

Earth Day, Conspiracy, & World Government

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On April 22, 2012, the 43rd Earth Day will be celebrated. On the same day, [Vladimir Lenin](#) will be celebrating (posthumously, of course) his 142nd birthday, meaning he was born exactly 100 years prior to the first Earth Day. As far as I can tell, this is a coincidence. But some people aren't so sure. Indeed, some people fear that climate change is a [hoax](#) fabricated – or at least exaggerated – by researchers in support of a subversive ploy to [impose](#) a costly and oppressive global government, whether through a strengthened United Nations or some other structure.

I can say firsthand that the environmental movement – or at least academic environmental research – is not a conspiracy. If it was, I'd be part of it. I even [associate](#) with the infamous [Michael Mann](#), a climate scientist playing a central [role](#) in public debates about the research. There are simply too many people involved in environmental research, with too many divergent views and outspoken personalities, for there to be any grand conspiracy.

That said, I do find the conspiracy theories to be very understandable. Environmentalists often are (quite reasonably) calling for stronger global governance, so that the world can coordinate and cooperate to address its global environmental challenges. While many local and national initiatives are helping protect the environment, without a global regime, polluters could simply shift their activities to locations with fewer protections. Indeed, as the [Rio+20](#) event approaches, we're seeing new calls for enhanced global environmental [governance](#) come from, among others, my environmental research colleagues.

Furthermore, protecting the environment does indeed involve people worldwide changing their behaviors and even their ways of life. Likewise environmental policies generally revolve around influencing our modes of transportation, our choices of appliances, and even our food. Human behavior needed to protect the environment is not particularly oppressive. Indeed, many are things we'd want to do anyways. But they're often a big change from what we're currently doing.

I also find it commendable that the conspiracy theories are publicly articulated. A healthy democracy can openly question its own leadership. And as unlikely as these conspiracies may be, the stakes are high enough that they're worth at least some serious attention. I see no reason to dismiss them out of hand, though in the present case, it seems clear that we should not believe them.

Just because environmentalism is not a sinister conspiracy, it does not necessarily follow that we should promote global government for our global environmental problems. There is one important caveat, one that is not widely appreciated by any side of this debate. In short, a global government might begin benevolent, but it could turn sour, even becoming the oppressive disaster that the conspiracy theorists fear. And if it does, there would be no other government out there to keep it in check.

It's worth noting that there have been several major oppressive governments throughout world history, [resulting](#) in some of the biggest disasters ever. Fortunately, a historical trend has been that other, more open societies have eventually out-competed them, leading to the oppression to decline. But if that oppressive government is a global government, then there is no chance for another society to out-compete it.

Maybe we will form some sort of global governance systems through Rio+20 and other environmental protection efforts. If we do, I expect that it would be done with the best of intentions, and that it would be quite helpful for our very real environmental challenges. Instead, if we do end up with an oppressive global government, it would probably follow from an initial, benevolent global government. That possibility should give us at least some pause at Rio+20 and beyond.

The core question for me is whether global government is worth the risk. Do the benefits of getting the world to cooperate on environmental problems outweigh the possible costs of the government becoming oppressive? My guess is that the answer is yes, we are better off with a stronger global government. But the answer is not at all obvious, and merits careful consideration. The fate of the planet may be at stake.