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The Pseudo-Science Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe

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Comments

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The Pseudo-Science Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe. By Michael D. Gordin. University of Chicago Press, 2012. 304 pp. \$29.00 cloth, \$17.50 paper.

Historian Michael D. Gordin's *The Pseudo-Science Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe* opens with an astute statement about the nature of "pseudoscience:" "No one in the history of the world has ever self-identified as a pseudo-scientist. There is no person who wakes up in the morning and thinks to himself, "I'll just head into my pseudolaboratory and perform some pseudoexperiments to try to confirm my pseudotheories with pseduofacts" (p 1).

Those who study topics variously referred to as the paranormal, occult, new age, or fringe science are well aware of the good intentions of those who desire to prove the "reality" of ghosts, Bigfoot, ancient astronauts and the like. Ghost hunters utilize a host of equipment, invented technical terms, and protocols, and claim great skepticism in their desire to appear scientific. Seekers of Bigfoot and other "monsters" have

invented a new field, “cryptozoology” in their quest to be taken seriously by the scientific establishment. Yet neither subject has been able to avoid the label of “pseudo-science,” the placement of which marks a subject as not worthy of consideration and the people involved as lacking in credibility.

Gordin explores the power of the pseudo-science label via a historical case study of reaction to the works of Russian psychoanalyst Immanuel Velikovsky during the Cold War era (1940s - 1970s). Virtually unknown today outside of “fringe science” circles, Velikovsky argued in a series of books such as *Worlds in Collision* and *Earth in Upheaval*, that Earth’s early history was defined by a series of close passes by Venus, Mars, a large comet from Jupiter and other celestial bodies that produced a series of upheavals and catastrophes. This revised history, Velikovsky argued, made sense of many of our myths and legends by providing a natural explanation for the parting of the Red Sea, great plagues and other spectacular events.

Although Gordin provides a history of Velikovsky’s early life in Russia, his career in psychoanalysis and the genesis of his ideas regarding planetary upheaval, the book primarily focuses upon the extraordinary vehemence leveled at his theories by conventional scientists. Early book reviews of Velikovsky’s work by scientists (particularly astronomers) were particularly fervent and led to a successful campaign to have MacMillan pull the book and sell its rights to Doubleday.

Oftentimes scientists will simply ignore pseudo-scientific claims. Gordin ties the intensity of reaction to Velikovsky’s work to the World War II/Cold War era context in which that work appeared. Following World War II the American scientific establishment found itself blessed with both greater power and prestige than previously experienced *and* higher levels of anxiety about the possible threat to American scientific domination posed by Soviet scientists such as Trofim Lysenko. Branding Velikovsky as a crank acted as boundary maintenance; it provided clear signals as to what constituted proper science, Gordin argues.

Although Gordin does not draw this connection, his argument places the book within a strong existing literature in the study of functionalist perspectives on deviant behavior. For example, Kai Erikson’s *Wayward Puritans* persuasively argues that the Salem Witch Trials acted as boundary maintenance for early Puritans whose identity was in flux in the wake of the Antinomian Controversy. Having a clear, unambiguous villain to rally against, Erikson argues, served the needed function of strengthening the community. Labeling outsiders serves the complementary function of defining insiders.

As a historical case study, Gordin’s book sometimes focuses on the specific details of the Velikovsky case, but more on the general principles or lessons that we should learn from it. However, this careful case study of scientists protecting their boundaries should be read by those with an

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interest in the sociology of science, deviant behavior and/or the New Age and fringe sciences.

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