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Smarter Critics of Environmentalism, Please

or, Ad Hominems Against the Ad Hominizers; or,
People who Use Ad Hominems are Nazis, Unless It's
Us.

Kevin Carson

July 26, 2006

In a comment thread about one of George Reisman's anti-mutualist posts, Shawn Wilbur remarked:

The section on environmentalism [in *Capitalism*] is probably the worst in terms of its mean-spiritedness, its tendency to lump [together] radically different tendencies, it's failures to back up broad claims with adequate evidence, etc.

That's borne out in spades, not only in regard to Reisman himself but many of his fellow travellers as well, in a post at Mises Blog. Reisman's remarks on "environmentalists" remind me of nothing so much as an 80-year-old Bircher in high-water pants and a bolo tie, sitting in front of the American Legion post and haranguing everyone in earshot about the "Innernashunnul Commonists."

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Retrieved on 4th September 2021 from mutualist.blogspot.com

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Reisman, in the main article, denounces “environmentalists” for their resort to ad hominem.

One of the very first replies to my posting of CO2 Science’s journal review “A 221-Year Temperature History of the Southwest Coast of Greenland” was this: “CO2 Science’ is funded by Exxon. Come on, you guys are usually such independent thinkers—you can do better than rehash this stuff.”

The author of this statement believes that it is sufficient to name the economic affiliation of an individual or organization to be able to dismiss and ignore anything that comes from them. This was a tactic employed for generations by the Marxists. Instead of refuting the criticisms leveled against their doctrines by economists and others, they were content to identify critics as a member of the capitalist class or as having received financial support from capitalists. The Nazis had their own variant of the practice. They were content to identify their critics as Jewish or as somehow supported by Jews or otherwise affiliated with Jews...

In the United States, we are fortunate to have both a long-standing tradition and clear Constitutional protection of a defendant’s right in a criminal trial not to testify. What the Marxists and Nazis and those who are following in their path today are seeking is the equivalent of a prohibition of a defendant’s right to testify.

Individuals, corporations, industries, are to be subject to attack by those who seek to injure or destroy them, and they are to be prohibited from defending themselves by virtue of people being unwilling listen to what they have to say. They are not to be listened to

necessary institutional framework, clearly defined and enforced property rights, is not in place.

Why, that sounds like... like... (gasp!) *free market environmentalism!*

There is, in fact, a respectable segment of environmentalist thought arguing that the best way to reduce carbon emissions is to reduce government-created externalities, in the form of subsidized transportation infrastructure, subsidized sprawl, and wars for oil. And even among geolibertarian environmentalists, the recommended approach is to substitute taxes on pollution and resource consumption for current taxes on labor and capital.

But according to Reisman, Sione, et al, anyone who takes these positions is apparently excluded from the environmentalist category (which is apparently a Platonic eidolon), *by definition*. I knew the Randroids had gone batshit on the nominalist vs. realist thing, but *really!*

for no other reason than that their avoidance of injury and their survival matters to them. They have an “interest” in the outcome. Yes, they do. And they have a right to be heard—for that very reason! Because their best defense is truth.

He also makes this sweeping generalization:

...the environmental movement would like to destroy... the oil industry, along with the coal and atomic power industries, and is using the alleged connection between global warming and CO2 emissions as its main weapon in its attempt to do so.

Several commenters, starting with CMB at the outset of the thread, were unkind enough to point out the frequent appearance of ad hominem attacks on pro-global warming research—right there at Mises Blog! Here’s CMB’s comment:

What about all those “Marxists” in the last thread who dismissed all the science surrounding global warming on the basis that scientists are a bunch of statist? Don’t they deserve a mention too?

FTR, I find it not good that you compare the people in the last thread who voiced doubts about the reliability of “CO2 Science” to Nazis. The likes of Tokyo Tom and I were arguing in good faith and making reasonable points. Yet here you are comparing us to the worst people in the world! In my opinion—and with the greatest of respect—making wild allegations like that is more a hallmark of a totalitarian way of thinking than the kind of reasonable and polite debate we were entering into.

Dan, taking umbrage on Reisman’s behalf, wrote:

I believe they mentioned state sponsored studies as self-interested in response to arguments that the Exxon study cannot be trusted on the basis of its self-interested position. Indeed, they framed the argument as “If the Exxon study is not trustworthy on such and such grounds, then the very same grounds can be used to discount government studies.” There is nothing wrong with that kind of argument, as it is basically a form of reductio.

As for your whining about being compared to Nazis it has nothing to do with gas chambers, so grow up. The Nazis as well as the Marxists indeed were well known for ad hominem type attacks, in which they attacked the source of an argument rather than the argument itself. Professor Reisman could not have made that any clearer.

Despite Dan’s lame attempt to pass off the ad hominem arguments as tu quoque arguments, I myself have seen enough right-libertarians reflexively resorting to ad hominem to know it’s a fairly common response to any research that appears dangerously “soft” on global warming. Global warming is commonly dismissed as a Trojan horse for the regulatory state. As I recounted in a recent post, *Reason’s* Ron Bailey was himself accused of being an environmentalist dupe for expressing a moderate shift in opinion toward the pro-warming position.

Anyway, Quasibill showed up for a rejoinder to Dan:

“The Nazis as well as the Marxists indeed were well known for ad hominem type attacks, in which they attacked the source of an argument rather than the argument itself. Professor Reisman could not have made that any clearer.”

think of themselves as engaged in science, but to the extent that their job security and advancement depend on acceding to political considerations, they are engaged in pretend-science. And these “other” considerations, whether or not they are acknowledged in public, comprise the whole purpose behind the institution that employs them!

Tokyo Tom, a frequent participant in the environmental threads at Mises Blog, got in a good jibe against Reisman:

What Dr. Reisman fails to note is that, at least as far as discussion on this blog goes, the best target of his very valid point – that one should not dismiss an argument through identifying them with a villainous group – would be himself and perhaps one or two others here.

He also quoted from some dangerously environmentalist-sounding material (by Roy Cordato) that had somehow managed to slip in at Mises.Org and contaminate their precious bodily fluids:

If a pollution problem exists then its solution must be found in either a clearer definition of property rights to the relevant resources or in the stricter enforcement of rights that already exist. This has been the approach taken to environmental problems by nearly all Austrians who have addressed these kinds of issues (see Mises 1998; Rothbard 1982; Lewin 1982; Cordato 1997). This shifts the perspective on pollution from one of “market failure” where the free market is seen as failing to generate an efficient outcome, to legal failure where the market process is prevented from proceeding efficiently because the

Consensus is the obsession of politicians maneuvering to impose their will by force on other people.

Reasonable people should be highly skeptical of much of the “science” produced by contemporary state-sanctioned institutions, because those institutions owe their existence to coercion. They are financed with tax dollars, and more and more they tend to be staffed and run by ambitious political types, who know how to massage the system for grants, prestigious awards, budget boosts, and official approval. Authentic scientists devoted to the adventure of discovery and understanding do not fare well in these institutions of Correctness, because the greater their devotion to science, the higher their resistance to compromising truth for political gain. There are many examples from history of the basic contempt for knowledge fostered by and characteristic of command science. As Ayn Rand explained years ago, force and intelligence are logically and fundamentally antagonistic.

In sharp contrast to the deceit that emerges when science is distorted by a regime of coercion, privately funded science, whether by Exxon or some other organization, has a major stake in establishing the truth. For private funding is voluntary, so both sponsors and scientists have a huge stake in getting results, which in this case means establishing facts. The privately-funded scientists want to establish facts because their reputations and prospects for advancement in science depend on it. Their sponsors want to establish facts, because such is their only effective defense against those who attack them. “Scientists” who embark on a career in tax-funded politically-driven institutions

Apparently by acting like a Nazi or Marxist, and using ad hominem attacks every chance he gets...

Good thing I wasn't drinking coffee. Reading Reisman, I keep thinking the title ought to be *My Struggle Against Looters, Moochers, Whim-Worshippers, and Hippies of the Right—and Methodists!*

Quasibill also mocked Reisman's hyperbolic treatment of environmentalists' ad hominem attacks on industry-funded research as tantamount to suppressing testimony in one's own defense.

Don R. responded that Reisman's remark just *couldn't* be hyperbole, because “the lunatic fringe of the environmental movement does EVERYTHING possible to silence opposition.”

Quasibill stuck to his guns on the charge of hyperbole, speculating on the likely reaction of a court to an attorney who produced this howler:

“your honor, you cannot possibly allow the prosecution to cross examine my client, my eyewitness, and my expert witness on their bias, as it would be akin to prohibiting my client from testifying on his own behalf!”

CMB seized on the “lunatic fringe” qualifier in Dan's comment, pointing out that

[t]he discussion is not about the lunatic fringe. It's about a couple of Austrian-friendly posters in the previous thread (myself included) who don't think the man-made global warming theory is necessarily wrong.

But the Kool-Aid drinkers insisted that all environmentalists belonged to “the lunatic fringe of the environmental movement,” and that an environmentalist by definition is one who wants to silence its critics, destroy the oil industry through massive government

regulation, etc. Sione, for instance, made this remarkably broad assertion:

The Nazis are about collectivism. Environmentalism necessarily treats people under collectivist premise. These two are simply variants of the same old poison.

CMB responded:

that just isn't true. Typing "Free-market environmentalism" into Wikipedia might be a good start.

Sione came back with this bit of sweet reason:

Adding the tag "free market" does not alter the essential attributes of environmentalism one iota. One may as well rename communism, free market communism.

Environmentalism requires the application of coercive force to ensure all people behave in the manner that environmentalists demand. Options to choose alternatives to the environmentalist ideology are forbidden. People are to be treated as a collective entity, not as individuals.

Indeed just another variant of collectivism.

Sione isn't just saying that it's *unlikely*, based on his assessment of past experience, that someone might seek to further environmentalist goals through free market means like eliminating energy and transportation subsidies. He's saying that it's *logically impossible*, because environmentalism is coercive *by definition*. See, a word means exactly what I want it to mean, no more and no less; it's just a question of who is to be the master. There's glory for you.

Even funnier, one especially frothy-mouthed rug chewer (Mark Humphries) let loose with the shotgun blast below, arguing that ad

hominems were only bad when used in regard to *industry-funded science*! When it came from environmentalists, on the other hand, suggestions of bias weren't bad at all. The difference, see, is that the industry research tells the *truth*, whereas environmentalist claims about global warming are *lies*. "Research that agrees with me is true, and research that agrees with my enemies is junk science; and whether money biases research depends on whether it's sponsoring the good guys or the bad guys." Just like the Contras were "freedom fighters" instead of "terrorists," because they were disembowelling peasants for the right reasons. Yeah, I know, I know, this guy really *is* running around loose. Anyway, here it is for your amusement:

Professor Reisman has pointed out indisputable similarities between ad hominum attacks routinely employed by Stalinist thugs and Nazis, and on this website by those who disparage any connection by science to Exxon or Mobil. The response to Reisman's clearly valid observation is to attempt to smear him as a totalitarian and etc. That response reinforces one of Dr. Reisman's points: Green crusaders are much more interested in shouting down their opposition than they are in carefully thinking about evidence and facts.

The global warming crusade is politics masquerading as "science". One indication of this bait and switch tactic is the argument, continually promoted by left-wing Greens, that a "consensus" of climate scientists support this officially sanctioned thesis. Aside from the questionable truth of this claim (more on this below), consensus has nothing to do with the process of identifying evidence, facts, and the logical integrations that lead to new scientific breakthroughs. So scientists properly ought not to be concerned with consensus.