but also because of the damaging loss of credibility for US media in so readily accepting the rationales of the Bush Administration for sending troops back to Iraq. More people in the US are now watching the BBC News and reading the *Guardian* online for similar reasons. Such trends are reversible, and the big US media giants certainly have the resources to address them, but this would involve redressing old habits of cultural insularity that, paradoxically, globalization has perhaps allowed to intensify.

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Counterknowledge: how we surrendered to conspiracy theories, quack medicine, bogus science and fake history, by Damian Thompson, London, Atlantic Books, 2008, x + 196 pp., ISBN 978 1 84354 6764

Thompson defines the subject matter of this book, 'counterknowledge', as

> misinformation packaged to look like fact-packaged so effectively, indeed, that the twenty-first century is facing a pandemic of credulous thinking. Ideas that, in their original raw form, flourished only on the fringes of society are now being taken seriously by educated people in the West, and are circulating with bewildering speed in the developing world. (pp.1–2)

Are these completely new phenomena?

It is useful to recall a somewhat similar book (Burnham, 1987), *How Superstition Won and Science Lost: Popularizing Science and Health in the United States*. Burnham's central argument was that, by the 1980s, there was 'cognitive dissonance' between scientific knowledge *per se* (as in the history of science) and popularised science, involving people's understandings of science and health. In earlier times (the nineteenth and early twentieth century), scientists had won numerous battles against superstition and mysticism: but by the late twentieth century a new cultural conflict had arisen in which 'a functional equivalent to superstition' had taken hold. This process occurred not only in the natural sciences (e.g. physics, chemistry and biology), but also in health, medicine and psychology.

Burnham argued that each scientific discipline went through the following four historical stages: diffusion, when scientific knowledge was not subject to condensation and simplification; popularisation, a time when scientists shared their vision of applying the scientific method; dilution, when popularisation passed from the scientists to 'science educators' and journalists; and finally trivialisation, when scientific knowledge became 'facts' or snippets of news, with an emphasis on authority figures.

By the 1970s, with the media's relentless emphasis on entertainment, sensationalism thrived: 'Reformers, especially environmental reformers, pointed out that they could not do any good unless they attracted media attention … which they did by playing up emotional content' (Burnham, 1987, p.235). Sensational emotionalism became standard fare for journalists, particularly those on TV.

Thompson's *Counterknowledge* was published in 2008, and its content, compared with Burnham's, can provide us with some intimation of how 'things have changed' in the intervening 23 years. This reviewer's view is that things are now worse.

Thompson elaborates his definition of 'counterknowledge' (given above) as follows:

> it purports to be knowledge but is not knowledge. Its claims can be shown to be untrue, either because there are facts that contradict them or because there is no evidence to support them. It misrepresents reality (deliberately or otherwise) by presenting non-facts as facts. (p.2)

It also involves 'a muddled, careless or deceitful attitude towards gathering evidence' (p.11). In considering the content of this book, it is useful to make a distinction between positive and normative statements.

Consider a normative statement such as 'all men are created equal … they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that amongst these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness', a much-quoted statement from the American Declaration of Independence. Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, Pol Pot, or any of the other mass murderers who populate human history, would not agree with this normative view; but advocates of the human rights view cannot 'prove' the mass murderers 'wrong'. All they can do is marshal arguments of all kinds to support their 'human rights' normative position. But their opponents can simply say 'That's your normative judgement, and I don't share it'. On the other hand, an empirical statement such as 'all men are of equal height' can be tested against the facts and can be determined to be false, given the evidence. Thus, the dimension of truth/falsity cannot be applied universally to all statements. This means that not everything can be brought within the ambit of 'counterknowledge'. Thus, religious belief cannot be proved or disproved, and is not part of counterknowledge. However, statements by religious believers (for example, 'life on earth began 2345 years ago' or 'the Roman Catholic Church organised the holocaust') can be tested by recourse to evidence.

Thompson points to a current paradox: despite the increased ability we have to evaluate evidence via experiment and statistical techniques applied to data, counterknowledge is spreading quite rapidly (recall 'the twenty-first century is facing a pandemic of credulous thinking'). Furthermore, it is corrupting academic standards across a number of disciplines. One need only recall the events surrounding Sokal's deliberate publication of nonsense in an academic journal. Consider also some data on what people believe. Thompson records the following: most young Americans and 36% of 'the adult population of the United States suspect that federal officials assisted the 9/11 attacks or deliberately took no action to stop them' (pp.8–9). Furthermore, a quarter of British Muslims believe that the British government was 'involved in some way' with the 2005 terrorist bombings on the London Underground (p.26). Such views are not restricted to high-income countries: a majority of respondents (in a Pew Research Centre survey) in Indonesia, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan and Pakistan denied that Arabs carried out the 9/11 attacks (p.26). In northern Nigeria, Islamic leaders have declared the polio vaccine to be an American conspiracy to sterilise Muslims (p.25). 'Only 29 per cent of British Muslims believe historical accounts of the Holocaust' (p.162). Also, many people now believe that the Roman Catholic Church has, for two millennia, suppressed the truth about the bloodline of Christ, as described in the novel *The Da Vinci Code*. All of this is associated with a significant lowering of the standards of proof (p.15).

Thompson deals specifically with Dan Brown's 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code*, subsequently popularised as a film. This work of fiction is based on a very controversial historical narrative which, Brown argues, is based on historical fact, i.e. the original story is not fiction. The narrative is that Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene were married, and had a child, the descendants becoming the Merovingian kings of France. There is a secret organisation (the Priory of Sion), which exists to protect this secret bloodline. The Roman Catholic Church also knows about this and conspires to suppress the knowledge. This story first came to an English audience in 1982 with the publication of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* by Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln. (Baigent and Leigh subsequently sued Brown in 2006 for plagiarism.) It is the 1982 book which is a work of pseudohistory, as documented in a 1996 BBC documentary. Thompson records that he (Thompson) was at an Oxford Union seminar with Baigent and Leigh at which they admitted to being taken in by an earlier hoax. Pseudohistory was previously seen as 'cult anthropology', the most famous example being the 1968 book, *The Chariots of the Gods* by von Daniken, in which the central argument is that the statues on Easter Island, the structure at Stonehenge, and the Egyptian pyramids provide physical evidence of earthly visits by space travellers.

Another episode Thompson describes is the 2001 work by Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*. (Menzies is not a trained historian: he is a former British Navy submarine commander.) The central argument is that Chinese mariners discovered Greenland, North and South America, Australia and New Zealand, prior to Columbus and Cook. As pointed out in a (London) *Daily Telegraph* article (4 April 2002), this book was truly significant: 'History books in 23 countries may need to be re-written in the light of new evidence that Chinese explorers had discovered most parts of the world by the mid-15th century'. However, professional historians were scathing: 'The drivel of a two-year-old' said one, and another, more politely, '[Menzies] misrepresents the scholarship of others and he frequently fails to cite those from which he borrows … His misunderstandings of the nature of [Chinese] ships impels him to depict voyages no captain would attempt and no mariner would survive' (Findlay, 2004). Menzies' success is explained, in part, by the re-writing undertaken by his literary agent, and the employment of Midas Public Relations to 'get a story in a national newspaper that would put [the] theory in the public domain'.

Another example is the 2007 book, *The History of Africa,* by Molefi Kete Asante. (Asante, from Temple University, was born Arthur Lee Smith, Jr.) He argues (like others, e.g. Diop and Bernal) that Africa was not only where humans originated, but also the cradle of civilisation. For these authors, not just writing and architecture originated in Africa, but 'both Hannibal and St Augustine were black Africans'. Thompson argues that this account of early African history is pseudohistory. Furthermore, Asante's work is a manifestation of Afrocentricism: Asante's view is that white academics 'do not have the proper orientation to adequately teach any African-American studies' (p.84). Thompson suggests that such an Afrocentrist position is racist: 'Try switching round "black" and "white" and substituting "European" for "African-American" and it becomes clear what a breathtakingly racist position this is' (p.84). It is argued also that Afrocentricism is a political rather than a scholarly project (p.85). Thus, there is an element of 'moral blackmail' in Afrocentricism that is absent from the other examples of historical counterknowledge. This involves only a difference of degree from political correctness in which 'knowledge' is an elastic concept determined by people's self-conceptions. Thompson discusses attending a 1999 seminar at Boston University at which 'a couple of rap artists … talked about the rumour that the US government

had developed AIDS as a weapon against black Americans' (p.23). No academics spoke out against this bald assertion, even though it was established that no academic present believed it. One of the academics, Glenn Loury, explained his silence as follows: he 'didn't want to be "disrespectful" to his own African-American community by giving his real opinion' (p.23).

Why is there now a problem of distinguishing science from pseudoscience, history from pseudohistory, sense from nonsense? For some, the answer lies in individual psychological factors leading to modern epidemics of hysteria. Showalter's (1997) explanation of recovered memories of sexual abuse, multiple personalities, alien abduction, satanic ritual abuse, a fatigue-syndrome virus etc. being so widespread in the West is to be found in the electronic media's ability to explode 'microtales of individual afflictions … into panics fuelled by rumors about medical, familial, community or government conspiracy'. For Showalter, these conspiratorial hysterias are outward manifestations of personal problems. Since Thompson's book was published, Aaronovitch (2009) has produced a more detailed study of societal conspiracy theories. It is relevant to observe that conspiracy theories come from both the political left and the right, from those with a religious orientation as well as those with a secular stance, and those from the underclass as well as the upper class. Although Aaronovitch recognises the commercial motives of some (book publishers, film producers etc.), his emphasis is on the personal feelings of powerlessness on the part of conspiracy theorists.

Thompson is not comfortable with such individualistic factors: he is more concerned with the social processes that create space for counterknowledge (p.147). He emphasises the fragmentation of traditional authority structures (churches, political parties, the two-parent family) and the failure of people in public institutions, such as universities, to speak out against falsehoods. Also, previously reputable publishing houses now seek out the purveyors of pseudoknowledge because their works will sell in the millions. Furthermore, politicians' lies and half-truths encourage the intellectual sloppiness that is now so widespread, thanks (in large part) to the Internet, where there are no standards.

It is impossible to prevent or control the spread of counterknowledge on the Internet. Like the poor, counterknowledge has always been with us: the Internet has just enabled an increase in its volume and the speed of its dissemination. For Thompson, the key lesson is for our society to take seriously its responsibility to base judgement on the evidence. His penultimate sentence outlines a role for intellectuals/academics/writers: 'We must hold to account the greedy, lazy, and politically correct guardians of intellectual orthodoxy who have turned their backs on the methodology that enables us to distinguish fact from fantasy' (p.171). But what if such a challenge to counterknowledge is not made? Then those greedy, lazy and politically correct guardians of intellectual orthodoxy will prevail and 'the sleep of reason [will bring] forth monsters' (p.171). The message is clear: the barbarians are at the gates, and some of those who should defend the life of the mind (and are inside the gates) have joined the ranks of the barbarians!

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