

OPINION

Want to be part of the fashionable set? Don't join the 'freethinkers'



Parnell Palme McGuinness

Columnist and communications adviser

June 19, 2021 – 5.32am

There are views that are not socially acceptable. They are not, as the Germans say, “salonfähig” – meaning, suitable to be aired in the salons, boardroom lunches, writers’ festivals, or harbourside soirees of fashionable society.

In the time of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, people who held such views were labelled “freethinkers”. They rejected arguments from authority, tradition and religion and insisted on logic and inquiry. Tolstoy praised freethinkers as “those who are willing to use their minds without prejudice and without fearing to understand things that clash with their own customs, privileges, or beliefs”. But sceptical Dostoyevsky saw also a type of person who wallows in “a hotbed of freethinking, depravity, and godlessness”.

These days, most fashionable modern salons are stridently godless. If you score an invite and you’re lucky, you might even discover one that’s still a little depraved, in spite of today’s secular moralism. But freethinking they are decidedly not.



Yuin man and Dark Emu author Bruce Pascoe on his property near Mallacoota. JUSTIN MCMANUS

That is why Bruce Pascoe's retelling of Indigenous Australian society, *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the Birth of Agriculture*, became instant lore among the fashionable set, when it should have been debated as an argument or theory. And it is why a credible new challenge to Pascoe's scholarship is rocking the salonistas who gulped the *Dark Emu* narrative down whole.

Shortly after the 2018 reissue of Pascoe's book took the salons by storm, conservative journal *Quadrant* published *Bitter Harvest*, a book devoted to pointing out factual errors, omissions and embroideries in *Dark Emu*. A website called *Dark Emu Exposed* was also set up as a sort of crowd-sourced fact check by the "quiet Australians". But, of course, the source of these efforts just reinforced to the salonistas that only nasty conservative colonialists would question such a brand, shining new theory which slotted in so nicely with fashionable views.

Dark Emu was quickly turned into a children's book, recklessly sub-titled *A Truer History*, and joined such modern children's classics as *A is for Activist* and *Greta Thunberg (Little People, Big Dreams)* on the shelves of all the twee bookshops. *Dark Emu* and *Young Dark Emu* even [made it onto school reading lists](#). Because many educators enjoy writers' festivals too.

It is deeply inconvenient that well-credentialled anthropologist Peter Sutton and archaeologist Kerryn Walshe have now co-authored *Farmers or Hunter Gatherers*, to correct Pascoe and celebrate an unbleached version of Australia's Indigenous history. Their speculation to *Good Weekend* that it is a "profound lack of knowledge about Aboriginal people and history" that has led the fashionable set to embrace *Dark Emu* uncritically, "or an unconcern with facts and truth themselves, or a combination of these things" are all the

more embarrassing because so many of the right sort of people gushed about *Dark Emu* so publicly.



Academic Peter Sutton, one of Australia's leading anthropologists, disputes many claims made in *Dark Emu*. DAVID SOLM

The fashionable set also has firm views in a completely different sphere of endeavour. If you belong in the salons, or aspire to be invited, you must not consider that the COVID-19 virus may have originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, China. This was the pet theory former US President Donald Trump, seized on from early intelligence briefings and publicly advanced in the early months of 2020. Trump, obviously, has not been salonfähig since he and Bill Clintons were hanging out with Jeffrey Epstein, and when he latches onto an idea you can be certain the salons will recoil from it. Consequently, the lab leak theory has been vehemently rejected in salon circles. Even scientists like harbourside soirees and it has now emerged that scientists publicly played down the plausible lab leak theory so as [not to be seen to be supporting Trump](#).

Now Trump-slaying President Joe Biden ordered an intensified investigation into the origins of COVID-19, including the possibility it originated in a laboratory, and the scientists are right behind him.

Worse, since the beginning of the pandemic, academics at the exceedingly salonfähig cross-section of climate change and public health have been telling us that the bat virus [is our climatory comeuppance](#). What if Trump was right and they are wrong? And what if the journalists who have been touting epidemiological consensus science [are wrong as well](#)? The extrapolations don't bear contemplating, which is why you must not mention the lab theory.

For similar reasons, if you wish to climb to the heights of polite society, you must not question whether it is useful and meaningful [to compile sexual assault statistics](#) which include everything from violence and compulsion through to incidents which women feel they can deal with themselves, or point out that Indigenous people [are now less likely to die in custody than non-Indigenous people](#).

But what you must do is denounce the fictions of the QAnon cult and those delusional folk who pick up an idea and knit it into a system of beliefs that becomes their whole world, to the exclusion of reality. Because it is only when you tell them that the salon has the only true and acceptable set of facts that they will know to put aside their anxiety about fake news and listen to the experts. The salonfähig ones, of course.

Opinion newsletter

Opinion takes on the week's most debated topics with views that will challenge, champion and inform your own. [Sign up to receive it every Thursday](#).



Parnell Palme McGuinness

Parnell Palme McGuinness is managing director strategy and policy at strategic communications firm Agenda C. She has in the past done work for the Australian Liberal Party and the German Greens.