

The misuse of science

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Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming. By Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway. Bloomsbury; 368 pages; \$27 and £25.

IN 1953 the leaders of America's big tobacco companies met John Hill, founder of a public-relations company, Hill and Knowlton, to talk about worrying new scientific research linking their products to cancer: worrying, that is, in that it might hurt sales. Hill stressed that a key part of their response had to be making sure that the public was informed of scientific doubts about the validity of the research. The tobacco industry took his advice to heart, even when its own in-house scientists were confirming what the public-health researchers had found out.

In this powerful book, Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway, two historians of science, show how big tobacco's disreputable and self-serving tactics were adapted for later use in a number of debates about the environment. Their story takes in nuclear winter, missile defence, acid rain and the ozone layer. In all these debates a relatively small cadre of right-wing scientists, some of them eminent, worked through organisations sometimes created specially for the purpose to take on a scientific establishment that they perceived to be dangerously unsympathetic to the interests of capital and national security.

By the time the makers of cigarettes were fighting against legislation on secondary smoking and the makers of chlorofluorocarbons against regulations to protect the ozone layer, their efforts had coalesced into a general attack on the environmental movement and the regulatory bodies it had brought into being. The techniques employed included disinformation of various sorts coupled with an enduring and disgraceful willingness to stick to discredited arguments that seemed to play well. It is a shameful story for many of those concerned, and the authors make effective use of the vast archive of tobacco company documents now in the public domain, and of the personal archives of some of the scientists involved.

The book is good on drawing out the politics involved, and pointing out the contradictions. People who insisted that it was vital to look at worst-case scenarios when dealing with the Soviet Union proved remarkably averse to taking the same approach to environmental issues. It is rather less strong on the politics on the other side. In most of these campaigns the dissenters have argued that the American

scientific establishment is tainted with an anti-corporate liberalism and is trying to impose socialism by the back door. One does not have to agree with this view, or to think that both sides are equally culpable, to feel that the ways in which science is used to generate assent for environmental action may sometimes be as interesting as the ways in which it is mobilised for dissent. Though the authors note as a curiosity that campaigns against secondary smoke predated the evidence that it did any harm, they show no desire to explore this seemingly reversed causality.

The book seems to suggest that the path from scientific assessment to environmental regulation would be a straightforward business were it not for the kind of opposition that the authors chart. But it would have added something to have examined more systematically the differences between cases where the science is clear (ozone after 1987) and where there was a fair amount of hype (forest death through acid rain). It is striking that America got acid-rain regulation passed in an election year under a Republican president. Moreover, it was passed despite there being very little scientific support for the more hyperbolic claims by environmentalists.

The authors rightly decry the degree to which scientists have sometimes manufactured and exaggerated environmental uncertainties. But they fail fully to explain how, despite this and other countervailing factors, environmental action has still often proved possible.

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