

CORRUPTED SCIENCE

Fraud, ideology and politics in science



John Grant

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DEDICATION

For Keith Barnett (1938–2006), the best big bro any little bro could have hoped for. Oh, Keith, that you might have lived to see this book complete . . . and to find my errors in it.

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INTRODUCTION

THE FALSIFICATION OF SCIENCE



There is, it appears, a conspiracy of scientists afoot. Their purpose is to break down religion, propagate immorality, and so reduce mankind to the level of the brutes. They are the sworn and sinister agents of Beelzebub, who yearns to conquer the world, and has his eye especially upon Tennessee.

H.L. Mencken reporting on the Scopes Trial,
Baltimore Evening Sun, July 11, 1925

They think that differential equations are not reality. Hearing some colleagues speak, it's as though theoretical physics was just playing house with plastic building blocks. This absurd idea has gained currency, and now people seem to feel that theoretical physicists are little more than dreamers locked away in ivory towers. They think our games, our little houses, bear no relation to our everyday worries, their interests, their problems, or their welfare. But I'm going to tell you something, and I want you to take it as a ground rule for this course. From now on I will be filling this board with equations. . . . And when I'm done, I want you to do the following: look at those numbers, all those little numbers and Greek letters on the board, and repeat to yourselves, "This is reality," repeat it over and over . . .

José Carlos Somosa (trans Lisa Dillman),
Zig Zag, 2007

Science is a set of rules that keep the scientists from lying to each other.

Kenneth S. Norris, cited in *False Prophets* (1988)
by Alexander Kohn

IT SEEMS HARDWIRED into the human brain that people in general believe what they're told by other people. One can understand why this should be so: verbal communication was presumably fostered initially as a means of exchanging vital information among tribal members ("the food's over there") and to members of other tribes ("if you try to take my food I'll kill you"). Speech would have little survival value for the tribe – and indeed little purpose – unless the information it contained were true. We can guess that the invention of the lie followed some little while after speech was in widespread use – and a devastating invention it must have been. Even today we naturally tend to believe what we're told – scepticism is an educated response, not an instinctive one, as demonstrated by the ease with which parents can fool small children with tall tales. Similarly, most of us tell the truth almost all of the time.*

For the most part it's essential for the smooth functioning of society that this twinning of truth-telling and belief continue. Consider the simple social interaction in which

* Hence the effectiveness of the joke applied to many politicians over the years:

Q: How can you tell when he's lying?

A: His lips move.

you ask a passing stranger for directions. Society would soon crumble if strangers habitually gave false directions, or if tourists habitually disbelieved the directions given to them by strangers. Of course, sometimes strangers *do* quite deliberately give false directions, either because they don't know the answer and have an infantile dislike for displaying ignorance or in the misguided belief that it's funny. (Sometimes, likewise, travellers disbelieve the genuine directions they've been given because "they don't make sense".)

The deliberate giving of false directions might be regarded as a small-scale demonstration of the inherent flaw in our natural assumption of truth-telling/belief. If one party, almost always the teller, disobeys the tacit rules of the game, the other is exceedingly vulnerable. Hence the effectiveness of false propaganda, as exemplified today by broadcasters such as Rush Limbaugh (see page 302) and the pundits of Fox News: they can tell whatever fibs they like secure in the knowledge that a high percentage of the audience will believe what they've been told; further, since those members of the audience who perceive the lie will soon go elsewhere for their information, the percentage of remaining listeners who're credulous tends to rise. This particular dishonest gambit is not a new invention, of course: it can be traced back throughout most of recorded history. False tales of the disgusting licentiousness of Cleopatra (69BC–30BC) were circulated in Rome to shape the citizens' attitudes towards the Egyptian queen. Lies concerning the sexual appetites and extravagance of Marie Antoinette (1755–1793) contributed to the onset of the French Revolution. And we all know the disastrous consequences of the early-20th-century antisemitic propagandist forgery *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*.*

The same vulnerability in our social structure is of course exploited alike by the hoaxer, the forger, the con artist, the trickster, the prankster, the dissembling politi-

* This was actually a reworking of *Dialogue in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu* (1865) by Maurice Joly (1829-1878). Joly's original was a perfectly honest satirical attack on Napoleon III. All the anonymous forgers of the *Protocols* did was change a few names and details.

cian, the religious fundamentalist (and indeed the self-styled prophet), the television evangelist, the propagandist, and the straightforward liar. Often the efforts of these assorted crooks are to harmless and/or humorous effect but sometimes, as per the *Protocols*, they have enormously damaging consequences; various political and media denials concerning imminent catastrophic climate change, for example, may spell the collapse of human civilization.

Most hoaxes and frauds are outwith the purview of this book, in which we're concerned only with the sciences, but that still leaves us plenty to play with. We'll start with scientists themselves – scientists who for one reason or another have felt driven to fake things. In the second half of the book we'll look at those who've corrupted science not from within but from the outside.