “Organized Climate Change Denial,” 150.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Dunlap and McCright, “Organized Climate Change Denial,” 152.

²⁰⁸ Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, “The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in the American Public’s Views of Global Warming, 2001-2010,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 52, no.. 2 (Spring 2011): 159, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23027550.pdf>.

²⁰⁹ McCright and Dunlap, “The Politicization of Climate Change,” 156.

Analysis

In Garrett Hardin's paper *Science*, he confronts one of the biggest challenges of life in a collective: the *tragedy of the commons*.²¹⁰ When a Swede chooses to drive to work, a Californian buys a SUV over a Prius, and a shopper in Copenhagen chooses fast fashion over the thrift store, their seemingly benign choices build up to form a global threat that could mean the demise of modern society: climate change. Because climate change affects us all, some believe we need nothing short of a *global* social contract.²¹¹ However, in countries like the USA and the Nordic nations, individual freedoms and rights are protected by law and cultural norms; instead of imposing climate-friendly habits through legal control, public opinion must be shifted through awareness and grassroots activism.²¹² But what makes a society want to adapt in the first place—and why has American society failed to adequately address the shared climate threat?

Regions with high *social resilience* are adept adaptors,²¹³ riding out changes like environmental threats with ease. These resilient societies share traits like wealth of capital, extensive resources, technology, well-educated populaces, and developed infrastructure.²¹⁴ In theory, both the USA and the Nordic nations should be resilient societies and excellent climate change adaptors. However, climate change is a long-term problem that requires extensive foresight and scientific input to evaluate risks and implement adaptation responses.²¹⁵ Since we're traveling in uncharted territory, the climate threat appears unclear and adaptation is

²¹⁰ Mary E. Pettenger, ed., *The Social Construction of Climate Change: Power, Knowledge, Norms, Discourses* (New York: Routledge, 2016), xii.

²¹¹ Pettenger, ed., *The Social Construction of Climate Change*, xiii.

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ W. Neil Adger, "Social and Ecological Resilience: Are they Related?" *Progress in Human Geography* 24, no. 3 (September 2000), 347, <https://doi.org/10.1191/030913200701540465>.

²¹⁴ Karen O'Brien et al., "Questioning Complacency: Climate Change Impacts, Vulnerability, and Adaptation in Norway," *Ambio* 35, no. 2 (March 2006): 51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4315686>.

²¹⁵ G. Robbert Biesbroek et al., "On the Nature of Barriers to Climate Change Adaptation," *Regional Environmental Change* 13, no. 5 (October 2013): 3.3, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-013-0421-y>.

complicated.²¹⁶ When societies assess risks, we weigh each threat's *probability* and *severity*,²¹⁷ along with our individual adaptation capability and likelihood of making a tangible difference.²¹⁸ To respond, we need to believe that we are facing a serious and probable threat to our well-being. However, our threat evaluation is flawed; we underestimate major threats and filter our risk assessment through the *availability heuristic*, measuring the risk based on tangible memories of past crises.²¹⁹ Even when a New Yorker decides that biking to work and going vegan are *possible* and *effective* adaptive measures, he will most likely decide to forego the efforts. A threat that he has never consciously faced himself will not seem dire enough to warrant a change to his status quo, even when the hassle of TSA precautions seem perfectly reasonable post 9/11.

In 1999, Risbey et al. identified four stages in public response to risk: *signal detection*, when issues are judged worthy of adaptation or set aside; *evaluation*, when the consequences of the threat are weighed; *decision and response*, when the society adapts to the threat, and *feedback*, when the adaptation is monitored for effectiveness.²²⁰ At each of Risbey's stages of risk appraisal, the differences in United States and Nordic social capital and arrangements come into play, shaping adaptation. These resilient societies may be more *capable* of adapting to climate change than most, but social capital determines whether they will take action or turn a blind eye to the threat.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ Torsten Grothmann and Anthony Patt, "Adaptive Capacity and Human Cognition: The Process of Individual Adaptation to Climate Change," *Global Environmental Change* 15 (2005): 205, <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2005.01.002>.

²¹⁸ Grothmann and Patt, "Adaptive Capacity and Human Cognition," 203.

²¹⁹ Grothmann and Patt, "Adaptive Capacity and Human Cognition," 205.

²²⁰ Grothmann and Patt, "Adaptive Capacity and Human Cognition," 201.

The Media and Climate Change Adaptation

In the *signal detection* phase of risk assessment, a population undertakes the first step in adaptation: determining which risks necessitate adaptation and which will be swept under the rug.²²¹ The media is considered one of the main institutions responsible for shaping risk evaluation;²²² the opinions espoused by talk show hosts and the articles that make it to the front page make up a population's first encounter with the climate risk. However, media outlets in both the US and Nordic region have had their work cut out in them: historically, climate change has been considered a relatively inconsequential threat in both regions. A 2002 poll found that the percent of respondents "very worried" about climate change was *lower* than the EU average in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland.²²³ In the USA, a 1992 Gallup Health of the Planet Survey found that less than half of respondents considered climate change a serious threat.²²⁴ Unfortunately, the media has not equipped populaces to *comprehend* the climate change threat. Surveys show that most Americans and Europeans cannot answer elementary science questions;²²⁵ similarly, in 1999, surveys found that just 11 percent of US respondents and 17 percent of Finnish ones could identify fossil fuels as the largest contributor to global warming.²²⁶ Unfortunately, climate change illiteracy is driven by media polarization; there are as many hot takes on climate change as there are political parties.

²²¹ Grothmann and Patt, "Adaptive Capacity and Human Cognition," 201.

²²² Grothmann and Patt, "Adaptive Capacity and Human Cognition," 200.

²²³ I. Lorenzoni and N.F. Pidgeon, "Public Views on Climate Change: European and USA Perspectives," *Climatic Change* 77, no. 1-2 (July 2006): 78, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-006-9072-z>.

²²⁴ Lorenzoni and Pidgeon, "Public Views on Climate Change," 75.

²²⁵ Michael Siegrist and George Cvetkovich, "Perception of Hazards: The Role of Social Trust and Knowledge," *Risk Analysis* 20, no. 5 (May 2002): 714, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0272-4332.205064>.

²²⁶ Lorenzoni and Pidgeon, "Public Views on Climate Change," 79.

The American Denial Machine

The American media is characterized by a commitment to ad revenue and a shocking degree of polarization; the Reuters Institute 2017 Digital News Report found that the media in the United States is more polarized than in *any other* Western nation.²²⁷ As the news becomes more and more politically polarized, so too does the climate change debate. In most nations, the existence of man-made climate change is no more up for debate than the existence of forest fires. After all, at least 97 percent of working climate scientists believe that it is “extremely likely” that humans are causing global warming.²²⁸ However, denial is widespread in the United States. Between 2001 and 2010, about 69 percent of liberals and 65 percent of Democrats believed that global warming had already begun to take effect.²²⁹ In contrast, just 43 percent of conservatives and 42 percent of Republicans said the same.²³⁰ Conservative white males contribute disproportionately to the divide: 65 percent of this group believed that “seriousness of global warming is generally exaggerated in the media,” while just 30 percent of all other adult Americans believed the same.²³¹

It’s no coincidence that the race, gender, and political preference of climate change deniers overwhelmingly match that of the representatives of CTTs, corporations, and the media. These voices use their media platforms to speak to the hearts of their fellows in the general public. Newly indoctrinated individuals then spread their denialist views through their personal connections and even through their own personal forms of media intervention, voicing denialism

²²⁷ Brett Edkins, “Report: U.S. Media Among Most Polarized In The World.”

²²⁸ “Scientific Consensus: Earth's Climate is Warming,” NASA: Global Climate Change, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/>.

²²⁹ McCright and Dunlap, “The Politicization of Climate Change,” 189.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ McCright and Dunlap, “Cool Dudes,” 1167.

on social media and through the influential conservative blogosphere.²³² In 2017, just one in five American conservatives trusted the news; the same could be said of half of American liberals.²³³ In this environment of media distrust and media polarization, Americans are able to cherry pick the sources that affirm their own attitudes towards climate change.²³⁴ Conservatives flock to Fox News in droves— by 2017, two in three conservative Americans were viewers.²³⁵ This audience becomes a front-seat spectator to Fox’s array of denialist-friendly content, with sets frequently featuring contrarian scientists and CTT spokespersons. The introduction of Donald Trump, a climate change denialist, to the political scene increased denialism even more. 2018 CBS News poll found that 91 percent of Trump’s most stalwart supporters “trust him to provide accurate information,” while 89 percent distrusted the news media.²³⁶

The Nordic Media Welfare State: No Space for Denialism?

The Nordic media lacks many of the traits that drive American news outlets to climate denialism. A high degree of public broadcasting, as enabled by the Media Welfare State, makes for a less polarized media scene. Nordic audiences are critical and distrustful of their news outlets. However, where American media outlets have sought to profit off of distrust, driving forward “alternative” news sources like Fox that preach climate change denialism, the Nordic news has chosen *self-regulation* over sensationalism. Press councils and surveys limit party bias in news coverage, resulting in an audience that finds public broadcasters more trustworthy than

²³² Dunlap and McCright, “Organized Climate Change Denial,” 153.

²³³ Edkins, “Report: U.S. Media Among Most Polarized In The World.”

²³⁴ McCright and Dunlap, “The Politicization of Climate Change,” 157.

²³⁵ Edkins, “Report: U.S. Media Among Most Polarized In The World.”

²³⁶ Jim Rutenberg, “Trump’s Attacks on the News Media Are Working,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/28/business/media/trumps-attacks-news-media.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=c&ur&fbclid=IwAR3O1GEJ8Ho4xigwSd7Pz9HY4tIJd18oNdGiWXbJnHQoplyfPEmIo1D03Ic>.

commercial ones. However, the Nordic media scene could be moving towards a denialist future; recently, increasing polarization of media consumption has allowed right wing news sources to gain a foothold with local audiences. If denialism becomes widespread, public opinion on climate change policies will shift and the Nordic nations may become less adept adaptors.

Individualism and Adaptation

In the second stage of public adaptation, societies *evaluate* the risk at hand, weighing its consequences.²³⁷ However, individuals often underestimate the ways they can adapt, particularly when it comes to environmental threats.²³⁸ Since the individual deems climate change an issue that they cannot personally address, the *role* they believe they play in their own society is crucial to their adaptive response. To adapt to a risk like climate change, a society must act collectively;²³⁹ social capital is crucial to risk response, as it mobilizes collective action and provides networks that spread awareness and aid in decision making.²⁴⁰ When asking ourselves why a society adapts or ignores climate change, we should look to the individual: does John Doe consider himself a cog in the system, or an autonomous actor who goes his own way?

***Janteloven* and Adaptation**

The norm of *Janteloven* at work in Nordic societies should help mobilize public support for climate adaptation policies. Under the Law of Jante, distinguishing oneself as superior is undesirable. Climate change is difficult to address because individuals are nearly incapable of

²³⁷ Grothmann and Patt, “Adaptive Capacity and Human Cognition,” 201.

²³⁸ Grothmann and Patt, “Adaptive Capacity and Human Cognition,” 203.

²³⁹ Adger, “Social Capital, Collective Action, and Adaptation to Climate Change,” 387.

²⁴⁰ Adger, “Social Capital, Collective Action, and Adaptation to Climate Change,” 389.

tangibly impacting it; instead, populations push the issue aside, reassured that they won't number among those affected.²⁴¹ When evaluating the risks of environmental destruction, *societal* consequences appear far greater than *individual* ones.²⁴² The privilege of owning a Hummer may seem worth the carbon emissions to the driver, but the risks to *society* of a gas-guzzling populace are dire. For this reason, *Janteloven* is a useful tool to mobilize group action: it discourages personal pride and encourages Nordic populations to view themselves as pieces of a collective.

American “Collectivism?”

In contrast, the nature of American individualism makes mobilizing collective action on climate change nearly impossible. Americans are social animals, joining associations at stunning rates (although this networking has declined in recent decades). However, they behave *individualistically* within their groups, viewing memberships as tools for personal fulfillment.²⁴³ This individualistic collectivism stands in the way of collective action; Americans are prone to social loafing, neglecting their duties when they can't be held accountable.²⁴⁴

Within an American group, rules and tradition are paramount, but the underlying motives that cause an individual to join the group in the first place are self-interested. Because of this contrast, Americans may be ill-equipped to use their collectivist traits in the fight against climate change. Cutting consumption, switching to renewable energy, and changing energy habits requires individual *sacrifice* for the common good. Additionally, although Americans are traditionalists and social conformists,²⁴⁵ they resent “state meddling” and are highly wary of

²⁴¹ Lorenzoni and Pidgeon, “Public Views on Climate Change,” 87.

²⁴² Lorenzoni and Pidgeon, “Public Views on Climate Change,” 82.

²⁴³ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 369.

²⁴⁴ Earley, “Social Loafing and Collectivism,” 577.

²⁴⁵ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 367.

government intervention.²⁴⁶ Adger considers the bonds between state and society crucial to climate change adaptation; this relationship allows the state to push forward sustainable development measures and properly budget resources.²⁴⁷ However, as long as Americans remain averse to government control, state efforts to impose green habits on the population will meet with opposition. A combination of social loafing and government distrust proves lethal to adaptation: without strong government policies to hold them accountable, Americans will shirk their personal duties towards the climate and will continue to consume unsustainably.

Benefits of Social Trust to Adaptation

Hobbes believed that people were untrustworthy and self-interested, necessitating the heavy-handed justice of a Leviathan to maintain order. The environmental “tragedy of the commons,” some believe, requires a Hobbesian control mechanism²⁴⁸—after all, how can our neighbors and countrymen be trusted to prioritize the environment over fast fashion and automobiles? However, some sociologists believe that *social trust itself* is valuable to adaptation; a society of distrusting Hobbeses will fail to adapt to the climate change threat, whereas a society of trusting Danes will mobilize in collective action. The influence of social trust on adaptation comes into play in the third stage of public adaptation, *decision and response*. When a society begins to adapt to the climate change threat, individuals must decide whether giving up their thirty minute showers and joy rides will be worth their while. If a society has a wealth of social trust and capital (like the Nordic regions today, and the United States of yesteryear) individuals will see the benefits of adaptation since they will trust their neighbors to do their part.

²⁴⁶ Fischer, “Paradoxes,” 365.

²⁴⁷ Adger, “Social Capital, Collective Action, and Adaptation to Climate Change,” 395.

²⁴⁸ Pettenger, ed., *The Social Construction of Climate Change*, xii.

The American Social Trust Decline: A Blow to Adaptive Capacity

Just as social trust encourages individual adaptation, a *loss* of social capital makes populations more vulnerable to environmental threats²⁴⁹ and endangers collective action. Americans are transforming from a high trust society²⁵⁰ to one of individualism and fragmentation. This loss in social trust is devastating: the degree to which people trust the strangers around them reflects their expectations of their neighbors' morality²⁵¹ and their willingness to cooperate with them through collective action.²⁵² If the trends continue, Americans will increasingly view their neighbors as "free riders" rather than as allies in the fight against climate change, and will find personal contributions to the cause pointless.²⁵³ When social trust decreases in a population, individuals are disinclined to pay their taxes, sort their trash, and even to follow the law.²⁵⁴ What busy American is willing to sacrifice personal comforts for the good of the environment if they can't trust their neighbors to follow suit?

The Nordic Social Trust Boom

The acclaimed Nordic welfare state is made possible by an abundance of social capital; in particular, trust in authorities and in fellow citizens allows for a successful system of taxation.²⁵⁵ This valuable resource is *increasing* in Nordic populations; although individuals born before

²⁴⁹ Grothmann and Patt, "Adaptive Capacity and Human Cognition," 200.

²⁵⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, 10.

²⁵¹ Ulf Andreasson, "Trust—the Nordic Gold," 11.

²⁵² La Porta et al., "Trust in Large Organizations."

²⁵³ Ulf Andreasson, "Trust—the Nordic Gold," 18.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ Ulf Andreasson, "Trust—the Nordic Gold," 21.

1945 in Denmark and the United States were roughly equal in social trust,²⁵⁶ a recent trust boom in the Nordic region and trust crisis in the US created a rift between the two. Social trust has become the “Nordic gold.”²⁵⁷

In addition to the benefits social trust poses for collective action, strong correlations have been found between social trust and trust in *institutions*. Sønderskov finds that quality institutions most likely contribute to increased social trust,²⁵⁸ although Fukuyama theorizes that the relationship runs the other way around.²⁵⁹ Regardless of which came first, trust in institutions and social trust are both high in Nordic populations; among thirty-three European nations, Finland, Norway, and Sweden took three of the top four spots in trust in public institutions.²⁶⁰ Although this relationship should aid in climate change policy implementation, researchers warn that government trust may be contributing to climate change complacency in Europe, owing to widespread assurance that the government can handle whatever risks the climate threat brings its way.²⁶¹

²⁵⁶ Sønderskov and Dinesen, “Danish Exceptionalism,” 18.

²⁵⁷ Ulf Andreasson, “Trust—the Nordic Gold,” 10.

²⁵⁸ Sønderskov and Dinesen, “Danish Exceptionalism,” 2.

²⁵⁹ La Porta et al., “Trust in Large Organizations.”

²⁶⁰ Ortiz-Ospina and Roser, “Trust.”

²⁶¹ O'Brien et al., “Questioning Complacency,” 51.

Conclusion

As temperatures rise, weather becomes more extreme, and flooding becomes the new normal, global populations face a choice: to act, or to deny. When we face risks that seem too daunting, we turn to maladaptation:²⁶² rather than work to develop sustainably and invest in renewable energy, we hide our heads in the sand and hope our descendents enjoy heatstroke.

Although denying the climate change threat allow us our gas-guzzling vehicles, shopping sprees, and continued peace of mind, the only way to preserve Earth for our unfortunate descendents is through *adaptation*. When a society evaluates a threat, it will only choose to confront it head-on if it perceives the risk to be both severe and addressable.²⁶³ In other words, climate change must move in the public eye from the realm of debate to that of scientific certainty—and we must assure populaces that resistance is possible.

Social capital is the key to this shift in public opinion. National media cultures inform a population's relationship to consumerism and can be used by a fragmented population to foment distrust and denialism. Dense social networks contribute to collectivism and social trust, enabling collective action to respond to the tragedy of the commons posed by environmental degradation. Conversely, individualism prevents a population from collaborating, creating a culture of distrust and hindering implementation of climate change policy.

The Nordic nations excel in social capital, possessing extraordinary levels of social trust and trust in institutions. These traits combine with a media characterized by powerful public broadcasters and minimal polarization to make an ideal laboratory for risk adaptation. Contrastingly, the United States is *losing* its social capital, owing to a breakdown in associational

²⁶² Grothmann and Patt, "Adaptive Capacity and Human Cognition," 203.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

involvement that began in the 60s. As Americans leave their memberships and societies behind, social trust decreases. Combined with a traditional distrust of authority and a polarized media, Americans are comparatively ill-equipped to address the climate question.

The benefits of Nordic social capital have become apparent in adaptation exceptionalism. Although the Nordic countries are expected to initially *benefit* from climate change, due to improved agriculture and tourism conditions,²⁶⁴ the Nordic nations have made unprecedented commitments to renewable energy use. For the same amount of carbon emissions, Nordic countries produce far more electricity. Wind power fuels over forty percent of Danish electricity, Sweden hopes to be greenhouse gas-free by 2045, and Norway plans to follow suit by 2050. That isn't to say that the Nordic nations don't have their weaknesses. Nordic carbon emissions and household consumption remain high. However, the success of renewable energy initiatives—and the public's willingness to *accept* ambitious sustainable development goals—speak to the success of social capital in regional adaptation.

In theory, socially resilient societies should be the best adaptors. After all, the Nordic region and the USA share plentiful wealth, infrastructure, technology, and effective education. However, the missing piece—social capital—can make or break a country's adaptive response. In the relatively new climate change debate, the realm of social capital is underexplored as a source of *adaptive capacity*. If we are to prevent further climate destruction, we will need to establish Nordic levels of social capital in all societies in order to mobilize collective action.

²⁶⁴ O'Brien et al., "Questioning Complacency," 50.

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