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Global Governance and Geoengineering

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RODGER A PAYNE, JUL 18 2010

In a review of Jeff Goodell's new book on geoengineering, *How To Cool The Planet: Geoengineering and the Audacious Quest to Fix Earth's Climate*, *Grist's* David Roberts notes that the topic raises a variety of "big questions about progress, responsibility, [and] the future of humanity." Roberts:

To begin with, consider that by some estimates a large-scale, controlled scientific experiment with solar radiation management could take up to 10 years. In the meantime, who controls the research? Who funds it? Who has access to the information it reveals? Will it take place behind closed doors in the Department of Defense or in public, in a transparent, open-source spirit?

If it does become possible to alter the climate by design, who decides who does it, and when, and how much?

I've previously noted, and Roberts acknowledges, that wealthy entrepreneurial individuals (a modern-day "Greenfinger") or any number of determined states might pursue geoengineering plans on their own accord. With as little as \$10 billion invested and two or three years of effort, the globe's climate could be altered significantly. Thus, "some kind of global governance" would be needed to control the technology:

If the Alliance of Small Island States — a group of countries that might disappear beneath the waves as a result of global warming — were to pool their resources and buy some big hoses and sulfur, what international law or treaty would stop them, and who would enforce it? Who would or could stop a powerhouse like China or the United States? The United Nations?

...Do we try to restore an old climate or create a new one, and who decides which is better? If history is any guide, it will be the wealthy with their hands on the levers. Climate imperialism, anyone?

I don't pretend to have the answer to all (or any) of these questions. Moreover, I fear that technological capability will arrive before concerted global governance measures. At some point, oceanographer Roger Revelle's famous statement (and prediction) about carbon dioxide buildup will prove to be wrong:

"Human beings are now carrying out a large scale geophysical experiment of a kind that could not have happened in the past nor be reproduced in the future."

The potential "experiments" imagined in the geoengineering literature will be overtly designed to alter the climate. By contrast, the carbon buildup experienced this past century was the unintended byproduct of energy production. Obviously, very difficult (but interesting) global politics problems are associated with both pathways.

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