

Four Decades of Fringe Literature

The numbers of books on fringe science rose to a peak in the late 1970s and have since been on a decline. Trends after 1945 may be associated with social attitudes and events.

Steven Dutch

ALTHOUGH MOST OBSERVERS of the scientific fringe are well aware that the public appetite for nonsense comes and goes in waves, there has been little documentation of the timing, duration, and levels of fringe waves. This paper presents a survey of trends in book publishing since 1945, based on counts in the *Cumulative Book Index* (hereafter CBI) and *Books in Print* (BIP).

Each of these sources has advantages and disadvantages. The data from CBI are based on counts under subject headings and can therefore be expected to yield a fairly complete listing. However, it may take a year or two for a rise in interest in some topic to be noticed and listed under a separate heading. When a fringe theory gains wide popularity, its subject heading may be subdivided, so that the apparent publishing level might appear lower than the true level. There is a certain element of subjectivity that enters into deciding whether to include a book under a given subject. Some fringe topics, such as theories about catastrophes, are not listed under separate categories. Finally, the CBI includes only books actually published in a given year, so there may be year-to-year fluctuations that have little to do with the public interest level. For example, a large press-run may supply demand for a couple of years, so that even though demand remains high, the next year's count may be lower.

The counts from BIP are based on key title words. This approach means that counts may be incomplete; some of the classics of the fringe, such as

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Worlds in Collision, *Incident at Exeter*, and *Chariots of the Gods?* will be missed by a search of common fringe title words. There will be a scattering of works with unrelated content, such as a medical treatise on occult traumatic lesions listed under "Occult." There will also be reputable scholarly works and even refutations. The importance of such anomalies is minor. Indeed, it is legitimate to include the refutations because they generally get published only when public interest in a subject is high, and anyway they are all too few in number. A search of title key words does catch the "parasitic" literature that appears after a high level of interest has developed and is therefore a useful indicator of public interest in fringe ideas.

BIP includes all works listed as in print by publishers. A given work may stay in print for some years after its press run. Therefore, the total number of works in BIP is two to three times greater than in CBI. Also, trends found from BIP data tend to be more subdued than those from CBI data, with lower peaks and shallower valleys, because the listings tend to persist for several years and year-to-year fluctuations are smoothed out.

There has been a steep increase in book publication since 1945. To determine the actual level of public appetite for the fringe, the title counts were divided by the total number of listings (determined by the page count and an approximate title count per page) and are presented in the figures as titles per 100,000 listings. Space limitations preclude a more detailed analysis, but I will be happy to send copies of my data to any interested researcher. (Please include a stamped return envelope.)

Ghosties and Ghoulies. . . .

By far the largest category of fringe literature might be termed the "classical occult." (See Figure 1.) Included in this subject area are the key words or subject headings "Astrology," "Atlantis," "Occult," "Psychic," and "Reincarnation." One might object that including "Astrology" skews the results, since it is such a popular subject. However, as the figure shows, the trends for all major themes are quite similar, and each theme tends to make up a roughly constant proportion of the total. It appears that interest in the occult, in astrology, and in psychic topics rose and fell together, with a major peak from the late 1940s to the mid-1950s and a much larger peak in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. There does seem to be a tendency for short-term lows in one heading to be offset by peaks in another, as if reader interest fluctuated among the different themes from year to year.

The plunge in publishing after 1981 has been so precipitous that I suspected it was the result of a change in classification, but a check of related subjects indicated that the drop is real.

The category of "Atlantis" is problematical. In earlier times Atlantis was part of the occult and was the source of occult knowledge for groups like Theosophists. More recently, Atlantis seems to have been more akin to UFO literature and especially Bermuda Triangle lore. It forms such a small part of

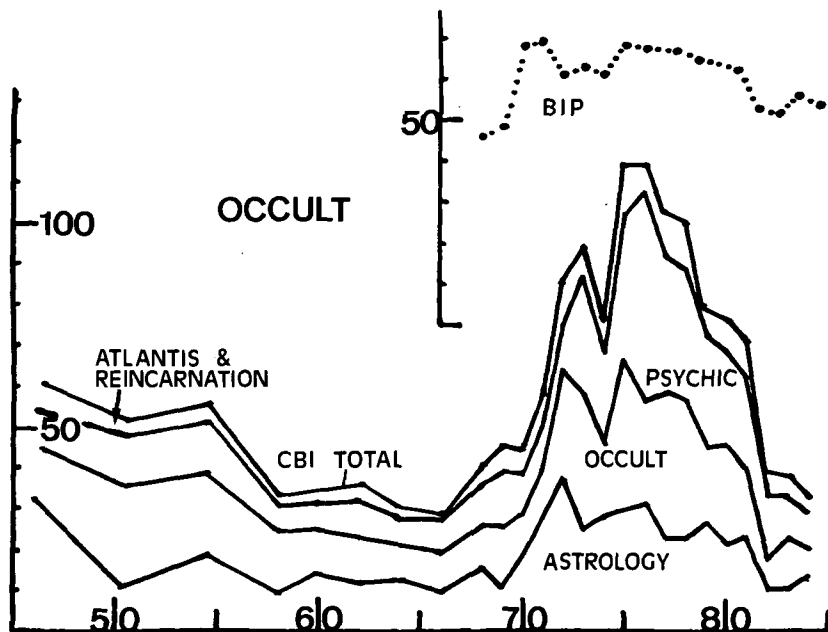


FIGURE 1

the total occult literature that it has no effect on the overall picture.

... And Long-legged Beasties ...

Another category is "Monsters." (See Figure 2.) Entries searched in this area included "Bigfoot," "Loch Ness Monster," and "Sasquatch." The CBI was also searched for "Abominable Snowman" before 1970. The publishing record before 1970 was so sporadic as to be essentially nonexistent. During the 1970s, interest in what has been called "cryptozoology" rose to a peak and then showed a definite decline. This fashion seems to have definitely passed, at least for the time being.

Another category that shows a similar pattern is Atlantis-Bermuda Triangle literature. These two apparently different themes actually have a good deal in common, specifically the notion that unknown marvels are to be found in remote parts of the earth. They might collectively be called the "lost world" literature.

... And Things That Go Bump in the Night

The archetypal fringe theory is, of course, that of UFOs. (See Figure 3.) The data used in this category included the key words "Flying Saucer," "UFO," and "Unidentified Flying Object," as well as all books by Erich von

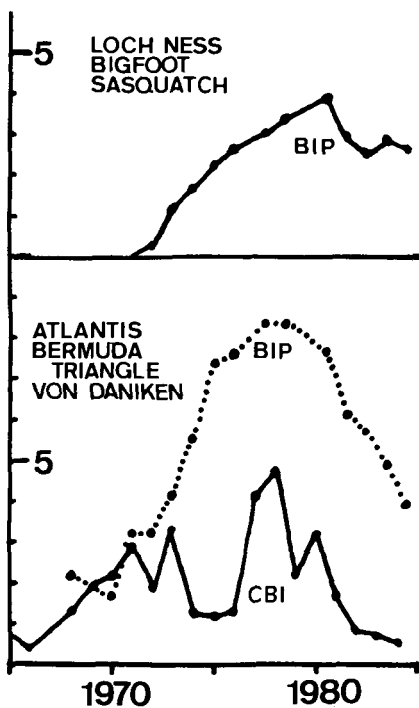


FIGURE 2

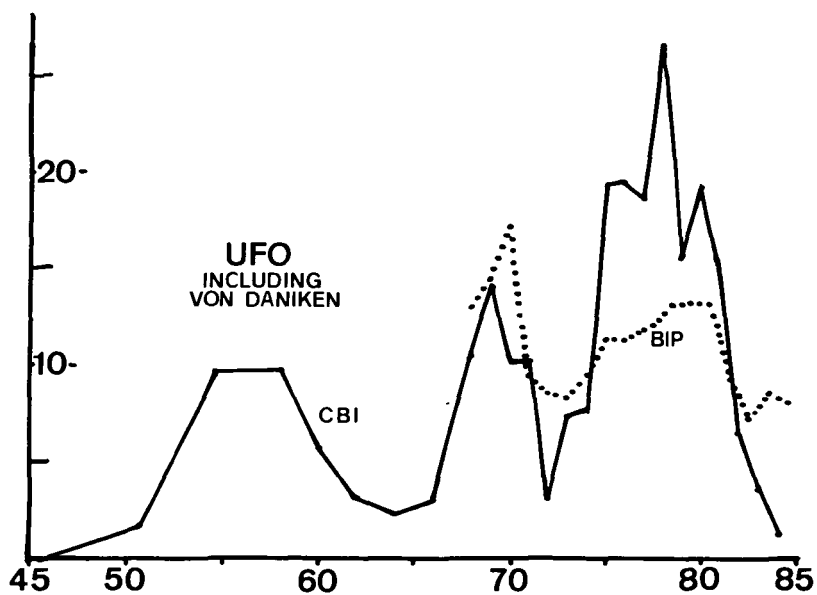


FIGURE 3

Däniken. The pattern is similar to the Occult trends. The great flying-saucer wave of the early 1950s is unmistakable, and a much greater wave in the late 1960s and in the 1970s. In fact, we can recognize two later waves: one in 1967-69, which produced John Fuller's *Incident at Exeter*, and another in 1971-77. Again, note the plunge in publishing after 1981.

Meanwhile, the Ultraconservatives . . .

It is interesting to examine a number of fringe notions that have occupied the ultraconservatives: fluoridation, laetrile, and extreme fundamentalism. (See Figure 4.) The peak period of anti-fluoridation literature ran from 1950 to 1968, but the level of activity came nowhere near equaling the furor over this subject. Clearly, most of the battle over fluoridation was carried on via other media. The few late anti-fluoridation works seem to have had no serious impact.

Laetrile became a *cause célèbre* in the 1970s, when an unlikely coalition from the right and left rallied around it. The peak in publishing is apparent, but as in the case of fluoridation, it is clear that books were not the primary means of information flow.

Two themes common to fundamentalists are also presented: creation/evolution and the devil. In both cases titles were screened and listed only if the intent of the book was obvious from the title or if the book was by an

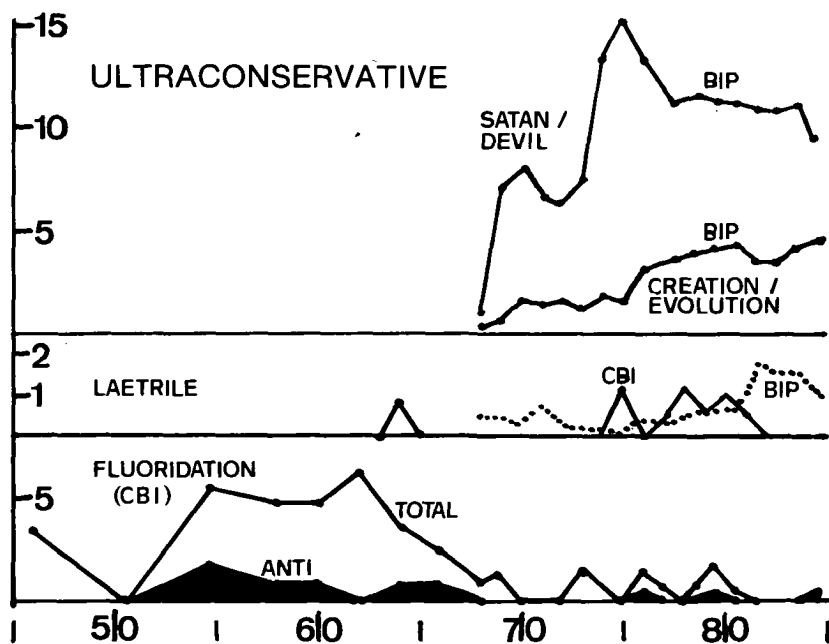


FIGURE 4

author or publisher known to be actively interested in the subject. The steady rise in creationist literature is obvious and needs little comment. The pattern for works with “Devil” or “Satan” in their titles is interesting for its two-stage rise. The first abrupt rise, about 1968, consists largely of occult literature. The second rise, beginning about 1973, is driven largely by fundamentalist works like Hal Lindsey’s *Satan Is Alive and Well on Planet Earth*. In fact, a good deal of recent fundamentalist literature is a reaction to the occult wave of 1967 and later.

External Factors

Figure 5 is an attempt to portray fringe literature in a historical context. A few salient works are shown (major debunking works are marked with an asterisk) together with economic indicators and some major historical events. Data for economic trends are from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

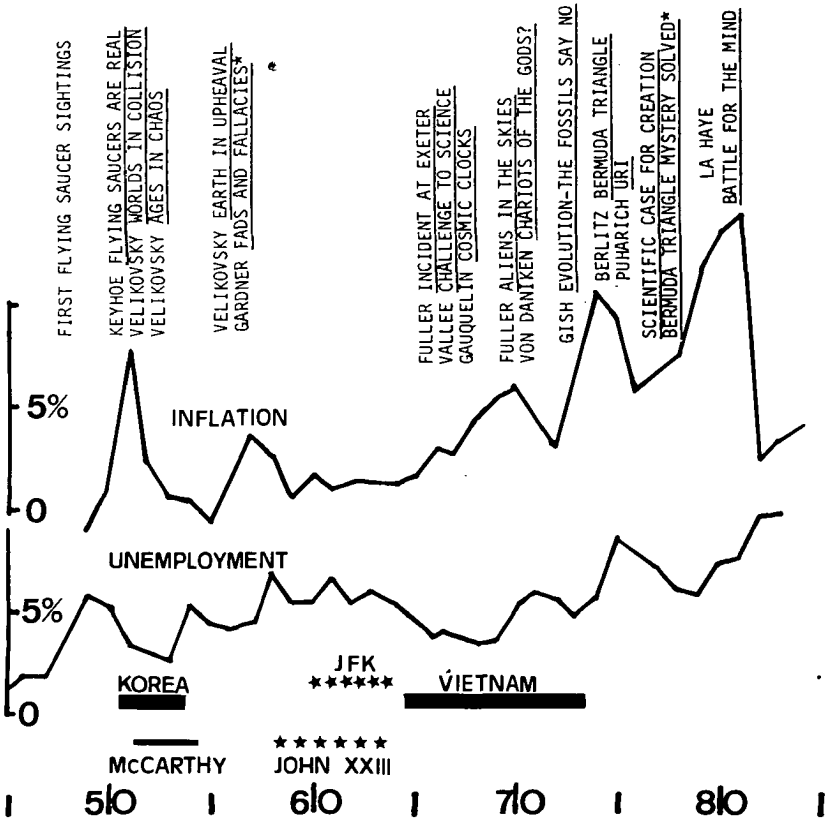


FIGURE 5

It is clear that there is no simple correlation between economic health and fringe publishing. The period of low activity between 1955 and 1967 was marked by stable and generally favorable inflation and unemployment levels, but otherwise a pattern is hard to find. Hard times seem to have little effect on a fringe boom in full swing (mid 1970s) but may be instrumental in ending a boom that is weakening (mid-late 1950s, early 1980s?). One might suspect that people would turn to the occult in times of hardship, but the big occult wave of the 1960s began during a period of sustained economic growth and very low unemployment.

The most obvious correlation is that both fringe booms coincided with a war, but the big flying-saucer binge of the late 1940s began long before the Korean War. A correlation with Vietnam, though, seems almost certain; the Vietnam era was a time of attack on all forms of authority, including scientific authority.

If there is any pattern at all, it seems to me that fringe literature burgeons during times of frustration or uncertain prosperity. During times of optimism, the real world is exciting enough; during very hard times, people are too busy surviving or coping with concrete threats. During the early 1950s, there was the frustration of seeing Soviet influence expand and not being able to counter it. Sputnik, in contrast, was a "threat" that could be met in a concrete fashion, and was. During the late 1960s and the 1970s, there was the frustration of Vietnam (for some, the inability to force a military victory; for others, the inability to influence the political system), civil strife at home, and Watergate. Erratic inflation and unemployment cycles added to the tension by making continued personal prosperity more unpredictable.

What Does It All Mean?

Discussions of values in America have tended recently to focus on the traits of decades. The 1950s have been characterized as complacent, conformist, conservative, and anti-intellectual. The 1960s have been considered activist, liberal, turbulent, socially concerned, open-minded, and intellectually lively. The 1970s have been labeled hedonistic and narcissistic, while the 1980s have been labeled materialistic and individualistic and generally much like the 1950s.

The trends in crank literature suggest that this picture is severely in error. Either trends in fringe publishing bear no relation to the attitudes of society, a rather unlikely assumption, or the simple decade picture is wrong. I think the latter is the case and that two major revisions are in order. The first is that the midpoints rather than the beginnings of decades are more likely to mark major transitions. The second, much more controversial, is that there was no major values-shift between the late 1960s and the 1970s.

For the 1950s, the picture is pretty noncontroversial. World War II perturbed the publishing market in so many ways that we can say little about trends in the mid-1940s, but in the late 1940s and early 1950s it is clear we had a wave of mass irrationalism that included the first flying-saucer sightings

in 1947, the works of Velikovsky in 1950, and the Bridey Murphy mania in 1954. Politically, of course, this interval also saw the McCarthy era. After about 1955, however, the level of all major fringe categories declined and stayed at a low level until about 1965. Then the level of fringe publishing began to climb, peaking in the early 1970s and slowly declining thereafter.

There are many lines of evidence that place the main values shift not in 1960 but about 1965. Most of the positive accomplishments of the 1960s took place early in the decade and were the end result of processes that began in the 1950s. The administration of John F. Kennedy rested on a political power-base built in the 1950s. If the rhetoric of the Sputnik era was at times hysterical, the improvement in public education that came as a result of the shock of Sputnik I was not. The passage of civil-rights legislation was the result of a campaign that began in 1954 with the outlawing of school segregation by the U.S. Supreme Court. Finally, we should note the reforms that accompanied the papacy of John XXIII (1958-63). I am not sure whether these leaders helped create a time of rationality or whether a rational period enabled them to be unusually effective.

On the other hand, most of the traumatic events we associate with the 1960s, except for the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, were concentrated in the latter half of the decade. The Vietnam war became a serious national issue after 1965; most of the campus riots took place in the latter half of the decade as well, as did most of the race riots. Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were killed in 1968.

The apparent exception to this pattern is the Apollo program, but even this is not an exception. The space program came under increasingly heavy attack in the late 1960s and was probably sustained only because of the commitments that had been made to it early in the decade, and especially the tendency to invoke John F. Kennedy's pledge to put a man on the moon before 1970. Once the first lunar landings were made, the Apollo program was terminated; in fact, the final three missions were cut from the program.

There is, in addition, good reason to believe that the unattractive values often associated with the 1970s actually were formed in the late 1960s. For example, there is an unmistakable continuity between the political nihilism of the late 1960s ("Down with the system") and the technological nihilism of the early and middle 1970s ("Down with technology—back to nature") as espoused by authors like Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, Theodore Roszak, and Charles Reich. Indeed, many of the leading anti-technologists developed and published their ideas during the late 1960s.

The egoism that has come to be a symbol of the 1970s can also be clearly traced into the 1960s, where the notion was widely espoused that individual conscience took precedence over social and legal norms, and where people who thumbed their noses at the System were often lionized and held up as role models. Few college students escaped reading Thoreau during that epoch! There was no major change in values after 1970; instead the causes that lent legitimacy to this value system lost their immediacy, and the egoism that once

seemed a means to legitimate ends degenerated into unfocused narcissism (or, if one is especially pessimistic, was revealed for what it always was). As a final note, the 1970s have also been labeled hedonistic, but it is almost superfluous to note that sexual liberation and the widespread use of drugs are products not of the 1970s but of the late 1960s.

The late 1960s were unquestionably a time of intellectual vitality. Unfortunately, it appears that the freedom to challenge basic assumptions often was dissipated in anti-intellectualism; an uncritical rejection of assumptions is just as destructive as uncritical acceptance. It is intriguing to note that the long downward slide of SAT scores coincided with the great boom in fringe literature. Apparently intellectual freedom meant, for many people, the freedom not to be intellectual.

The use of terms like "the sixties" has the advantage of providing convenient labels. It also serves certain ideological ends, particularly for those nostalgic for "the sixties" who feel threatened by the current questioning of the values of that period. The term "the sixties" allows the user to bask in the glow of John Kennedy's Camelot and the struggles of Martin Luther King, imbue the radicalism of the late 1960s with the same aura, and simultaneously disavow the narcissism of the 1970s. Similarly, using the label "the fifties" allows the user to tar the entire decade with the brush of McCarthyism.

The data, I argue, present a radically different picture. There was a definite wave of popular hysteria from about 1947 to 1955 as Americans learned to adjust to Cold War tensions; but the interval from 1955 to 1966 was apparently quite rationalistic (or at least not overtly irrational), perhaps more so than any period in recent American history. It was not all pure reason. (This interval saw the anti-fluoridation panic, and the response to Sputnik was well out of proportion to the real threat.) But the output of crank literature was the lowest of any period studied. After 1965, political unrest was paralleled by a boom in crank literature that has only recently begun to abate.

For the present, the data suggest cause for cautious optimism. Most of the indicators of fringe science have fallen off considerably from their 1970s peak. The creationist movement has lost its key court-cases and has apparently retreated to its classical role of agitation within ultra-orthodox religious groups rather than trying to win open equality with science. (This does *not* mean it has ceased to be a threat!) Indeed, a key reason for the failure of creationism has been the reluctance of major evangelists and denominations to risk tying their own credibility to creationism lest the bubble burst. Finally, recent writings of major evangelists abound in warnings about "backsliding," "worldliness," and "becoming lukewarm," a dead giveaway that their pitch has lost some of its appeal.

On the negative side, we have lost much. All that was gained in the interval from 1965 to 1980 could have been gained more easily and rationally. Despite the successful Voyager mission, the full-scale Grand Tour of the solar system proposed in the late 1960s never took place. There was no U.S.

mission to Halley's Comet. The state of science education is a shambles. Although no major educators have said so openly, many of the educational reforms that have been proposed in recent years amount to a return to pre-1965 methods and curricula. Funding for science has been cut and cut again; both by conservatives who opposed such spending on principle and by liberals who see it as diverting funds from social expenditures. The level of crank publishing has fallen sharply, but the backlog of such literature in print is still high; and there is plenty of fringe literature outside the book market. We should also bear in mind that an absence of fringe literature would not necessarily mean an intellectual public. Recall that the early 1960s, a time of low fringe output, was also the time that television was called "The Vast Wasteland." Certainly it appears that many of the people who read *Chariots of the Gods?* a few years ago are watching "Dynasty" rather than PBS; that is, fringe literature has given way not to intellectualism but to nonintellectual escapism.

On a positive note, I suspect the rise of microcomputers may also have played a role in diverting attention from fringe works, first of all by providing intellectually stimulating alternative activity and, second, by enabling millions of people to develop a feeling of technological competence and a sense of participation in science and technology.

It appears we are in a time of transition. I suspect fringe publishing will be relatively dormant for a while, then revive as a new generation of consumers arises. The task confronting us is to make the best possible use of this interval and to be prepared when (not *if*) the next fringe wave arrives. •

The Potent Process of Peer Criticism

Within science, ideas have to prove their mettle. The scientist has to have his ideas accepted by other scientists if he is to make "a contribution to science." This informal but nonetheless potent process of scrutiny and criticism by peers is reinforced nowadays by the existence of formal custodians or assessors. For example, scientific referees who judge the results of research before publication in scientific journals, and granting committees who evaluate applications for funds to support new and continuing research projects. The system operates primarily to decide what is to be accepted as a likely contribution to the advancement of science; a largely unintended consequence is that it operates also to determine what is scientific and what is pseudoscientific.

—J. W. Grove, "Rationality at Risk: Science
against Pseudoscience," *Minerva* (Summer 1985)