

A disgraced liar accuses scientists: Matt Ridley's Viral

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24 November 2021

For years, the word “disgraced” has been obligatorily prepended to the name of Viscount Matthew Ridley, the British aristocrat and chairman of Northern Rock who steered the bank, and the entire United Kingdom, into financial ruin.

“Matt Ridley, disgraced in 2007 as the former chairman of collapsed bank Northern Rock,” wrote Reuters in 2013 in an article on “shamed” bank executives. The “disgraced banker,” the Guardian called him in 2015.

Ridley’s “disgrace” occurred in the House of Commons Treasury Committee in October 2007, where MPs declared the executive had no “sense of honour” and had “damaged the good name of British banking.”

They demonstrated that he had openly and flagrantly lied to Parliament, writing in a letter, “we have no subprime loans,” while running advertisements reading “open for sub-prime business.”

Thenceforward, it was assumed that Ridley would be seen not only as a crook and an incompetent, but a liar whom no one would take seriously on anything, much less the ethical conduct of others.

But since his misadventure in banking, which cost British taxpayers 37 billion pounds and led to tens of thousands of foreclosures, the 5th Viscount Ridley was not content to retreat to his estate, home to the largest open-pit mine in Britain.

“What is honour?” asked Shakespeare’s corrupt and cowardly knight, Sir Falstaff. “Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? he that died o’ Wednesday... Therefore I’ll none of it.”

Perhaps with similar sentiments, the Viscount returned to public life, elected by his aristocratic peers to the House of Lords in 2013, and has rebooted his career as a “science writer” to deny the existence of climate change, argue the genetic basis of race, and promote ideas associated with Social Darwinism.

Most recently, he has joined the band of rogues and scoundrels, including the racist Nicholas Wade and “aluminum tubes” liar Michael R. Gordon, working to slander the world’s leading coronavirus experts, including Shi Zhengli and Peter Daszak, during a global pandemic that has killed up to 20 million people.

In line with his fellow Brexit advocate Raheem Kassam, the co-host of Steve Bannon’s “War Room: Pandemic” podcast, Ridley has, since early 2020, sought to blame China for the COVID-19 pandemic, asking in March 2020, “Is there not a case for demanding some sort of reparations from the Chinese government” for “the terrible human suffering” caused by the pandemic.

Working backward from this conclusion, Ridley has accused the US National Institutes of Health and the EcoHealth alliance of a coverup, implying that they are complicit in the creation or release of SARS-CoV-2.

Using the “weasel words” common to all intellectual pickpockets, Ridley regularly makes sweeping claims in the press using deniable language arguing to promote the claim that SARS-COV-2 is a genetically engineered virus created at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. For example,

he wrote in May 2020, “The simple story of an animal in a market infected by a bat that then infected several human beings no longer looks credible”—a statement that any normal person would interpret as a rejection of the natural origins of COVID-19.

As the consummation of this campaign, Ridley has, together with Alina Chan, an “intellectually dishonest, manipulative conspiracist” in the words of virologist Angela Rasmussen, written a 400-page book purporting to substantiate the “lab leak” hoax.

For the work of two scoundrels, *Viral* is not a completely useless book. “For though myself be a full vicious man, a moral tale yet I you tell can,” says Chaucer’s church-sanctioned seller of false religious relics. *Viral* provides a service, of sorts, in compiling, in long form, every argument concocted by every quack, every leak provided to anonymous internet “researchers,” used to impugn the credibility of the scientists who have devoted their lives to protecting humanity from new infectious diseases.

After hundreds of pages describing the genesis of the “lab leak” theory, Ridley and Chan get to their central argument: an effort to present a right-wing hoax as a “credible” scientific theory.

They devote one chapter to the case for the natural origins of COVID-19, another arguing for “non-natural origins,” and one chapter drawing conclusions.

These arguments are presented in the form of a jury deliberation in a criminal case, with the arguments addressed to “ladies and gentlemen of the jury.”

The chapter arguing for natural origins begins as follows: “So the theory that the pandemic began as a natural spillover was from the start, and remains to this day, highly plausible. It is the null hypothesis, the default assumption.”

In a judicial proceeding, the “null hypothesis” is “not guilty.” By implication, the case of zoonosis is presented as the defense, and the “lab leak” theory is rendered as the prosecution. Having framed the issue this way, Ridley goes on to argue for the defense:

Then there is the lack of direct evidence of a laboratory leak. Where is the infected laboratory worker, the index case? Where is the record of an accident? If there was a leak, why, in the months since the pandemic began, has no scientist come forward with a confession or an eyewitness account? The Chinese regime may be authoritarian, but it is not omnipotent. The lack of a whistleblower with genuine evidence of an escape of the virus into the community must count for something.

Do not forget that there is no evidence at all that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was the subject of experiments in any laboratory.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, says the attorney, there is no evidence of a laboratory leak, and the default assumption must remain that this pandemic began with a natural event, as so many other epidemics have done in the past.

This is a simple, direct, consistent and correct argument. Ridley and Chan then turn to the argument of the prosecution, which we abridge here:

the allegation we take seriously is that scientists at the Wuhan Institute of Virology and, possibly, other laboratories in the city, at the Center for Disease Control or the Huazhong Agricultural University, were doing exactly what they said they were doing: namely, studying viruses from bats and other wildlife with a view to predicting pandemics and eventually developing therapeutics or vaccines. But something went wrong and a virus leaked, either infecting a person who worked in the field, in a laboratory, or elsewhere in the city if lab waste had not been properly decontaminated before being discarded....

Next consider that there is no direct evidence of a natural origin of the Covid-19 pandemic....

We now know, as we did not in February 2020, that the WIV was in possession of a batch of very closely related viruses collected from an abandoned copper mine in Mojiang where workers had sickened with a SARS-like illness in 2012....

In stark contrast to the 2003 SARS virus, there has been no explanation of how it came to be so adept at spreading among humans. Both the 2003 SARS and SARS-CoV-2 are generalist viruses and can infect a wide range of animal species, but the stepwise adaptation of the 2003 SARS virus to its new human host in the early months of that outbreak is missing altogether in the case of SARS-CoV-2....

Then there is the almost ridiculous secrecy that surrounds the mine itself....

The next piece of evidence against the laboratory scientists is the long and detailed record of their research. In paper after paper, they laid bare a record of experiments on sarbecoviruses and other coronaviruses that were ingenious, comprehensive and successful....

One final argument for the laboratory leak is that more virologists have shifted their view and now either think it is possible or even likely....

It must be conceded that many of those making the charge that SARS-CoV-2 leaked from a laboratory are not agreed as to which of several versions of the leak they find most plausible: whether SARS-CoV-2 is a natural virus that was stored there and leaked, like the SARS leaks in Beijing in 2004; or a virus that had been passaged in human cell cultures to the point where it evolved into an efficient human pathogen; or whether SARS-CoV-2 is an engineered chimeric virus. All are possible and until there is better evidence none of these can be ruled out....

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the attorney concludes, there is a stark absence of evidence for a zoonotic spillover at the start of this pandemic. In contrast, the proximity of the outbreak to the WIV—the largest collector of SARS-related coronaviruses in the world, where scientists were creating chimeric viruses and experimenting with close relatives of SARS-CoV-2—makes a compelling case for a laboratory-based origin of the virus.

Ridley assumes that his readers will conclude that a quasi-judicial presentation of his arguments will impart to them rigor. But by framing the argument in this fashion, it only opens him up to total refutation. In statistics, if the “null hypothesis” is not rejected to a high confidence level, say 90 to 95 percent, alternatives are discarded, and the null hypothesis stands.

In the standards of criminal law, the defendant is presumed not guilty,

unless he can be proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

I asked my colleague Tom Carter, an attorney, how he would react if a prosecutor accused his client of committing a crime but offered two mutually exclusive theories of how the crime was committed. Carter replied:

If the prosecutor says that either the crime occurred one way or it occurred another way, then I would jump up and respond that this means that the prosecutor doesn't actually have enough evidence to prove either alternative beyond a reasonable doubt. Therefore, the prosecutor can't actually prove that a crime was committed at all.

You see exactly this type of argument made all the time by unscrupulous prosecutors, who attempt to strengthen a weak case by piling on the charges, in hopes that the jury will think that with all these official-sounding accusations the defendant must be guilty of something.

One accusation that can't be proven beyond a reasonable doubt added to another accusation that can't be proven beyond a reasonable doubt is just two accusations that can't be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. Zero plus zero is still zero.

And this is precisely the issue. Some of the claims Ridley makes are partially true, some are misleading, and some are totally false. But if all of the accuser's premises—true and false alike—are granted, he still cannot come up with a story of what he thinks occurred.

Ridley begins by claiming that he does not know if the disease was genetically engineered or not. Then he implies that he believes SARS-CoV-2 was genetically engineered from RaTG13, a virus that is 96 percent similar to it. Then, new viruses are discovered in Laos, and he accuses scientists of doing research in Laos and taking the viruses to Wuhan, implying that they used those viruses as a basis for genetically engineering SARS-CoV-2.

Each one of these storylines is so tendentious that even Ridley refuses to commit to one or the other. So, he just adds them up, one on top of the other. But, as Carter puts it, “Zero plus zero is still zero.” And Ridley and Chan know it.

Having failed to prove his favored theory using the logical test he establishes, Ridley decides to throw his own methodology out, totally contradicting his earlier assertion that the natural origins of COVID-19 is the “null hypothesis:”

Much of the debate about the origin of the virus assumes that the laboratory-leak theory must prove itself. Natural spillover, by contrast, is the default assumption, which does not have to prove anything. The ball is in its opponent's court. This holds any laboratory-leak theory to a higher standard of proof than any natural theory.

But why should the burden of proof be with those who posit a laboratory leak? True, there has been no major pandemic caused by a laboratory leak, so it would be a first. But we have entered an era when scientists are collecting, sequencing and manipulating viruses at unprecedented scale.

We think that even if the burden of proof was on the laboratory leak initially, it has since shifted. That the closest relative of SARS-CoV-2, RaTG13, got to Wuhan via scientists shifts the burden of proof. So does the obfuscation and misdirection in the story of the Mojiang miners. So does the existence of the other eight SARS-CoV-2-like viruses from the mine. So does the missing database of

more than twenty-two thousand entries. So does the long record of virus collection, coronavirus genetic engineering and animal infection experiments in Wuhan. So does the track record of scientists inserting furin cleavage sites into viruses and the failure to find a furin cleavage site in another SARS-like virus despite widespread searches in China and other countries. And so does the failure of the market spillover hypothesis to find any definitive evidence—no intermediate host, no immediate precursor to SARS-CoV-2, no animal samples found to be positive for the virus.

To summarize Ridley's argumentation, the evidence pointing to a laboratory origin of COVID-19 is so substantial that the burden of proof to demonstrate his theory must be lowered.

This is an argument so nonsensical that a typical reader would just assume he misunderstood it. But no, this is what Ridley is actually claiming: That is, there are so many "zeros," so many speculations and long shots proving nothing, that this justifies lowering the burden of proof for what all these zeros are seeking to prove.

This is the theory. While there does not exist a "preponderance of evidence" between multiple competing theories defended by Ridley and Chan, all the speculative and unproven allegations, added up together, make "a plausible hypothesis worthy of a credible investigation."

No. No, it does not. It does not even add up to a plausible hypothesis if every specious claim made by the authors is granted, if all counterarguments are ignored, and the motives of its proponents are disregarded.

But in reality, every week adds new evidence to the natural origins of COVID-19, from the revelation of the fact that the first known case was a vendor at the Huanan seafood market, to the discovery of a set of viruses in Laos whose receptor binding domains are closer to that of the wild-type SARS-CoV-2 than that of its variants, to new evidence that SARS-like coronaviruses are constantly spilling over into the human population throughout Asia.

And the "evidence" described by Ridley and Chan pointing to a "laboratory origins" ranges from the irrelevant to the preposterous. In his excellent review of *Viral* in the *Guardian*, the medical historian Mark Honigsbaum tears them apart one by one.

Take Chan's claim that it appeared pre-adapted to human transmission "to an extent similar to late epidemic Sars". This claim rests on a single mutation in the spike protein that appears to "slightly enhance" (Chan and Ridley's words) its ability to bind to human receptor cells and suggests that by the time it was first detected in Wuhan it had "apparently stabilised genetically".

But this is highly misleading. As the subsequent alphabet soup of variants demonstrates, the coronavirus has undergone repeated mutations that have steadily increased its fitness. Furthermore, studies of viruses isolated from pangolins, one of the animals suspected of being an intermediary host, bind to human receptor cells even more efficiently than Sars-CoV-2, suggesting capacity for further adaptation. As two leading virologists put it, the virus was not perfectly adapted to humans but was "just good enough".

Another supposedly suspicious feature of Sars-CoV-2 is that it possesses a molecular key, known as a furin cleavage site, that enables it to prise open the receptor protein on human cells and kickstart the infection process. The same sequence is seen in highly contagious flu viruses and had previously been employed by researchers to modify the spike protein of Sars. Chan and Ridley suggest this is exactly the sort of insertion you would expect to find in a bat virus that had been modified in a laboratory.

However, 21 leading scientific experts recently pointed out that the furin sequence is suboptimal and that "near identical" sequences have been found in coronaviruses that commonly infect humans and cattle. In other words, although the feature is absent from *known* bat coronaviruses, it could just as easily be the product of natural evolution. Tellingly, Chan and Ridley do not go so far as to suggest this feature of the virus was inserted deliberately. Merely, that there is "no way to know".

It is this same piling up of tendentious "evidence" that led Ridley to give credence in 2020 to the conspiracy theory that AIDS was a man-made virus, writing, in the exact same language he uses to promote the Wuhan lab lie,

"Most scientists believe that Aids was 'naturally' transferred from primates to human beings via a hunter who ate a chimpanzee. But a competing theory claims that Aids was caused in the 1950s when thousands of Africans were given a live polio vaccine derived from chimp kidneys. The stakes are getting higher."

But the motive is what turns the "lab leak" theory from mere misguided nonsense into a right-wing conspiracy theory.

It is noteworthy that *Viral* addresses some of the criticisms raised by the *World Socialist Web Site* of the US media's treatment of the conspiracy theory. It grudgingly admits Nicholas Wade's history of falsifying science, and the connections of "whistleblower" Li-Meng Yan to Steve Bannon.

But Ridley refuses to acknowledge the fact that Michael R. Gordon, whose front-page article in the *Wall Street Journal* led the entire media to declare the lab-leak theory "credible," wrote the discredited *New York Times* article that declared Saddam Hussein was seeking "aluminum tubes" for nuclear weapons.

The omission of this revelation is deliberate and significant because it is the fundamental refutation of Ridley's argument. The far-right gunman Kyle Rittenhouse, in the words of the neo-Nazi Daily Stormer, is "an all-American boy just trying to help the community." Likewise, the lab-leak hoax is not a pretext to demonize China and prepare for a war, it is a "scientific theory."

But it is precisely demonizing China that is the central aim of Ridley, who is a fascist, an anti-Semite, and an advocate of mass infection with COVID-19.

On October 15, Ridley embraced the Great Barrington Declaration, authored in consultation with Trump's White House, to declare, "Students who catch COVID may be saving lives." He adds, "The extraordinary truth is that a student catching COVID might be saving Grandma's life rather than threatening it."

Embracing Nicholas Wade's racist tract in 2014, Ridley raved, "Perhaps people of Ashkenazi Jewish descent have high average IQs because for centuries their ancestors worked almost exclusively in professions such as money-lending."

Ridley blames socialists for the fascist dictatorships which exterminated hundreds of thousands of left-wing workers and millions of Jews, declaring, "Fascism, properly understood, is not a phenomenon of the right at all. Instead, it is, and always has been, a phenomenon of the left."

For months, scientists and the general public have been subjected to a nonstop campaign promoting the Wuhan Lab lie. Every major US newspaper cited Nicholas Wade favorably. The "left-wing" *Intercept* carried stories condemning Anthony Fauci for his role in an alleged coverup. Joe Biden demanded an investigation. Even the National Institutes of Health made an unsubstantiated claim that the EcoHealth

Alliance failed to appropriately report its findings. This was coupled with death threats and anti-Semitic hate speech targeting scientists and journalists.

But truth is truth, and all the forces of the state and the corporate media, all the forces of ignorance and reaction could not change the fact that the lab leak “theory” is a lie.

As Daszak recently told Science, “This is an antiscience attack and, unfortunately, we’re the target... If a small group of scientists were absolutely correct in their predictions, why are we now putting them on the pyre in the middle of the village, dancing around, and burning them alive?”

“That’s what really sickens me to my stomach.”

As we have told the scientists, this right-wing witch hunt disgusts not only them, but also the tens of thousands of workers all over the world who see scientists like Daszak as leaders and guides in their fight to protect their own lives and those of their loved ones from the pandemic.

This month, Peter Hotez, a Baylor College of Medicine global health researcher, condemned the campaign against Daszak as a witch hunt. He is one of the leading voices of a chorus of scientists and principled journalists who, turning to the working class for support, will condemn this disgusting hoax and all its proponents to infamy.



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