

Climate Science and Politics Don't Mix

The widely understood libertarian environment has lately published a multitude of very eloquent articles about how to approach the global warming issue, what to think about “established science,” and whether or not to be “agnostic.” Those materials, however well written, fail to see the core of the scientific method – which is again understandable since their authors have been immersed in a different kind of science – that is, social science. The word “agnostic” does not fit in here, however. One can be an “agnostic” only towards what is untestable. But we can test the temperature in which water freezes, we can test how poisons affect human body, and we can test how certain layers of the atmosphere affect solar radiation. Those results are necessarily verified by nature itself. They leave no place for even the subtlest “polishing” of the results so that they fit the assumption – and if what climatologists say seem to leave a different impression, it is either due to the imperfections of human language or due to the fact that, sadly, they already tend to incorporate political agendas into their scientific commentaries. Let us note here however, that the carbon isotope ^{12}C is way too primitive a structure to be plotting for worldwide socialism. (The ratio between ^{12}C and ^{13}C in the atmosphere serves as a geochemical argument for anthropogenic global warming).

Unfortunately, since global warming serves the government as justification for their plans for greater control of society, we are doomed to mix politics and science where it should never be mixed. This may be one of the symptoms of the declining level of public discussion. Again unfortunately, the reaction in which we rebel against our preconceived ideas is perfectly natural. Here it is linked, however, with the

difficulty of distinguishing between scientific information and political beliefs. The question “what is going on?” is different than “what should be done?” If I provide a geochemical argument for manmade global warming, it does not automatically mean that I am an interventionist. After all, a lot of basic research underlying modern atmospheric physics is as old as 200 years – but the physics is not accused of bias, since back then no government was plotting to use it as a pretext for public policy.

The magnitude of emotions linked with this issue is unsurprising given that it may affect all humanity in a relatively short time. I do have an impression though that those emotions stem from the fact that the whole discussion is politicized, not because of a genuine care for human life.

A Classical Case of “What Is Seen and What Is Unseen”

The *laissez faire* position in environmental problems suffer from a serious and rather impossible to deal with image defect – it does not give easy answers and well calculated recipes. A statist will provide a detailed and nuanced answer with a graph, an emission-reduction calculation, and a firm loud prescription for government intervention. The non-interventionist will not. We will say that we trust to the same innovation that has continually improved human living standards for centuries. That we trust that the human mind can break through a number of Malthusian traps is born from historical experience, and experience suggests we can – with accordingly big investments – create the technology level we need to adapt. In contrast, no such experience speaks to any success for global schemes of controlling the global economy.

In this light, interventionism is not only unethical, but also inefficient. In a public discussion this stance would lose, since we can only repeat after Hayek that we do not know what to do – and it is impossible for any individual to know:

It is through the mutually adjusted efforts of many people that more knowledge is utilized than any one individual possesses or than it is possible to synthesize intellectually; and it is through such utilization of dispersed knowledge that achievements are made possible, greater than any single mind can foresee. It is because freedom means the renunciation of direct control of individual efforts that a free society can make use of so much more knowledge than the mind of the wisest ruler could comprehend.

For an average listener of such a debate, it would be a choice between “I don’t know” and “I calculated all, I know what the government should do, and I even have a photo of a sad seal to invoke your feelings.” It’s no wonder that freedom loses the advertising battle.

And yet, what sounds unconvincing in front of a TV, works much better in real life. What we need is technological progress in the energy sector and in the methods of waste storage and reduction. Would that progress be possible in a rich or in a poor country? How to cook up new technologies most efficiently, and then make them widely affordable and accessible?

That is why the answer to what the desirable role of the government with respect to global warming should be is the stuff of yet another [classic Bastiat’s essay](#). I am certain that the control of carbon dioxide emissions would be the last chapter of “That what is seen and that what is not seen,” had he lived in our times to witness it.

Obviously, it is straightforward to calculate the expected temperature change given certain restrictions. It will be beneficial for the environment – short-term, *that is what is seen*. But how those restrictions would affect the prices of strategic resources, transportation, and, generally speaking,

life? Wouldn't they hamper long-term investments in advanced research and development, that is – the only long-term solution to the problem? What if, to give an example, a company that studies cheap nuclear power plants that also extract carbon dioxide from the atmosphere goes bankrupt? What if a number of other similar initiatives do?

Will You Say “Yes” to Civilization?

Poor societies cannot afford to care about the environment. They cannot afford research and development. The government wants people to believe it is the only means of addressing ecological problems. But the state can be counted on to just use any new powers as a means of control, and in the long run – to impoverish societies and block the progress of civilization. We are being told we must choose between the freedom of humans and the freedom of polar bears, convincing us that they trade-off with each other, while actually it may not be the case at all. (Here I omit the discussion whether polar bear protection should be subject to law or to ethics).

Statists here think in a very close-minded way – failing to see how dynamic our civilization is. Not long ago, we could not imagine having the internet or commercial flights. How are we so certain then, that in the next fifty years we wouldn't come up with a clean, cheap and efficient way of obtaining solar energy, or a routine and inexpensive procedure of reducing carbon dioxide particles to carbon and oxygen? The assumption that this will not happen, and if it will, it will by state coercion, only makes this progress slower. And going deeper into this assumption would eventually lead to creation of a totalitarian monster which controls not only our energy use, but also birth rates or meat consumption. How immoral and terrifying would be the reduction of a human being under such inhumane conditions! And how could we escape a Malthusian trap while being trapped by the state?

And if someone, anyone claims that “capitalism destroys the

Earth,” show them any pollution or ecological-catastrophes map. They speak for themselves.

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