EDITOR'S FORUM

A NOTE ON CARGO CULTS AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHANGE

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In a work now more than twenty years old, Levi-Strauss argues that totemism, as anthropologists then conceived of it, does not really exist. He likens totemism to hysteria: "Totemism is like hysteria, in that once we are persuaded to doubt that it is possible arbitrarily to isolate certain phenomena and to group them together as diagnostic signs of an illness, or of an objective institution, the symptoms themselves vanish or appear refractory to any unifying interpretation" (Levi-Strauss 1963: 1). He convincingly argues that analysts failed to understand totemism because they abstracted it from its appropriate context and treated it as a thing unto itself, thereby isolating it from similar and related phenomena. "The totemic illusion is thus the result . . . of a distortion of a semantic field to which belong phenomena of the same type. Certain aspects of this field have been singled out at the expense of others, giving them an originality and a strangeness which they do not really possess; for they are made to appear mysterious by the very fact of abstracting them from the system of which, as transformations, they formed an integral part" (ibid. : 17-18).

What I want to suggest here is that, similarly, cargo cults do not exist, or at least their symptoms vanish when we start to doubt that we can arbitrarily extract a few features from context and label them an institution. For that is what many anthropologists have been doing: isolat-

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ing and classifying these phenomena as if they constituted an objective, separate institution, category, or class of events-drawing relatively arbitrary lines and thereby "distorting the semantic field," a process Levi-Strauss claims so hindered our understanding of totemism as I suggest it hinders our comprehension of cargo cults.' My goal in this brief note is simply to identify a different and probably complementary perspective: that of considering cargo cults in the context of a different semantic field. I argue that analyzing how cargo cults interpenetrate with a people's ideological or cultural construction of change yields more understanding than treating the cults as a manifestation of some cross-cultural category such as millenarian movements. As totemism did not exist, being merely an example of how people classify the world around them, cargo cults too do not exist, being merely an example of how people conceptualize and experience change in the world.

We must begin this expansion of understanding of cargo cults by lessening our concern with constructing a typology of millenarian movements in general. Analysis cannot begin with the assumption that the significant aspects of these movements are the same cross-culturally. They do appear to be similar, but are the similarities the seminal features of interest? Geertz reminds us that "the fact that a phenomenon is general does not mean that the particular occasions of its appearance may not be various, as the example of inflation only too well demonstrates" (1963:62). Setting the analysis of cargo cults in the context of a global category of millenarian movements distracts our attention away from the sociocultural context in which they occur. We cannot ***assume*** a similar cause and a similar meaning for every event that has been labeled a millenarian movement.

What I am suggesting is that we draw conceptual and analytical lines differently, or at least dim our old categories temporarily to reveal what other shapes and forms emerge. This process must begin by examining the cultural assumptions and frameworks that structure, inform, and give meaning to these so-called cults as well as ***other,*** similar beliefs and behaviors. In trying to understand cargo cults as religious and millenarian activity, it has been easy to neglect to see how the activities contingent in them are actually ones that occur in other cultural contexts. The beliefs and assumptions that underlie the cargo activity also undergird a variety of other arenas of social action and realms in which cultural meaning is constructed and generated. When the analytical lines are redrawn in this way, "cargo cults" as a distinct category do cease to exist -at least the category ceases to exist exactly as it did before-and far more meaningful arrangements of phenomena are left for analysis.

A symptom that something is amiss is the frequent inability to discern whether a cargo cult is taking place or not. Generating a definition of cargo cult is not difficult, but deciding if actual phenomena merit inclusion in the category is. Forget for the moment that because we are using heuristic distinctions as if they were real, we have difficulty distinguishing cargo cults, cargo behavior, cargo beliefs, and cargo thinking; focus only on organized social movements. Is "X" a cargo cult or isn't it? Why is it so difficult to be certain sometimes? For example, Maher (1961, 1984) presents fascinating data on the Tommy Kabu movement in the Purari River delta. One of the more interesting things about this movement is that administration officials disagreed about what it was. Senior administrators found little threatening about or wrong with the movement and were perplexed by the attitude of patrol officers in the field who were hostile to the activities and thought them dangerous; those removed from the scene saw economic development activities, those nearby perceived cargo cults (Maher 1984:218). [2] Was the Paliau movement on Manus a radical social reform movement, a political movement, or a cargo cult (Mead 1956; Schwartz 1962)? Was Yali a cargo cult leader or not (Lawrence 1964)? Errington (1974) clearly labels the Kaun movement on Karavar a cargo cult, but the leaders of that movement called it "business" and likened it to economic development projects. What are we to make of such a discrepancy? If "they" are defining business differently than the usual Western definition, what does their definition include and how does it compound Western notions of business and cargo cult? Where does development project stop and cargo cult begin? I discuss this in some detail below; the point I want to stress here is simply that it is difficult to distinguish between these phenomena precisely because cargo cults are not an analytically separable category but merely one manifestation of a particular way of constructing the world, acting in it, and deriving meaning from it.

A variety of factors enter into this process: conceptions of power, epistemology and knowledge, [3] the construction of order, the concept of person, and notions of integrity may all be relevant. [4] What I would like to focus on here, however, is a single factor that must be considered, a segment of ideology that underlies these so-called cargo cults as well as economic development, political activity, religious conversion, myth and cosmos, and ritual activity. That factor is how a people conceptualizes the nature of change and ways in which change can be effected as well as affected. So-called cargo cults are, after all, among other things, about change. People are trying to effect change, and if we want to understand what is happening we must include an examination of their

cultural assumptions about change. [5] Many of the factors that anthropologists have argued play a part in the generation of cargo cults-such as relative deprivation, the political oppression of colonialism, the failure of exchange systems- are really only subsidiary elements that participate in the desire for and motivation to change. They are reasons why people desire alternatives, but conceptions of change structure how they go about change and what they expect from it.

In another paper (McDowell 1985), I present data about how the people of Bun conceptualize change and can only summarize the argument here. The Bun have what Gellner (1964) labels an episodic (or neo-episodic) view of time, change, and history as opposed to an evolutionary one (see also Errington 1974 for an initial delineation of this conception of change on Karavar). They do not conceive of the past as a series of interconnected events in a cause-and-effect chain. For them there is no gradual, cumulative, evolutionary change; change is always dramatic, total, and complete. Discontinuity is a requirement of and for change. It is as if all change were executed only on the model of a rite of passage, with an abrupt transition or liminal period. Indeed, the relationship between change in general and the changes effected in rites of passage is more than analogous or structurally isomorphic: the rituals are but one kind of change that follows the general pattern or model. 'There must be discontinuity for a boy to become a man, discontinuity for the unmarried to become the married, and so on. Often, for example, there must be a liminal period of "no rules" before "new rules" (Burridge 1969:165-166) Myths, too, reveal that change occurs only through discontinuity: an ancestor or culture hero participates in events that radically alter the nature of society and the cosmos. [6]

This episodic conception of history and change is not restricted to the past but provides a model for change in the future as well: coming change must also be total, drastic, and radical. This view admits of no gradual accumulation or loss of ideas or customs, only pervasive, comprehensive transformation. The Bun cannot identify the exact nature of future change nor the details of the world to come, but they are able to perceive that a new order, totally unlike anything they have known, is imminent (McDowell 1985: 33).

The Bun conception of change-both past and future-affects social behavior and cultural meaning in a variety of ways. Because people perceive change to be of this nature, they have deep and profound expectations about how change will come about. They expect dramatic revolutions; if one thing changes, everything will change-they only need to find the key(s) for controlling and directing the change, pre-

venting or effecting it. This kind of expectation pervades much of what the villagers do, feel, and think. It is not new: I suspect that such a conception of change is old (and probably a relatively accurate view of Bun history; see also Scaglion 1983). What *is* new in this century are all of the indications that a revolution is about to occur again, as it had done in the past. What *is* new are all of the visions about possibilities for the future. What *is* new is the awareness that the old way needs changing if people are to acquire moral equity-Burridge's integrity (1969)-once again. So, people set about to change their worlds. And they do it as they have always done it: through work and through ritual, not necessarily separate indigenous categories (see also Counts 1971). Either the change is immanent and people attempt to control what is coming, or they want to cause the change and initiate a new world for themselves.

An array of activities is informed by these expectations in Bun (McDowell 1985). People tell a myth of an ancestress who was unfairly drummed out of her home and who wandered until she came upon a new land (America) where she created wealth and lived the easy life. When she forgives those who spurned her and returns to Papua New Guinea, all will change and the people will again have wealth and moral equity. So the myth goes.

When the first person to leave the village for schooling returned (without finishing), he began a youth club. Many villagers, especially older ones, believed that this might be the portent of radical change because it was a new idea, a new entity. Some were fearful that the changes would be predominantly negative ones, accompanied by chaos; a rumor went around among the women, for example, that they would be forced into prostitution by the club. Others, however, were far more hopeful about the impending transformation and thought that it would be the fulfillment of their dreams of wealth and full humanity. No one knew for certain which direction the change would take, but most knew that the change was coming (McDowell 1985).

The uncertainty, of course, is one of the problems. Will change be for the better? The transition itself is chaos-liminality is frightening-what will be on the other side? When people are confronted with an impending millennium and have no control over its arrival and nature, are powerless to influence it, they are, to say the least, justifiably anxious. On the eve of Independence, for example, the Bun believed that radical change was immanent. The nature of the change was unknown; earthquakes, heaven on earth, and invasions by Indonesian soldiers were all mentioned as possibilities for the certain-to-arrive cataclysmic event. Peoples' behavior was affected by their belief about coming

events; marriages were hurriedly arranged so that children would be settled and safe, and ambitious people or those who had been plagued by overdue debts worked with some fervor to make prestations and payments before Independence arrived.

Bun economic activities, particularly development projects, are infused with these conceptions of change as well. In that earlier paper I wrote that

> the expectation of radical, and in this case very positive, change motivates them to plant enthusiastically any new crop that makes its way into the region in the hope that this particular one will revolutionize the economic bases of their lives and allow them to attain at least material equality with Europeans. But when the harvest comes in and the crop is sold, the small return is always a disappointment. And when the activity fails to trigger the drastic changes anticipated, when it fails to initiate a new time, enthusiasm wanes and the crop is tended sporadically if at all. (McDowell 1985:34)

This conception of change, then, pervades and penetrates a whole range of activities in Bun. If we insist on making arbitrary analytical distinctions between such realms as economic behavior and club behavior, or political expectations and cargo thinking, then we will fail to understand Bun meaning and experience.

A conception of change and history similar to the one that I have sketched here is not uncommon in Melanesia. In an important earlier article, Errington (1974) describes the Karavar as having just such a view. Josephides says that the Boroi of Madang Province "treat transition as something sudden and dramatic . . . and . . . some idea of reversal has always coloured the Boroi perception of change" (1984:25). Tuzin (personal communication) describes Ilahita Arapesh historiography as catastrophic. In a fascinating article, Burman begins with "Bourdieu's proposition that temporal constructs play an active role in structuring practical action" (1981:251). He goes on to analyze Simbo temporal concepts and how these underlying notions relate to social hierarchy, thus paralleling the notion that concepts of time and change in Bun affect a variety of "practical actions." Furthermore, the Simbo have an episodic view which profoundly affects their construction of change (ibid.:263).

Even a cursory perusal of the literature with these ideas in mind reveals that considerable insight can be achieved if so-called cargo cults

are examined within different contextual fields, particularly within the context of indigenous notions of change. I want to present a few ethnographic examples' merely to illustrate that drawing arbitrary lines that separate cargo cults from other aspects of sociocultural life and experience inhibits our understanding of the source and meaning of these cults *as well as* those other aspects of behavior and ideology from which the cults are separated.

The first arbitrary line to fade is that which separates cargo cult from Christianity. The possibility that cargo-like thinking played a role in at least some of the conversions to Christianity in Melanesia cannot be doubted, and evidence is now appearing that many similar issues are central in religious revivals and the establishment of fundamentalist Christian groups in Papua New Guinea. In an article on revival movements in the southern highlands, Robin (1982) strives to distinguish cargo cults from revival movements but, not surprisingly, is unsuccessful. In an article about a particular fundamentalist group, Wetherell and Carr-Gregg also cannot disentangle Christian cult from cargo cult, although they attempt to do so:

> . . . the ready acceptance of Christian beliefs may have been closely related to "cargo-thinking"-the notion that material benefits could be obtained by mastering the "true knowledge" of the Europeans. "Cargo thinking" alone, however, cannot adequately explain the complete conversion of the Keveri. As well as a desire for material advantages, a number of other factors such as their quest for spiritual improvement and an extension of their social horizons must be taken into account. The search for a better quality of life may have triggered off the "instant" conversion to a belief system which was not, as they perceived it, fundamentally different from their own. (1984:201)

In an important (and unfortunately neglected) [8] article, David and Dorothy Counts analyze the Kaliai of New Britain very much as I am arguing that we should, within a whole new semantic field. They begin by delineating a conception of change that is very much like Bun's episodic one. They argue that the Kaliai "foresee change, not as a process occurring by degree, but rather as a sudden qualitative transformation that alters fundamental relations [and] , , . they believe that they can foresee such transformations and can, by appropriately changing their activities, prepare themselves to take advantage of, or at least survive,

them"(Counts and Counts 1976:304). They analyze Kaliai expectations and activities in the context of these cultural assumptions about change. They compare two groups, those who followed the "Rule of Money" and those who followed the "Law of the Story." The Story is what we would easily and traditionally label a cargo cult, but the Rule is not as easily categorized. On the surface, followers of it spurned the cargo cult and seem progressive; they invested their energies in development projects, cash cropping, and the formation of economic corporations. But the Counts convincingly argued that because of the shared assumptions about the nature of change, these so-called progressives were not substantially different from their cargo-oriented friends and neighbors. While those who followed the Story awaited the millennium, those who followed the Rule awaited Independence, which was not just a political event but a radical change in the entire social order. The sources and motivations of these two groups were the same:

> There seem to be no basic philosophical differences between those who joined the Story and those who did not. The different ways by which they attempted to ensure their survival in the new order, whether by hard work or through ritual action, do not reflect different conceptions of either the nature of that order or the process by which it will be instituted. There is no notion of gradual process. The Story teaches that the new order will come suddenly and totally: the snow will fall and when it melts the millennium will have arrived: Progressives seem to assume that the stroke of the pen marking independence will likewise institute a new order for which they must prepare themselves. (Ibid.:301)

Seemingly diverse behaviors, one clearly labeled cargo cult and probably receiving administrative disapproval, the other easily labeled economic development activities and probably receiving administrative support, really spring from the same assumptions, beliefs, and aspirations (see also Counts 1971, 1972, 1978, 1980).

The literature abounds with examples of the resemblances between cargo activity and economic activity. Often the connection between the two is analyzed simplistically in terms of the material concerns that seem to underlie both, but many authors appreciate the deeper connections between the two. Allen, for example, describes a movement in the Dreikikir area of the East Sepik Province in which people planted and grew rice with great enthusiasm during the 1950s. But marketing diffi-

culties and the small scale of production doomed the project to failure. "There is no doubt whatsoever that people expected to transform their lives with this activity and the disappointment was extreme. The appearance and rapid spread in 1956 of a spectacular millenarian movement, involving mass hysteria, frenetic dancing, marching, the raising of the recently dead and attempts to communicate with those already in the cemetery cannot have been fortuitous" (Allen 1984: 19). In the 197Os, after the introduction of coffee and escalation of perceived economic inequalities despite increased business activities, another "cargo cult," the Peli Association, occurred. Again, Allen directly links the business activity with cargo activity. The activities of marketing crops and performing rituals to induce the beginning of the millennium were both classified as "work," and both had the same goal (ibid.:25). Elsewhere, Allen specifically addresses the issue of differential definitions of "business" and correctly argues that *bisnis*

> must not be equated with Western concepts of business. *Bisnis* is a broad concept manifested in a number of ways, which includes producing crops for sale, and investing money in enterprises which it is believed will cause large amounts of money to accrue to the individual. . . . When ***bisnis*** was first introduced people believed it was the form of behaviour which Europeans used to gain access to wealth and power, and because of this they adopted rice growing enthusiastically. . . . When people found rice growing was not bringing about the changes they believed it would, they ceased planting. (Allen, quoted in Scaglion 1983:481)

The line between economic or business activity and cargo activity seems to be a blurred one indeed. Lutkehaus describes how Manam men, after the war, were interested in achieving material and social equity with Europeans, so they began experimenting. "The nature of their experiments took two not unfamiliar forms: ***bisnis*** ('business') and cargo" (Lutkehaus 1984:17). She aptly remarks on a continuing "fusion" of the two in a local business group as well (ibid.:18). Taylor likens post-war business activity and the enthusiasm people around Wewak had for it to millenarian concerns (1984: 1). Roscoe (1983) describes a situation among the Yangoru Boiken in which the patrol officers and administration officials seem to have confused the two and praised the people for what were, to many, essentially cargo activities.

But there are more lines blurred than the one between cargo cult and

economic behavior. Scaglion begins a description of the Abelam with a consideration of concepts of history and change, conceptions very much like the episodic one of Bun. He discusses the Abelam experience of Independence in this context. "In the Maprik area, Independence was accompanied by widespread uncertainty, anxiety, and the development and rebirth of numerous 'cargo cult' millenarian movements" (Scaglion 1983:463). The list of rumors concerning the nature of Independence (ibid.:463-464), such as that Jesus would come and kill non-church-goers or come with the cargo, that bombs would fall, that the spirits would return with cargo, that the Independence people would come and murder indiscriminately, sounds remarkably similar to the ideas that circulated in Bun on the eve of the expected cataclysm as well. Independence and the complex of expectations and behaviors anticipatory to it in some places looked like, felt like, seemed like, a cargo cult (see also Counts and Counts 1976). In the same article, Scaglion brings religious change into this new semantic field as well when he compares cargo cult activities among the Abelam to what he calls their "Jisas" cult. A relatively rapid rise of interest in Christianity seemed related to a belief in the Second Coming and that Christ would bring cargo. The people prayed, gave donations, and performed Christian rituals in order to acquire the cargo (Scaglion 1983:483).

One consequence of attempts to classify cargo cults as millenarian is that the focus has been too much on their millenarian aspects to the detriment of attention to other features that intracultural analysis reveals as more critical. Surely it is recognized now that the authors of the best monographs, such as Burridge's ***Mambu*** (1960) and Lawrence's ***Road Belong Cargo*** (1964), do not make this mistake; they analyze these beliefs and behaviors in cultural context and place them within a particular epistemological framework. Wagner comes close when he says that "cargo cult is just a name we give to Melanesian culture when its usually covert interpretations of the world around us emerge into the open" (Wagner, quoted in Counts 1972:374). But even these analysts do not go far enough in the direction of constructing what Levi-Strauss calls a new "semantic field" because they still assume that cargo cult is ***the*** discrete category for analysis. One of the reasons that, despite his excellent ***Mambu*** (1960), Burridge's more general work, ***New Heaven, New Earth*** (1969), falls short is that he argues that "if it is not to become overly ethnocentric, anthropology . , . must, initially, use broad concepts capable of containing the varied arrangements offered by different cultures" (7-8). He claims that the book is an essay which "attempts a break-down and re-synthesis of the components of various types of

millenarian activity" (ibid.:2). He is, I think, correct that these movements have to do with redemption, power, and integrity, but his analytical framework would be more powerful if he abandoned the commitment to the broad classification and typology. He trivializes cultural differences by suggesting that the difference between one movement and another is merely a matter of how the prophet can best communicate with his or her followers within a common cultural language (ibid.:31).

The point I am trying to make here is simply that we must rethink our analytical categories if we are to understand experience and behavior glossed as "cargo cult." There is more going on in the association between cargo movements and economic activity than that they both share a concern with material items and the generation and production of wealth. There is more going on in the association between cargo cults and political activity and conceptions of independence than that they both share concern with political equity and power distribution. There is more going on in the association between cargo cults and Christianity than that they both share a concern with religion, spirits, and the comings and goings of supernatural beings. All of these things seem to be similar because they ***are*** similar: they spring from the same cultural assumptions about, at the very least, the nature of change. This is not to deny that they share other elements and participate in other cultural meanings, such as a concern with power, a desire to control knowledge and the social order, a need to achieve integrity and moral worth. But if we continue arbitrarily to isolate cargo cults from other phenomena of the same kind, we will fail to understand their origin, development, and meaning.

NOTES

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1. As Levi-Strauss was forced to use the word totemism while arguing its nonexistence, I find that I need to use the phrase cargo cult. It would, I think, be a distraction to enclose it in quotes each time it appears, but the reader should supply these quotes mentally if the discrepancy is bothersome.

2. Maher (1961:122) sides with the higher administrative officials and classifies this movement as something other than a cargo cult. I think he does recognize the connection when he suggests that if economic movements fail, people can turn to the "mystical" solution of cargo cult.

3. A concern with knowledge is manifest in a variety of ways, not just the desire to obtain "the secret" to cargo. For example, in Bun there is a common concern with getting to the *"as tru"* or truth, root, heart of whatever the matter at hand is. See also Lindstrom 1984.

4. There are a variety of excellent studies that speak directly to these issues. See, especially, Brunton 1971; Burman 1981; Burridge 1960, 1969; Counts and Counts 1976; Errington 1974; Knauft 1978; Lindstrom 1984; Brown 1966; Ogan 1972; Harding 1967; and Gesch 1985.

5. See Errington 1974 for an excellent analysis of how the concept of change provides the parameters in which so-called cargo cult activity takes place.

6. This is related to the imagery that analysts and participants in cargo cults often use to get a handle on their meaning. We and they speak of a "new" that implies radical transformation and discontinuity: new way, new heaven, new earth, new man, new canoe (e.g., Burridge 1969; Errington 1974; Maher 1961; McDowell 1985; Mead 1956).

Of course the contrast between evolutionary and episodic is drawn strongly here to illustrate the differences. It is certainly possible that in any particular society, such a clear-cut distinction might not be tenable. Furthermore, different aspects of change might be conceived in different ways. A further complication arises because although we in the West certainly have an evolutionary view, we tend to impose order on the flow of events we believe to have taken place by categorizing into periods and epochs, thus superimposing an episodic perspective.

7. The first version of this paper was originally written for a symposium on cargo cults in the Sepik area of Papua New Guinea, and therefore most of these examples, especially the ones about economic and political relations, are from the Sepik region. Although some of the ideas I present here may be tied to this particular region, the existence of examples in many other parts of Melanesia suggests that the connections are probably widespread.

8. In some ways, my 1985 paper was a partial reinvention of the Counts' 1976 wheel. I should have been familiar with it but was not. My apologies to David and Dorothy Counts.

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