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Introduction to Global Studies

11:00 – Tuesday/Thursday

Final – Prompt 1

Climate Change: An Issue of Ignorance and Immobility

“I do not believe in the concept of global warming. Admittedly, I don’t know much about it, but it doesn’t seem to be too accurate.” I uttered these words a mere four years ago during an impromptu speech on a randomly selected topic in my sophomore year Public Speaking class. And with those opening lines, which I adamantly disagree with now, I identified a great problem facing climate change and how to combat it. There is an overwhelming ignorance and unawareness of the facts, statistics, and information, and the very real effects that climate change has on the world’s ecosystems.

 Growing up in a small conservative hamlet in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania - where the economic boom generated from the steel industry still leaves its mark – I was wary of the idea of climate change. Doesn’t the earth have cycles? Are these weather patterns really abnormal and caused by humans? There was an ice age once, this period of increased temperatures and bizarre natural incidents are only a delayed response to other stages that the earth has been in previously. Each of these questions or statements were, and are still today, customary beliefs of the citizens of my area.

 However, as Bjorn Lomborg so rightly and bluntly put it in his address for the Subcommittee on Environment of the Committee on Science, Space and Technology, “Man-made global warming is a reality and will in the long run have overall, negative impact” (Lomborg). Climate change, defined as “in principle, a significant and lasting change in the average weather conditions and the distribution of extreme events around the world”, is a worsening problem, exacerbated globally by the omnipresent neoliberal capitalist system (Rouse, March 31). This system touts economic success and profitability as its main objective – which is certainly a beneficial goal – however it does so at the expense of the externalities that the pursuit of economic success creates; namely the pollution and destruction of the world’s ecosystems.

Of course, climate change is by no means a new concept; its various effects have been building for centuries. The world has seen increasing CO2 emissions since 1950, with 81.2% stemming from fossil fuels. Growth in CO2 emissions is strongly correlated to growth in economic power and stability. Since CO2 emissions are a harmful but “necessary” (deemed thus by proponents of the current capitalist system) byproduct of success, many companies have chosen to ignore the effects as they are not immediate nor necessarily clearly evident (Lomborg). Various powerful national governments often choose to ignore the insidious effects that corporations’ waste has on the environment; as corporations control a greater proportion of international wealth (able to be funneled into political campaign), governments have chosen to support the needs of the corporations over the needs of the individuals *(*The Story of Stuff, 2007). In effect, the corporations are creating the waste, the individuals are bearing the burden, and the government is seemingly turning a blind eye.

This has created public outcry, with calls for greater governmental intervention and greater focus on environmental issues in the political sphere. However, a major hindrance to success is the view that environmental regulation is a largely bipartisan issue, with support from the radical left and oppositions from the conservative right. For example, according to Naomi Klein, the “US Political Right has campaigned fervently and according to polls, successfully, to frame climate change as an anti-capitalist conspiracy that will lead to self-destruction” (Klein 2).

However, to be completely transparent and to also give the situation more personal context, I have politically conservative leanings on many issues, however I refuse to deny or ignore alarming statistics and visible proof when they are presented. Extreme statements such as this may be true for a subsection of a larger group, but they also serve to alienate those who may be part of the conservative right but care deeply and desire mobilization to make immediate changes in the current state of the environment. Therefore, though the political climate is polarized, in order to enact change a coalition of multi-party members must be created - as cooperation will garner the greatest and most beneficial outcomes. Environmental issues are not a bipartisan issue, they affect each of us, and we must act together to transcend party lines in order to affect climate change. However, we must not settle for cooperation between groups within our own national borders, but instead push for a unified global initiative.

 As the world becomes increasingly globalized and each individual is able to share products, ideas and resources with ease, each also shares the effects created via this system. These are increasingly visible through the various lasting impacts on the environment – depletion of resources, pollution of waterways, air, and land, erosion of wildlife and the natural environment, increase of toxic waste, and the various social aspects intrinsically associated with these negative externalities. None of these are contained to a single nation within the lines of man-made borders, but instead affect each individual of the globalizing world, regardless of his or her personal contribution caused by the current system in place.

 As Manfred Steger notes, “we must realize that we are inextricably linked to each other through the air that we breathe, the climate we depend on, the food we eat, and the water we drink. Therefore, as human beings, we equally hold the role of a citizen of the global world, and must take responsibility for the drastic changes being imposed on the earth. We must mobilize to take prompt action to revitalize the environment and its resources to create a more sustainable lifestyle and better preserved world, both for the health of the earth, but also for ourselves.

 In order to reduce these harmful effects, we can no longer ignore the facts. This course has granted me incredible exposure to eye-opening statistics, broadening my understanding of the issue. I was unaware of the breadth of climate change, the myriad of aspects that it affected, and my own part in its creation and maintenance. For example, according to the People’s Agreement, “a 2° Celsius (3.6° Fahrenheit) increase in global average temperatures would result in a 50% probability that the damages caused to our Mother Earth will be completely irreversible” (People’s Agreement). How can we hear this statistic, realize its meaning for the future – desolation and destruction – and not do anything? The simple answer – we can’t and we mustn’t.

 Again realizing my inextricable linkage to all other global citizens, the great disparity between nations must be addressed. Though Bjorn Lomborg was correct in his statement, “Man-made global warming is a reality and will in the long run have overall, negative impact”, I disagree with his belief that “What matters in the twenty-first century is the emissions from the developing world, not the developed” (Policy Relevant Climate Change Issues in Context). Richer countries, such as the United States, have an ecological footprint five times bigger than what the planet is able to support. According to *The Story of Stuff,* we would require nine worlds to support the current level of consumption if it were to remains the same, yet it is projected to increase.

To expand upon this notion, the United States’ emissions are nine times higher than the average inhabitant of the “Third World” and twenty times higher than that of the average inhabitant of Sub-Saharan Africa (World’s People’s Conference). Furthermore, the United States’ population comprises 6% of the total world population, but it consumes 30-40% of the planet’s natural resources (Steger 89). These alarming statistics prove that the level of toxic output is disproportionately created by richer nations and that earth will not be able to sustain this level of toxic output. As both an American Citizen and active market consumer, my actions contribute to these alarming statistics and I, nor any avid consumer under the capitalist system, can claim impunity.

Poorer nations consume less yet feel the effects of consumption more greatly. Not only is their natural environments eroding, but these inhabitants face daily fears of their homes disappearing and lack many basic and inherent rights that the sources of climate change are denying them. When pollution of toxic wastes from factories affect the waterways and air, citizens of “third world” countries face increased illnesses and escalating death rates. More than a billion people lack access to clean and safe water and 12 billion people die annually from contaminated water (Water for Sale). Transnational corporations ship their toxic waste to the “third world” which inevitably pollutes the waterways, causing disease and death (Shiva 120).

Again, disparity is seen between the creators of the waste and those who bear the burdens this ecological footprint disproportionately affects those who are not creating it. Therefore, not only is lack of information and an ignorance of the information an issue, but so is immobility in the face of climate change – as changing nothing about one’s daily actions is effectually contributing to climate change. For example, half of the world’s wetlands have already been destroyed (People’s Agreement). 50% of all plant and animal species, most in the global south, will disappear by the end of the century. Should sea levels rise more due to increases in global temperatures, the Pacific Islands of Tuvalu and Kiribati would disappear (Steger 93). Yes, I am simply regurgitating various facts, but these are the foreseeable and very real results if immobility remains the theme of environmental action.

In an effort to affect climate change, we must mobilize to change consumption behavior and to address the inequalities between the “Third World Countries” and the industrialized nations who are carelessly polluting our ecosystem. So what exactly does this entail? What can we do? How can we not only addresses these problems, but also formulates an action plan?

In order to achieve success, a serious and deliberate response must be formulated. This requires “…recovering an art that has been relentlessly vilified during these decades of market fundamentalism: planning. Lots and lots of planning” (Klein 6). The first step of this plan must be to attack the root of the problem: lack of awareness. This course and the relevant readings provided an enhanced knowledge and started a conversation, and I now have the obligation to further this conversation with the information I have accumulated. Armed with the ability to transform this knowledge into words and actions, I can aid the crusade to expose the culprits of the environmental degradation, but also share how we, as global citizens, can help.

Secondly, we must change the mentality of the current political and economic system in place via protesting the cronyism impacting the government and altering the inherent concept of neoliberal capitalism that many citizens hold. We have the ability to capitalize on our position as a consumer to take action by promoting sustainability measures and supporting only those corporations that are following eco-friendly business practices. As Steger puts it, “the capitalist culture industry seeks to convince its global audience that the meaning and chief value of life can be found in the limitless accumulation of material goods” (Steger 88).

Capitalism is not the sole enemy to the environment, but rather the profit-oriented and materialistic-focus it has generated. Free-trade and the business model are important and should not be altered entirely, but as environmental circumstances become increasingly dire, we must step away from this accepted and ordained idea in favor of a more socially responsible and sustainable business model that celebrates corporate responsibility over profits.

Changing the system will involve strict governmental regulation that promotes sustainable and environmentally friendly business practices. Cap the amount of carbon emissions allowed and impose a severe fine and further punishments if the offense is repeated. Provide incentives such as subsidies for renewable energy that will lead the way for big business to begin analyzing their internal operations and altering them for the better. This will provide the potential of increasing the percentages of “Green Energy” currently allocated globally, a necessary increase from the current use of .7% wind and .1% solar (Lomborg).

If American corporations take advantage of the proposed government subsidies, this would create more jobs in the renewable energy field. The subgroup of far right conservatives who vilify eco-friendly policies, such as Richard Rothschild who, at the Heartland Convention claimed, “climate change is a Trojan Horse designed to abolish capitalism and replace it with some kind of eco-socialism”, will be appeased by the creation of these positions, allowing for a greater chance of national cooperation (Klein 2).

Finally, we must expose the inequities that climate change has on different areas of the globalizing world, and change how we, citizens of a high-polluting nation, are affecting these “third world” nations and those who inhabit them. The United States generates more than 275 million tons of toxic waste each year, such as cyanide, mercury and arsenic, and is being deposited in developing countries for “processing””(Shiva 116). Going hand in hand with the necessity of changing the mentality generated by neoliberal capitalism, we must change the “main mantra of globalization which is “international competitiveness”” and instead discover new outlets for cooperation, thereby furthering global goals of reduction of poverty and ecological well-being, rather than personal political or business agendas (Shiva 114).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of aspirations to achieve in the future for the globalizing world, create a valid framework and serve as a starting point to end poverty and improve the current ecological state. Some of the most relevant points include “ensuring availability of water and sanitation for all”, “ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all”, and “taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts”. (Ford – Sustainable Development Goals, All You Need to Know). However, these goals must be patrolled by an outside international organization, such as a subcommittee of the UN or a newly created institution tailored specifically for this use. Each respective government will be responsible for patrolling and enforcing the regulations as well, proportionally funded by the nations who contribute the most to the ecological harm, via taxes on corporations.

These proposed measures are simply an outline, however in order to achieve these, education on the issues is imperative. We must take responsibility as the current state of the environment is a byproduct of the careless and repetitive actions of consumers and corporations under the neoliberal capitalist system. The system advocates profit as the main objective, and ignores or willfully accepts without care, the negative externalities created in this pursuit of profit – such a social and ecological ramifications. Through a greater awareness, immediate mobility, and governmental regulations, the globalizing world can begin to help the earth that it has already so greatly harmed. And it is my hope that within the near future, no educators, peers nor any citizen of the global world will hear statements such as “I do not believe in the concept of global warming. Admittedly, I don’t know much about it, but it doesn’t seem to be too accurate.”

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