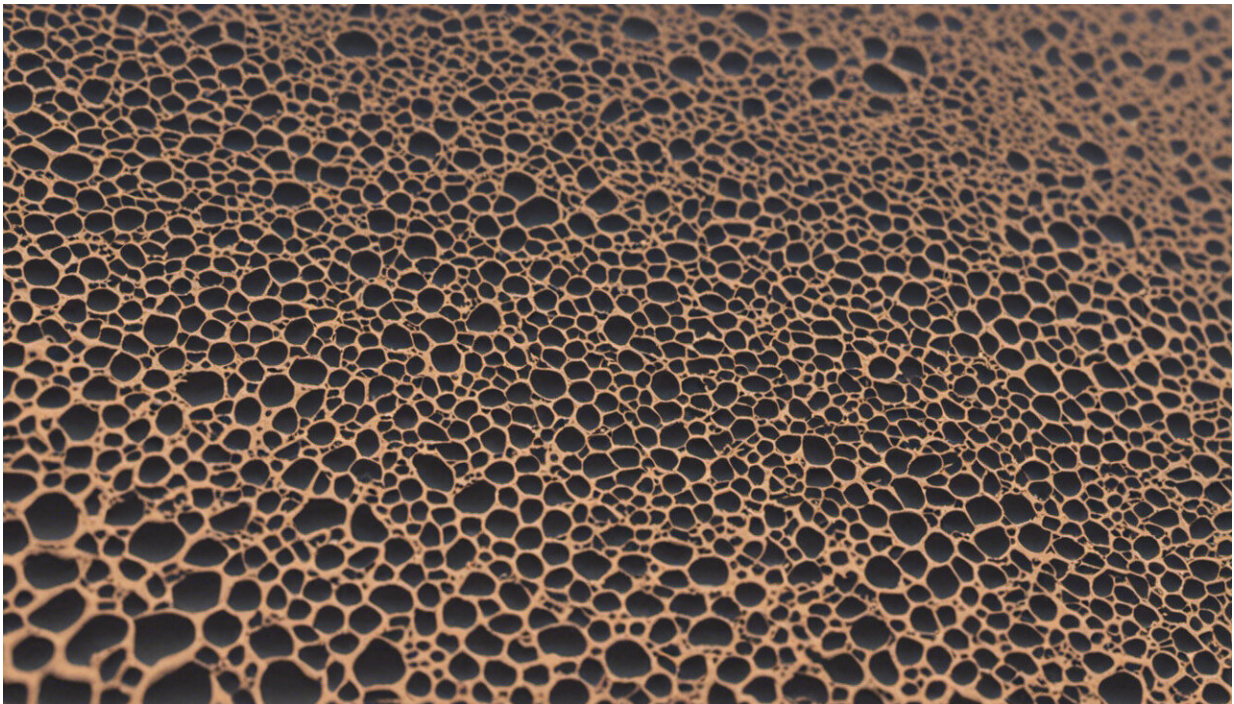


The plastic crisis has deep corporate roots: To protect our planet, they need to be exposed

August 4 2022, by Alice Mah



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

This spring, I taught a new undergraduate course in environmental sociology. Most of my students took the course because they were curious to see what their desire to live more sustainably had to do with sociology.

By the third week—after a deep dive into the troubling connections between [fossil capitalism](#) (the dependence of capitalism on [fossil fuels](#)), [waste colonialism](#) (the unjust international trade and disposal of hazardous waste between countries) and [environmental injustice](#)—a few students said glumly that they had thought the course would be more optimistic.

During the fourth week, we explored the well-documented history of [climate denial and deception](#) among [fossil fuel companies](#), as well as the related "[deceit and denial](#)" tactics of the tobacco, lead and chemical industries. "Do you think it's really true?" one student asked me imploringly. "Do you think that businesses are really that unsustainable and will never change?"

I hesitated. I wanted my students to consider complex environmental problems from a critical sociological perspective, but I didn't want to lead them down a pessimistic path. "Well," I admitted, "I did just [write a book](#) about the plastics industry with the subtitle 'how corporations are fueling the ecological crisis and what we can do about it.'"

It's hard to avoid pessimism when you witness firsthand the obstinacy of socially and environmentally damaging industries. Early in 2019, I attended a plastics industry conference in the wake of the [marine plastic crisis](#), prompted by public outrage over viral images of marine wildlife [choking on plastic](#). The crisis prompted a swift response from plastic-related corporations, who attempted to frame the problem in terms of littering and waste rather than overproduction. "We need to get the image of plastic in the oceans out of the public's mind," exclaimed a corporate executive at the conference. "We need to make plastic fantastic again."

Since the dramatic rise of plastic production across the world after the [second world war](#), petrochemical and plastics companies have fought to

expand and protect their markets through creating demand for plastic products, denying toxic risks and shifting blame for pollution onto consumers. And despite increasing public awareness of (and regulations on) plastic pollution, the global plastic crisis is only [getting worse](#).

My new book, [Plastic Unlimited](#), sheds light on the corporate roots of this crisis. In it, I address the concept of the "corporate [playbook](#)" used by [big oil](#), [big tobacco](#), and, more recently, [big plastic](#).

Playbook tactics

The [corporate playbook](#) often contains a common repertoire of strategies used by controversial industries to conceal or cast doubt on the harmful effects of their products. Champions of these strategies have been dubbed "[merchants of doubt](#)" and accused of offenses from downplaying the [health risks](#) of smoking to funding climate change denial.

As researcher David Michaels wrote in his exposé [Doubt is Their Product](#), "the manipulation of science by the plastics industry was at least as flagrant and as self-serving as any other industry" he had researched—including the tobacco industry. Michaels was referring to the [vinyl chloride scandals](#) of the 1960s and 1970s, when leading chemical companies conspired to hide evidence about the toxic health effects of the vinyl chloride monomer on workers in chemical plants.

Big industry's track record continues today. It has denied the [toxic hazards](#) of myriad petrochemicals and [plastic products](#), funded climate misinformation campaigns, misled the public about the [effectiveness of recycling](#), and lobbied to [thwart and delay](#) environmental regulations. During the pandemic, it also lobbied to promote single-use plastic bags as the "[sanitary choice](#)."

Leading corporations also use offensive tactics, including directing

attention to their role as so-called innovators in green tech. Take the [circular economy](#), for example. It sounds like a great idea to try to eliminate waste by shifting from a linear "[take-make-waste](#)" economy to one in which existing materials are reused for as long as possible. But, crucially, no global or national policy visions of a [circular economy](#) for plastics go so far as to call for [limiting plastic production](#) altogether.

In fact, the [plastics industry](#) promotes the weakest form of the circular economy—recycling—which means [plastic production](#) can keep going, despite the [reality](#) that most items going into a recycling bin will end up being burned or dumped.

What's more, recycling uses a lot of energy. [Chemical recycling](#), for instance, involves returning plastics to their original molecular states to be used again. Although it's promoted as a solution to the plastic crisis, it's a toxic, carbon-intensive process that's effectively the same as [incineration](#).

Here's some good news: in March 2022, the [UN Environment Assembly](#) in Nairobi agreed on a mandate for a [new global treaty](#) to address the crisis. This was a landmark achievement towards creating [legally binding measures](#) to prevent toxic [plastic](#) pollution.

Many scientists, activists and organizations insist that any resulting treaty must include a cap on [plastic production](#). The negotiations will be challenging, however, given businesses' vested interests in keeping regulations focused on waste rather than production. Now, it's urgent that we push back against greenwashing and work towards a global mandate for limiting unsustainable plastics growth.

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