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The Totalities of Copenhagen

Global warming and the psychology of true belief.

By BRET STEPHENS



"I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last." Is it not obvious that the vision of apocalypse as it was revealed to Saint John of Patmos was, in fact, global warming?

Here's a partial rundown of some of the ills seriously attributed to climate change: prostitution in the Philippines (along with greater rates of HIV infection); higher suicide rates in Italy; the 1993 "Black Hawk Down" battle in Somalia; an increase in strokes and heart disease in China; wars in the Middle East; a larger pool of potential recruits to terrorism; harm to indigenous peoples and "biocultural diversity."

All this, of course, on top of the Maldives sinking under the waves, millions of climate refugees, a half-dozen Katrina-type events every year and so on and on—a long parade of horrors animating the policy ambitions of the politicians, scientists, climate mandarins and entrepreneurs now gathered at a U.N. summit in Copenhagen. Never mind that none of these scenarios has any basis in some kind of observable reality (sea levels around the Maldives have been stable for decades), or that the chain of causation linking climate change to sundry disasters is usually of a meaningless six-degrees-of-separation variety.

Still, the really interesting question is less about the facts than it is about the psychology. Last week, I suggested that funding flows had much to do with climate alarmism. But deeper things are at work as well.

One of those things, I suspect, is what I would call the totalitarian impulse. This is not to say that global warming true believers are closet Stalinists. But their intellectual methods are instructively similar. Consider:

- *Revolutionary fervor:* There's a distinct tendency among climate alarmists toward uncompromising radicalism, a hatred of "bourgeois" values, a disgust with democratic practices. So President Obama wants to cut U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by 83% from current levels by 2050, levels not seen since the 1870s—in effect, the Industrial Revolution in reverse. Rajendra Pachauri, head of the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, insists that "our lifestyles are unsustainable." Al Gore gets crowds going by insisting that "civil disobedience has a role to play" in strong-arming governments to do his bidding. (This from the man who once sought to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution.)

- *Utopianism*: In the world as it is, climate alarmists see humanity hurtling toward certain doom. In the world as it might be, humanity has seen the light and changed its patterns of behavior, becoming the green equivalent of the Soviet "new man." At his disposal are technologies that defy the laws of thermodynamics. The problems now attributed to global warming abate or disappear.

- *Anti-humanism*: In his 2007 best seller "The World Without Us," environmentalist Alan Weisman considers what the planet would be like without mankind, and finds it's no bad thing. The U.N. Population Fund complains in a recent report that "no human is genuinely 'carbon neutral'"—its latest argument against children. John Holdren, President Obama's science adviser, cut his teeth in the policy world as an overpopulation obsessive worried about global cooling. But whether warming or cooling, the problem for the climate alarmists, as for other totalitarians, always seems to boil down to the human race itself.

- *Intolerance*: Why did the scientists at the heart of Climategate go to such lengths to hide or massage the data if truth needs no defense? Why launch campaigns of obstruction and vilification against gadfly Canadian researchers Stephen McIntyre and Ross McKittrick if they were such intellectual laughingstocks? It is the unvarying habit of the totalitarian mind to treat any manner of disagreement as *prima facie* evidence of bad faith and treason.

- *Monocausality*: For the anti-Semite, the problems of the world can invariably be ascribed to the Jews; for the Communist, to the capitalists. And as the list above suggests, global warming has become the fill-in-the-blank explanation for whatever happens to be the problem.

- *Indifference to evidence*: Climate alarmists have become brilliantly adept at changing their terms to suit their convenience. So it's "global warming" when there's a heat wave, but it's "climate change" when there's a cold snap. The earth has registered no discernable warming in the past 10 years: Very well then, they say, natural variability must be the cause. But as for the warming that did occur in the 1980s and 1990s, that plainly was evidence of man-made warming. Am I missing something here?

- *Grandiosity*: In "SuperFreakonomics," Steve Levitt and Stephen Dubner give favorable treatment to [an idea to cool the earth by pumping sulfur dioxide](#) into the upper atmosphere, something that could be done cheaply and quickly. Maybe it would work, or maybe it wouldn't. But one suspects that the main reason the chapter was the subject of hysterical criticism is that it didn't propose to deal with global warming by re-engineering the world economy. The penchant for monumentalism is yet another constant feature of the totalitarian mind.

Today, of course, the very idea of totalitarianism is considered passé. Yet the course of the 20th century was defined by totalitarian regimes, and it would be dangerous to assume that the habits of mind that sustained them have vanished into the mists. In Copenhagen, they are once again at play—and that, comrades, is no accident.

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