

Essay 2: Politicians and the Environment: A Sociological Perspective

“Right now, we have an energy policy that is rigged to boost the profits of big oil companies like Exxon, BP, and Shell at the expense of average Americans. CEO’s are raking in record profits while climate change ravages our planet and our people – all because the wealthiest industry in the history of our planet has bribed politicians into complacency in the face of climate change. Enough is enough. It’s time for a political revolution that takes on the fossil fuel billionaires, accelerates our transition to clean energy, and finally puts people before the profits of polluters.”

-Senator Bernie Sanders

First off, to manipulate is to “control or play upon by artful, unfair, or insidious means especially to one’s own advantage” (Merriam-Webster), and this is exactly what our media is doing to the American public on climate change. I think we all can relate to that one extremely toxic and manipulative friend that made you think you were best friends but all they really needed you for was a ride to school because they didn’t have a car yet and didn’t want to ride the bus. And in this case, America’s biggest industry: the fossil fuel industry is that similarly toxic friend who is pursuing only their self-interest and hurting you in the process, except on a much larger scale because the entire world is at risk of getting hurt.

Now, in this metaphor, you’d hope that their parent or guardian would come in and ground the shit out of them for taking advantage of others and being a selfish jerk, right? Wrong, they slip their parents some money so they can do whatever they want while their parent turns a blind eye because they don’t have to drive them around, so it’s mutually beneficial. Well then let’s at least hope you’d have that one genuine friend that’s always had your back and helps you get rid of that toxic, good-for-nothing, mooch! **Ahem**, the media...helping us see through lies, informing us of the dangers that exist in the world, and identifying toxic public figures and companies.

Yet somehow, the American citizen doesn’t have that genuine friend anymore, as they were won over to the dark side in the 1980s. A time when the media was privatized and deregulated which created transnational media giants with high-profit tunnel vision. ‘Giants’

comprised of newspaper owners, advertisers, and corporate interests that get the privilege of being the “gatekeepers of truth.” Instead of being an outlet for freedom, truth, and access, they now have a disproportionate amount of power that work to marginalize protester voices and discredit their opponents (who even have science on their side!) making us ignorant to the truth and constructing an alternate reality for us to live in. This “concentrated media ownership provides elite business interests with the apparatus for citizen thought control and therefore socially construct global warming.” (Dispensa, 2003, p. 86).

This manipulation of the American public was described by Herbert I. Schiller (author of *The Mind Managers*) that the US is “a divided society in which manipulation is one of the chief instruments of control in the hands of a small governing group of corporate and governmental decision makers.” (Dispensa, 2003, p. 80). This manipulation has got to stop and Bernie’s quote about climate change openly attacks players in the fossil fuel industry. His ability to talk freely about their unethical dealings is based in his freedom from their campaign “contributions.” He isn’t controlled by their money as our media has become and can therefore report openly about their priority over our citizens as is reflected in our government’s policy decisions.

Bernie doesn’t specifically bring up the media in his quote, but the principle is the same...they manipulate others to further their profits. His truthful and aggressive stance on climate change is directly relatable to Dispensa and Brulle’s article, “Media’s Social Construction of Environmental Issues: Focus on Global Warming.” They analyze the American disconnect with climate change with other parts of the world by identifying the major industrial stakeholders that control information and shape an alternative reality. This puts the majority of its citizens at a disadvantage to make informed decisions that affect their health and their environment. As Dispensa and Brulle state (2003, p. 86) “environmental issues create a

fundamental challenge, not only to specific business interests, but to the legitimacy of the entire industrial society. Environmental problems are a crisis of industrial society itself, deeply rooted in the foundation of its institutions.” This goes hand in hand with the Treadmill of Production theory, that states environment and industry can never thrive together and that industry will continue to have the priority because it drives our economy which is believed to be the ultimate solution. As Schnaiberg states in his article, “economic criteria remain the foundation of decision making about the design, performance and evaluation of production and consumption, dwarfing any ecological concerns.” (2002, p. 1). “The state...often cedes a great deal of power to private sector actors...which is highly problematic for creating conditions for sustainability and ecological responsibility.” As the state relies more and more on private actors for funding they can more easily sidestep environmental regulations.

I’m no stranger to different publications having an obvious bias based on the declared subject matter. I’ve had a run in with this in a small sense when I wrote for the *National Parks Traveler*, where I was writing about a potential new national park in the State of Maine, and even though I wanted to express that state management would be more beneficial than national management, I couldn’t express that because we were the *National Parks Traveler*, not the *State Parks Traveler*. So, as a citizen we can figure out the stakeholders for each news syndicate and try to discern on our own which is an ad, which is biased, and which is true.

Whether or not Bernie is going to be put in office he is getting people to think about how they are manipulated by private interests and how most of our elected officials have been “bribed” by corporate contributions. It’s a powerful movement that he’s trying to start by fighting those giant players with their money deciding our policies. If we want to see change, we need to find leaders who can’t be bribed and who know that it is crucial for society to have a free

Essay 2: Politicians and the Environment: A Sociological Perspective

and independent media, because “a democratic and open society is premised on the free flow of information among its citizenry.” (Dispensa, 2003, p. 77).

References

Dispensa, J. M., & Brulle, R. J. (2003). Media’s social construction of environmental issues:

Focus on global warming – a comparative study. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23(10), 74-105. doi:10.1108/01443330310790327

Issues - Bernie Sanders. (n.d.). Retrieved April 3, 2016, from <https://berniesanders.com/issues/>

Schnaiberg, A., Pellow, D. N., & Weinberg, A. (2002). The treadmill of production and the environmental state. *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy The Environmental State Under Pressure*, 15-32. doi:10.1016/s0196-1152(02)80004-7