The Inquisition of Climate Science

by James Lawrence Powell

reviewed by John R Mashey

The Inquisition of Climate Science is an excellent, well-written book for the general audience which gives readers a broad view of organized attacks on climate science over the last few decades.

Anti-science campaigns try to induce the public to reject inconvenient science or at least confuse people enough to avoid unwanted actions. Such campaigns create strange alternate universes. As readers of RNCSE will know, evolution anti-science seems driven by an ideology associated with some religions, engendering an alternate universe where biology does not work. For financial gain, cigarette companies funded tobacco anti-science to create a universe that ignores medical science.

Climate anti-science combines considerations of both finance and ideology—in this case extreme free-market fundamentalism, which goes beyond a preference for free markets to a categorical rejection of most government actions, such as safety or environmental laws. In the resulting alternate universe, physics, statistics and biology do not work, and human-induced global warming is a giant hoax created by a cabal of climate scientists trying to create a world government … or something like that.

Chapters 1–3 of Powell’s book provide a quick tour, with many examples, into the alternate universe of climate anti-science, its organizations, and prominent people. Some of this might seem too zany to be true, but on the basis of much personal research and writing on this topic, I think that it is accurate, with one quibble. Powell writes with reference to Galileo,

At least the Roman Inquisition had an alternative theory of the solar system: Ptolemy’s earth-centered astronomy from the second century ce. Even today’s creationists and disciples of intelligent design have their Bible to fall back on. The modern inquisitors have not even that much: they have no alternative theory to explain the observed facts of global warming. (p 3)

Some of them have no such theory, because they reject the observed facts. But the rest have many explanations—the sun, cosmic rays, undersea volcanoes, urban heat islands, or maybe just natural cycles for which no physical explanation is known—which, however, lack scientific credibility and often contradict each other. Skeptical Science (http://www.skepticalscience.com/) catalogs such attempted explanations.

Chapters 4–6 spend just 18 pages to explain the science of the greenhouse effect and its history, starting in the 1800s, highlighting key developments of the last half-century and
ending with “All You Really Need to Know in One Chart.” The discussion is accurate but properly brief, because the book’s focus is anti-science. For the next level of depth on the science, a good general-audience book is Archer (2009).

Organizations that support climate anti-science overlap slightly with those that attack evolution, but overlap considerably with those that learned the techniques of creating doubt about science from the cigarette companies. Chapter 7 of The Inquisition of Climate Science addresses the tobacco tactics, and chapter 8 shows how ideologically-driven climate anti-science followed suit. Chapter 9 discusses some key “think tanks,” typically non-profit “public charities” that act more like public relations agencies or lobbyists, who often learned doubt-creation through involvement with the tobacco industry. Powell notes that these think tanks have employed tactics similar to those of creationists in trying to insert anti-science into schools and harass teachers. I think that such tactics led teachers to ask for help from NCSE, which responded by adding staff with climate expertise. Chapter 10 focuses on ExxonMobil’s campaigns, often involving the funding of think tanks and front groups, against climate science.

Chapter 11 notes some of the ways in which the media have failed to cover this story well. Powell charges that the media often gives anti-science marketing equal time with credible science, thus confusing the public.

Having described the machinery behind climate anti-science, Powell spends the rest of the book (chapters 12–17) describing specific attacks on climate science and scientists, including disinformation, intimidation, and legal harassment. I know quite a few of the scientists mentioned in the book, and I’ve seen other examples of such attacks. For an example following publication of the book, see Johnson (2012) and Sinclair (2012) for a taste of the hate mail directed at the climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe.

Powell ends eloquently: “If deniers can vilify individual scientists and neutralize the field of climate science simply because of ideology and a conspiracy theory, what will be the next field of science—or art, or history, or literature, or medicine—that some group chooses to denounce?” (p 187).

Powell knows the subject well, but has not been directly involved in the climate fights, so his book offers a good perspective. Readers new to this topic will find The Inquisition of Climate Science a fine starting point. Later, the reader might study Oreskes and Conway (2010) for its in-depth history of four people important to climate anti-science. For recent accounts by climate scientists under attack, see Bradley (2011) or Mann (2012). Proctor (2012) is a detailed history of the tobacco industry, whose tactics and personnel have been inherited by climate anti-science. Finally, one might borrow a copy of Inhofe (2012) to read an example of anti-science writing by a US Senator. Read Powell first.

Readers might ponder the power of the organized doubt-creation detailed in this fine book. The Surgeon General reported in 1964 that cigarettes damage health, and the science was already clear. About 20% of adult Americans smoke—and most started as teenagers after that report appeared. The effects of their smoking on their health are tragic for them and for their families and not easily reversible, but people have reduced its prevalence in some places by legal actions in the face of strong tobacco industry tactics. People cannot likewise change the laws of physics, which show that increasing CO₂ will make significant and
mostly negative global changes to our planet. The current generation has a choice between bad and worse effects, not so much for ourselves, but imposed increasingly on each successive generation. The effects promise to be tragic for many.

REFERENCES


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