

The Misogyny of Climate Deniers

Climate skeptic Bjørn Lomborg has built his global brand on keeping his cool. “Cool it,” his best-selling book told those worried about the warming planet. For some reason, however, he seems to have difficulty sticking to the blasé tone when it comes to a 16-year-old climate activist from Sweden.

Lomborg has repeatedly mocked and criticized **Greta Thunberg**, the prominent young activist who has sailed across the Atlantic to attend the UN’s Youth Climate Summit and other meetings in the U.S.

In June, he tweeted out a cartoon that implied Greta was only useful to climate activists because being young made her unassailable—in four years, it joked, she’d be replaced with someone younger still. Earlier in the year, he’d asked why the World Economic Forum was listening to her at all, and approvingly shared a **Quillette** article which called Thunberg a fanatic and **“absolutist”** and which argued adults had a duty to correct her childlike naiveté.

And Lomborg’s on the more civil end of Thunberg’s critics. In April, while tweeting that her policies were **“unrealistic”** and **“costly,”** he added that, **“of course, she should be treated respectfully, just like all participants in the climate debate.”** Several of his followers didn’t seem to care for the caveat, attacking Thunberg with comments about her age and mental health in replies.

As Thunberg approached America, she was followed by a tsunami of male rage. On her first day of sailing, a multi-millionaire Brexit activist tweeted that he wished a freak accident would destroy her boat. A conservative Australian columnist called her a **“deeply disturbed messiah of the global warming movement,”** while the British far-right activist David Vance attacked the **“sheer petulance of this arrogant child.”**

In the U.S., former Trump staffer Steve Milloy recently called Thunberg a “teenage puppet,” and claimed that “the world laughs at this Greta charade,” while a widely shared far-right meme showed Trump tipping The Statue of Liberty to crush her boat. We can expect a surge of similar attacks now that she is onshore in the U.S.

While these examples might feel like mere coincidence to some, the idea that white men would lead the attacks on Greta Thunberg is consistent with a growing body of research linking gender reactionaries to climate-denialism—some of the research coming from Thunberg’s own country. Researchers at Sweden’s **Chalmers University of Technology**, which recently launched the world’s first academic research center to study climate denialism, have for years been examining a link between climate deniers and the anti-feminist far-right.

In 2014, Jonas Anshelm and Martin Hultman of Chalmers published a paper analyzing the language of a focus group of climate skeptics. The common themes in the group, they said, were striking: “for climate skeptics ... it was not the environment that was threatened, it was a certain kind of modern industrial society built and dominated by their form of masculinity.”

The connection has to do with a sense of group identity under threat, Hultman told me—an identity they perceive to be under threat from all sides. Besieged, as they see it, both by developing gender equality—Hultman pointed specifically to the shock some men felt at the #MeToo movement—and now climate activism’s challenge to their way of life, male reactionaries motivated by right-wing nationalism, anti-feminism, and climate denialism increasingly overlap, the three reactions feeding off of one another.



“There is a package of values and behaviors connected to a form of masculinity that I call ‘industrial breadwinner masculinity.’ They see the world as separated between humans and nature. They believe humans are obliged to use nature and its resources to make products out of them. And they have a risk perception that nature will tolerate all types of waste. It’s a risk perception that doesn’t think of nature as vulnerable and as something that is possible to be destroyed. For them, economic growth is more important than the environment”

Hultman told **Deutsche Welle** last year.

The corollary to this is that climate science, for skeptics, becomes feminized—or viewed as **“oppositional to assumed entitlements of masculine primacy,”** Hultman and fellow researcher Paul Pulé wrote in another paper.

These findings align with similar ones in the United States, where there is a massive gender gap in views on climate change, and many men perceive climate activism as inherently feminine, according to research published in 2017. **“In one experiment, participants of both sexes described an individual who brought a reusable canvas bag to the grocery store as more feminine than someone who used a plastic bag—regardless of whether the shopper was a male or female,”** marketing professors Aaron R. Brough and James E.B. Wilkie explained at **Scientific American**.

“In another experiment, participants perceived themselves to be more feminine after recalling a time when they did something good versus bad for the environment.”

In the past year, young women such as **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez** in the U.S. and Thunberg in Europe have become the global faces of climate activism, often with tremendous political impact. In the United States, Ocasio-Cortez has helped transform what was once considered a bit of fringe rhetoric—the **Green New Deal**—into a topic of regular conversation. Across the Atlantic Ocean, in a recent poll, one out of three Germans said that Thunberg has changed their views on climate change.

The rise of Thunberg and Ocasio-Cortez has generated a predictable backlash among conservative men. In the U.S., Ocasio-Cortez has become an obsession on right-wing media. Fox News mentioned her an average of 76 times a day during her first month in Congress. Now, Greta Thunberg is becoming a similar target for European nationalists. In Germany, the far-right **Alternative für Deutschland** party seems to have coordinated their attacks on Thunberg with the right-wing **European Institute for Climate and Energy** think tank.

Climate change used to be a bipartisan concern, the first Bush senior presidency famously promising to tackle global warming. But as conservative male mockery of Thunberg and others shows, climate politics has quickly become the next big battle in the culture war—on a global scale.

As conservative parties become increasingly tied to nationalism, and misogynist rhetoric dominates the far-right, Hultman and his fellow researchers at Chalmers University worry that the ties between climate skeptics and misogyny will strengthen. What was once a practical problem, with general agreement on the facts, has become a matter of identity. And fear of change is powerful motivation.

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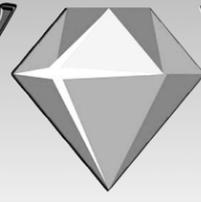


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