

July 4, 2006

Letters

Not So Cool Ideas

To the Editor:

"How to Cool a Planet (Maybe)" (June 27) revealed a new example of insanity: scientists are engaged in trying to concoct Rube Goldberg devices to literally pull our planet out of the fire. Meanwhile, business and government continue the behaviors that caused the problems in the first place.

If this were the Titanic, I would expect the scientists to be hard at work on a way to turn the Atlantic into a bed of gelatin dessert, while the politicians and businessmen started burning the lifeboats for warmth.

Alex Dering
Princeton, N.J.

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To the Editor:

Re: "How to Cool a Planet (Maybe)": Participants in the global cooling debate have forgotten to tell the public one crucial point: what is the optimum temperature of the globe, and why?

What are the social cost/benefit analyses behind statements that we are "too hot" or even "too cool"? Are we now in the "best of all possible worlds" or is some other temperature better?

Carl Olson
Woodland Hills, Calif.

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To the Editor:

"How to Cool a Planet (Maybe)" reveals that even in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, some scientists and engineers have undiminished conceit about their ability to manipulate nature.

Building sunshades in space would be the celestial equivalent of the levees in New Orleans, another vast enterprise that even if technically and economically plausible would be vulnerable to neglect, denial, shifting political priorities, imperfect physics and the law of unintended consequences.

What mad branch of science seriously believes that it's better to reflect solar energy than to collect it?

If these desperate times call for desperate measures, then let's assign our scientists and engineers something truly bold: a 10-year global program to disinvest in fossil fuels and their problematic cousin, nuclear power, and to replace them with sunlight, wind, water, biomass and unprecedented levels of energy efficiency.

William Becker
Golden, Colo.

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To the Editor:

Re "Cool a Planet": The suggestions that [global warming](#) could be mitigated by some form of shading of earth misses an important point. As carbon dioxide concentration reaches 700 or 800 parts per million, vegetation will have a hard time adjusting.

If many species of plants die, shading and temperature control will not suffice to avoid catastrophe. Planetary shading may be useful for perhaps a decade or two, but is at most a stopgap.

If we don't have a drop in the rate of rise of the carbon dioxide concentration fairly soon, and at least stasis shortly thereafter, controlling the planetary temperature will not help.

Michael E. Green
Manhattan

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To the Editor:

Coming in the wake of [Al Gore's](#) alarming film on global warming, "How to Cool a Planet (Maybe)" might seem to indicate that the immediate and dire threats of global warming and increasing intoxicification of the planet were finally beginning to register as newsworthy items to The Times. This is better late than never.

But given the scope and nearness of the calamity that the world faces today from pollutions of all kinds (the most harmful of which may be nuclear [radiation](#)), and in all fields, The Times's response falls woefully short.

Why not take seriously the most perilous, albeit invisible, threat not only to our nation, but also to the very planet that sustains us, and educate the public on the immediate and critical stakes of our ongoing pollution of the planet?

Do your duty to the public, which stands in grave danger, before it's too late.

Joseph Ring
Oakland, Calif.

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To the Editor:

As a graduate student in atmospheric science at [Columbia](#), I find it mind-boggling that anyone would consider trying radical climate-altering proposals like those discussed in "How to Cool a Planet (Maybe)" in preference to severely curbing greenhouse emissions through alternative energy sources and conservation.

My jaw drops at the notion that people want to inject sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere (with hundreds of jets and concomitant fuel use, to be repeated every five years or so), subjecting the globe to toxic acid rain, just so that people can keep driving their Hummers.

What is wrong with us? Haven't we learned our lessons? Why not limit our atmospheric greenhouse gas contributions as much as we can and then see what kind of climate we've got before we do anything else that we don't understand?

Joy Romanski
Brooklyn

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To the Editor:

Re "How to Cool a Planet (Maybe)": I was disappointed that your article on geoengineering climate failed to mention the profound ethical issues that such proposals raise. The most fundamental of these concerns is who has the right to intentionally change global climate?

The risk is that the same thin slice of global humanity that is primarily responsible for climate change in the first place will simply continue the experiment, without consulting those who are most vulnerable.

Your neglect of these issues is especially surprising since the American Association for the Advancement of Science held a symposium on geoengineering in 1994 in which such issues were discussed.

The results were published in *Climatic Change*, the very journal whose inner workings you dissect. (I was a contributor to that issue.) In any case, these questions will have to be addressed for these proposals to have any hope of being carried out.

Dale Jamieson
Manhattan

The writer is a professor of environmental studies and philosophy at [New York University](#).

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To the Editor:

Re "How to Cool a Planet (Maybe)": On the use of geoengineering to help reduce the effects of global warming, Dr. Roger Angel suggests an orbital sunshade, which presumably would act like a giant umbrella, preventing some of the sun's rays from striking the earth.

In the 1991 film "Highlander II," which takes place in a future in which global warming has become global heating, this exact device was used on a planetary scale. And although it is admittedly fiction, one need only see the film to realize the unexpected and extremely dangerous potential ramifications of such a device.

Rev. [Ian Alterman](#)
Manhattan

Back (Forward?) to the Future

To the Editor:

In "Does This Mean People Turned Off, Tuned Out and Dropped In?" (June 27), James Gorman discusses evidence of a group of people who "see the future as behind them and the past ahead of them."

I often point out to my students that classical rabbinic texts display exactly the same conception of past and future. A famous story in the Talmud has Moses ask God to see the later sage who will explicate the Torah in ways that Moses could never have imagined. God tells Moses: "Turn behind you" — and, thus,

Moses finds himself in the academy of Rabbi Akiva.

Mr. Gorman's article raises important questions about the universal nature of our most basic conceptions. Studying classical texts with care offers a similar opportunity for students to question their basic assumptions and to encounter worlds that challenge their own.

Devora Steinmetz

Manhattan

The writer is an assistant professor of Talmud and rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

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To the Editor:

The concept of time among the Aymara Indians ("Does This Mean People Turned Off, Tuned Out and Dropped In?") is similar to that described by Walter Benjamin in his commentary on the Paul Klee painting "Angelus Novus." Benjamin's image is that of the angel of history facing the past but falling or being blown backward into the future.

This notion, like that of the Aymara Indians, seems to describe the perception of time more accurately than "facing the future."

Wilhelm Hahn

Cape Town

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To the Editor:

So the Aymara see the future as behind them and the past ahead of them? How odd of them.

I was always confused when I arrived at work Monday mornings and learned that the meeting scheduled for the coming Wednesday had been moved "forward" (or, more likely, "up") to today and that Tuesday's meeting had been moved back to Thursday.

Usually "back" in time means an earlier date and "forward" takes you further into the future, but in the modern office we use those words to move the opposite ways.

Furthermore, moving "up" in space puts you at a greater distance, while moving up in time brings you closer. And no one ever moves a meeting "down" — unless she changes the room to one on a lower

floor.

Maybe the Aymara know which way they're going.

Janet Hays
Manhattan

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To the Editor:

Re "Does This Mean People Turned Off, Tuned Out and Dropped In?":

Your article brought to mind a semantic issue I have debated with my husband for many years. It has to do with the way people express the need to delay an event scheduled sometime in the future.

For example, if he needs to change a dinner reservation from 7 to 8, he says, "I pushed our reservation back to 8." This has never made any sense to me. "Back" is in the past. How can rescheduling something to occur further in the future be described as "pushing it back"?

I argue that the reservation has been pushed "forward," or possibly "up" (another antonym for back). I have posed this question to several friends and colleagues and have not found any allies. Does that make me an Aymara? Or the rest of them?

Georgette McConnell
Shelter Island, N.Y.

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To the Editor:

James Gorman ("Does This Mean People Turned Off?") writes that speakers of Aymara think differently about time and that they "see the future as behind them and the past ahead of them." He calls the idea mind-bending.

Careful reading reveals this as false advertising.

Speakers of Aymara think of time just about like everyone else does. They simply have a different — and more vivid — way of talking about it. They call the past "ahead" and the future "behind" because we know more about what's located in front of us, just as we know more about the past than about the future.

This no more suggests that speakers of Aymara (absurdly) conceive of the future as in the past than that the British usage of "boot" means they conceive of people as wearing cars on their feet.

Jill North
New Haven

The writer is an assistant professor of philosophy at [Yale](#).

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To the Editor:

Re "Does This Mean People Turned Off?": That the Aymara language should speak of the future as behind, the past as before, is not all that odd. For us, the future is before only by spatial metaphor.

In its own temporal terms the future is not before but after, later. So our spatial metaphor for time makes for some oddities of its own.

For example, if we are flying from Maine to Pennsylvania, over Boston and New York, we can say at takeoff, "Boston is before us, and New York is after that again." Here we have made sense but plainly put before in the same direction (of travel) as after, which appears to be a paradox.

The solution is that the before is spatial, the after temporal and that the spatial before corresponds, in terms of travel, to the temporal after. We arrive at what is out before us later; we arrive at the before afterward.

Denis Corish
Brunswick, Me.

The writer is a professor of philosophy at Bowdoin College.

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To the Editor:

Re "Does This Mean People Turned Off, Tuned Out and Dropped In?": I have always been impressed with the coverage of science news appearing in Science Times.

That is why I was shocked to see this column taking up valuable space and receiving the prestige of appearing in your paper.

That the Aymara think of past and future time intervals in terms of what is known and what is not has no scientific content at all. (It may be of value in linguistic and conceptual ways.)

We are told that the Aymara refer to the past as before you because you know what is in front of you, and the future as behind you because you cannot see or know what is behind you. Obviously, this does not mean that they are talking about time reversal or any scientific property of time.

The fact that Mr. Gorman's column is based on an article in Cognitive Science should not have exempted it from editorial scrutiny.

William B. Rolnick

Troy, Mich.

The writer is a professor of physics at Wayne State University.

A Successful Notion

To the Editor:

Re "New Notions on Pregnant Women With [Cancer](#)" (June 27): I find it interesting that your article highlights the statement "One study suggests that [chemotherapy](#) is in fact possible." My 2-year-old daughter is living proof.

When I was 10 weeks pregnant and 29 years old, I had a suspicious lump in my breast biopsied. When the radiologist confirmed the malignancy, she told me I needed to terminate the [pregnancy](#) to have any chance of a life with my husband and toddler son.

Luckily, the surgeons and oncologists I consulted were more knowledgeable about the latest research.

They knew that certain chemotherapy drugs were safe in the second and third trimesters, and they had treated pregnant women successfully. I had chemotherapy, and like the child of the woman in your article, my healthy daughter arrived with far more hair on her head than I had.

Lacey Calhoun Sikora

Oak Park, Ill.

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To the Editor:

Re "New Notions": In 2004, while 21 weeks pregnant, I learned I had inflammatory [breast cancer](#) and received aggressive chemotherapy without terminating my pregnancy.

Thanks to my treatment, I am now cancer-free and have a healthy 2-year-old boy. Your article states that

"treatment remains controversial" because of "uncertainty about the baby's long-term health and the possibility that the baby could be left motherless."

My husband and I chose to ignore the perinatologist who warned him — as if we needed reminding — that he "might be a single father."

No parent's or child's future is certain: being a parent necessarily means risking tragedy for the joys of love and life. It's true that living with cancer means living with uncertainty, but it also means living with hope.

Anya Krugovoy Silver
Macon, Ga.

DDT Use Is Long Overdue

To the Editor:

It is gratifying to learn that Dr. Arata Kochi plans to adhere to sound medical evidence and promote the indoor spraying of DDT in poor regions where [malaria](#) remains endemic ("An Iron Fist Joins the Malaria Wars," Scientist at Work, June 27).

It has been proved that such use of DDT (along with effective drug therapies to reduce the blood parasite load, and insecticide-treated bed nets that are appropriately used and accessible) can sharply lower the current unacceptable death rate from malaria.

This approach was used successfully in North America and Europe in the decades after World War II, but unscientific fear of DDT dating from the "Silent Spring" era has prevented similar success in Africa and Asia.

DDT is the cheapest and most effective agent available to reduce this carnage. It's increased use is long overdue.

Gilbert Ross, M.D.
Manhattan

The writer is the executive and medical director of the American Council on Science and Health.

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