My book’s basic premise is that science is under attack by the Christian Right, whose leaders appeal to paranoid conspiracy theories by claiming that many scientists peddle misinformation and conceal their actions from the public. Supposedly these scientists threaten to undermine the moral foundation of American society. The four most significant offensives in this attack come from proponents of intelligent design, the ex-gay movement, conservative bioethics, and climate change denial. The combined effect of these four “paranoid science” movements is to create an alternative reality where Christian Right leaders’ religious beliefs are safe from disconfirmation.

I write as a sociologist trained in the study of religion. Science is the terrain on which these four movements fight, but ultimately they’re driven by religious and political dynamics. These dynamics are what I analyze in the pages ahead. I also write as a “critical” sociologist. I believe that sociology is called to a careful study of the facts about human societies, but there’s room in the discipline for discussing what kind of society we should be.

My writing is clearly influenced by my social location. I’ve spent a decade and a half as a faculty member at the Iliff School of Theology, a United Methodist seminary with historic ties to the liberal or progressive wing of American Christianity, which holds that Christians should constantly revise their beliefs in light of new knowledge. I want to analyze and critique the Christian Right because I believe that Christianity should have a much different expression in American society; it should support the scientific enterprise and counter social oppression rather than reinforce it. That being said, I’m also writing for a broad audience, including people of all religious persuasions as well as those who don’t consider themselves religious (or even “spiritual”) at all. I’m writing for anyone who wants to understand more about how the Christian Right attacks science.
I’m sure that someone, somewhere who identifies with the Christian Right will say that in writing this book, I’m being paranoid. So let’s set the record straight. In order for this book to fit Richard Hofstadter’s definition of the paranoid style, I would have to put forth a grand conspiracy theory—claiming that the secret actions of the Christian Right’s evil leaders threaten to destroy American society. I argue no such thing. First of all, the Christian Right’s anti-science agenda is very public, as it needs to be if it wants to mobilize grassroots support. I found all of the data for this book in publicly accessible documents. If these leaders have any secrets, I failed to uncover them. Second, I don’t personally know any of the Christian Right leaders whom I write about, and I can’t judge their motives. I assume that, however misguided they may be, most of them believe that they’re doing the right thing. What about cases in which they blatantly distort the truth, which are numerous? It’s likely that they’re engaging in self-deception, believing what they want to believe. Essentially, they’re inviting others to join the alternative reality that they inhabit. Finally, I don’t claim that the Christian Right is the only group (or even the worst group) that negatively impacts society. There’s a lot of blame to go around for this country’s shortcomings.

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