

# The Dirty Politics of Climate Change

by [Sean Haylock](#) (November 2019)



*Nighttime Encounter with a Lunatic*, Otto Dix, 1924

*The future: a planet where a molten sun seethes cosmic malice, turning trees to spindly-limbed pillars of chalk, and crows, carking emphysemically, cast oversized shadows on overbaked earth, and underneath insects with horrible segmented bodies click their mandibles and ooze acid onto dead flesh. A place where your best hope is to make your bed on a sleeve of discarded snake skin and suffocate before a scalding ocean engulfs you. This is my future. And you, leaders of the world, you who have had the despicable temerity to disregard my interests—you are responsible for making it my future. To you I can only say this: your shame will outlive the sun.*

Had Greta Thunberg read the preceding paragraph when she appeared on the world's stage to unleash an embittered howl of protest against the perpetrators of ecocide and their complacent enablers, would she have been received any less rapturously by her cheerleaders in the progressive media? I have my doubts. There would, I suspect, have been the same fawning, swooning, adulatory chorus of oh-no-she-didn'ts.

The novelist Jonathan Franzen, a known Germanophile with a reputation for party-poopery, was never going to be so warmly received, least of all when living up to that reputation. Like the much less famous writer Paul Kingsnorth, Franzen recently spoiled the fun of protesting the despoliation of the planet by suggesting that ecological ruin was inevitable, that we should all "[stop pretending](#)" that the worst effects of climate change could be averted. (Kingsnorth at least had the panache to give his grim ecopolitics [a name that would not embarrass a metal band](#)).

Franzen [rides](#) this sober premise to a demented conclusion:

. . . any movement toward a more just and civil society can now be considered a meaningful climate action. Securing fair elections is a climate action. Combatting extreme wealth inequality is a climate action. Shutting down the hate machines on social media is a climate action. Instituting humane immigration policy, advocating for racial and gender equality, promoting respect for laws and their enforcement, supporting a free and independent press, ridding the country of assault weapons—these are all meaningful climate actions.

Everything from outlawing assault rifles to helping women into the workforce, from taxing the rich to banning transphobes from Twitter, is for Franzen a climate action. The word “climate” is thus emptied of any substantive meaning and effectively becomes a substitute for the theocrat’s reference to God. Franzen departs from mainstream progressive climatocray only in evacuating his climatocratic commitment of every last vestige of optimism. Calvin would be proud.

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- [Sentenced to Death](#)
- [Transversing the Landscape of Gender Politics, Pt I](#)
- [My Evolution as a Mammal](#)

The comparison to theocracy here isn’t meant to be alarmist, or even to make Franzen look especially nutty. Franzen’s considered defeatism is nothing like as sinister as the

rhetoric of most other climate zealots, with their skittish eyes on the doomsday clock and their “No planet B” placards held furiously aloft. There’s wisdom to admire in Franzen’s frank assessment of human nature (the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity is only half wrong). His thorough disenchantment with conventional politics amounts to a kind of [Benedict Option](#) for virtue-signaling literatos and luvvies. Call it the Cumberbatch Option.

You don’t have to be Sherlock Holmes, or Alan Turing, or Thomas Edison, or Professor X, to work out that mainstream political discourse on the topic of climate change has about as much to do with science as L. Ron Hubbard’s fanclub.

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There are tags sewn onto some of my clothes that say “Think Climate: cold wash and line dry”, and I find them distinctly sinister. They are conspicuously unlike other tag missives: “Keep out of reach of children”, or “Use only as directed.” These tags affect a different, more complicated mode of address. They seem to place me in an absurd position: their subtext is something like “When you do your laundry you should consider it an activity with global ecological ramifications”, but before I can permit myself the gust of incredulous laughter that I reflexively feel this sentiment deserves, some cowardly and self-serving or simply vigilant sector of my mind kicks into gear and reminds me of a few things: the censure that such a reaction, if publicly observed, is likely to call down on me; the unsettlingly eager acquiescence of multi-billion-dollar corporations in a massive programme of public moralism that this tag I’m reading right now represents; the flavour of contrarian cant or pernicious flippancy that these

thoughts of mine will inevitably have for anyone (and this includes a whole lot of people) with a cemented conviction of the unprecedentedly dire and urgent threat posed by anthropogenic climate change, which will make it incredibly difficult to explain these thoughts without being perceived as an irredeemable eco-ignoramus and political philistine. The magnitude of the moral obligation I'm being asked to arrogate to myself runs headlong into the surety that those most insistently asking have vanishingly small supplies of magnanimity. So rather than laugh I just feel oddly shamed. Which is a win for public moralism, I suppose.

Several friends, like me conservatives of one kind or another, have told me they avoid talking about climate change because they don't understand the science behind it. The problem with this climate agnosticism is that it pretends the issue hasn't already been thoroughly politicised. Or rather (since there's no use complaining about the politicisation of what is blatantly a political issue), it fails to notice that whenever someone engages in punditry on the topic of climate change their convictions on seemingly unrelated political matters apply a definite weight to everything they have to say, indeed often influence the fact that they're saying anything on the topic at all.

Only if you're sure that abortion is a morally unproblematic medical procedure can you claim that climate change is the greatest moral challenge of our time. Every insistence that climate change is a unique test of human virtue rests on a perverse skewing of moral priorities. It's not merely a coincidence that the most passionate climate advocates are also people who believe that cisheteronormativity is an entirely bad thing. You can't object to the maximum velocity dissolution of sexual norms if you're going to keep insisting

that coal-fired power plants and oil rigs are the greatest threats facing civilisation.

I've now said more than enough to reveal myself as morally unclean. And this, after all, is what most climate activism (because most progressive activism in general) seems to be about, not saving the planet but enforcing standards of moral hygiene. I've no principled objection to the idea that morality can be thought of as analogous to hygiene. One can live in moral squalor, and by the same token one can live in over-sanitized moral conditions. But the hygienic frenzy of progressives where climate change is concerned seems as misguided as maintaining a spotlessly clean guest room while your bathroom is encased in limescale.

It is not a non sequitur to observe that if Greta Thunberg decided she was a boy trapped in a girl's body progressives would begin falling over themselves to affirm her in that delusion, and showering her with congratulations if she chose to be surgically mutilated.

Probably this sounds like the most reckless partisanship, something like saying: If the issues that matter most to me don't matter to you, then we've nothing at all to talk about; our points of agreement are irrelevant. But if this is true then it's only tit for tat, and so wholly within the logic of our relentlessly adversarial politics. Climate advocates have frequently been models of reckless partisanship and haughty moralism, perfectly willing to sacrifice intellectual honesty in favour of the consolations of collective self-righteousness.

I've experienced this first-hand in the form of a protracted protest campaign several years ago, at the university where I used to work, against the proposed hosting of a research centre headed by Danish climate contrarian Bjorn Lomborg. You wouldn't know it from the protesters' vehement antipathy toward him (or from anything they said, for that matter) but Lomborg is not a climate skeptic. He doesn't dispute the reality of anthropogenic climate change. He's just an advocate of subjecting any climate change abating proposals to a cost-benefit analysis and guilty of the heresy of believing that humanity faces other challenges that may be as bad as or worse than climate change (things like AIDS, malaria, and malnutrition). I witnessed what seemed like the entire humanities department fervently embrace the protest. Very nearly every door in the humanities corridors bore a sticker with the panic-stricken slogan "Stop Lomborg". And I witnessed one vocal academic, who I'm certain never read Lomborg's [best-selling book](#) or its [sequel](#), stand rigid with indignation in the staffroom and venomously denounce "this Lomborg idiot". I'm sure no one else present doubted whether his expert knowledge of film noir qualified him to make this scathing judgement.

My point is not that Lomborg is right and his critics are wrong. I really don't know whether his judgements stand up to informed scrutiny. My point is that there seems to me to be an egregious injustice in treating a man whose departure from climate orthodoxy is relatively minor as though he were a climatological David Irving. There is no exaggeration in that analogy; people were as livid as I imagine they would have been had the university administrators proposed hosting the [Institute for Historical Review](#).

This is by no means an isolated case. Take what I will call



the Stephens Affair, after the columnist Bret Stephens (and no, I'm not talking about the time he [took umbrage at being called a bedbug](#)). In April 2017, in his debut column for the *New York Times*, Stephens stated that

Anyone who has read the [2014 report](#) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change knows that, while the modest (0.85 degrees Celsius, or about 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit) warming of the earth since 1880 is indisputable, as is the human influence on that warming, much else that passes as accepted fact is really a matter of probabilities. That's especially true of the sophisticated but fallible models and simulations by which scientists attempt to peer into the climate future. To say this isn't to deny science. It's to acknowledge it honestly.

He followed this immediately with "By now I can almost hear the heads exploding." One would hope a jocular aside like this would give pause to anyone ready to erupt with indignation at something they read in an Op Ed by making them conscious that their reaction is a predictable one. A vain hope, it seems.

Stephens proceeds to point out three things of such impeccable good sense that they really ought not to need pointing out at all.

Claiming total certainty about the science traduces the spirit of science and creates openings for doubt whenever a climate claim proves wrong. Demanding abrupt and expensive changes in public policy raises fair questions

about ideological intentions. Censoriously asserting one's moral superiority and treating skeptics as imbeciles and deplorables wins few converts.

Each of these looks like a perfectly unobjectionable piece of self-evident wisdom to me, but apparently they ring alarm bells in the minds of progressives. Leading left-wing publications declared the column "[textbook denialism](#)" and Stephens a "[climate change bullshitter](#)", and outraged readers, among them climatologists, organised *en masse* to cancel their subscriptions to the *New York Times* in protest. How dare a distinguished newspaper permit one of its writers to argue for epistemic humility on a matter of vital public interest, even if his plea was combined with an acknowledgement that the central facts of the matter are "indisputable." The newspaper must be punished and the offending writer outed as a crackpot and a charlatan. Susan Matthews at *Slate* even acknowledged that Stephens hadn't said anything untrue, but insisted he must be decried nonetheless; his remarks were, *because* not marred by outright falsehoods, "all the more insidious." Stephens, the fool, failed to notice that his well-intentioned (and technically correct) observations were giving succour to the hated enemy: the vicious unconvinced.

At the risk of condescending to my reader, I would point out that the dismayed responses to Stephens' column seem to vindicate its point, and to recapitulate exactly the error it seeks to redress.

Stephens used as his epigraph an old piece of Galician wisdom, quoted from dissident Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz.

When someone is honestly 55 percent right, that's very good and there's no use wrangling. And if someone is 60 percent right, it's wonderful, it's great luck, and let him thank God. But what's to be said about 75 percent right? Wise people say this is suspicious. Well, and what about 100 percent right? Whoever says he's 100 percent right is a fanatic, a thug, and the worst kind of rascal.

Shouldn't this have stopped anyone in their tracks when they thought about fanatically, thuggishly, calling God's wrath down on the rascal who dared question that the science is 100 percent settled? How sanctimonious and arrogant and deaf to nuance would you have to be to denounce Stephens' column as an example of irresponsible extremism, especially given this charming epigraph?

Can I be blamed if these things, the Affairs Lomborg and Stephens, leap into my mind whenever I hear anyone solemnly intone the words "climate change"? Is it really hysterical of me to experience lasting unease at the spectacle of gratuitous invective and self-righteous groupthink that both of these events became? Am I wrong to intuit from them a frightful and far-reaching lesson about the cynicism and near-sightedness of many of those who adopt climate change as a political cause?

I personally have no difficulty believing that we are in the midst of a planetary ecological crisis of our own making. What I do have difficulty believing is that those who cling to such a crisis as a validation of their own moral rectitude and a shibboleth for determining the moral depravity of others are likely to produce the most prudent responses to that crisis, and to be innocent of polluting their proposals with any political opportunism at the expense of their adversaries.[\[1\]](#)

The trouble is that anyone who thinks it appropriate to subject climate claims to scrutiny, even the clichéd soundbites that any smart person ought to expect are confected or misapplied, will win for himself instant distrust. The slash-and-burn, take-no-prisoners approach of climate advocates leaves no room for disagreement that is not heresy. Any deviation, no matter how nuanced or carefully articulated, is likely to be vehemently anathematized. What's that? You suspect that long-term predictions about how complex systems such as economies and ecologies will interact are hostage to ineradicable ambiguities? Well, give my utterly sardonic regards to [Lord Monckton](#), you denialist scum.

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Perhaps all I've been complaining about is another manifestation of the political double standard that prevails in all areas of popular culture.

If you believe climate change is real and a danger to civilization, then you're allowed to point to a single weather event as proof of your beliefs. But if you don't believe climate change is real or a danger to civilisation, then you're unbelievably stupid for thinking you can point to a single weather event as proof of your beliefs. That cold snap is statistically insignificant, as any intelligent person could tell, but this forest fire, as every responsible person knows, is a terrible portent of the fate that awaits the entire planet.

When President Trump's advisor Kellyanne Conway referred to "alternative facts" she was widely mocked in the media. But there is nothing obviously philistine or obscurantist about the phrase itself. Only the most uncharitable reading will imagine that there is. (There's no reason it should be treated as a rehash of the famous dismissal by an advisor of President Bush Jr. of the "fact-based community"). It's unlikely anyone in the media would have bat an eyelid if a liberal had uttered the phrase "alternative facts." It's not a phrase that would be out of place in a college seminar room, indeed it would sit comfortably within the vocabulary of critical theory.

When a conservative says "alternative facts" he must mean an alternative to the facts, but if a liberal says "alternative facts" he must mean a neglected perspective on reality. The conservative is making excuses for his errors, is engaged in brazen special pleading. But the liberal appealing to "alternative facts" would be drawing attention to some overlooked details, offering a probing analysis. It's assumed that the conservative is stubbornly resisting the authoritative account, while the liberal would rather be bravely challenging the official narrative. Even a particularly apt turn of phrase uttered by a conservative, once subjected to a merciless hermeneutic of suspicion, is rendered as the most artless piece of Orwellian propaganda. Where the conservative is confined to transparent and malicious euphemism, the liberal can make use of subtler and more sophisticated devices like irony and metaphor.

The worst consequence of this double standard is the increasingly common spectacle of progressives excusing their partisan credulity, and their acquiescence in the propagation of blatant falsehoods, by insisting that their political intuitions, by virtue simply of correctly identifying the

enemy, are grounded in unassailable truths. If it was wrong to assume that those Covington boys instigated that confrontation, it is not nearly as wrong as it is right to characterize President Trump as a racist and all of his supporters as complicit in that racism. Behind the superficial inaccuracies, all the violent denunciations of those schoolboys were impeccably discerning. [\[2\]](#)

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I'm not suggesting that conservatives ought to be allowed to engage in the same sort of unscrupulous self-justifying rhetoric. But I don't think anyone should be the slightest bit surprised if a similar way of thinking characterises the attitudes of many conservatives to the issue of climate change. Even if it isn't a "hoax," climate change activists sure do act like hoaxers. The intricacies of the facts pale into insignificance in light of the one overwhelming fact: regarding this issue there is a brutally enforced progressive orthodoxy, an orthodoxy whose proponents will not permit one iota of dissent. If these people are determined to have me and mine as their adversaries, why would I do anything so conciliatory as conceding the validity of their premises and taking issue merely with their conclusions. If it's a total culture war they want, then that's what they'll get.

Anyone who wants to lament the lack of political will in addressing climate change ought to also to think about lamenting the fact that conservatives' skepticism on this issue is a perfectly rational response to the squalid

political ecology they find themselves in.

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[1] I also doubt that the best reasons for adopting their proposals aren't completely different to the reasons they offer. Sir Roger Scruton has written "Unlike the eco-whiners I don't oppose travel because of the energy consumed by it. I oppose travel when it causes people to wander where they do not belong, unsettling those who are settled there, and dispersing the spiritual capital that is stored in every place where love has been invested." It is better to object to travel not because it is chemically irresponsible but because it is culturally irresponsible. And as much as we are told, increasingly often it seems, that eating meat is chemically irresponsible, it is surely culturally irresponsible *not* to eat meat, a dereliction of our [duty to eat our friends](#). Anyway, your local butchers, if they're anything like mine – ruddy, wholesome blokes, the very picture of affability and good cheer –, deserve their livelihoods much more than any carping academic or unctuous opinion merchant.

[2] Forget about a [helpline](#) catering to those who "get irrationally angry at a teenage girl who wants to save the planet" (because nothing says an earnest desire to do good like "How dare you...We will never forgive you"). How about a service catering to those who get irrationally angry about boys wearing hats in the presence of brown people?

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