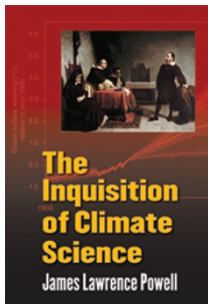


Sceptical about scepticism



The Inquisition of Climate Science

by James Lawrence Powell

COLUMBIA UNIV. PRESS: 2011. 272 PP. \$27.95 / £19.50

My dictionary describes the Spanish Inquisition as “an institution that guarded the orthodoxy of Catholicism in Spain, chiefly by the persecution of heretics”. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spain and Italy were dangerous places for those exploring ‘unorthodox’ ideas. Those accused of non-Catholic beliefs or actions were subjected to horrific torture during the inquisition’s tribunals to produce a confession, which would lead to their punishment and, often, death. Among those interrogated was the astronomer Galileo, who was forced to recant on his statements on heliocentricity, despite there being no evidence to support the Church-held geocentric view. In the twenty-first century, is climate science being judged by an inquisition of climate deniers in a similarly unscientific way?

The Inquisition of Climate Science by geologist James Lawrence Powell claims just that. With an artist’s impression of the Galileo inquisition on its cover, the book charges climate sceptics with trying to impose an irrational orthodoxy on the rest of us. In this book, Powell — who has a knack for writing popular science books on intriguing questions — examines the issue of climate change denial and sets out to debunk the deniers. He wonders why the public distrusts climate scientists, particularly in the US, and concludes that “we are witnessing the most vicious, and so far most successful, attack on science in history”. He may be right. Powell takes forthright and deserved pot-shots at some well-known enemies of rationality in the climate change debate, including US Republican Senator James Inhofe, who calls global warming “the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people”, and US Republican politician Sarah Palin, who labels it “snake-oil science”.

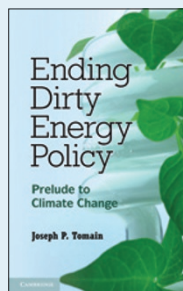
But are things so simple? Do climate scientists share blame for the way they react to criticism? Sadly, in his rush to defend climate science, Powell does not address these questions, and so he becomes part of the problem, too. The boot often seems to be on the other foot. For Powell is the man guarding the orthodoxy on climate science, and deviation invites demonization. With chapter titles such as ‘Not sceptics, deniers’, ‘Adventures in denierland’ and ‘The Lomborg deception’, Powell’s world echoes that of George W. Bush, in which “if you are not for us, you are against us”. Should science be like this?

Powell’s case is that there is a denial industry out there, that it is funded by people with a vested interest in trashing inconvenient science, and that this industry gives voice to some arrogant, ignorant and vengeful people. The book is full of crazy sceptics, from Palin to US radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh to wacky would-be boffin, UK politician Viscount Christopher Monckton.

This plain man’s guide to the climate wars is right to take on these sceptics, and for the most part does it well. However, although these individuals are fair game, they are also easy game. The central flaw of this book is that Powell fails to address the serious and coherent critiques of the climate change consensus. Where in this book are Judy Curry of Georgia Institute of Technology, the University of Colorado’s Roger Pielke Jr, the University of Alabama’s John Christy and others? All three are renowned academics, yet they each have also been reasoned critics of the orthodox climate science canon, and of their fellow researchers, in specific areas. Arguments from credible scientists like these can be used by the climate change deniers to bolster their non-scientific case. As such, they cannot be ignored.

It seems that Powell leaves them out because they would complicate a simple story. He ends up conflating such reasoned

ON OUR BOOKSHELF

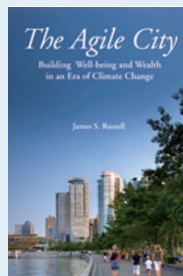


Ending Dirty Energy Policy: Prelude to Climate Change

Joseph P. Tomain

CAMBRIDGE UNIV. PRESS: 2011. 320 PP. £19.99

Weaning society off its fossil fuel dependence presents enormous regulatory challenges. Focusing on the United States, this book by Professor of Law Joseph Tomain puts forward the case that a real change in the energy mix can only be achieved by transformative energy policy. Regulatory systems need to be redesigned, he argues, to open up new markets and promote competition and investment in renewable and efficient technology.



The Agile City: Building Well-Being and Wealth in an Era of Climate Change

James S. Russell

ISLAND PRESS: 2011. 312 PP. £25.00

Climate adaptation and mitigation should start with housing, argues journalist and urban analyst James Russell. In this book, Russell writes that change undertaken at the building and community level to adapt towns and suburbs offers a far more effective approach to reducing climate risks and carbon emissions than tax gimmicks or massive alternative-energy investments.