

Why the Left needs climate change

By Steven Hayward, Forbes, 13 June 2015

Try this out as a thought experiment: what would happen if, tomorrow morning, we had definitive proof that catastrophic climate change was impossible, wasn't happening, and would never happen. Would Al Gore breathe a big sigh of relief and say—"Well good; now we can go back to worrying about *smoking*, or bad inner city schools, or other persistent, immediate problems."

A combination of outrage and despair

Of course not. The general reaction from environmentalists and the left would be a combination of outrage and despair. The need to believe in oneself as part of the agency of human salvation runs deep for leftists and environmentalists who have made their obsessions a secular religion. And humanity doesn't need salvation if there is no sin in the first place. Hence human must be sinners—somehow—in need of redemption from the left.

I got to thinking about this when reading a short passage from an old book by Canadian philosopher George Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*:

"During the excitement over Sputnik, it was suggested that the Americans were deeply depressed by Russian success. I thought this was a wrong interpretation. Rather, there was a great sigh of relief from the American elites, for now there was an immediate practical objective to be achieved, a new frontier to be conquered—outer space."

Medieval dragon hunters

This tracks closely with Kenneth Minogue's diagnosis of liberalism in his classic *The Liberal Mind*. Minogue compared liberals to medieval dragon hunters, who sought after dragons to slay even after it was clear they didn't exist. The liberal, like the dragon hunter, "*needed* his dragons. He could only live by fighting for causes—the people, the poor, the exploited, the colonially oppressed, the underprivileged and the underdeveloped. As an ageing warrior, he grew breathless in pursuit of smaller and smaller dragons—for the big dragons were now harder to come by."

Hence on college campuses today the liberal mind is relentlessly hunting after "microaggressions," which is pretty pathetic as dragons of injustice go. Environmentalists are still after the fire-breathing dragon of climate change, now that previous dragons like the population bomb have disappeared into the medieval mists—so much so that even the *New York Times* recently declared the population bomb to have been [completely wrongheaded](#).

A better metaphor is drug addiction

Or perhaps a better metaphor for true-believing environmentalism is drug addiction: the addictive need for another rush of euphoria, followed by the crash or pains of withdrawal, and the diminishing returns of the next fix. For there's always a next fix for environmentalists: fracking, bee colony collapse disorder, de-forestation, drought, floods, plastic bags . . . the list is endless.

The political scientist Anthony Downs diagnosed this aspect of environmentalism in a famous 1972 essay in *The Public Interest* entitled “[Up and Down with Ecology—The Issue-Attention Cycle](#).” In analyzing the then fairly new public enthusiasm over environmentalism (though it tended to go by the term “ecology” back then), Downs laid out a five-step cycle for most public policy issues. A group of experts and interest groups begin promoting a problem or crisis, which is soon followed by the alarmed discovery of the problem by the news media and broader political class. This second stage typically includes a large amount of euphoric enthusiasm—you might call this the dopamine stage—as activists conceive the issue in terms of global salvation and redemption.

Then reality starts to intrude

But then reality starts to intrude. The third stage is the hinge. As Downs explains, there comes “a gradually spreading realization that the cost of ‘solving’ the problem is very high indeed.” This is where we have been since the Kyoto process proposed completely implausible near-term reductions in fossil fuel energy—a fanatical monomania the climate campaign has been unable to shake.

“The previous stage,” Downs continued, “becomes almost imperceptibly transformed into the fourth stage: a gradual decline in the intensity of public interest in the problem.” Despite the relentless media and activist drumbeat and millions of dollars in paid advertising, public concern for climate change has been steadily waning for the last several years.

A twilight realm of lesser attention

“In the final [post-problem] stage,” Downs concluded, “an issue that has been replaced at the center of public concern moves into a prolonged limbo—a twilight realm of lesser attention or spasmodic recurrences of interest.”

Activist liberal elites always need a Grand Cause to satisfy their messianic needs, or for the political equivalent of a dopamine rush. For such people, the only thing worse than catastrophic climate change is the catastrophe of not having a catastrophe to obsess over—and use as an excuse to extend political control over people and resources, which is the one-size-fits-all answer for every new crisis that starts through the issue-attention cycle.

They’ll find new ways to get their fix

Downs did think that the issue-attention cycle would be longer for environmental issues than other kinds of issues like civil rights and crime, for a variety of reasons. So environmental junkies should chill. They’ll find new ways to get their fix. They always do.