

See whether you can spot the lunacy

Anastasios Tsonis is not a lunatic, and no serious person says he is. He is a scientist, a mathematician at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee whose specialty is climate. He and a colleague say they've figured out why the Earth is cooling.

It has been cooling, since about 2001, and Tsonis and a colleague say temperatures may go on cooling for 10 or 20 more years.



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He doesn't deny that the Earth is warming. All he did was propose a different mechanism. Oops, wrong answer.

Climate, says Tsonis, is heavily affected by a few well-known oscillating systems — El Niño, in the Pacific, is one — and from time to time, four big oscillations synchronize.

When they do, he says, they become coupled, as if synchronized swimmers tried holding hands, and this messes up the dance. There is, then, a sudden shift in trends. If it had been getting hotter, it gets cooler, and vice versa. This happened in 1943, in the 1970s, in 2001, and it will happen again, he says.

Though this doesn't mean humans aren't also pushing temperatures up.

The trend "might be on top of something we're doing" with carbon dioxide, he says. Some laymen skeptical about climate Armageddon read too much into his work, says Tsonis.

Willie Soon is not a lunatic, either, nor a "denier," though militants use the word to slander him. He is an astrophysicist at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. The data, he says, show the Earth has been getting warmer — and the data show, further, that this is linked to solar output. Blame our variable sun.

"The sun is not a constant light bulb," he says.

The documentable changes in the energy put out by the sun, the source of almost all the climate's heat, correlate to historical changes in climate, say Soon and some other solar scientists. The sun's effects easily overwhelm the small

Soon.

This lands Soon on Greenpeace's "deniers" list, an online roll of scientists who expressed impermissible thoughts and who must not be listened to. It's part of what disgusts Soon about climate politics these days: The reality of scientists' findings has become secondary to their usefulness. Now, he says, "it is always the answer first." Data will be regarded only if they get you to that right answer.

Keep in mind that Soon doesn't deny that the Earth is warming. All he did was propose a different mechanism. Oops, wrong answer. Same as with, for instance, MIT climatologist Richard Lindzen, who, noting that the global mean temperature has risen all of 0.6 degrees Celsius in a century, says this does not portend catastrophe. Or William Happer, Princeton physicist and expert on the radiative properties of gases; he says CO₂ will have diminishing effects. Or Freeman Dyson, the giant of physics who says carbon dioxide is up but not catastrophically. Or John Christy, University of Alabama climatologist and a lead author of a U.N. report on climate, who calls the reports rife with groupthink and politics and who says carbon isn't catastrophe.

Like Soon, they're all lunatics, say the activists, who, one must note, do not say this of Tsonis. The scientists' data and conclusions differ in key ways; all that binds the "deniers" is that their conclusions happen to be, unlike Tsonis', inconvenient for those who say climate disaster is imminent, that talk must end and action begin. One could expand the list to thousands of other scientists who stray from orthodoxy into "denial." What they're denying is the unimpeded propagation of motivating fear.

Motivating toward what? To harangue you into shutting off lights — or all of Wisconsin's coal plants. Or to ban flat-screen TVs, as California regulators proposed. Or to oppose cheap flights and affordable gas. Or to demand veganism, as a top U.N. official did. Or to urge cutting the population in half, as did a top climate adviser to the British prime minister. The adviser's a lawyer, by the way, not a scientist.

This is why it matters that scientists have not settled on whether the Earth is warming, how much it's warming or why, or whether that will be disastrous, whether we can adapt, whether it can be stopped. If on their uncertainty hung only the question of whether we'd nudge down thermostats, it wouldn't much matter. But the supposedly settled matter now is used to justify proposals of such intrusiveness and breathtaking extent that they make sense only if doom is otherwise certain. As you may notice, guys with doctorates say it isn't.

In which case, declaring them unhearable and following politicians off cliffs would be lunacy.

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