

# Why “Science Denial”?

In a new book two professors of psychology, Gale Sinatra and Barbara Hofer, seek to explain why what they call “science denial” is rampant today and how dangerous it is. They also give their account in a strange conversation with Michael Shermer, the editor of *Skeptic* magazine, from whom we might have expected a tad more “skepticism” or at least some devil’s advocacy.

The views of all three are in some ways vague and even confused, but the condescension toward the unenlightened rubes who disagree with them on certain scientific controversies—primarily climate- and COVID-19-related—couldn’t have been more clear.

While Sinatra and Hofer smear a large and diverse group of people as “science deniers,” they undercut their own claim when they admit that no one actually rejects science per se. So their sensational but misleading title and broad statements are designed not to inform but rather to sell books to their progressive-minded audience. The rubes they are talking about, the authors admit, go to doctors, take prescribed medicines, fly on airplanes, etc. That hardly sounds like general science denial.

So what’s the problem? What the authors have in mind is doubt about or rejection of *particular* scientific claims. They are willing to apply the label “cafeteria deniers.” But why not call them “cafeteria skeptics”? Or would that hit Shermer too close to home?

My purpose is not to defend or criticize any particular scientific claim in dispute. Some are backed by strong evidence, while others have little or no evidence behind them. Laymen ought to exercise care in (tentatively) deciding who among the contending scientists are likely to be right. Here I only want to raise a big reason for doubt that the authors and Shermer ignore.

But first, to demonstrate authors’ and Shermer’s sloppiness (which may be too charitable an interpretation of what they’re doing), please note that early on they embrace the allegedly near-unanimous (97 percent) consensus among climate scientists on ominous manmade global warming. Their point is that anyone who would take a position contrary to such an overwhelming consensus would have to be a jerk.

In fact, that so-called consensus was cobbled together by examining just the abstracts of a selection of climate scientists’ journal articles over a certain period. Only a third of those papers expressed an explicit or implicit view on whether manmade global warming was happening. Of *those*, 97 percent agreed on—well, something. But what? What they all apparently agreed on was that an *unspecified* amount of warming has occurred and that human activity has had an *unspecified* degree of responsibility.

Notice that no magnitudes and no net assessment of harms and benefits are implied in that sentence whatsoever. By that low bar, most if not *all* climate scientists and laymen in the realist-optimist camp are part of the consensus! That a good deal of the force out of the consensus proclamation, wouldn't you say?

Yet this "consensus" is decisive for climate alarmists Sinatra, Hofer, and Shermer. (If you think humility is a virtue in scientists, don't look for it in these writers.) Shermer says what impressed him is that all those in the 97 percent "converged" on that view (again, what view?) "independently," while the others, he says, converged on no particular theory about the climate. Has he looked into the facts? Or does he go along with whatever is *called* a consensus by the news media? Is this is how he decides on matters outside his specialty? They're growing a strange crop of skeptics these days.

Here is the problem: when the authors and Shermer call someone a "climate change (or just a climate) denier," they are making a slickly illegitimate move; for what's being denied is not climate change or warming between 1850 and 1998, but a *looming climate catastrophe*, natural or manmade. *Catastrophe denial does not equal climate-change denial*. No one—*no one!*—thinks that climate does not change. Well, actually one group does seem to think this: the alarmists who imply or say outright that *except for human activity*, climate would not change (or not change very much). But that of course is absurd. The concept *change* is baked into the concept *climate*. The only sense in which the climate is not changing today is that it *never* stops changing.

Sinatra, Hofer, and Shermer spent an hour and a half talking about "science denial," with no disagreement among them. In all the time none of them mentioned the word *politicization*, that is, the perverse incentives from government meddling in scientific research. They discussed lots of possible reasons for "denial"—like confirmation bias and other well-known cognitive biases—but it seems never to have occurred to any of them that some people are more inclined to distrust particular scientific claims these days than previously because they have observed that purportedly objective claims (and not just about scientific matters) are used to advance political causes. Sinatra, Hofer, and Shermer have no trouble believing that so-called deniers have hidden political and cultural agendas, but they show no sign of suspecting that those who make the claims, along with the politicians who translate them into coercive government policy, may also have political and cultural agendas—and often not so hidden.

This seems like a serious shortcoming. While Sinatra and Hofer acknowledge that scientists are human beings and subject to the same imperfections as everyone else—envy, greed, ambition, a desire for peer approval, etc.—they assure us that these faults are rooted out by internal checks and balance system. Because of these, no threat to science can arise from within, but only from outside, that is, from "deniers."

That, however, isn't how it works out. Checks and balances on paper often bear little relationship to checks and balances in practice. (This is true of constitutions too.) For example, the peer-review process for academic publication and promotion has become incestuous "pal review." Paradigms are protected against challenges and patched up through ad hoc salvage operations when a paradigm's shortcomings are exposed.

Moreover, politicians are naturally inclined toward research that identifies "crises" that allegedly only government can address. As H. L. Mencken pointed out, "The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by an endless series of hobgoblins, most of them imaginary."

In need of government grants to secure promotion and tenure at their universities, many scientists are inclined to give the politicians what they want. Those are the ones who will get the money, at any rate. An orthodoxy arises, and independent thinkers, no matter how qualified, are marginalized and smeared as, say, "science deniers." (The obvious association with the properly stigmatized term *Holocaust deniers* is no coincidence.) It's happened repeatedly before. It's happening now. (Again, I don't mean that every scientific claim that is criticized is necessarily wrong.)

Politicians demand research that goes in one direction, and some scientists are happy to supply it. The politicians then use the research to justify expanded power (the Green New Deal and economic shutdown in a pandemic), which stimulates further research in that direction. I'm not saying that every participant is a cynic, but it is fun to be near the action. To borrow a trope from the analysis of the military-industrial complex, it's a self-licking ice-cream cone. And all of this is further amplified by the 24/7 news media, which will always prefer reports of looming disasters to good news, and of course the social networks, which are the lookout for "misinformation."

If you want to see how politicization can create doubters, here's one case apart from scientific controversies: Russiagate. For years the American people were assured by most of the "objective" mainstream media, fed by "public-spirited" leaks and retired government spies working as dispassionate commentators, that the allegedly nonpolitical intelligence apparatus had solid evidence that Vladimir Putin had rigged the 2016 election to put his puppet Donald Trump in the White House. None of that was true, as shown by the massive FBI investigation led by a sainted special counsel. Don't you think that a good portion of the American people realize that this establishment campaign was intended to drive Trump from office or at least cripple his presidency, effectively reversing the election? (One not be a Trump fan—I'm certainly not—to see this.) Germane to my point, if that kind of gross abuse can occur in one matter, why can't it be occurring in other matters?

A key part of the politicization of science is government finance of research, which Sinatra and Hofer predictably want more of. As I noted recently, in his 1961 farewell speech

President Dwight Eisenhower warned about the emerging government-science complex, which he said was just as dangerous as the military-industrial complex.

If climate alarmists regard private support for research as tainted by self-interest, the rest of us are entitled to regard government support as similarly tainted. Sinatra, Hofer, and Shermer really should grow up and embrace what Public Choice political economist James Buchanan called “politics without romance.”

Maybe if politics had not tainted institutional science, fewer people would distrust so many of its claims. Politics is the craft of winning and maintaining power by assembling self-serving coalitions in order to impose costs on everyone else. Some people have justifiably come to assume that many government-financed scientific claims are formulated for that purpose.

If I’m right, then the use of science to advance an interventionist political agenda has sown very distrust the authors and Shermer abhor. Laymen should certainly be discriminating when they judge scientific claims, and *real* consensuses should be taken into account. But that does not exonerate the scientists who have actively fed policymakers’ efforts to control our lives.