

Critical Point Conspiracy theories

As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, why – asks **Robert P Crease** – do conspiracy theories still abound?

Global warming is a plot manufactured by a global community of scientists. United Nations panels deliberately understate the radiation levels of the Fukushima and Chernobyl disasters. US media outlets contrive “fake facts” to refute Tweets of Donald Trump. Venal politicians are behind Ebola and other epidemics.

Groundless conspiracy theories are now an established feature of the political landscape. They resemble epidemics themselves, appearing from nowhere, spreading like wildfire, disrupting normal life, and being all but impossible to stop. They threaten democracy by poisoning the ability of voters to lucidly deliberate issues of human life, health and justice.

In her recent book *Democracy and Truth*, the University of Pennsylvania historian Sophia Rosenfeld argues that conspiracy theories thrive in societies with a large gap between the governing and the governed classes. Such conditions, Rosenfeld writes, allow some of the governed to reject the advice of experts as out of touch with “the people”, and to create a “populist epistemology” associated with an oppositional culture.

Populists, Rosenfeld continues, “tend to reject science and its methods as a source of directives”. Instead, such people prefer to embrace “emotional honesty, intuition and truths of the heart over dry factual veracity and scientific evidence, testing and credentialing”. Modern science accentuates the gap between experts and non-experts, making it possible for populists to interpret “factual veracity” as tainted.

Galileo's gap

In my book *The Workshop and the World: What Ten Thinkers Can Teach Us about Science and Authority*, I argued that this scientific gap emerged with Galileo. Writing in his 1623 book *The Assayer*, Galileo used a striking image to defend his seemingly heretical studies of nature. The book of nature, he wrote, “is written in mathematical language, and the symbols are triangles, circles and other geometrical figures, without whose help it is impossible to comprehend a single word of it”.

The use of mathematics creates a rift between those unable to understand this special language and those who do, mak-



Shutterstock/Bernhard Staehli

Deep question Why do some people still think global warming is a conspiracy?

ing it easy for the former to distrust the latter. Galileo's Gap, as I call it, has widened in size and consequence in the four centuries since then, feeding the frequency and severity of conspiracy theories.

Hard to believe, but I received hate mail after *The Workshop and the World* came out. Some concerned what I'd written about *The Preaching of St Paul* – a 1649 painting by Eustace Le Sueur that now hangs in the Louvre museum in Paris. This dramatic and imposing work shows St Paul looming above a pile of burning books, some with geometrical figures on their pages. The not-so-subtle intent was to portray heretics who read the book of nature as dangerous criminals.

Contemporary conspiracy theories, I wrote, show that St Paul is back.

My critics were furious. The painting is not about Galileo, they chastised me, but a passage in the Book of Acts 19:19, where St Paul's preaching prompted mystics to have “brought their books together, and burned them”. Besides, the critics added, this issue can be settled factually by noting that the figures on the pages of the burning books resemble nothing found in maths texts. What's more, no trace exists of Le Sueur's intent, or that of the religious authorities who commissioned the painting. I must surely therefore be part of a conspiracy to slander the good saint.

I responded that of course the figures in the burning books were not in modern maths texts; they are what a religious firebrand of 1649 might think geometrical figures looked like. I also said that no factual information about the painting's creation could help us to understand its meaning, which can be understood only in the light of its historical context.

Le Sueur, a religious painter funded

by church commissions, composed the work at a time when the most fundamental issue confronting the Catholic Church was that its claim to have the sole authority to interpret the Bible was being torpedoed by growing evidence in support of Galileo's mathematically based findings. Only that explains why a devout Catholic painter would devote enormous time and resources to create a 4 m high work about a handful of words in the Bible that mention book-burning – and then paint geometrical figures on the books' pages.

In a similar vein, the playwright Arthur Miller did not compose the 1953 play *The Crucible* because he had an interest in the Salem witchcraft trials. He did so to address the persecutions of supposed communist subversives taking place in the US in the 1950s. I probably did not convince my respondents. But their accusations that I had joined an anti-Christian conspiracy stopped.

The critical point

Modern anti-science conspiracies differ from their 17th-century antecedents, which emerged principally from the Church. Contemporary sponsors of conspiracy theories are multiple, spread not by preachings and paintings but by the Internet, and are energized by the ability to self-select information. But then, as now, conspiracy theories are not a sign of irrationality. Instead, they spring from the attempt by non-experts to make sense of often overwhelming and contradictory information based on personal values, available evidence, whom one trusts, and experience.

To reduce the impact of conspiracies, there's little point quoting mainstream experts, citing scientific papers, appealing to facts, or even teaching more science, for all these things will be said to belong to the conspiracy. Far more effective is to provide people with better tools to make sense of their personal, political and social experience. Yet the disciplines that cultivate these interpretive tools, collectively called the humanities, are largely having their resources redirected to the sciences.

Ironically, the dazzling and visible successes of the 21st-century sciences are overshadowing and undermining the 21st-century humanities that ground the authority of the sciences themselves.

Robert P Crease is chair of the Department of Philosophy, Stony Brook University, US, e-mail robert.crease@stonybrook.edu. His latest book is *The Workshop and the World: What Ten Thinkers Can Teach Us About Science and Authority* (WW Norton)