

Les Dessous des Cartes

Mark Herring

Science under Siege: How the Environmental Misinformation Campaign Is Affecting Our Laws, by Michael Fumento (New York: Morrow, 1996)

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Since the publication of this book in 1993, more than a million and a half people have died from cancer.

On the surface, such an assertion seems at best sad but inconsequential—a kind of non-sequitur—or at worst pointless, meaningless. But that is the point of the book under review. So much of the information, or I should say, *misinformation*, we get about the environment is often phrased in just such starkly meaningless terms. Much is left out of the equation, leaving many of us wondering if the “pursuit of happiness” is an *ignis fatuus*, or something that can be achieved if you keep your nose out of the newspaper.

Michael Fumento is one of those journalists that if he didn't exist we'd have to invent him in order to be free. Not many such journalists still remain, the recent past having seen the loss of the irrepressible Warren Brookes. Fumento's articles and books on AIDS, Magic Johnson, asbestos and more have rocked the intelligentsia with overwhelming data and clearly reasoned logic to overturn pet theories and extinguish scare-flares. Of course, such “the emperor has on no clothes” prophecies are not always appreciated and Mr. Fumento has been the subject of a number of scathing diatribes and acerbic vitriol. This book will continue to reap him those rewards, but those of us who wish to be informed should show our appreciation by buying his books by the carload. If Fumento, and others like him (Ronald Bailey comes to mind) were required reading along with all the other garbage that passes for “Ecostudies,” we might not be in the place we are now: trying to decide if technology (i.e., science) is worth the ease of life it brings.

This argument about whether science is worth it all is not hyperbole for effect. It is unfortunately the ugly sign of these times. On the one hand, you have companies like Bath and Body Works playing the crying game about not using animals in testing any of their soaps (why would you use an animal to test “Save the Jungle Currant Body Bath”?) while other Eco-terrorists bar the use of animals for research to prevent the diseases of children or to expand the longevity of life. This adulation of animalitarianism by

ecophobes, for that is precisely what this is all about, has reached such a pitch that we may well be fighting for our lives, literally, in a few decades. But that's only the good news. Amid this madness is another. While on the one hand, animals who are thought to be happier, more natural and more normal than humans, and therefore a better part of the environment, are treated with the respect we once accorded to humans. Meanwhile, companies use unborn baby parts to reduce wrinkles, erase crow's feet or just possibly make life easier for those afflicted with debilitating diseases. Of all the pax former Surgeon General Elders fauxed, her most intelligible may have been about the “fetus” and our love affair with it. Ms. Elders, it appears we have gotten over our love affair with the fetus; what we still can't seem to overcome is the death of Bambi's mother.

For those who may think that ecophobes are merely a nuisance to be avoided rather than an army to be attacked, it may be helpful to relate the various incomes of some environmental agencies. For example, The Nature Conservancy raked in more than \$278 million in fiscal year 1993 to add to a fund balance of more than \$855 million. They were not squeamish on how it was spent, either, unloading \$219 million on various enterprises. Greenpeace carted in just under \$100 million dollars. They spent about half that.

Sierra Club, along with its defense fund, acquired, through various fucatory means, just over \$50 million while spending about 80% of it. But never fear. Sierra still maintains a balance of just under \$20 million. When you think of the number of young people who walk the streets for them summer day after summer day, this amounts to robber-baron acquisitions: mirmydonic labor at poverty level prices. Even mostly unheard of organizations like Friends of the Earth or Izaak Walton League of America, have Midas-touched their way to a combined total of more than \$4 million, while spending about the same amount.

The combined totals for the thirteen most notable activist environment organizations is just under \$650 million in revenue, just over \$550 million in expenses. The balance sheets of these organizations amount to *more than* a billion dollars. Now, all we may be saying is give peace a chance. But by golly, with money like that, you can *demand* that peace be given a chance or you'll shoot. Such figures make mincemeat out of books like Gore's *Earth in the Balance* or any number of other eco-terrorists books that argue how bad capitalism is for the environment. If it was so bad, you can bet corporate America would not be funding these seeksorrows to bedevil themselves with. For you see, what makes all these figures so interesting is that the very companies that help fund them are usually the very ones that often bear the brunt of the power that money gives these activist organizations. What was it that Lenin said about us: we'll charge them for the rope they'll use to hang themselves? Apparently corporate America either forgot, or never remembered, that *res est ingeniosa dare*—giving requires good sense.

Make no mistake about it. These organizations mean business. Rosa Luxemburg's threat that “The future will be green or will not be at all” should not be taken lightly. What is meant is that they will get their way or there will not be a way. Murray Bookchin of social ecology fame argues that, “We can't heal the environment without remaking society.”

This sounds a lot like, “You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs,” so often bruited from the lips of totalitarian reformers. Of course what they meant had nothing to do with the kitchen. They mean that you couldn't remake society without breaking a few million legs. The proponents of the ecostate sound chillingly similar, as in the words of Jonathon Porritt, of Britain's Ecology Party, a while back: “From all the knowledge we now have about environmental issues, the inevitable conclusion is that our way of life cannot be sustained. [W]e cannot go on living as we do now.” Porritt also speaks of “warriors for the planet.”¹ All of this strikes me as sounding too much like war when so many of us don't recall it ever having been declared.

But war has been declared and was declared a very long time ago. While still a junior in high school, my avant-garde team-taught Chemistry teacher assigned Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb*. Read it I and my classmates did and it became the *vade mecum* for the rest of the year. We up-and-going-nowhere-in-particular, soi-disant intellectuals slurped the thin gruel lurciciously, never once asking one question about it. Indeed, *questioning* the text was decidedly against classroom rules. This was the truth and there was no other. From Ehrlich, we went to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and cried rivers over DDT. It did not take us long to begin wearing protest buttons, bitching about the Vietnam War, and in general making grand nuisances out of ourselves.

Fumento's book gives the clarion call to arms loudly enough for those within earshot. The pizzicato is just harsh enough to make one take notice; just melodious enough to keep one's attention strong. But the fear is that the book will not get the publicity it deserves. To check this assertion in a very unscientific way, I looked at the holdings on OCLC for the four books mentioned so far: Fumento's, Ehrlich, Carson's and Gore's. OCLC is a bibliographic network of about 20,000 public, academic and special libraries throughout the world. While the presence of a book on OCLC in no way assumes its merit, multiple holding of books by various sites could mean something. For the book under review, in its only edition so far, 742 different libraries have it on their shelves. Not bad for a book full of technical jargon and analyses.

But Ehrlich's book—all 23 editions of it—is held at 2,631 locations, while Carson's book—in 29 editions—is held at more than 4,000 locations. These figures *do not* include multiple copies, nor do they reflect all of the various formats that may be under slightly different titles. The Gore book is more telling since it has been out an even shorter time than Fumento's. It is held at more than 3,300 locations, this not including its French, German and Spanish editions!

Now what does all of this mean? It means that a budding and inquisitive soul entering a library and looking for environmental information will have about *five* times the chance of finding *misinformation* about the environment than he will of finding information. I put it in these terms because the claims of Carson, Gore, and Ehrlich have all been laid to

1 For a fuller discussion of these and other issues, see Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *Deconstructing the Left*, Second Thought Books, 1991.

rest by scientists working in these areas. That is, that the dangers may be present, but that they are not present in statistical probabilities as seriously gloomy as they have been presented to us. Perhaps now, when reexamining those figures for the environmental organizations and their funding, readers will understand where some of that money may be going. If books like Fumento's could be purchased and sent to thousands of libraries, the chances that they would get on the shelves, while never as great as a book like Gore's, would be greater than relying on the left-of-center ideology of many of the nation's librarians to pick these.

Against those odds, the Fumento book provides an ample arsenal for those willing to stockpile it. The book is laid out in thirteen chapters that cover various topics from the Alar scare to how unscientific reasoning is passed off as scientific fact. What is clear throughout this book is that hyperbole of fact is neither the last refuge of liberals nor the *pis aller* of conservatives. *Both* are guilty of meschancy, and both deserve blame. But because the left holds its ideology as religion, while the right holds its as fact, the left gets far more air time and good press. The argument against conservatives is usually reduced by their enemies to, "Oh, so you want to kill hundreds of little third graders?!" What is never pointed out is that the probability of harming even *one* third grader from some environmental fiasco is far more remote than that same third grader dying in a car wreck while riding to school with his Mom or Dad. The left also wins by the very act of scaring. When the evidence is finally in, everyone has gone on about his business. Consider but two examples.

President Bush signed into law an enormously expensive Clean Air Bill against the ululations of many scientists and strong-minded conservatives. But their advice was reduced to ashes with the vaniloquence of liberals complaining that conservatives *wanted* people to die from air pollution. So the bill was signed into law. It added nearly \$700 additional dollars to all cars since its passage, while reducing pollution in the air by less than one half of one percent! What really pollutes the air are *older* cars. But since the largest percent of these cars is owned by another class victimology created by the left - the poor - the ox remains ungored. Or, consider the passage of those [expletive deleted] "child-proof" caps. The advent of such caps was to prevent the unnecessary deaths of young children from consuming pills not meant for them. This added to the cost of medications, but who really cared? It was for the *children*. Quietly, these caps have *not* reduced deaths. In fact, in the years following the change, accidental deaths by pill-taking children have *increased*. This has not been widely reported for it shows in such clear relief the foolishness of such plans. Of course what happened was that people took the "child-proofing" seriously and became far more careless about where they left their medications. But to undo this and reduce the cost of medications would be an admission of stupidity - something highly unlikely from America's eco-idiot savants.

Fumento's book is a *tour de force* on scientific reasoning and the scientific method. He begins with the Alar scare. For those who missed this *60 Minutes* of nonsense, here's what happened.

- Cafeteria workers pulled apples, apple sauce, apple pie, and other products from 500 schools in California;
- Stock boys and store managers pulled off apple products from shelves and threw out fresh apple pies all across America;
- Physicians were flooded with calls by parents very nearly at their wits' end;
- The price of apples fell to \$7 per 420 pound box, \$5 dollars below the break even point;
- Washington State apple-growers lost \$135 million in 1989;
- One by one, apple growing cooperatives were foreclosed after nearly 100 years in existence.

Alar is a chemical made to preserve the life of apples. By using it, apple growers could preserve the life of up to 25% of their crops, saving those apples for sale rather than the waste bin. It wasn't that Alar was something that made apples redder. It made them last longer, creating a longer selling season. It also proved the only chemical known to produce these effects. Alar by itself posed no threat. But a component of it, UDMH, a component of Alar, was considered a carcinogen and therefore did. What must be understood, however is that nearly *any* chemical in the world, including those our bodies make, are carcinogens. For example, our saliva, digestive bacteria and our very sexual hormones have *all* been found to be carcinogenic! Anyone ready to give up sex? So, the question becomes, how carcinogenic must a chemical be before it will be considered life-threatening? For ecophobes, *any* chance is too great.

When rats were fed Alar in doses as high as 10,000 parts per million a day, they produced *no* tumors or carcinogens. However, when rats were fed even higher doses for several years, they did develop tumors. What *60 Minutes*, *Newsweek* and other publications did not report, however, is that eighty percent of the rats died from the toxicity of the dose, not from cancer. Obviously the maximum toxic dose had been surpassed. But none of these things matter. Ralph Nader and his group bullied several companies like A&P, Safeway and Kroger into removing Alar-laced products. When it was further discovered that the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) had overestimated childhood exposure by 389 times, the damage had been done. As it turned out, in order for a child to approximate the amount of Alar the rats had which contracted cancer, he would have to eat something on the order of about 700 Alar-treated apples a day for 75 years. At *that* point, he *might* contract cancer. In fact, in the assessment that the EPA makes to determine the dose to humans in which a hypothetical chance of cancer *may* occur, the rat receives, on average, 380,000 times the human dose.

Of course not treated here are the number of assumptions that the EPA and others like them make. First, there is an explicit belief in ratiomorphism, or the fact that animals and

mankind are the same physiologically, an assumption that has not only not been proven, but that much of the available evidence proves otherwise. The second unwarranted assumption is that the astronomical doses given to rats—many of which die from the amount of the dose, remember—can be extrapolated to humans. The EPA and others argue that it *must* be this way, even though scientists know there is no rat/mouse-to-man predictive power.

All of this is taken at face value by an unwitting public. No one ever stops to reason that such odds are more like dropping a coin from a plane and guessing, within one inch, where it will land. Food scares like Alar a few years ago, and the cranberry scare several decades before, are taken as odds more on the order of one in two, or three out of five, when in fact, the chances of dying on the way to work are thousands of times greater. This is easily the most compelling part of Fumento's book: examining the odds of a thing and explaining to readers that their odds for it are actually far more remote than the things they do everyday. The *degringolade* technique of the eco-terrorists begins to pale when such things are fully understood.

The chapter on Agent Orange will be the least satisfactory for readers. It is, by now, an article of faith that Agent Orange is responsible for numerous cancers, nosebleeds, unexplained illnesses, recurrent vomiting and more among Vietnam veterans. The only problem with this scenario is that those exposed to Agent Orange show positively no higher incidence of cancer or any other illness than those not exposed. This is particularly telling when those men who *prepared* the Agent Orange solution, thereby exposing them at rates 100 to 500 times higher than any other group, revealed no higher levels of illness than any other group with which they were compared. This is especially aggravating, to say the least, for those who have experienced illness. Of course all of this is moot since the federal government decided to saddle the middle class with reparations by settling many of these claims *in spite of the evidence against them*. If one examines the public cases, invariably there are no scientists and doctors called to the stand, but anecdotal evidence.

Fumento also treats Love Canal. Here the evidence is much more public and the government has generally admitted its egregious error—but only after it had resettled an entire community. Again, anecdotal evidence was paraded as proof: my child got sick—what else could have been the reason? Fumento points out that one must always remember that whatever the group, there will *always* be evidence of some cancers, some heart attacks, some fatal childhood illnesses. While these are all tragic, they do not necessarily constitute a “pattern” or a “trend” in one direction or another. What has to be examined is whether the evidence suggests that these various illnesses are much higher than what one would expect to find. Once this is ascertained, causes for the illnesses can be determined. Until then, it falls under the tragic but uneventful phrase of “normal”, whether resulting in illness or death.

Probably the best part of Fumento's books is his section on tenets and common fallacies. Among the tenets are: everything is a gamble; many gambles result in death; *something* is

going to kill you; anything can kill you; practically nothing is guaranteed to kill you (except life); and people affect their own odds. The fallacies include: people feel more comfortable when they are in control; old risks are better than new ones; outrage increases the magnitude of a risk; humans need to fear; odds accumulate [of course they don't]; people fear most that which happens least; and odds cannot be generalized. These rules of thumb help in explaining many "scares" or "alerts" about which we should not be the least bit scared. For example, the fact remains that most carcinogens found in foods we eat, the air we breathe, and the water we drink would require massively enormous doses in order to cause cancer. But because the *possibility* exists, the EPA and eco-terrorists wish to remove them entirely. This would not be a matter of much concern, save for the additional fact that most of those carcinogens are either natural or necessary to life.

Understanding that the risks for many things brought out to scare us, such as Alar, Agent Orange, Love Canal, electromagnetic fields and so forth, are not really material threats lessens the power of ecophobes. If one is willing to devote one's life to consumption or exposure to such things for decades, perhaps one really is at risk. But normal everyday existence raises the risk imperceptibly. To remove everything carcinogenic from shelves or out of daily life is to make our lives more uncomfortable, to raise costs dramatically, to scare us unnecessarily, and to line the pockets of the eco-terrorists substantially.

Fumento's book should be required reading in high school or college. Without such books, we fall victim to fears that are really bogeymen meant to make things go "bump!" in our lives. The great essayist Samuel Johnson once offered "What is known is not always obvious, and what is obvious is not always known." Such is the case with eco-terrorist scare-tactics. Mr. Fumento has gone a very long way in making the obvious known, and the known obvious.