

BOOK REVIEW

False Alarm: How Climate Change Panic Costs Us Trillions, Hurts the Poor, and Fails to Fix the Planet, Bjørn Lomborg (2021) Basic Books, New York, 336pp., £12.50 (paperback), ISBN 978-1541647473

Say you woke up one morning and decided to publish something on a controversial topic with a view to maximizing your sales. You might choose climate change and global warming as good candidates, given that there is much disagreement about the causes of the changes and the remedies available. You then write the book in ‘popularese’, emphasizing the contributions of people who cast doubt on the topic and ignoring those who publish articles that take it seriously – particularly people who publish creative solutions in refereed journals. You then enjoy the rewards of your endeavour, securing an excellent publisher on the strength of your anticipated sales. The sales are duly daunting and the controversy extended. Mission accomplished.

This is highly relevant to the book under review. Ever since the publication of his 2001 book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, Bjørn Lomborg, the Danish controversialist, has been profiting from populist, one-sided accounts of the complexities of climate change. It is hard to take his latest book, *False Alarm*, seriously – given that it makes no effort to provide a fair treatment of the evidence regarding climate change, and completely ignores creative proposals for dealing with the problem. They do exist. Take the work of the Californian professor, Mark Jacobson, and his colleagues. Ever since 2009, they have been publishing and updating their demonstration that renewable energies could provide all the world’s power requirements, publishing their findings in top journals and subjecting them to rigorous review. Lomborg ignores their work; he pretends it doesn’t exist.

That’s why it’s difficult to review this book. It cannot be taken seriously as a work of scholarship when it is so transparently a work of fiction, a tract that relentlessly presents only one side of the issue and ignores, omits or cancels anything to the contrary. Science has advanced because of its innovative methods of testing the veracity of its propositions; it uses experimental demonstration to endorse propositions that generate results corresponding to experimental validation and abandoning those that do not. But such an approach depends on authors playing the game by the rules and publishing results in good faith. If someone decides to break with these conventions, then they rule themselves out of serious consideration.

Let me give a few examples to back my assertions. What is the evidence that Lomborg is not writing in good faith as a contributor to the advancement of scientific understanding? I leave out of consideration the assertions that climate change is not as serious as many scientists (and the entire UN project of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) argue. Let us just take the case for a greening of energy and manufacturing technology as a means of substituting for fossil fuels and drastically reducing carbon emissions, universally regarded as a major human-made contributor to global warming. A widely held view is that renewable power can be utilized to generate green hydrogen via electrolysis of water; the green hydrogen could then be used as a substitute for carbon in heavy industries such as steel, cement or aluminium production. What does Lomborg have to say about this pressing topic with its enormous and growing literature? Zip, nada, niente.

What about the shift to batteries for renewable electric energy when charged from renewable resources (and thereby cutting across the problem that solar or wind power is produced only when the sun shines or the wind blows)? There is just one mention in the whole book (p.102) and this comes from a 2019 Twitter post from Ken Caldeira on the growth in battery production in 2018. What about financing of the shift to green technology, and the resort to climate bonds – widely

discussed as the most promising form of green finance and superior to tax-based finance? Nary a mention in Lomborg's index. The same is the case with other green topics, such as 'green growth' – no entry in the index. What about China's astonishing shift away from fossil fuels to renewables, in 2024 reaching the point where 50% of China's electricity generating capacity comes from renewable resources (water, wind and sun). Nothing acknowledged along these lines – apart from a few derogatory remarks on the scale of China's continuing fossil fuel usage.

Is there anything positive to say about Lomborg's work? Yes, it is true that he is a qualified statistician who treats real problems with evidence-based solutions. Since publishing *False Alarm*, he has chosen 12 global problems (such as malaria) and has offered quick solutions at a total cost of US\$35 billion. There is something to engage with here. But Lomborg's slant is that climate change is not one of his 12 problems, and that \$35 billion would be better spent on his chosen topics than on solutions for climate change. Do I need to make the obvious point that we can have our cake and eat it – or we can walk and chew gum at the same time? If the world can pony up US\$35 billion to solve 12 real and urgent problems (as Lomborg assumes), then it can surely find a further US\$35 billion to tackle the biggest problem of all – climate change and the future of our industrial civilization. The premise of Lomborg's most recent book is just risible.

False Alarm has no doubt contributed handsomely to the coffers of Basic Books and Lomborg's personal bank account. But has it shed any light on the drivers of climate change and the available solutions? To ask the question is to answer it.

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