

Death penalty for global warming deniers?

An objective argument...a conservative conclusion

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For years, hard-nosed scientists have been predicting global warming (GW) and its devastating consequences. For a reputable summary of arguments for and against GW, see [skepticalscience](#).

Some accounts are clearly exaggerated ([more](#)). But given the inherent uncertainty surrounding climatic predictions, even exaggerated accounts must be considered possible, albeit with a low probability. Consider this: If ten million people are going to die with a probability of 10%, that is like one million people dying with a probability of 100%.

When the earth's temperature rises on average by more than two degrees, interactions between different consequences of global warming (reduction in the area of arable land, unexpected crop failures, extinction of diverse plant and animal species) combined with increasing populations mean that hundreds of millions of people may die from starvation or disease in future famines. Moreover, an unknown number may die from wars over diminishing resources ([more](#)). Even if that does not happen, thousands of plants and animals will become extinct. Islands, shorelines and coastal communities will disappear.

So far, the political response to the threat of GW has been lots of talk and little action ([more](#)). But action is urgently needed. We are in a very real sense talking about something similar to the end of the world. What will it take to get people to sit up and listen?

Much more would have happened by now if not for the GW deniers. An amazing number of people still believe that GW is a story made up by scientists with ulterior motives. For a long list of climate change deniers and their stories see [desmogblog](#). The opinions of everyday GW deniers are evidently being driven by influential GW deniers who have a lot to lose if GW is taken seriously, such as executives in transnational oil corporations.

Of course it is possible that scientists are just making it up for their own benefit. The trouble with that argument is that scientists who publish fake data or deliberately set out to mislead people about GW have a lot to lose and nothing to win. When scientists fake data and are caught, that usually means the end of their career. It's not the kind of risk that a scientist would like to take. It is possible someone is paying the scientists behind the scenes to publish environmental doomsday stories, but again the argument is problematic: there is simply no money in environmental doomsday stories (just like there is no money in writing internet pages like this one). And here is why: It has been clear for a long time that the cost of reducing GW to a manageable amount (whatever that is) will be enormous, and the costs incurred by not doing that or doing it too late will be many times greater. The main problem is that no-one wants to pay this money. As a rule, those who make money out of ignoring GW would rather leave this problem for our children and grandchildren to deal with. (How kind of them!) In this situation, a corrupt scientist can certainly earn a lot of money by publishing research that plays down the importance of GW, so that those who profit from ignoring it can continue their environmentally unfriendly activities - and presumably many scientists have already done so. But there is no money in publishing the uncomfortable truth about GW, except for the ordinary rewards that ordinary scientists get for publishing good research reports.

The problem gets even more uncomfortable when you consider the broader context. Even without GW (or ignoring the small amount that has happened so far), a billion people are living in poverty right now. Every five seconds a child is dying of hunger ([more](#)). The United Nations and diverse NGOs are trying to solve this problem, and making some progress. But political forces in the other direction are stronger. The strongest of these political forces is GW denial.

The death penalty

In this article I am going to suggest that the death penalty is an appropriate punishment for influential GW deniers. But before coming to this surprising conclusion, please allow me to explain where I am coming from.

I have always been opposed to the death penalty in all cases, and I have always supported the clear and consistent stand of Amnesty International on this issue. The death penalty is barbaric, racist, expensive, and is often applied by mistake. Apparently, it does not even act as a deterrent to would-be murderers. Hopefully, the USA and China will come to their senses soon.

Even mass murderers should not be executed, in my opinion. Consider the politically motivated murder of 77

people in Norway in 2011. Of course the murderer does not deserve to live, and there is not the slightest doubt that he is guilty. But if the Norwegian government killed him, that would just increase the number of dead to 78. It would not bring the dead back to life. In fact, it would not achieve anything positive at all. I respect the families and friends of the victims if they feel differently about that. I am simply presenting what seems to me to be a logical argument.

GW deniers fall into a completely different category from Behring Breivik. They are already causing the deaths of hundreds of millions of future people. We could be speaking of billions, but I am making a conservative estimate.

My estimate of "hundreds of millions" is based on diverse scientific publications about GW. There are three important things to notice about those publications, in general. First, their authors are qualified to do the research. In general they worked hard and more than full-time for at least ten years before being in a position to participate credibly in research of that kind. They are not just writing stuff off their heads. Second, they do not generally stand to gain or lose anything if their research concludes that GW will be more or less serious than currently thought. They have a different motivation: they want their research to be published in a good academic journal so that people will read it and it will improve their career chances. As a rule that depends only on the quality of the research. Third, the authors of different studies are generally working independently of each other in different countries, universities and disciplines. If so many unbiased people independently come to a similar conclusion, the probability that that conclusion is wrong is negligible.

For decades, the tobacco lobby denied that cigarette smoking was linked to cancer, at the same time as countless research projects were presenting evidence to the contrary. How many deaths did tobacco denialism cause? Globally, lung cancer due to smoking claims one million lives per year. A significant proportion of these deaths is due to tobacco denialists who slowed attempts to slow down the rate of smoking. Those individuals may individually be responsible for tens or even hundreds of thousands of deaths.

I don't think that mass murderers of the usual kind, such as Breivik, should face the death penalty. Nor do I think tobacco denialists are guilty enough to warrant the death penalty, in spite of the enormous number of deaths that resulted more or less directly from tobacco denialism. GW is different. With high probability it will cause hundreds of millions of deaths. For this reason I propose that the death penalty is appropriate for influential GW deniers. More generally, I propose that we limit the death penalty to people whose actions will with a high probability cause millions of future deaths.

Consider the following scenario. A suicidal genius develops the means to destroy most of the world's population. A heroic woman turns up (could also be a man, if you prefer) and kills the villain just in time. Just like one of those superheroes comics. Even Amnesty International joins in congratulating the heroine. What else can they do? They are glad to be alive themselves.

From this example, it is clear that there is a dividing line somewhere between murders for which the death penalty is appropriate and murders for which it is inappropriate. I am proposing to make that dividing line concrete at about one million people. I wish to claim that it is generally ok to kill someone in order to save one million people. Similarly, the death penalty is an appropriate punishment for GW deniers who are so influential that one million future deaths can with high probability be traced to their personal actions. Please note also that I am only talking about prevention of future deaths - not punishment or revenge after the event.

That raises the interesting question of whether and how the Pope and his closest advisers should be punished for their consistent stand against contraception in the form of condoms. It has been clear for decades that condoms are the best way to slow the spread of AIDS, which has so far claimed 30 million innocent lives. The number of people dying of AIDS would have been much smaller if the Catholic Church had changed its position on contraception in the 1980s, or any time since then. Because it did not, millions have died unnecessarily. There is a clear causal relationship between the Vatican's continuing active discouragement of the use of condoms and the spread of AIDS, especially in Africa. We are talking about millions of deaths, so according to the principle I have proposed, the Pope and perhaps some of his closest advisers should be sentenced to death. I am talking about the current Pope, because his continuing refusal to make a significant change to the church's position on contraception ([more](#)) will certainly result in millions of further unnecessary deaths from AIDS in the future. Since many of these deaths could be prevented relatively easily simply by changing the position of the Catholic church, which incidentally is one of the most influential political powers in Africa and elsewhere, we are talking about something remarkably similar to premeditated mass murder. Not the same, because the church does not want the affected people to die. But the numbers of people involved are so enormous that at some level it doesn't matter any more whether the murder is premeditated or not. The position of the church is presumably also racist: if those dying from AIDS were not predominately black, the

church would presumably have changed its position on contraception long ago. Just imagine 30 million white people dying from AIDS in Europe or North America, and you will see what I mean.

What about holocaust deniers? The Nazi holocaust was the worst crime in human history, for two reasons: the enormous number of murdered people and the automation of the murder process. Those who deny the holocaust certainly belong behind bars. The death penalty would be too much for them, because holocaust deniers are not directly causing the deaths of other people. The holocaust is in the past, not the future. Those who died in the holocaust cannot be brought back to life.

Counterarguments

In self defence, both the Catholic church and the GW deniers would point out straight away that they don't intend to kill anyone. The Catholic church is merely of the opinion that contraception is generally a bad thing. The GW deniers are simply of the opinion that the GW scientists are wrong. Both groups are enjoying their freedom of speech and perhaps they sincerely believe what they are claiming. They can certainly cite lots of evidence (you can find evidence for just about anything if you look hard enough).

Another counterargument is that we can never be sure that the predicted GW will happen, or that its effects will be as severe as predicted. But this is not a strong argument. The courts are used to dealing with uncertainty. Even at the conclusion of a murder trial, there is generally some remaining uncertainty about the guilt of the accused, even if the court pretends that there is not. Courts must rely on eye-witness reports, but memories can be distorted and witnesses can have ulterior motives. That is why there are so many reports of executions of innocent people. In the case of GW, the case is clearer. Even if the prediction of hundreds of millions of deaths turns out to be exaggerated, the more moderate prediction of tens of millions will not.

For the purpose of argument, let's give the GW deniers the benefit of the doubt and imagine that the scientists are wrong with a high probability, say 90%. If they are right, some 100 million people will die as a direct result of GW. Probably more like a billion, but this is a conservative estimate. If the probability of that happening is only 10%, then effectively "only" 10 million people will die. These are the numbers that GW deniers are playing with while exercising their "freedom of speech". The number that the Catholics are playing with are an order of magnitude smaller, but still horrendously large. Since these figures exceed the arbitrary limit of one million that I am proposing, it follows that the death penalty might be an appropriate punishment for influential GW deniers and possibly also the Pope. It also follows for example that George W. Bush and Tony Blair should not face the death penalty for the Iraq war, since it "only" claimed about 100 000 lives since 2003 ([more](#)).

Please note that I am not directly suggesting that the threat of execution be carried out. I am simply presenting a logical argument. I am neither a politician nor a lawyer. I am just thinking aloud about an important problem.

Lawyers will see this situation differently, of course. According to current law you cannot exact a criminal sentence of murder on someone for deaths that have not yet happened, and might not happen if - despite GW deniers - governments and people act to stop GW. Even conspiracy to murder depends on intent to murder, which clearly does not exist in this case. Then there is the question of in which judicial system someone could be tried and prosecuted. Given that the alleged victims of the criminal act are not confined to the country in which the GW denier lives, but are all over the world, then only an international court (perhaps the International Criminal Court) would do. I guess that right now there is no existing law, either national or international, under which such a prosecution could be pursued. Given the overriding importance of GW (just about everything else that we hold dear depends on it), I am proposing with this text a legal change that will make the criminal trial of GW deniers possible.

In such a trial, ignorance of scientific research would be no excuse. There is clear evidence that unprotected sex is causing the deaths of ten millions, and that GW deniers are causing the deaths of hundreds of millions. This evidence is freely available and constantly in the media. If the legal change that I am envisaging comes about, a future court of law will not accept the claim that the culprits simply did not know about this research.

Consequences

If my argument is correct, it has clear political consequences. Here is a scenario for what might happen if my argument is broadly accepted, both democratically and politically.

The universal declaration of human rights and every national constitution would be amended to include the

rights of future generations. Incidentally, that would also make national debts illegal, because they oblige future generations to pay them. Getting rid of national debts would in turn solve an important aspect of the "global financial crisis" ([more](#)), which currently belongs to the list of common excuses for not investing money in the prevention of GW.

The proposed legal change would be announced and widely publicized for an extended period before it came into force. During that time, GW deniers would have a chance to change their ways and escape punishment.

The police would start to identify the most influential GW deniers who had not responded to the changed legal situation. These individuals would then be charged and brought to justice.

If a jury of suitably qualified scientists estimated that a given GW denier had already, with high probability (say 95%), caused the deaths of over one million future people, then s/he would be sentenced to death. The sentence would then be commuted to life imprisonment if the accused admitted their mistake, demonstrated genuine regret, AND participated significantly and positively over a long period in programs to reduce the effects of GW (from jail) - using much the same means that were previously used to spread the message of denial. At the end of that process, some GW deniers would never admit their mistake and as a result they would be executed. Perhaps that would be the only way to stop the rest of them. The death penalty would have been justified in terms of the enormous numbers of saved future lives.

Outlook

Right now, in the year 2012, these ideas will seem quite crazy to most people. People will be saying that Parncutt has finally lost it. But there is already enough evidence on the table to allow me to make the following prediction: If someone found this document in the year 2050 and published it, it would find general support and admiration. People would say I was courageous to write the truth, for a change. Who knows, perhaps the Pope would even turn me into a saint. Presumably there will still be a Pope, and maybe by then he will even have realised that condoms are not such a bad thing! And by the way 2050 is rather soon. Most people reading this text will still be alive then.

I don't want to be a saint. I would just like my grandchildren and great grandchildren, and the human race in general, to enjoy the world that I have enjoyed, as much as I have enjoyed it. And to achieve that goal I think it is justified for a few heads to roll. Does that make me crazy? I don't think so. I am certainly far less crazy than those people today who are in favor of the death penalty for everyday cases of murder, in my opinion. And like them I have freedom of speech, which is a very valuable thing.

This page is inspired by the project [Establishing Crimes Against Future Generations](#) by the [World Future Council](#). Please support the work of the World Future Council!

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