

# THE PANDEMIC OF FALSE KNOWLEDGE

The disease eating away at our social-political order and threatening our freedom.

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When I wrote *Plagues of the Mind: The New Epidemic of False Knowledge* twenty years ago, I focused on the bad ideas underlying many of our social, cultural, and political dysfunctions. I was particularly concerned with the universities, where most of these ideas had been born and nurtured. Though aware of the larger malign effects of the intellectual and political corruption of higher education, I never imagined that the “higher nonsense,” as one critic (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/002202799183197>) called it, produced in universities would so pervasively infect the larger culture and lead to policies, politics, and cultural mores so absurdly irrational.

At the heart of these bad ideas lay a strange hybrid of technocratic hubris and the therapeutic imperative. The former is a species of scientism founded on the category error of believing that human beings with minds, cultures, languages, and free will, can be understood and manipulated the way hard science understands and manipulates the material natural world.

The latter is the obsession with individual feelings and subjective perceptions of personal well-being and happiness, accompanied by demands that environmental, historical, or social impediments to both be corrected or eliminated with rational techniques developed by the “human sciences” like psychology, sociology, economics, and especially political science.

Moreover, this hybrid in its public guise uses the methodologies and quantification of science to give a spurious authority to its unscientific and politicized conclusions about human nature and behavior, while at the same time relying on ancient myths, cultural memes, and modern political programs. This incoherence is the essence of false knowledge. But these days, this debased Enlightenment idea joined with an equally debased Romantic one has burst out of its university nursery and become a culture-wide pandemic.

Several examples of these bad ideas I analyzed have expanded exponentially in the last two decades to surreal excess. What I called romantic environmentalism overlays ancient myths about nature and humanity’s relationship to it, with a patina of ecological science that claims proven scientific facts, not myths or politics, generate the proposed policies. In the Nineties, Al Gore, in his bestselling 1992 *Earth in the Balance*, was the environmentalist guru who recycled stale romantic mythemes about our lost harmony with nature, simplistic denunciations of industrial capitalism’s “Satanic mills,” and half-baked environmental science in order to frighten us into spending billions to “save the planet.” Popular culture went along, with movies like *Dances with Wolves* and Disney’s *Pocahontas*, both of which served up myth-history and nature-love clichés. Schools preached the environmental nature-cult with holy days like Earth Day, and the penance of recycling our bottles, plastic, cardboard, and cans.

But though catastrophic anthropogenic global warning (CAGW) was on the list of sins alongside the disappearing Brazilian rainforest and the widening hole in the ozone layer, I did not foresee how CAGW would become the dangerous mixture of nature worship and boondoggle— research grants and green-energy pork totaled \$359 billion (<https://www.heritage.org/environment/commentary/follow-the-climate-change-money>) in 2014— that it is today. Despite the claims of scientific authority and “settled science,” in fact we do not as yet understand how global climate, a complex of systems and subsystems with multiple feedback-loops, works over time well enough to predict that human-caused increases in CO<sub>2</sub>, which makes up 0.04% of the atmosphere, can override the sun as the prime factor in global climate change.

Yet based on incomplete science and appeals to old romantic myths of our lost harmony with nature, CAGW dominates our popular culture, school curricula, and politics, most obviously in the draconian reductions in carbon-based energy called

for in the Democrats' proposed Green New Deal, which would cost our economy trillions of dollars and inhibit global economic growth—without appreciably lowering temperature that would bring on a global Armageddon.

The other phenomenon nurtured in universities is radical feminism. When I was researching my book in the Nineties, fads like a “women’s way of knowing” superior to reason and science, and the fake history of a prehistoric European matriarchy that worshiped a nature-goddess and knew neither war nor social injustice, were colonizing the university and making their way into popular culture and grade-school curricula alike. But more consequential for today was a scholarly trend I analyzed in the tiny discipline of Classics: the Foucauldian notion that biological sex was not natural, but a “construct” of social, economic, and political forces used to justify and propagate the oppressive power of the patriarchy and industrial capitalism.

I never imagined that this esoteric freak of literary scholarship would break out of the university and infect the larger culture in the current “transgender” phenomenon. Casting aside biological science and common sense alike, this ideology holds that “male” and “female” are politicized, reductive constructs that ignore a wider variety of “gender” identities in order to suit the ruling class’s power and privilege. Now individuals decide, based on their subjective feelings and perceptions, whether they are male or female, or some other of an ever-increasing variety of “genders.”

As a result, today we have medical professionals dispensing hormone-suppressing drugs to pre-teens, and performing “sex reassignment” surgeries that can be described only as mutilation. “Woke” corporate retailers do away with male and female designated restrooms, creating a feeding pool for sexual predators. Boys “transitioning” to females participate in girls’ sports and smash historical records, and public libraries host transvestites to educate immature children about how to become, and live as, their preferred sex.

In a sane world this all would constitute medical and pedagogical malpractice. Worse yet, as a recognized “protected class,” the “transgendered” are given Title IX legal protections against discrimination, and taxpayer money to pay for their “transition” to whatever sex they “identify as.” Yet another group has joined the conga-line of victimhood to be exploited by “activists” in order to leverage more political power.

Finally, in my book the therapeutic imperative to acknowledge, validate, and privilege the feelings of protected “victims” of prejudice and oppression was analyzed through its linguistic manifestations.

Twenty years ago the word that captured the therapeutic sensibility's need to protect people's feelings, and avoid discussing personal responsibility or "blaming the victim," was "homeless." Today this euphemism for what were once known as bums, tramps, drifters, drunks, drug addicts, and the mentally ill has become universal. It was quickly followed by a whole lexicon of euphemisms like "differently abled" for "handicapped," and "special needs" for "retarded," while every word ending with the suffix "-man" was shoved down the memory hole. Today the most egregious examples of this obsession with avoiding verbal offense involves race, especially in our universities. With legal segregation gone and the Ku Klux Klan a crank fringe, we now have redefined racist aggression as the product of "institutional racism" and subconscious "implicit bias" that manifests itself in "microaggressions" and "dog whistles" imperceptible to all except those who can decipher the racist code.

This demand that politically favored minorities never be offended, what we call "political correctness," is running rampant beyond higher education as well. Using the wrong personal pronoun for a transgendered person has become a grievous offense in need of punishment and a reeducation program. Public monuments to Civil War generals or slave-owners are pulled down, and murals depicting now proscribed historical figures like Christopher Columbus and George Washington are veiled or painted over. A theater named for silent-movie star Lillian Gish must change its name because she acted in D.W. Griffith's 1915 racist epic *Birth of a Nation*. The NBA will no longer call its executives "owners" because that implies players are slaves. Yankee Stadium banished Kate Smith's version of "God Bless America" from the seventh-inning stretch because in 1931 she recorded the satirical song "That's Why Darkies Are Born," even though the black communist singer Paul Robeson recorded it too. And sneaker company Nike withdraws a new model with the Betsy Ross flag on the heel because it evokes the era of slavery.

And more dangerously, progressive sensitivity commissars openly call for limiting the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech by including "hate speech" exceptions, as defined by the most sensitive, neurotic, or politically malevolent.

This is just a small sample of the "triggers" that the "woke" left condemns for being offensive. Apparently, half our country now comprises "snowflakes," the term we use for privileged, hyper-sensitive college students who throw public tantrums when their utopian expectations aren't met, their absurd whims mocked, or their delicate feelings are wounded.

All these symptoms of false knowledge bespeak a pandemic that threatens not just reason and truth, but our political freedom, for truth is democracy's immune system. It is the biggest scandal of our times that the disease eating away at our social-political order that protects our rights and freedom has been incubated and

spread by what once was the bastion of our collective search for truth—our universities and colleges.

## **ABOUT BRUCE THORNTON**

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