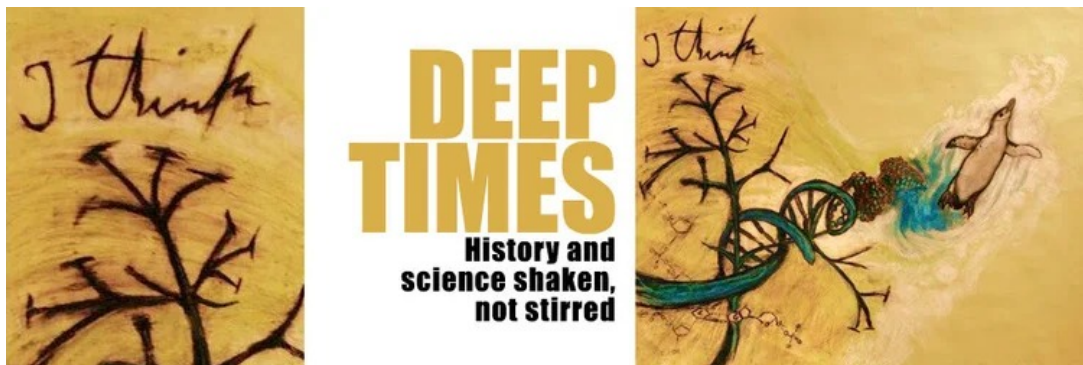




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The Toxic Legacy Of Michael Crichton

February 15, 2023





"I'm telling you, *this is the way modern society works* – by the constant creation of fear." The cover of Michael Crichton's fourteenth novel, *State of Fear* (2004), courtesy of my local library. London: HarperCollins (cit. from Prof. Hoffman's tirade on p. 456).

When celebrated novelist **Michael Crichton (1942-2008)** addressed the **American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1999**, he gaslighted the scientific community by saying that stereotypical portrayals of mad scientists and other negative tropes in the movies were absolutely normal ("Since all occupations are portrayed negatively, why expect scientists to be treated differently?"). Scientists, according to Crichton, were the ones who misunderstood the role of mass media and failed to grasp that storytelling was incompatible with science, that their negative portrayal was quite inevitable, and that there was no point in worrying since "there is essentially no correspondence between social reality and movie reality. None at all" (Crichton 1999). The **smug tone of the address** betrayed the fact that Crichton did not quite believe those reassurances himself. The novelist really did have a chip on his shoulders. He hated science with a vengeance [1].

Some years later, Crichton decided to exploit his unearned role as a spokesperson for scientific wrongdoing and alert his worldwide readership to the dangers of science through his novel *State of Fear* (Crichton 2004a). By then, climate change was on the verge of becoming the hottest talk in town, with counter-climate change propaganda morphing into the frontline of the burgeoning right-wing culture war. Crichton entered the fray with the intent to

denounce climatology, of all things, as the real enemy of humankind.

The novel portrays scientists in cahoots with a fictitious environmental association (National Environmental Resource Fund, or NERF) that funds eco-terrorists keen on engineering environmental disasters to subvert the world order. Their goal is to establish a “state of fear” by convincing the public opinion that climate change is real. The hero is John Kenner, an MIT professor with a secret agent identity and a stand-in for Crichton himself (who held an M.D. from Harvard Medical School). Kenner saves the day after a Christopher Nolan-style globetrotting adventure through Antarctica, Arizona, and the Pacific Ocean, climaxing in a tsunami-level catastrophe. Not satisfied with an overindulgent, tin foil-hat infodump of cherry-picked charts and even scientific references cited *in extenso* in dedicated footnotes (with which Kenner tries to educate his co-protagonists and allegedly prove that climate change is not real *between over-the-top action scenes!*), Crichton even manages to squeeze in his book:

- a relentless tirade against the “neo-Stalinist mode of thought” produced and maintained thanks to postmodern “fascist” academia bent on producing “theoretical texts on the semiotics of Foucault” (*sic!*) on behalf of what Crichton calls the PML, the “politico-legal-media complex” that after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 took control of Western democracies (Crichton 2004a: 458 and 459). This jeremiad is delivered by another avatar of the novelist, USC professor *emeritus* Norman Hoffman (Crichton 2004a: 446-460), who, in a mad uncle-style, laments how universities changed for the worst in the 1980s only to become “factories of fear. They invent all the new terrors and all the new social anxieties. All the new restrictive codes [...] They produce a steady stream of new anxieties, dangers, and social terrors to be used by politicians lawyers, and reporters. Foods that are bad for you. Behaviors that are unacceptable. Can’t smoke, can’t swear, cant’ screw, can’t *think*” (Crichton 2004a: 458-459; original emphasis). Hoffman is a comically misunderstood mashup of various cognitive scholars cited in the final bibliography of the book, and his takeaway is that the “ecology of thought [...] has led to a State of Fear” (Crichton 2004a: 450). Apparently, environmentalism with its campaigns to promote fear in the population is the crown jewel of the PLM and is basically as bad as the fossil fuel industry (or worse).

- a cruel subversion of the noble savage trope: Ted Bradley, a naïve liberal character who doesn't believe that human beings can be deliberately cruel and who thinks that stories about anthropofagy are just "scare stories [...] at the expense of the indigenous people of the world", is eaten alive in the most grandguignolesque way by the cannibal inhabitants of Pavutu, Solomon Islands, in the Pacific Ocean (Crichton 2004a: 503 and 533). The character dies only after having being lectured by Kenner: "You think civilization is some horrible, polluting human invention that separates us from the state of nature. But civilization doesn't separate us from nature, Ted. Civilization *protects* us from nature. Because what you see right now, all around you – this is nature" (Crichton 2004a: 527; for more than a rebuttal on this nasty and hasty generalisation see Graeber and Wengrow 2021; for all the tropes of Crichton's novel see [TvTropes](#)).
- the rejection of the precautionary principle and a shocking disregard for long-term longitudinal studies, so that DDT was "so safe you could eat it" (according to a study published in 1969); its banning pushed by the "environmental movement" was "arguably the greatest tragedy of twentieth century" because it led to "more than fifty million needless deaths", that is, "more people than Hitler" (Crichton 2004a: 487-488; instead, DDT is "an endocrine disruptor, a predictor of breast cancer, and a marker of high risk", Cohn *et al.* 2015). Also, the recall of silicon "breast implants [...] claimed to cause cancer and autoimmune diseases" was wrong because "four years later, definitive epidemiological studies" showed "beyond a doubt" that they "did not cause disease" (Crichton 2004a: 456; for a rebuttal see Watad *et al.* 2021).
- the rejection of any current environmental preservation project because "we don't know how to [...] manage the environment" in the right way (Crichton 2004a: 484). As Kenner pontificates, the mismanagement of the Yellowstone National Park since its establishment exemplifies "a history of ignorant, incompetent, and disastrously intrusive intervention, followed by attempts to repair the intervention, followed by attempts to repair the damage caused by the repairs, as dramatic as any oil spill or toxic dump. This disaster was caused by environmentalists charged with protecting the wilderness, who made one dreadful mistake after another" (Crichton 2004a: 486; for the history of the recovery of the park and a proper historical contextualisation see instead Russell 2011: 49-50). [2]

To further draw a strong “correspondence between social reality” and his novel, Crichton added to the 567 page-long novel an “Author’s Message” (Crichton 2004a: 569-573), which consists of a preface and a 25-point bullet list. In the latter, we can read apodictic statements like “Nobody knows how much of the present warming trend might be man-made”, alongside a wild “guess” about an increase of world temperature of 0.812436°C “in the next century” intended to mock climatology (“there is no evidence that my guess [...] is any better or worse than anyone else’s”); a plea about maintaining a *laissez-faire* attitude in climate change management because we will “shift away from fossil fuels [...] in the next century” almost magically, “without legislation, financial incentives, carbon-conservation programs, or the interminable yammering of fearmongers”; a bewildering cognitive-based attacks on those “ideologues and zealots” who are incapable of changing their mind about ideas they held “thirty years ago”; a disconcerting *everyone does it fallacy* aimed at shifting the blame from fossil fuel industry, “big business”, and governments on environmental organisations for their “incompetence” (“all have equally dismal track records”); and, last but not least, a conclusion which falls into the category of the *Ishmael effect*, for Crichton’s alone knows the truth: “Everybody has an agenda. Except Me.”

The mix of wishful thinking, unpreparedness, superciliousness, and sheer hubris demonstrated by Crichton finds its ultimate expression in the most serious “Appendix I: Why Politicized Science Is Dangerous” (Crichton 2004a: 575-581). The novelist here tells his own version of both 20th-century eugenics in the USA as a “new scientific theory that warne[d] of an impending crisis” and Lysenkoism in Soviet Russia as an example of “government ideology controlling the work of science” to imply both an *ad Hitlerum* fallacy and a guilt-by-association equivalence between those despicable historical case studies and pro-anthropogenic climate change meteorology (Crichton 2004a: 575 and 578; the text is also widely available online on both Crichton’s personal website and multiple counter-climate change pages: e.g., Crichton 2004b; on both the history of Lysenkoism and eugenics see, respectively, Cassata 2008 and Cassata 2015).

I won’t comment on the second appendix (“Sources of Data for Graphs”; Crichton 2004a: 581-582), because Crichton’s fallacious interpretations of the

available data have already been assessed and commented by climate scientists (see refs. below; to evaluate the data presented by Crichton please refer to the [GISS Surface Temperature Analysis](#) website by NASA), and I will instead briefly focus on the final 21-page long, confirmation bias-informed bibliography engineered to seed doubts in his audience about scientific consensus, and to reiterate *ad nauseam* that what his characters discussed in the book has been said by certain selected scholars unafraid, like Crichton himself, to question authority. Thus, among a discombobulating mix of wild claims haphazardly selected from (pseudo)scientific sources and real scientific studies (just as a *dilettante* might do), we can find both third party's quotations and Crichton's own comments designed to drive his points home one last time: we might be about to enter a new ice age; the climate has always changed in the past; contemporary urbanisation processes are more relevant to localized global warming than carbon dioxide emissions; some places in the world are cooling and not warming over long periods; the impact of the Industrial Age on climate warming has been minimal at best; extreme weather events are not predictable (as Crichton stated in the book, they are not even increasing)... you get the idea. Crichton wanted really bad to prove that global warming is allegedly an invention by ruthless liberal scientists incapable of thinking with their own heads, who “are collaborating with the environmental movement, bending facts in a cavalier manner to fit [their] mad global-warming theories — and when the facts won't bend far enough, [they] make them up” (Allen 2005; Crichton 2004a: 583-603; for an examination of anthropogenic atmospheric pollution since antiquity, and not just the Industrial Age, see Preunkert *et al.* 2019).

Upon its publication, scientists had a field day with all ignorant allegations and pseudoscientific fallacies portrayed in the book (e.g., Schmidt 2004; Ekwurzel 2005; cf. Prothero 2013: 67-103). But it was too late; the damage was done. *State of Fear* spent 14 weeks in the top ten list of the *The New York Times Fiction Best Sellers* between [26 December 2004](#) and [27 March 2005](#), being prevented from taking the first place only because of the success of another pseudoscientific novel, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

Crichton's novel, “evidently inspired by the eco-conspiracy theories of Bjørn Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist*” (Allen 2005), was hailed by climate change deniers as a scientific masterpiece and was awarded the American

Association of Petroleum Geologists (AAPG) 2006 Journalism Award (see Brigham-Grette *et al.* 2006 for a moral and critical rebuttal). Before and after the publication of his book, Crichton delivered speeches and released interviews in which he, as a real-life Kenner or Hoffman, declared that environmentalism was a fundamentalist religion that engaged in wrong “doomsday predictions” and in the active killing of people (because, it bears repeating, as a movement it successfully promoted the banning of DDT, which, according to Crichton, was “not a carcinogenic”; Crichton 2003a), mocked climatologists and the very idea of scientific consensus (which he ridiculed as “pernicious” and “the first refuge of scoundrels”; Crichton 2003b), and savagely lambasted the author of a critical piece about his Republican-adjacent counter-climate change crusade by turning him into a minor character of his next novel, remarkable only for being a most odious rapist and for a particular, risible, anatomical feature (Lee 2006). So much for accepting criticism and confrontation. Crichton, ever the egocentric, reacted in that abhorrent way because that journalist really touched a nerve: the novelist was playing the part of the contrarian *idiot utile*, lending his voice time and again to support the *status quo* and the fossil fuel industry.

This interview has aged like cheese. Charlie Rose (right) grills Michael Crichton (left) on his climate change-denialist novel *State of Fear*. Aired on ABC, 19 February 2007, 28'09". Source: charlierose.com.

In 2005, after having been received at the White House by an “excited” George

W. Bush to enthusiastically discuss *State of Fear*, Crichton was even summoned “as an expert witness testifying on global warming in front of the United States Senate” by Republican Oklahoma senator James Inhofe, who called global warming “the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people” (Remnick 2006; Wilson 2005). Two years later, in a one-hour long interview with Charlie Rose aired on ABC, Crichton engaged in a remarkable *life-imitating-art-imitating-life* act, summarising once again the only consensus that mattered to him, the Crichton-Kenner-Hoffman paradigm (Rose 2007). On that occasion, sometimes almost reciting word for word his characters’ statements, he held in no particular order that:

- he did his own “calculations” (!), according to which we “will have .8 of a degree warming increase in the next 100 years”;
- climate change is real but “it’s not a crisis”;
- he didn’t rely on “expert witness” (“I didn’t talk to anybody”, to which Rose asks “You do the work yourself?”, and Crichton answers, “yes”);
- “consensus science is not science” (to which he adds, “all this consensus stuff is about politics. The real question is what is about the science? And that’s why I said, for example, if you have got a good model, run it out 10 years and let’s see you show it”);
- carbon dioxide was not the “primary driver” of climate change (the culprit was, instead, “the sun”);
- “we’ve been de-carbonizing since the days of Abraham Lincoln and Queen Elizabeth” (which is completely *bonkers*);
- “nobody knows how fast it’s going to get warmer, and nobody knows for sure what the various contributions of warming are”;
- the predicted sea level rise would be just about “38 centimetres” (*laughs*);
- computer models are unreliable (“climate... is a... coupled non-linear chaotic system... I don’t think that a computer model cuts it. I’m not having it”, and “if you have got a good model, run it out 10 years and let’s see you show it”);
- climate change wasn’t a political issue worth spending much money on (“It’s low on the totem pole. We ought to be taking care of disease. We ought to be taking care of world hunger. We ought to be taking care of a lot

of things before we do this”), and so on and so forth.

The 2007 ABC interview is a great example of intelligent people finding intelligent ways to confirm their own biases and dodge criticism [3] (Crichton was already doubting climate change in 1995, by the way, so his statements in *State of Fear* about “ideologues” not changing ideas throughout the years make for quite a Kafkaian reading; Rose 1995) [4], and a cringeworthy illustration of the **Dunning-Kruger** effect, for everything Crichton said was wrong, misinterpreted, or cherry-picked (and the bit about running a model for 10 years hoping his own “calculations” will hold against the whole consensus of a scientific discipline has to be one of the dumbest and self-defeating predictions I’ve ever read). Meanwhile, just as Crichton was pointing his finger at imaginary eco-terrorist conspiracies and boasting that he “could do a better movie” than Al Gore’s “dicey” *An Inconvenient Truth* (Rose 2007), the real conspiracy by the fossil fuel industry and right-wing politicians to preserve the *status quo*, despite knowing well that they were condemning the planet thanks to their own proprietary modeled projections, continued apace (Supran, Rahmstorf and Oreskes 2023; cf. Prothero 2013: 67-103).

Some years ago, I concluded an article in which I reflected about the legacy of both world-renowned historian of religions Mircea Eliade and the “king of pop” himself, Michael Jackson, with the following paragraph:

“In the end, these two important figures were not what many thought they were, what those at the top of the academic discipline and the music industry wanted us to believe they were. As suggested by Maureen Dowd in the *New York Times* piece recalled in the opening epigraph, icons can be cons. To avoid being duped by the fool’s gold of fake stars, let us first stop normalizing psychopathology” (Ambasciano 2019b: 11; cf. Dowd 2019).

To be sure, in this case, we have to do with toxic ideological agendas, not psychopathology, but the core message remains the same. Peter Gutteridge prefaced his review of *State of Fear* by pointing out that “Michael Crichton’s techno-thrillers all have in common the concern that scientists can’t be trusted to keep control of advances in science and technology. The consequences can be potentially devastating” (Gutteridge 2005). Crichton was not the savant many thought he was (including himself). He was no futurist guru. He was

merely a novelist well out of his depth. The real dangers for society come from for-profit private companies and an unregulated tech sector, their CEOs and the complacent politicians in their pockets, and those public figures eager to spout *urbi et orbi* their bad-faith opinions about topics they don't even understand – just like Crichton. We wasted precious time dealing with people like Crichton. We don't need their toxic and false views today.

As I wrote in my [previous essay](#), Crichton fooled us by leveraging our most precious childhood memories – dinosaurs – to attack science as a whole, as he always did in his literary production. He struck gold by partnering with Steven Spielberg and the geniuses at ILM for *Jurassic Park*, and grateful palaeontologists erected the new dinosaur genera *Crichtonpelta* and *Crichtonsaurus*. I seriously doubt that Crichton deserved such a honour. For all the good that came out of his involvement (and I'd say, *despite* his involvement), there is a dark side that cannot be silenced. His success as an author empowered him, but he abused his power to willingly propagate pseudoscience with [devastating consequences](#) (e.g., Carrington 2023). Today, he is still being lionised by the US radical right as a “political philosopher and a very wise one”, and his relentless criticism about scientific research is being used to bolster the radical right's ongoing attack on truth and science (e.g., Carlson 2023). And today I add Michael Crichton to the expanding rogue gallery where former icons are revealed as cons.

Good riddance.

Notes

This post was updated on 16 and 20 February 2023 and partially corrected on 2 July 2024.

This contribution is intended as a coda to the previous post, [The End of The \(Jurassic\) World](#), to which I refer readers

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interested in the bigger picture.

[1] When Crichton started his career as a paperback writer of pulp thrillers, he adopted two pseudonyms to separate his literary from his medical career. One of these pseudonyms was John Lange, chosen to honour Victorian polymath Andrew Lang (1844-1912; John was Crichton's first name; see Shenker 1969). In part mirroring Crichton's own path, Lang left academia for a career in journalism, becoming the author of more than 100 books which "for the most part were 'both trivial and superficial'" (Wheeler-Barclay 2010: 110; cit. from Ambasciano 2019: 80). Crichton's choice is also possibly explained by what he must have perceived as a sort of science-critical common ground between him and the Victorian writer, as Lang's thoughts were shaped by "anti-positivism, anti-modernism, degenerationism and ambiguous criticism" of the scientific method, particularly insofar as the fields of Comparative Religion and Anthropology were concerned (Ambasciano 2019:

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[2] The idea of the total collapse of entire ecosystems in the wake of some unexpected behavioural changes was somewhat prefigured in *The Lost World*, Crichton's sequel to *Jurassic Park*. In that novel, the extinction of the dinosaurs is imagined by mathematician Ian Malcolm, Crichton's *alter ego*, as the consequence of some behavioural and dietary changes affecting some dinosaurs which, in an environmental domino effect, led to the destruction of the whole food chain: "some dinosaur roots in the swamps around the inland sea, changes the water circulation, and destroys the plant ecology that twenty other species depend on. Bang! They're gone. That causes still more dislocations. A predator dies off, and its prey grow unchecked. The ecosystem becomes unbalanced. More things go wrong. More species die. And suddenly it's over. It could have happened that way. [...] It doesn't require asteroids or diseases or anything else. It's just behavior that

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suddenly emerges” (Crichton 1995: 339 and 340; cf. with the description of Yellowstone’s chain food collapse and entire ecosystem after the removal of wolves in Crichton 2004a: 485). Crichton’s gradualist scenario was akin to the myriads of questionable theories that proliferated until the [Dinosaur Renaissance](#) (for a list see Archibald 2012: 1029-1030). While gradualist and catastrophic scenarios for the K/Pg extinction event were still being discussed in the mid-90s and beyond (e.g., Russell and Dodson 1997), the former had been seriously challenged since the early 1980s and have been ultimately [falsified](#). For a clearheaded and contemporary analysis of the topic see Alvarez 1997; for a recent, quick, but precise overview see Naish 2021: 84-87.

[3] Michael Shermer defined this self-justification bias as follows: “smart people believe weird things because they are better at rationalizing their beliefs that they hold for nonsmart reasons” (Shermer 2011: 310).

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[4] In Crichton's own words from 1995: "[the extinction of the human species] it's not around the corner, no. In fact, I think that most of the things that people are worrying about here are, you know, the trends in global warming and the changes in... I'm really not persuaded that... that maybe they're not a good idea, but I'm not... it's not clear exactly how dire they are" (Rose 1995, 8'57"-9'07"). In *The Lost World*, Ian Malcolm states that "changes can occur very quickly. Human beings are transforming the planet, and nobody knows whether it's a dangerous development or not" (Crichton 1995: 338). On the other hand, "cyberspace means the end of our species" (Crichton 1995: 339).

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