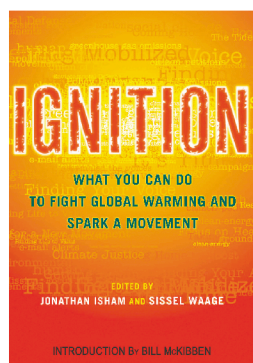


Fighting fire with fire



IGNITION: WHAT YOU CAN DO TO FIGHT GLOBAL WARMING AND SPARK A MOVEMENT

Edited by Jonathan Isham and Sissel Waage

Island Press: 2007. 285 pp. \$18.95

Three years ago, two American social analysts, Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, caused a storm of controversy among US green nongovernmental organizations when they pronounced the “death of environmentalism”. So controversial were their conclusions that Nordhaus and Shellenberger were virtually ostracized by some of the environmentalists whose tactics they were criticizing. It is a measure of how things have shifted — and how their once heretical assertions have now become almost mainstream — that both authors are included in a roster of green luminaries contributing to this new tome on how to spark a successful political movement to confront global warming.

Perhaps the two commentators are included because this time the critique is less biting and the suggestions more positive. In a chapter chirpily entitled “Irrationality wants to be your friend”, Nordhaus and Shellenberger — together with coauthors and environmentalists Kenton de Kirby and Pamela Morgan — take a deeper look at the psychology underlying global warming ‘denial’ and suggest ways to side-step the tedious and damaging causality debate surrounding climate change by focusing more on adaptation and preparedness.

One of their most useful insights is that the dominant narrative of global warming catastrophism may be driving people deeper into denial by making

them feel disempowered by the scale of the challenge and therefore less inclined to believe that it is an issue at all. This is not to say that the impacts of unrestrained warming will not be catastrophic — they will — but to admit that simply telling people more and more bad news doesn’t necessarily inspire them to do anything about it.

The news is undeniably bad, and the subtext to the political mobilization challenge of this book is that we don’t have much time left if we are to restrain global carbon emissions soon enough to avoid some of the major Earth-system tipping points that look set to kick in if temperatures pass 2 °C above preindustrial levels. However, *Ignition* is a thoroughly optimistic book. It is also a scholarly work, featuring contributions from academics who have spent their careers analysing social movements and identifying the conditions and tactics that can make the difference between success and failure.

Most of them speak from experience: Mary Lou Finley, for example, was active in the US civil rights movement of the 1960s, giving her analysis both a historical context and a depth of understanding that today’s activists would do well to take notice of. Susanne Moser’s contribution on successful communications strategies is also a must-read for budding climate campaigners. The ever-readable Bill McKibben offers an introduction that

is determined, clear-sighted and moving. McKibben manages to combine academia, writing and campaigning without losing his grip in any of these very different fields. He was one of the driving forces behind a workshop held in January 2005 at Middlebury College in Vermont, where he is a scholar in residence — a meeting that brought together many of the campaigners whose perspectives later came to comprise this book.

I suspect that most of these writers and campaigners would agree with me that we need a movement on global warming today probably more than we have ever needed any previous social movement in history. We face a massive challenge in decarbonizing our economies in the short time available, and vested interests and sheer political inertia have already held up progress for more than a decade. *Ignition* is at different times both visionary and very practical, and, although written for a US readership, it has lessons for all of those now helping build a true worldwide movement to tackle climate change.

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