

*Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution.* By *Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner*. Berkeley: University of California Press/ Milbank Memorial Fund, 2002. xx + 408 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, maps, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN 0-520-21749-7.

Reviewed by David Stradling

The latest collaboration of historians Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner has resulted in a clear and troubling thesis: both the lead and vinyl industries conspired “to deny and suppress information about the toxic nature of their products” (p. 4). The title, *Deceit and Denial*, well captures the essence of this work, and though Markowitz and Rosner can sound as much like activists as scholars, this is a thoroughly researched and very convincing book. Their work lays out ample evidence to support an argument made by environmental activists for over thirty years: industry has endangered public health “by controlling research and manipulating science” (p. 5).

Although written as a monograph under this central argument, the book really has two distinct topics: the lead industry’s efforts to maintain sales during debates about lead’s toxicity, and the petrochemical industry’s more recent efforts to hide or obfuscate research concerning the toxicity of vinyl chloride monomer (VCM), the building block of the widely used plastic polyvinyl chloride. Both sections include damning evidence of industry culpability in jeopardizing the health not just of workers, but also of the general public. The most important evidence, revealing what these industries knew and when they knew it, has become public through its inclusion in lawsuits.

The social history of lead poisoning has been well covered by Christian Warren’s *Brush with Death* (2000), but Markowitz and Rosner add significant detail in two areas. First, through extensive use of papers obtained from the Lead Industry Association, the authors provide good evidence that the industry well understood the dangers of its products, especially lead paint, but rather than act to protect human health, it organized an aggressive, deceitful campaign in an effort to protect sales. Second, in an extremely effective chapter on the National Lead Company’s advertising, beginning in 1910 and extending through the 1930s, the authors reveal a “cynical” and “insidious” ad campaign designed to make lead paint appealing to children, especially through the Dutch Boy

character. Revealing a staggering lack of concern for human health, National Lead worked hard to ensure that generations of children would be put at risk through unnecessary exposure to lead in interior paints, even as applied to toys, a practice that continued decades after infant deaths had been linked to lead paint. Markowitz and Rosner have provided startling evidence here, including the print advertisements themselves, one of which shows an infant leaving fingerprints on a lead-painted wall.

These early chapters on lead are disturbing, but they largely cover well-known topics, including the tetraethyl lead controversy in the 1920s and Robert Kehoe's research on behalf of industry. Perhaps familiarity with the industry's immoral behavior makes it seem less shocking. This is much less the case in the authors' discussion of the chemical industry's role in polyvinyl chloride production, which takes on a sharper edge, as evidenced by the chapter titles "Evidence of an Illegal Conspiracy by Industry" and "Damn Liars." Here the most incriminating (literally incriminating) evidence is found in the Manufacturing Chemists' Association records, from which Markowitz and Rosen draw out salient instances of industry deception, including the purposeful withholding of evidence from Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

The theme established in their analysis of the lead industry persists through this later discussion, as the petrochemical industry attempts to retain markets and limit regulation through the control of science. But by the 1960s the world had changed dramatically, as growing environmental awareness, public skepticism regarding powerful institutions, the Civil Rights Movement, and a strengthened labor movement all came together to limit the industry's ability to control the debate or quash evidence.

The story takes shape as workers begin to die from a rare liver cancer at a B. F. Goodrich vinyl chloride plant in Louisville in the early 1970s, nearly a decade after research had linked VCM to a bone disorder and had suggested links to cancer. Despite the probability that VCM posed grave threats to human health, the industry failed to initiate sufficient research to establish the levels at which VCM might actually be safe for workers, for fear of discovery that no exposure level was safe. At the same time, the industry quietly took VCM out of products like hairspray, where it was used as a propellant, without warning the public about potential health consequences from using the products already manufactured and sold. As had been the case regarding lead, the

petrochemical industry treated negative links to human health as little more than a public relations nightmare or a potential legal liability.

*Deceit and Denial* also includes two chapters concerning Louisiana's petrochemical industry, in which the authors describe the development of the environmental justice movement and recent efforts to prevent Shintech Corporation from building a large plant in Convent, in the heart of "Cancer Alley." This story is familiar to environmentalists and environmental historians, and although well told here, it adds relatively little to the book, particularly given the near absence of industry documents that might press the theme of "deceit and denial."

Markowitz and Rosen have collaborated on a series of influential histories, including their 1994 book on silicosis, *Deadly Dust*, and an earlier edited volume, *Dying for Work* (1987). Some readers may find their activism too obvious here, but excellent scholarship is always at the heart of their work. References to current politics will distract some readers, but others will find such links central to the book's point: deceit and denial continue, and the lies will probably be uncovered only after damage is done. The many references to the Bush administration remind us that despite progress in eliminating lead from the built environment and in limiting VCM exposure, the history of industrial pollution is hardly progressive.

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