

Book Review

Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway

Merchants of Death: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming

New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2010

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

In December, 2002, Canada, under the Liberal government of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, ratified the Kyoto Accord on climate change. Earlier that year, future prime minister Stephen Harper had already sent out a fundraising letter to his supporters in which he denied the fact of global warming and said that “Kyoto is essentially a socialist scheme to suck money out of wealth-producing nations.” Harper insisted that, if elected, he would reverse Canada’s direction in global environment.

In December, 2011, Prime Minister Harper proved true to his word and Canada became the first country to formally withdraw from Kyoto. In the meantime and for some years afterward, Canadian public servants and especially government scientists lived under tight political restrictions. When scientific findings did not comport with the preferred ideology of the governing Conservative Party, measures were taken to silence critics and suppress opposing evidence.

Policies were put in place that denied scientists the right “to speak with media or members of the public without first gaining approval of departmental superiors, a procedure that opened even basic interview requests up to political interference and message control” (Linnitt, 2016). In some cases, scientists who did not comply or who otherwise ran afoul of political priorities were disciplined up to and including dismissal. Meanwhile, departmental budgets were slashed and whole research programs were reduced or eliminated.

In the recent Collective Agreement signed between the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada and the current Liberal government, freedom to speak openly about research findings has been restored to about 15,000 scientists. No longer will they be compelled to obtain permission from senior bureaucrats or to have scientific articles vetted to ensure political compliance with government policy. Federal scientists have been assured that they may speak openly about their research without fear of reprisal, the requirement to win prior approval for publications or the need to obtain permission from their organizational superiors in order to be interviewed by the print and broadcast media on matters related to their areas of expertise without the presence of bureaucratic “minders.”

Although it seems that the fundamental principle of evidence-based policy development appears to be returning in Canada, this is no time for complacency. On December 15, 2016, news also broke that researchers at the University of Toronto were scrambling to ensure the

preservation of sensitive and essential environmental information. They reasonably fear that such data will be at risk when Donald J. Trump assumes office as the forty-fifth president of the United States of America.

Like Mr. Harper, President-elect Trump has lashed out at the scientific community and declared that “climate change” is nothing but a “Chinese hoax” aimed at harming the US economy. This alleged hoax is, in his opinion, being enabled and facilitated by US government employees who, wittingly or unwittingly, have been seduced or duped into promoting unnecessary concern about climate change. So, he has named Oklahoma Attorney-General Scott Pruitt as his choice for the position of Director of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Mr. Pruitt, of course, has filed suits against the EPA on several occasions seeking to challenge its constitutional authority or otherwise inhibit its research and regulatory powers. He has indicated that, if confirmed by a seemingly submissive US Senate, he will dismantle the agency “in almost every form.” Concerned Canadian academics can, therefore, be excused for taking care to protect and preserve essential research before it is destroyed by one of the petroleum and coal industry’s most vocal advocates (Hudes, 2016; Kaczynski, 2016).

If such anxiety seems excessive—perhaps to the point of paranoia— please be aware that disturbing signs in the US public sector are quickly appearing. The Trump transition team, for example, has already sent a list of seventy-four questions to every employee at the Department of Energy. The questions deal with matters such as whether the employee has ever worked on projects concerning global warming or if the employee now believes in climate change. Lest anyone be reluctant to “self-incriminate, direct inquiries have been backed up by demands that the Department of Energy itself also provide a list of names of people who have worked on President Obama’s climate policy. To date, department officials have refused to comply out of “respect [for] the professional and scientific integrity and independence of our employees in our labs and across our department” (Collins, 2016); such reluctance is unlikely to be tolerated once a new Energy Secretary has taken control. Considering that the individual to be nominated to take the reins of the department is ex-Texas governor Rick Perry, a strident climate change denier and strong advocate for the fossil fuel industry, public servants in this field may be understandably pessimistic about their employment prospects (Pitt, 2016).

“Punishing civil servants for their work under previous administrations “would be tantamount to an illegal modern-day political witch hunt and would have a profoundly chilling impact on our dedicated federal workforce.” – Sen. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.), December 9, 2016

While the recent conflicts between environmentalists and health care professionals on the one hand and free market advocates in private sector corporations on the other may be unusually sharp at the moment, public sector managers, workers and supporters should not be surprised if pressure intensifies, but neither should they imagine that the rise of right-wing political movements are unique to the turn of the twenty-first century. As with all subjects of controversy, it is helpful to comprehend contemporary struggles in context. At the least, gaining perspective can help us understand our own circumstances better and, with luck, building our insights on past experience may permit more effective responses in support of professional autonomy and the public interest.

Oreskes and Conway provide that context, and then some.

Readers may be reluctant to accept the notion that private firms, supported by free-market ideologues, are willing not merely to put the public at risk, but also to do careful risk assessments in their pursuit of profit and then market unsafe products after calculating the balance between earnings and the costs of lawsuits and criminal convictions arising from charges of either negligence or knowing complicity in causing harm to consumer complainants and to the public at large. If so, they may find the main themes and the evidence provided in this book to be hard to process. Some may recoil and claim that *Merchants of Death* trades in “conspiracy theories” or, worse, a kind of quasi-Marxist critique of capitalism in general. They would, however, be wrong to dismiss the book lightly. In fact, after dispassionately reflecting on the logic and evidence in the argument, they might come sensibly to appreciate that immense harm has been done and continues to be done to individuals, communities and the entire natural ecology by a relatively small number of manufacturers and distributors of products from cigarettes to carbon-based fuels or, for that matter, asbestos which killed one of my neighbours precisely fifty years ago, but which the Government of Canada only admitted was a carcinogenic in 2015 (Rideau Institute, 2016) and is only now taking sufficiently seriously to announce an impending ban (Canada, 2016). They will then take very seriously the allegation that these corporate initiatives have been carried out with the assistance of an even smaller group of scientists who have put themselves in the forefront of inquiry and advocacy on behalf of many of the most culpable corporations.

One of the more troubling themes that is followed throughout *Merchants of Death* is that purveyors of dangerous and often lethal products quite self-consciously follow a pattern in which they seek to raise doubts about the science that threatens to bring their products into disrepute. Current climate-change deniers and others have learned from masters of the tactics dating back at least to the tobacco industry in the 1950s. Among the putative villains in the piece are not incompetents or quacks, but seemingly or (perhaps better) formerly credible scientists for whom the lure of substantial financial gain may have trumped (so to speak) professional ethics and concern for the common weal.

“It must be recognized that businessmen have not been trained or equipped to conduct guerrilla warfare with those who propagandize against the system.” – Lewis Powell, 1971.

Oreskes and Conway, however, do not stop there, for the story of compromised science is not just a matter of individual or corporate avarice. They also effectively make the case that greed and political ideology make excellent bedfellows. The principal characters who show up defending both cigarette smoke and industrial smoke are *sincerely* committed to more than their bank accounts. They are also largely made up of true believers an especially harsh neoliberal version of capitalism that, I venture to say, classical economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo would have found morally repulsive.

The material interests and political beliefs of the free-market science deniers converge brilliantly in their commitment to economic deregulation and the (again, sincere) belief that government has, or ought to have, no business tinkering with business, obstructing enterprise or “picking winners” in commerce, finance, resource extraction, manufacturing and the constitutionally guaranteed “pursuit of happiness.” Except for domestic law enforcement and the

deployment of global military might, they are absolutely convinced that private ownership of the means of production and market determination of the relations of production in an unregulated marketplace is the most rational, the most ethical, and the most efficient and effective way to run an economy. And, come to think of it, considering the massive use of private police forces, private prisons and mercenary military contractors hired in support of foreign wars, even those armed services seem increasingly ready for extensive privatization.

“These free-market fundamentalists, steeped in Cold War oppositions . . . attacked any and all efforts to trace environmental maladies back to corporate chemicals.” - Robert Proctor, 2010.

Oreskes and Conway tell a convincing story. It is that the people who blended fierce anti-communism and massive economic growth in the 1950s to the 1980s are the same as those who now see in ecologists and environmentalists an (almost) equal threat to their belief system and their business interests as provided by the “international communist conspiracy” during the Cold War. Indeed, as conservative columnist and Washington talk show pundit George Will famously put it: environmentalism is “a green tree with red roots,” and a supposedly existential threat to American freedom and the myth of the United States as a “shining city on the hill,” admired and feared in equal measure by liberal democracies and developing nations alike. In Canada, of course, the theme was amplified by officials in the Harper government who warned against foreign eco-terrorists infiltrating from the USA in opposition to Alberta tarsands development — an eerie reversal on past experience when segregationists in the American south spoke of the subversive activities of “outside agitators” promoting civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s (Caplan, 2012, 2013).

Patriotism and profits blend smoothly in the minds of free-market fundamentalists and the tight network of right-wing intellectuals now housed in mushrooming “think tanks” such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute, the Heritage Institute, the Hudson Institute (abetted in Canada by the Fraser Institute) and others who are carrying out the work assigned to them by the spirit of Lewis Powell, corporate lawyer, Chamber of Commerce director and future Supreme Court justice, who’s famous memorandum of August 23, 1971, created the blueprint for a right-wing recovery and eventual domination of American public life (Rideau Institute, 2016), by assembling a critical mass of right-wing theorists and disseminating their views through the mainstream and the fringe media (with Fox News coming somewhere in between) and an increasing presence in institutions of higher education — notably in graduate programs in business administration, commerce and finance as well as in so-called STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) courses.

The targets of the apologists for the “merchants of death” are not just those who are sceptical of the tobacco and petroleum industries and lobbies. Through the decades they have also tried to thwart critics of the consequences of chlorinated fluorocarbons for the ozone layer, sulphates for acid rain and other obvious pollutants.

Oreskes and Conway name names. They show how a small group of enthusiastic “scientists-for-hire” have insinuated themselves into impressive sounding pseudo-science organizations with close connections to the aforementioned think tanks and legitimate right-wing outlets such as the late William F. Buckley’s *National Review*. These individuals and their

supportive institutions are, of course, to be admired. They have done a tremendous job of sowing seeds of doubt in the American and a smaller part of the Canadian electorate. They have capitalized (so to speak) on the ethical conceits of print and broadcast journalism which pride themselves on giving each issue a fair hearing by reporting both sides of the story. Too often, however, this means giving equal time to astrology and astronomy, to Julia Child and Hannibal Lecter. After all, *faux* debates on CNN, for instance, are much more entertaining than rigorous reporting. And, of course, such staged contests rarely admit that there might be *more than* two sides to their stories. Such complexity, they seem to think, would unnecessarily confuse the audience.

Other issues come into play. We are, according to some perceptive critics, now living in a “post-factual” world. Satirist Stephen Colbert’s amusing concept of “truthiness,” a lie made up to sound plausible which, if repeated often enough, may replace the actual truth in public discourse (Digital Economy Forum, 2016) is part of the problem; but, as Donald Trump’s successful campaign for the most powerful elected position on the planet makes clear, it has become possible for public figures to display open indifference to fact and overt hostility to evidence to a degree even more astonishing than, for example, when Australian prime minister Tony Abbott famously repealed carbon laws in open defiance of rational discussion and overwhelming scientific verification on the matter (Connor, 2014).

As a result, what Robert Proctor (2010) has called “manufactured ignorance” has become a part of public policy development and governance. We may hope it is temporary and that somehow the public and public opinion leaders will soon come to their senses. The stakes are too high to sink into the luxury of apathy or cynicism and the price to be paid by responsible politicians, public servants and citizens for failure to restore respect for as much truth as we can rationally and empirically discover is much higher than the personal cost of deferring to authority and power.

“The Breaking News Generator - Today's top story... you! Or, whatever you want. Add your pic, write the headline and we'll go live to the scene. Sort of.” – US advertisement for fake news

Oreskes and Conway’s book is a persuasive effort to describe and critique the mobilization of mass ignorance in the service of emotional appeals to what is now commonly called “populism” and to wantonly tear down not only standards of civility, but also defensible standards of thought as well. Although this volume is already five years old, it remains a crucially important text upon which to build a better understanding of processes now afoot in the land. As Proctor (2010) writes, “ever since the ‘Reagan Revolution’ of the 1980s, libertarian ideologues have managed to convince large numbers of Americans that government is inherently bad — worse even than carcinogens in your food or poisons in your water.” The same impulse lies behind and has been amplified in recent and impending shackles on independent thought and conscientious work by scientists in the public service.

We are, to put it bluntly, in a situation in which some citizens are being drawn into a narrative in which they will blindly follow demagogues who appeal to their desperate needs and to their darker angels, while others may look aghast at some features of politics and governance in otherwise respectable liberal democracies and shrink away in paroxysms of incredulity and

horror. This is plainly not a time for complacency, for the greater threat to the public interest and modest progress on all policy fronts may not be the toxic “innovations” threatened by monstrous forces, but the apathy and cynicism that leeches into the body politic. As Emile Cammaerts (1937, p. 211) wrote in his study of G. K. Chesterton, the trouble with Christian believers who lose their faith and “choose not to believe in God” is not that they henceforth will “believe in nothing, [but] they then become capable of believing in *anything*.” A loss of faith in democracy can have even broader and deeper consequences. We have witnessed them before.

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