

On Global Warming, for Columbia Magazine

Last year there were a few articles in Columbia Magazine, the alumni magazine of Columbia University, that provoked many strong responses. They were “States of Dependence”, by Glyn Vincent, on the oil problem, and several short essays in a “Science Special on Climate Change”, by David J. Craig, all in the Summer 2008 issue, and “The Deep Sleep”, also by David J. Craig, in the Fall 2008 issue, about global warming. They all seemed to me basically well-done, informative, and unexceptionable; in fact it was the responses rather than the articles that moved me to respond in turn.

There were several basically cogent responses, but some others that accused the writers and editors of a strong bias on behalf of the proposition that global warming is an established fact and that if it continues there will be dire consequences. Some even expressed themselves in rather unpleasant ways. (Whatever biases of the editors may have, they did not hesitate to print letters expressing views highly contrary to their own.) The common denominator among several of these responses seemed to be the attitude that (not to put too fine a point on it) things are OK and will stay that way if we just let free enterprise deal with it all. This seems to me untenable to the point of absurdity, so I just had to write. Below is my letter, as submitted, followed by a few remarks I had left out for brevity’s sake.

To the Editors:

Regarding the responses to recent articles about oil and global warming, I was surprised how many respondents dispute the notion of global warming. Some dispute that there is even a scientific consensus about it.

But let’s leave aside the question of whether human activity is causing adverse trends in climate change. Even if we have nothing to do with recent (alleged) warming, does anyone suppose that we are doing just fine where the planet is concerned? The problems are still abundant, plain to see, and urgent. Think of quickly diminishing resources, above all petroleum, and available potable water. Think of the overfished oceans, the depleted soils, the threat to the food supply. Of the congestion of our cities and towns, bad air, waste disposal, and growing population. Of the multitudes at the threshold of economic modernity, whose consumption will increase dramatically in the near future. Think also, last but not least, please, of the destruction of wilderness and of the flora and fauna driven to extinction. Who believes we can go on like this, convinced that infinite growth is not only possible but desirable?

Although hardly the first to do so, I would like to assert a broad esthetic basis for environmentalism. I feel that even the merely esthetic is sufficient reason for us to behave in a way that will avoid spoiling the earth. The esthetic is not just a thing with no place outside the realm of art. It is a largely instinctive reaction to all we see around us. Ugliness is not just disagreeable, it also offends (as does a bad painting) our sense of how things ought to be. Our moral instincts are closely tied to our feelings about what we see. If one reveres life and the earth, one experiences the ugly aspects of civilization as a sort of blasphemy, a sin against nature. The disgust we feel for the way the world is going is a signal that all is not right with the way we live. Even to the extent to which the effects of human activity on the planet are purely esthetic, they merit attention. That we may as well be endangering ourselves and future generations on a very material level only makes the matter more urgent. (Too bad that for so many the esthetic reason for environmentalism is insufficient – that it takes a threat to our own economic welfare to arouse our interest.)

This is not a call for us to return to the Dark Ages in order to save the planet. Technology is here to stay, and although alone it won’t solve our problems, it is still a valuable and by now

indispensable tool. I would like to see a smaller, less intensive civilization – a few billion people would be plenty – but one which would value more the quality of life, not just our raw material circumstances. If instead we continue more or less as usual, we may soon find ourselves in a Dark Age of another sort, be there global warming or not.

Allen Schill '73CC
Torino, Italy
June, 2009

Further remarks:

In the Winter 2008-09 issue, Thomas Johnson MD '79CC seems to blame the “Lilliputians of regulation” for everything that doesn’t run well, and seeks an “American” solution, which seems to consist of unleashing our entrepreneurs to solve our energy needs. We’re all for fostering new technology, but Johnson hasn’t demonstrated that this can only work in a context of laissez-faire, or that regulation has no part to play in trying to achieve our goals in this area. He must know that some of the most important research, in all fields of technology, in different settings (public, private, university, etc.), is funded by the government. I can’t see his (libertarian) ideological approach to the problem, as opposed to a practical and balanced one, as having any more sense than an ideological approach of the radical left.

In the same issue, Brad Tupi '75CC confidently makes several assertions to support his rejection of the global warming hypothesis, but most of them are frankly rather lame. He is conversant on the topic, but oddly tendentious. His data seem cherry-picked, and fail to negate what most experts now believe (which, right or wrong, is a consensus by definition, no matter what Tupi thinks). He does not say how his point of view is influenced by his experience in environmental law (mentioned but not described on his firm’s website). One would be curious to know who his clients are; somehow I doubt that he litigates for environmentalists. He is entitled to his opinions of course, but if he has a professional interest he should declare it.

Links:

Columbia Magazine, Summer 2008: States Of Dependence

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Summer2008/feature1.html>

Columbia Magazine, Summer 2008: Climate Change

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Summer2008/science.html#science1>

Columbia Magazine, Fall 2008: Deep Sleep

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Fall2008/feature1.html>

Columbia Magazine, Fall 2008: Letters

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Fall2008/letters.html>

Columbia Magazine, Winter 2008-09: Letters

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Winter2008-09/letters.html>

© 2010 Allen Schill. All rights reserved in all countries. No part of this document may be reproduced or used in any form without prior written permission from the author.