Why smart people believe stupid things

Greg Melleuish

In February this year I organised a colloquium on what we called 'Weird History'. It focused on some of the strange and downright preposterous versions of history that are currently floating around. These included Gavin Menzies' fiction masquerading as fact that a giant Chinese fleet sailed around the world in the early fifteenth century and the very popular writings of the Russian Anatoly Fomenko who apparently believes that Ghengis Khan was actually a Russian.

One of the things that came out of that colloquium was that many of the writers of weird history, and those who take it seriously, are intelligent and sophisticated people. Fomenko, for example, is a leading mathematician. Such a realisation immediately opens up interesting questions about the nature and efficacy of education. The old nineteenth century idea was that education, especially university education, would make individuals more rational, more capable of distinguishing between good and bad arguments, and able to judge if the evidence supported an argument. Put another way, education was meant to inoculate individuals against the foolishness of rumour and unsubstantiated opinion.

Yet we now live in age in which the level of education is at its peak, but also in which the human capacity to believe in weird and wonderful things has never been so strong. One could almost argue that the advance in education has been parallelled by a growth in human gullibility. Why should this be so?

Three recent books provide different perspectives on the human capacity to believe in things that on close inspection are weird, fraudulent or simply unbelievable. In *Counterknowledge: How we surrendered to conspiracy theories, quack medicine, bogus science and fake history*, Damian Thompson discusses a whole range of forms of what he terms 'counter knowledge', a type of knowledge that runs counter to real knowledge, ranging from strange medical notions to bogus history to creation science and get rich schemes. Christopher Booker and Richard North chronicle in *Scared to Death: From BSE to Global Warming* the extraordinary number of scares that have erupted in Britain over the past twenty-five years beginning with the various food scares, such as Salmonella in eggs, through to ritual satanic abuse and culminating in climate change. And Rachael Kohn's *Curious Obsessions In the History of Science and*

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Spirituality explores some of the more exotic and wonderful religious beliefs, many of them having a scientific dimension, which have been held by individuals, especially of the more educated variety.

Counter knowledge, for Thompson, is essentially a betrayal of the Enlightenment. There is a sound body of knowledge that has been established by an equally sound set of methods, and then there is the dubious counter knowledge that is advocated for a variety of reasons. One reason is ideological; there are groups who want to claim 'their' knowledge as being equal or superior to that of science. Such groups include those who want to make Africa the source not just of homo-sapiens as a species but also of all human civilisation as a means of building up African pride. The only problem is that they can only do so by twisting the facts to fit the politics.

Then there are those who advocate creation science, interpreting the natural world to fit in with their biblical fundamentalism. Thompson points out that creation science is not just a Christian phenomenon and that there are versions of it rampant throughout the Islamic world. There are some eighty 'museums' of creationism across Turkey while in most Islamic countries less than ten per cent of the population is willing to accept Darwin's theory of evolution.

Then there are those who peddle all sorts of quack remedies, both for the body and the soul. These include all sorts of alternative medicine. Such advocates are the descendants of the merchants of the wonder pills of the nineteenth century; in fact, in some cases they are still selling the quack remedies of the nineteenth century such as chiropractic manipulation and homeopathy. The problem with most forms of 'alternative medicine' is that they there is no evidence that they actually work. Thompson quotes surgeon Michael Baum to the effect that 'Homeopathy is to medicine what astrology is to astronomy.'

Finally there are those out simply to make money by selling lots of books, such as Gavin Menzies and the host of diet gurus. Now it may not matter if these were simply eccentrics—part of the rich tapestry of existence—but, as Thompson observes, they are taken seriously. Alternative medicine is now studied in many universities. It is the middle classes who lap it up.

Thompson blames a number of things for the success of counter knowledge, including the way in which the internet spreads all sorts of ideas, the loss of respect for traditional experts and the post modern belief that one form of knowledge is as good as another. People can no longer distinguish between reputable and bogus knowledge. This is despite the 'fact', which our educationalists tell us *ad nauseam*, that today's students may not know anything, but nevertheless possesses advanced critical skills.

Thompson may be right that one of the major problems is a decline in the authority of traditional science but, as Booker and North argue, one of the causes of the numerous scares to which Britain, along with many other Western countries, have endured over the past twenty years is a sort of unholy alliance between science and over-zealous bureaucrats. The problem seems to be twofold. The first is that while scientific knowledge generally might be reliable it is invariably provisional and open to further investigation. Of course there are occasions when the science is totally bogus, as in the case of ritualised satanic child abuse where a highly dubious technique was devised to 'prove' that children had been 'abused.' But generally there is a lack of certainty regarding the science in most matters. Interpreting the evidence, scientists simply make mistakes and draw incorrect conclusions. This would not matter if the interpretation of data was a mere academic matter, but when such judgements are used as the basis of government policy and action the consequences can be disastrous.

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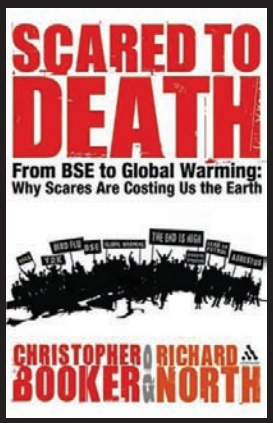
The second part of the problem is the way in which these incorrect interpretations are used by activists, particularly those employed by the government, to exaggerate problems, and even to create them. Booker and North point out that it is government officials who are generally more important in driving such scares than politicians who simply follow the advice of their bureaucrats. Once set in motion these scares accelerate for a number of reasons. One is the expectation in the contemporary world that any risk should be avoided and the way in which minor risks can suddenly be blown up. Another is the way in which particular interest groups, such as lawyers, can exploit such circumstances to their advantage. A final factor is the capacity of the media to get hold of a scare and drive public panic forward.

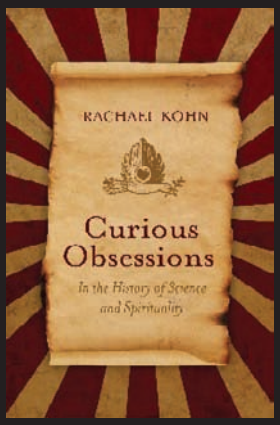
There are two major features of the scares chronicled by Booker and North. The first is how regular they have become. The second is the expense that they cause, particularly to those who get caught up in the attempts by bureaucrats, politicians, journalists and activists to minimise what they see as the risks involved. Something like a million chickens were slaughtered in response to a salmonella scare, eight million animals were slaughtered at a cost of £3.45 billion in response to the BSE scare. This was a small cost compared to the billions in repairs and compensation generated by the asbestos scare. And yet even that is only small change compared to the potential costs of the biggest scare of them all—climate change.

Booker and North demonstrate how the whole climate change scare has been driven by the selective use of



Scared to Death: From BSE to Global Warming
by Christopher Booker & Richard North
(Continuum, 2007, 512 pages)

Counterknowledge: How we surrendered to conspiracy theories, quack medicine, bogus science and fake history
by Damian Thompson
(Atlantic Books, 2008, 256 pages)



Curious Obsessions in the History of Science and Spirituality
by Rachael Kohn
(ABC Books, 2007, 272 pages)

scientific evidence by scientific activists and politicians. Their picture of Al Gore is unflattering, in particular his political manipulation of scientific evidence. Their account raises real problems for people like Thompson who would want to solve the problem of bogus knowledge by placing more trust in the expert. Experts may turn out to be less than model exemplars of the Enlightenment tradition. They not only may choose what to believe on the basis of what increases their career prospects, but also they share in our common humanity and can be carried away by moral panics.

Rachael Kohn provides us with a collection of essays that describe some of the stranger religious obsessions that have taken hold of people. These include such things as the search for the 'lost' tribes of Israel in some of the most unlikely places ranging from Native Americans to the Maori. Mormonism is based on the belief that Israelites settled in America in about 600 BC. Then there is Theosophy, like Homeopathy, a nineteenth century concoction, much of which was found to be fraudulent at the time but which nonetheless appealed greatly to certain segments of the educated classes.

What runs through much of what Kohn discusses, from Giordano Bruno (after whom 2GB in Sydney is named) to John Dee to the Mormons and theosophy is the idea of hidden spiritual knowledge, or *gnosis*, to which the chosen few alone have access. This has long been an attractive idea to a class of educated people who wish to distinguish themselves from the mere masses. This Gnostic tradition runs right through the history of the West, was a subterranean element of the Enlightenment and blossomed in America. As Catherine Albanese demonstrates in her recent study of American 'metaphysical religion', Mormonism—now one of the world's fastest growing religions—incorporated a lot from Masonry and this Gnostic tradition.

All of this suggests that the search for hidden knowledge and the spiritual illumination that goes with it is far from dead in the twenty-first century, a fact illustrated by the large New Age section to be found in most bookshops.

The Enlightenment project saw history as progress, as a path from superstitious and 'primitive' beliefs to a state in which human beings have become rational and 'enlightened'. What these three recent books indicate is just how susceptible human beings are both to believing in weird things and to 'moral panics'. Education does not 'inoculate' individuals against such things. In some ways the educated can be worse than their less educated neighbours, something we already knew from the past fondness of many of them for Communism.

These books raise real problems for anyone seeking their way in the contemporary world. The first is how to decide, even when dealing with science that is apparently 'mainstream', whether scientific statement is true, or at least plausible, or just a load of cobblers. We are accustomed to accept much science on authority. After all, who outside of a small minority can hope to understand quantum mechanics in all its complexity? But what happens when that authority is abused? Does any lay individual, no matter how intelligent, have the time and the capacity to master the science relating to climate change? The second is how to make a judgement when confronted by the various scares and moral panics that now seem to erupt on a regular basis. A bogus scare can waste a lot of money.

The lesson is that in a free society the garden will contain as many weeds as it does flowers. Many of these weeds are relatively harmless, and simply make us smile. Others, however, especially when they have a major impact on public policy, have the potential to do a lot of harm.

Despite massive increases in the level of education, human beings are still basically the same creatures that they have always been. The task of arguing for sane and sensible policies and ideas is a never ending one.

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