

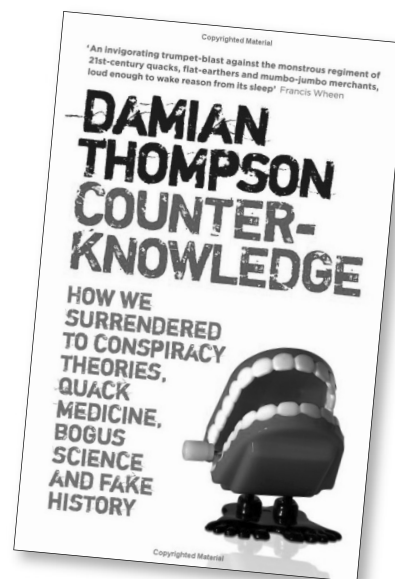
THE NEW HYSTERIA

We can't blame the demise of Enlightenment thinking on diet doctors and Islamists alone, argues **Munira Mirza**

Counterknowledge: How We Surrendered to Conspiracy Theories, Quack Medicine, Bogus Science and Fake History

by Damian Thompson

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As the recent legal inquiry into the death of Princess Diana rumbled on—turning into possibly the most expensive and time-consuming conspiracy theory of all time—sensible onlookers may have wondered why the authorities were unwilling to terminate the morbid speculation over what actually happened. Although the facts of her death in Paris are largely undisputed, and most of us moved on with our lives about ten years ago, the law courts seemed unable or unwilling simply to say, ‘Enough is enough.’

Conspiracy theories, Damian Thompson argues in his new polemic, were once the domain of the marginal and lunatic, but today they are fast becoming regarded as gospel. *Counterknowledge* is a short but effective attack on the bogus science, paranoia, and pseudo-history that seems to recruit millions of people today.

The essence of ‘counterknowledge,’ Thompson explains, is that it stands in direct opposition to modern scientific method. Science allows us to

make and test empirical observations to develop an increasingly accurate understanding of the laws and processes of nature. Counterknowledge, by contrast, fails these basic empirical tests. Although at times it dresses itself up in the language of science or fact, it can be shown to be untrue by the existence of other facts or by the weakness of its own evidence. Medicines that do not cure illnesses, theories about sinister conspiracies, and history books without credible sources are all examples of counterknowledge.

Western societies, of course, have a long and ignoble history of counterknowledge. The quacks of Georgian England advertised miracle potions to gullible patients, and nineteenth-century mystics

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indulged in apocalyptic nightmares, numerology, and racist conspiracy theories. Even after the rationalist mood of the Enlightenment, people were willing to believe the irrational.

The forms of counterknowledge that existed in the past, however, tended to be the hobby-horses of a few deluded souls, whereas today they are major industries. Thompson points to the surging popularity of creationism in US schools and Islamic countries, the multimillion-pound success of alternative medicine hucksters, bestselling ‘fake history’ books, and the virus-like spread of conspiracy theories on the internet about 9/11. Some people seem willing to believe almost any ludicrous theory, particularly if it opposes the ‘official’ version of events.

Thompson concedes that homeopathy and oddball conspiracy theories may not seem like great threats to humankind. After all, millions of people read their horoscopes every day and continue to lead healthy, happy lives. But the consequences can also be serious, especially when it begins to undermine the effective work of real knowledge.

Why should ... crackpot theories seem so compelling today, especially in a modern society that is supposedly shaped by Enlightenment reason?

In Britain, Dr Andrew Wakefield’s controversial research in 1998, suggesting the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccination (MMR) is linked with autism, panicked parents and reduced the vaccination rate in 2001 to a record low of 84%. Despite assurances from some in authority (though notably not from all), parents’ groups, sections of the media and other influential bodies simply would not trust the ‘Establishment’s version’ of the MMR story. In the end, pet theories and homespun wisdom on MMR were seen as more credible than actual facts and scientific evidence. For all the talk of ‘empowerment’ and a ‘patient-led’ health service, the departure from science led to greater confusion and danger for the public.

Going further than Thompson’s examples, it is clear that the pattern of ‘consumer-led’ lobbying

and distortion of public debate has terrified the public about a range of modern technologies—mobile phone masts, genetically modified food, the use of chemicals in food production, and so on. Evidence is repeatedly sidelined in favour of prejudice and emotion. This is particularly troubling in those areas where there is less certainty and a genuine need for further public and scientific debate.

An unholy alliance

Why should blatant lies and crackpot theories seem so compelling today, especially in a modern society that is supposedly shaped by Enlightenment reason? Thompson argues that various social changes in the past few decades have created a new sense of disorientation for the individual. The decline of traditional social institutions such as marriage, church, and political parties has loosened the social bonds that once gave the individual a sense of meaning, leading us to what British sociologist Anthony Giddens calls ‘the reflexive project of the self.’ People feel a greater pressure to develop their own framework of meaning.

Also to blame are changes within academia and the long march of relativism. The rigours of orthodox scholarship have become denounced by trendy postmodernists as elitist and oppressive. The ultimate howler is the description by French feminist writer, Luce Irigaray, of $E=mc^2$ as a ‘sexed equation’ because it privileges the speed of light over other speeds that are vitally necessary to us.

Within this context, where knowledge is whatever you want it to be, an unholy alliance of interests has helped push all manner of untruths into the public realm.

First, there are the unscrupulous entrepreneurs who develop expensive DVDs, television programs, and books to peddle their quack theories. Dr Gillian McKeith—Britain’s foremost ‘diet doctor,’ who presented the Channel 4 program *You Are What You Eat*, and produced a bestselling book of the same name—was exposed for her dodgy qualifications by *The Guardian*’s science journalist Ben Goldacre. McKeith had obtained her ‘degree’ from a non-accredited US institution on a correspondence course.

Another shady figure is Patrick Holford, whose dubiously named Institute for Optimum Nutrition

has advised the Food Standards Agency and the National Association of Head Teachers. Holford's bestselling books, DVDs, and 'Q-Link' microchip pendants (a bargain at £69.99) promote a mixture of pseudoscience and homespun wisdom, mixed in with elements of Christian Science. His only scientific qualification is a psychology degree from York University. In 2005, he claimed that AZT, the first prescribable anti-HIV drug, was less effective than taking vitamin C—a point he also made on his tour to South Africa in 2007. (If we're going to blame African governments for having primitive views on the AIDS epidemic, it is worth asking where they are getting their ideas from.)

More worrying, there are mainstream institutions that buy into such chicanery. The major publisher Transworld bought rights to *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*, by Gavin Menzies, heedless of factual inaccuracies that were later picked up in critics' reviews. The University of Teeside made Patrick Holford a visiting professor in 2007, and the University of Bedfordshire validates a foundation science degree offered by his Institute for Optimum Nutrition. The National Health Service funds five homeopathy hospitals, spurred on by Prince Charles, even though there is not one single peer-reviewed paper to show that these treatments work more successfully than the placebo effect.

Thompson's book explores many of these issues in detail, making many strong points along the way and illustrating some of the worst expressions of contemporary irrationality. However, it is worth teasing out some of the weaknesses of the book to push the debate further along.

Faith and reason

First, Thompson argues that Islamic societies are particularly vulnerable to counterknowledge and quackery in general, because their governments have a vested interest in encouraging hatred towards the West and because there is a wider sense of paranoia 'over there.' For instance, countless surveys show that Muslim populations believe that Islamist terrorists were not responsible for 9/11. In January 2007 in Pakistan, the parents of 24,000 children would not allow them to receive the polio vaccination after radical mullahs claimed it was a US conspiracy to sterilise Muslims.

And yet, Thompson's own evidence shows that Western societies are themselves consumed by conspiracy theories, anti-science, paranoia, and irrationality. In America, according to a 2006 Scripps Howard poll, 36% of adults suspect federal agents of helping to plan the 9/11 attacks, or deliberately taking no action to stop them, so that the government could go to war in the Middle East. High-profile politicians have even voiced their suspicions publicly. British Labour MP Michael Meacher voiced suspicion about the 'official' story of 9/11 by pointing out that the US Air Force stood down its fighter jets that morning. In an interview in November 2006, the French housing minister, Christine Boutin, admitted it was possible that President Bush may have planned the terrorist attacks. As the bulk of Thompson's eloquent attack is focused on Western targets, his singling out of Islamic societies sounds a jarring note.

The relationship between religion and counterknowledge is an important feature of today's superstitions compared to the past's.

To make sense of the Islamic world's own cultural tendencies—irrationalism, mysticism, particularism, nihilism, anti-hedonism, anti-consumerism—it would be better to trace the partial origins of these phenomena within the West, rather than seeing them as springing solely from Islam and its followers. In fairness to Thompson, he has been the first to admit there is often anti-Islamic hysteria on the internet. In January this year he reported an incident in Australia in which Muslim protesters barricaded a hospital to stop the body of a young man being subjected to medical tests in contravention of sharia law. He later stated in *The Guardian* that there was no evidence or witness for this story and that it was probably an urban legend, recognising that he had helped propagate poisonous counter-knowledge himself.¹

The relationship between religion and counterknowledge is something that Thompson

alludes to only briefly, but it's an important feature of today's superstitions compared to the past's. In the past, religion and mysticism spoke in an entirely different discourse to rational knowledge. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle wrote, 'we walk by faith, not sight.'² Miracles were seen as extraordinary precisely because they bend the normal order of physical reality: they cannot be proven, only believed. In this way, it was possible for religious people to still accord respect to the value of reason, in its place. Galileo himself stated that he 'could not believe that the same God who endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect had intended for us to forgo their use.'

Today's counterknowledge ... invades the territory of knowledge and reflects the dethronement of human reasoning.

What makes today's counterknowledge so different is that it invades the territory of knowledge and reflects the dethronement of human reasoning. This has confusing effects. At a time when religion is weak, it seeks to deploy the traditional discourse of science for credibility: homeopathy practitioners doing medical 'research' to prove the effects of their remedies, creationists trying to 'prove' intelligent design, historians referring to bogus sources for their claims, and so on. At the same time, the use of rational or scientific discourse is itself lacking in confidence, so it resorts to emotionalism, mysticism, and subjectivism. Doctors are expected to treat patients' views about their own bodies as equally valid as their own scientific understanding. Scientists are supposed to bow down to the emotional power of 'lay knowledge.'

Also, while it is a joy to see Thompson ruthlessly take apart charlatans like McKeith and Holford, they are easy targets. Counterknowledge thrives because it is part of the mainstream—it is very often propagated by honest and even intelligent people. For example, profit-seeking diet doctors are only the endpoint of an irrational national obsession with health and obesity. Fears about MMR express well the problems with the

wider support for 'patient expertise,' which is now mainstream NHS policy. It is not that stupid people have been allowed to run riot; rather, the authorities have very often been at the vanguard of stupidity.

Finally, while a defence of the Enlightenment is important, we must recognise that it has often been misused as a way of closing down debate amongst anybody who is seen to criticise 'the scientific consensus.' The idea that 'objective science' must not be questioned is anathema to the scientific process, which is constantly testing and scrutinising itself. Green campaigners regularly accuse dissenters of being 'unscientific' because they won't go along with the majority view. This effectively places moral limits on what may be discussed and, as a consequence, on our collective pursuit of truth. Instead of dismissing alternative or radical ideas out of hand, we must be prepared to debate them and really sound out their evidential basis. By the same token, the guardians of 'knowledge' must be as willing to subject their arguments to rigorous scrutiny as the proponents of counterknowledge, rather than complacently relying on being in the majority.

Overall, Thompson has written a valuable little book—witty, fierce, and effective. Hopefully it will provoke a more rational discussion about some of the hysterias of our age.

Endnotes

- ¹ Damian Thompson, 'Have I Just Spread Counter-knowledge?' *Daily Telegraph* (30 January 2008).
- ² 2 Corinthians 5:7 (King James Version).