



Teenage activist Greta Thunberg (Kirsty Wigglesworth/AFP/Getty Images)

The Misogyny of Climate Deniers

Why do right-wing men hate Greta Thunberg and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez so much? Researchers have some troubling answers to that question.

By [Martin Gelin](#) August 28, 2019

Climate [skeptic](#) Bjørn Lomborg has built his global brand on keeping his cool. “Cool it,” his best-selling book [told](#) those worried about the warming planet. For some reason, however, he seems to have difficulty sticking to the blasé tone when it comes to a 16-year-old climate activist from Sweden.

Lomborg has repeatedly mocked and criticized Greta Thunberg, the prominent young activist who has been sailing across the Atlantic to attend the UN’s Youth Climate Summit and other meetings in the U.S. In June, he [tweeted](#) out a cartoon that implied Greta was only useful to

climate activists because being young made her unassailable—in four years, it joked, she’d be replaced with someone younger still. Earlier in the year, he’d [asked](#) why the World Economic Forum was listening to her at all, and approvingly [shared](#) a Quillette article which called Thunberg a fanatic and “absolutist” and which argued adults had a duty to correct her childlike naiveté.

And Lomborg’s on the more civil end of Thunberg’s critics. In April, while [tweeting](#) that her policies were “unrealistic” and “costly,” he added that, “of course, she should be treated respectfully, just like all participants in the

climate debate.” Several of his followers didn’t seem to care for the caveat, [attacking Thunberg](#) with comments about her age and mental health in replies.

As Thunberg approached America, she was followed by a tsunami of male rage. On her first day of sailing, a multi-millionaire Brexit activist tweeted that he wished a freak accident would destroy her boat. A conservative Australian columnist called her a “deeply disturbed messiah of the global warming movement,” while the British far-right activist David Vance attacked the “sheer petulance of this arrogant child.”

In the U.S., former Trump staffer Steve Milloy recently called Thunberg a “teenage puppet,” and claimed that “the world laughs at this Greta charade,” while a widely shared far-right meme showed Trump tipping The Statue of Liberty to crush her boat. We can expect a surge of similar attacks in the U.S. as she arrives in New York this week.

While these examples might feel like mere coincidence to some, the idea that white men would lead the attacks on Greta Thunberg is consistent with a growing body of research linking gender reactionaries to climate-denialism—some of the research coming from Thunberg’s own country. Researchers at Sweden’s Chalmers University of Technology, which recently [launched](#) the world’s first academic research center to study climate denialism, have for years been examining a link between climate deniers and the anti-feminist far-right.

In 2014, Jonas Anshelm and Martin Hultman of Chalmers [published](#) a paper analyzing the language of a focus group of climate skeptics. The common themes in the group, they said, were striking: “for climate skeptics ... it was not the environment that was threatened, it was a certain kind of modern industrial society built and dominated by their form of masculinity.”

The connection has to do with a sense of group identity under threat, Hultman told me—an

identity they perceive to be under threat from all sides. Besieged, as they see it, both by developing gender equality—Hultman pointed specifically to the shock some men felt at the #MeToo movement—and now climate activism’s challenge to their way of life, male reactionaries motivated by right-wing nationalism, anti-feminism, and climate denialism increasingly overlap, the three reactions feeding off of one another.

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“There is a package of values and behaviors connected to a form of masculinity that I call ‘industrial breadwinner masculinity.’ They see the world as separated between humans and nature. They believe humans are obliged to use nature and its resources to make products out of them. And they have a risk perception that nature will tolerate all types of waste. It’s a risk perception that doesn’t think of nature as vulnerable and as something that is possible to be destroyed. For them, economic growth is more important than the environment” Hultman [told](#) Deutsche Welle last year.

The corollary to this is that climate science, for skeptics, becomes feminized—or viewed as “oppositional to assumed entitlements of masculine primacy,” Hultman and fellow researcher Paul Pulé [wrote](#) in another paper.

These findings align with similar ones in the United States, where there is a massive gender gap in views on climate change, and many men perceive climate activism as inherently feminine, according to research published in 2017. “In one experiment, participants of both sexes described an individual who brought a reusable canvas bag to the grocery store as more feminine than someone who used a plastic bag—regardless of whether the shopper was a male or female,” marketing professors Aaron R. Brough and James E.B. Wilkie [explained](#) at *Scientific American*. “In another experiment, participants

perceived themselves to be more feminine after recalling a time when they did something good versus bad for the environment,” they write.

In the past year, young women such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the U.S. and Thunberg in Europe have become the global faces of climate activism, often with tremendous political impact. In the United States, Ocasio-Cortez has helped transform what was once considered a bit of fringe rhetoric—the Green New Deal—into a topic of regular conversation. Across the Atlantic Ocean, in a recent poll, one out of three Germans said that Thunberg has changed their views on climate change.

The rise of Thunberg and Ocasio-Cortez has generated a predictable backlash among conservative men. In the U.S., Ocasio-Cortez has become an obsession on right-wing media. Fox News mentioned her an average of 76 times a day during her first month in Congress. Now, Greta Thunberg is becoming a similar target for

European nationalists. In Germany, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland party seems to have [coordinated](#) their attacks on Thunberg with the right-wing European Institute for Climate and Energy think tank.

Climate change used to be a bipartisan concern, the first Bush senior presidency [famously promising](#) to tackle global warming. But as conservative male mockery of Thunberg and others shows, climate politics has quickly become the next big battle in the culture war—on a global scale.

As conservative parties become increasingly tied to nationalism, and misogynist rhetoric dominates the far-right, Hultman and his fellow researchers at Chalmers University worry that the ties between climate skeptics and misogyny will strengthen. What was once a practical problem, with general agreement on the facts, has become a matter of identity. And fear of change is powerful motivation.

This article has been updated with specifics on Lomborg’s writings on Thunberg, as well as the removal of a reference to an April 24 tweet by Lomborg. The tweet referred to the author of an article defending Thunberg—not to Thunberg herself, as this story originally stated.

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