

ECONOMICS

Seller's market

A pair of historians explain how market fundamentalism leads to science denial

By H. Holden Thorp

The landmark book *Merchants of Doubt*, by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, meticulously documented how prominent scientists lacking relevant expertise used their credentials and influence to enhance conservative opposition to government regulation on matters ranging from tobacco and secondhand smoke to climate change (1). As Oreskes and Conway explain in their outstanding new book, *The Big Myth*, the pair were challenged by Senator Tim Wirth to produce a companion book that explained what to do about the findings presented in *Merchants*. That is not precisely where they ended up—it is probably more accurate to say that *Merchants* gave us the “how” of science denial, and *The Big Myth* gives us the “why”—but the new book is no less important.

The “why” of science denial, the authors argue, is market fundamentalism—the belief that free markets unencumbered by government regulation can solve any problem through what Ronald Reagan repeatedly called the “magic of the marketplace.” Although popularized in the 1980s, this philosophy was the result of 100 years of

methodical efforts to build the political case—and resulting political coalition—for doubting evidence that favored government regulation. The authors weave an engaging tale with compelling underlying research that shows why scientific research on topics ranging from climate change to COVID-19 is so effortlessly dismissed.

Many of the seeds of market fundamentalism were planted in the 1920s, when struggles ensued over how to provide electricity to rural America. Specifically, great debates occurred over whether rural electrification was best provided by private entities or by regulated public-private partnerships. To fight government involvement, power companies formed a trade association, the National Electric Light Association (NELA), that instigated a pro-business propaganda campaign that included introducing materials into grade-school textbooks. NELA established a framework that many future anti-regulation campaigns would follow.

The next big move by market fundamentalists occurred in the late 1930s, when an industry group called the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) cultivated what they called the “tripod of freedom.” This concept held that three aspects of American life were inseparable: civil and religious liberty, representative democracy, and free private enterprise. NAM propagated this idea through a radio program called *The American Family*

The Big Myth: How American Business Taught Us to Loathe Government and Love the Free Market

Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway
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Robinson, which reenvisioned the 1812 novel *The Swiss Family Robinson* through a lens of free enterprise in an effort to convince Americans that free markets were coequal with democracy and personal liberty. With that idea in place, it was easy to argue that impediments to free enterprise through government regulation were tantamount to the dismantling of the democratic system and encroachment on individual freedom.

In subsequent sections, eye-opening episodes abound. In chapter 6 (“The Big Myth Goes West”), the authors expose how Rose Wilder Lane, a founder of American libertarianism and the daughter of *Little House on the Prairie* author Laura Ingalls Wilder, shaped her mother’s children’s novels to serve as instruments of market fundamentalism. In chapter 7 (“A Questionable Gospel”), they explain how Christianity was reframed in the mid-20th century by leaders such as Norman Vincent Peale from a pursuit focused on compassion and collective welfare to one of personal liberty. And in chapter 9 (“Steering the Chicago School”), they explain how the “Chicago school” of free-market economics—a philosophical framework that emerged at the University of Chicago during the 1930s and was exemplified by the work of economist Milton Friedman—provided an intellectual basis for laissez-faire economics that was validated by numerous Nobel Prizes. Astoundingly, although Friedman’s ideas have never been rigorously verified by experiment, they remain prominent in the field of economics.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged as Oreskes and Conway were writing *The Big Myth*, provides a perfect endpiece for the book. Here, the authors show how 100 years of anti-regulation propaganda enabled vaccine hesitancy and pushback over mask mandates.

For scientists who are dumbfounded by anti-science attitudes, understanding this history is vital. Only by understanding the forces that cause science denial can anything be done about it. Like *Merchants of Doubt* before it, *The Big Myth* offers crucial insight into this phenomenon. ■

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. N. Oreskes, E. M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (Bloomsbury, 2010).

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One hundred years of anti-regulation propaganda preceded mask pushback during the COVID-19 pandemic.