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ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND THE IRRATIONAL

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Sir Raymond Firth, most distinguished living representative of the great tradition of British social anthropology, once wrote, 'Science and magic ordinarily represent to two poles of reason and unreason, but it is not easy to draw a rigid line between the rational and the irrational spheres of human activity.'¹ Anthropologists have not always found the drawing of this line to be as difficult as Firth makes it out to be. Sir James Frazer, for one, had no doubts that bloodthirsty savages dancing about in the skins of their enemies were irrational, whilst scholars writing about these matters in their studies in Cambridge were rational. To anthropologists, the irrational has meant the dark forces: magic, superstition, witchcraft, voodoo, and the like. Since anthropologists adopted participant observation they can reasonably claim to have greater intimacy with such matters than anyone except the initiates themselves.

Intimacy with the irrational has had its effects. The armchair anthropologists of the nineteenth century, and most of the fieldworkers of the twentieth century, through about 1950, were scientific, rational and detached in their outlook. Hence they regarded the irrational as something in need of explanation. Without for a moment believing that the subjects of anthropological investigation were enslaved by the dark forces, as traveller's tales and priests had tended to suggest, they nevertheless acknowledged that other than rational

1. Raymond Firth, Human Types, Revised Edition, London 1956, p. 155.

ideas played a quite considerable role in the social organization of many of the peoples they studied. But so too did many ideas that any European social scientist could identify with, such as technology, wealth, power, legality, sexuality, and so on. If, then, these societies had ideas and institutions that were quite intelligible in their structuring and operation to the European mind, how could they co-exist with ideas about the dark forces and together constitute a coherent and integrated society? Why would not societies wracked by accusations and counter-accusations of sorcery and witchcraft not pull themselves apart, rather as in the cases of the Witchfinder General in England or Salem in Massachusetts?²

The attempt to explain interest in the dark forces looked, to some observers, like an attempt to explain them away. Anthropologists have always vacillated between curiosity about others and a guilty admiration. This sets them up for the reaction of relativism. Maybe anthropologists should not be explaining the dark forces but learning about them in order to comprehend their power in the society studied and in our own society. An anthropologist has only to pick up a tabloid newspaper and turn to the astrological section, or to notice the myriad religious and quasi-religious cults that flourish in his own society, to come rapidly to the conclusion that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in scientific philosophy, and that perhaps a more humble attitude is appropriate. Thus whereas once the legends were about which anthropologist slept with his or her subjects, now the additional question arises as to whether the anthropologist was initiated into the tribe, embraced their religious ideas, or keeps a juju in his office.

Perhaps a third way can be charted. Is it not possible to explain the things people do without setting out to explain them away; is it not possible to allow that people may believe different things without concluding that all beliefs on offer are equally valuable; is it not possible to examine the dichotomy between the irrational and the rational upon which both reactions draw and to break it down? Perhaps rationality lies not in beliefs, but in the manner in which beliefs are held. Perhaps rationality is a matter of attitude. The anthropologist can escape patronizing the poor superstitious savages, escape patronizing his own culture as naive

2. Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, London 1971; Brian Easlea, Witch-Hunting, Magic and The New Philosophy, Brighton 1980; Alan McFarlane, Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England, London 1970.

and ethnocentric, and instead attempt to secure for his subject an attitude that is both tolerant and yet rational, open to the ideas of others yet not uncritical of them; infused with human sympathy yet not irresponsible.

My plan will be to explore the first two reactions to the irrational in order to expose their weaknesses and deficiencies, and to conclude by building an approach that supersedes them, partly by defusing the issue itself. Perhaps we can cease to be prisoners of the assumption that there is an irrational, some dark forces, to which we must react. All that there is is the flux of experience, bewildering and incoherent as it presents itself to us, and there is our yearning to give it order and thus to be able to enjoy it, to no longer be afraid of and threatened by it.

This account is general, because it is clear enough that anthropological subjects, mired in the dark forces as they are supposed to be, display the same kind of fascination and repulsion towards western man and his works, as the anthropologist displays towards witchcraft, voodoo, etc. etc. And the anthropologist capitulating to the native world in the style of Castenada³ is a form of crisis or breakdown of imposed order that is similar to frenzied reactions on the other side, such as the cargo cult.

Long ago, in a study of anthropology refracted through the experience of the cargo cult, I tried to suggest that anthropology was an academic cargo cult. I should also have added that there were elements of cultural cargo cult too. Anthropology was the cutting edge of scientific man's self-confidence. They would go to the remotest societies and show that they made perfect sense on quite humdrum principles. Their members would be seen to be organizing their lives around power, wealth and belief; engaged in the struggle for survival; obeying law, pursuing their livelihood, contracting marriages, and so on. This needed saying and became a sort of crisis-point in western self-regard because they were a living alternative to the brave new world of progress, industry and science. The cultural loss of self-confidence that this induced was slow, perhaps because it was easy to reject their coziness with the heart of darkness. But anthropology was a reflexive cargo cult, it insidiously undermined the

3. Carlos Castaneda, The Teachings of Don Juan, Berkeley 1968; Journey to Ixtlan, New York 1972

self-regard of the cultures doing it, bringing home to them the elements of caprice, arbitrariness, and even darkness to be found even among ourselves.

1. Repulsion

Repulsion from the dark forces can be seen in reactions that range from 'Ye Beastly Devices of Ye Heathen,' through to moderate old Evans-Pritchard's view that, neat though the Azande system of witchcraft, oracles and sorcery might be, unfortunately, chaps, witches simply don't exist. In the case of the cargo cults, the strongest repulsion was expressed by the colonial official-cum-anthropologist F. E. Williams, who chronicled the cult called the Vailala Madness.⁴ This was a prototypical cargo cult among people living on the Vailala River in Papua. The belief became widespread that the ancestors were going to return, bringing with them vast quantities of cargo, that is, material goods, that belonged to the people, but had been misappropriated by the white colonists. Great excitement surrounded the beliefs. The traditional religion and its implements were rejected, new organizations, such as dummy police and dummy civil service were set up, and preparations went ahead to receive and store the coming cargo. Particularly notable to the observing Europeans was the affliction of mass hysteria in which large numbers of people became giddy and staggered around, sometimes pouring out utterances in what appeared to be glossolalia.

Williams' reaction to this cult was that it was muddle-headed nonsense. Somehow, the natives had to be brought to realize that cargo goods were worked for, earned and manufactured, and that they did not rightfully belong to anyone but their manufacturers and purchasers. They also had to be calmed down, got back to productive work and perhaps educated into an outlook less fantastic and occult.

At about the same time Peter Lawrence and I published studies in which we in effect rehabilitated Williams's view.⁵ Our contention (developed entirely independently) was that cargo cults were attempts to impose meaningful order on the flux of experience, especially the

4. F. E. Williams, Papua: Anthropology Reports No. 4, The Vailala Madness, Etc., Port Moresby 1923

5. Peter Lawrence, Road Belong Cargo, Manchester 1964; I. C. Jarvie, The Revolution in Anthropology, London 1964. [Added for web publication: I tried to express my appreciation of Lawrence's work by taking it further in 1988e.]

experience of western colonialism as it had impacted on these dwellers of the western Pacific. Fusing the received stock of ideas of their traditional thought systems with the events surrounding the arrival of white men led, by no very great leap of thought, to doctrines we call cargo cults, where traditional magico-religious means were applied to current colonial situation problems, especially that of relative deprivation. My reasoning was from a philosophically sympathetic cognitive reading of the cargo cults ideas, Lawrence was able to show how in the historical succession of cults in one area there was manifestly some improved grasp of what was actually going on in the culture contact situation. Although Lawrence was far from the point Peter Worsley reached, when he suggested the cults were the beginnings of a political or class consciousness of the exploited.⁶

Looking back, I see now a grave weakness in my reasoning, at least; the account was too specific. Here apparently are cults that grow out of culture clash; but, were there not millennial or end-of-the-world cults in our own society, also expecting such things as reversal of the social or economic order, and how could these be related to anything like culture clash? I have in mind the sort of cult studied by Festinger in When Prophecy Fails, which concentrated on the problem of what happens to cults that predict a millennium that then fails on the given date to arrive.⁷ I also think of the True Light Church of Christ in North Carolina that believed Jesus' Second Coming was due in 1970, who had quit their jobs in anticipation of being the only 'elect' who would be saved.⁸

These cults in the heartland of the United States could hardly be laid to culture clash. But they could be looked as stemming from the desire to give order and meaning to diverse elements of experience. They grow up among people who have taken the Christian scriptures very seriously, including lots of dark sayings, numerological and cabalistic passages, references to what seem like real events, and so on, and some attempt has been made to decipher these hidden messages from God and to act accordingly. The difference between

6. Peter Lawrence, Road Along Cargo, Manchester 1964; I. C. Jarvie, The Revolution in Anthropology, London 1964.

7. Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter, When Prophecy Fails, New York 1956.

8. New York Times, January 3, 1971.

these cultists and the anthropologist is easy to discern: while the anthropologist believes in gods, he probably doesn't believe in God, he doesn't take the holy scriptures awfully seriously, and he finds order in his life by trying to fathom the order other people make of their lives. But by what argument does he elevate his own seeking or order over that of his subjects?

Answer: By the argument of the priority of science. Can this argument be sustained? Not, I believe, in its progressivist or positivist forms. Science does not have a priority that is god-given. Science has a priority only in the sense that it is an attempt at a more comprehensive ordering of experience, that in its turn makes ordered sense of our earlier attempts at ordering. But it does not and need not exempt itself, or earlier versions of itself. Science can be treated as merely one more religion among others, but it can also be treated as a meta-religion that makes sense of other first-order religions and is itself open to being made sense of in its turn. It teaches curiosity and scepticism towards objects of repulsion (and attraction). The dark forces may be the ancestor of enlightenment.

In the history of the encounter with cargo cults, then, we can see a development. Bewilderment and disgust is the initial reaction: the Papuans are acting childishly, or like the stupid savages they are. This is followed by two related and rather high-falutin, explanations, similar in that they do not find it tolerable to treat what the savages are doing without either attraction or repulsion. I am alluding to structural functional and to symbolist explanations. Structural-functional explanations are those that relate the workings of social institutions to the basic functional ordering necessary for social life to go on at all. Most subtly worked out in Evans-Pritchard on Nuer kinship and Azande religion, it was most pithily formulated for the dark forces by Max Gluckman in his classic radio talks published as Custom and Conflict in Africa.⁹ After chapters with such titles as 'The Peace in the Feud,' 'The Frailty in Authority,' he set out to demonstrate 'The Logic in Witchcraft.' By 'logic' I think he meant 'reason,' and what he tries to do is show the sociological reasonableness of witchcraft accusations. They systematically follow, he says, lines of tension and dispute in social institutions; they provide a means of concretizing the bad feelings that grow up among those

9. Max Gluckman, Custom and Conflict in Africa, Oxford 1955.

living in proximity, rivalry, subordination, kinship and so on. And though they may appear to be deeply divisive of themselves, perhaps what they do is externalize and canalize bad feeling. Furthermore, many societies have means of counteracting witchcraft, or deciding whether an accusation is true, and employing customary means to diffuse it. Among the Azande the witch does not necessarily know that he or she is hexing his or her victim, and so the accused too has an interest in deciding and discharging the accusation.

This picture is very neat and impressive except that it relies on a homeostatic model of society that offers no account of the transition from, or the decay of, useful social institutions like witchcraft. Cargo cults are, for the purposes of this argument, even more acute. Manifestly they are in Melanesia phenomena of culture clash and social change, and hence only partly amenable to structural explanation. They are in no way part of a homeostatic system, if anything they are disruptive interruptions of social change. As for cults in the American heartland, one might look at them with less than glassy-eyed trust, as structural phenomena, certainly, but not central or homeostatic. They might be looked at rather as marginal patterns of bonding between individuals and families who feel socially isolated and threatened. Their ready acceptance of themselves as an elect who must keep together and act on instructions shields them from the realization that perhaps their way of life and beliefs play no functional role in the present social set-up.

As a consequence of these weaknesses, symbolist explanations came to the fore. Fascination and repulsion were fused, then mixed perhaps with a little patronage. Could it be that cargo cults are not discourse at the literal level at all, but rather at the symbolic level, whatever that is? Here there is a difficulty, because some anthropologists are Freudians, others are Roman Catholics, still others Levi-Straussians and so on, and each author hunts for different sets of symbols at work in religious ideas. At an obvious level, of course cargo cults are symbolic. To believe in the return of the ancestors bearing great wealth, thus inverting the present social relations of colonialism and dependence between natives and the powers that be, might almost be described as wish-fulfillment. Much more sophisticated vocabularies can be introduced and much more cryptic symbolic purposes can be entertained, as when Mary Douglas reduces notions of purity and danger, of the ordering of meals, of the abominations of Leviticus to the social need to classify, to order, to impose sense upon inchoate and

threatening nature.¹⁰ So cargo cults too would be amenable to such reasoning. The people on the Vailala River perhaps re-ordering their world in line with the orderings they see Europeans manipulating in the hope that they too will be able to manipulate successfully.

Both structural-functionalists and symbolists rely heavily on the ideas of Durkheim and Mauss; on confronting the dark forces and noting how marvellously they integrate the society. Structures and symbols can be interpreted as struts and buttresses that hold the working society together. But cargo cults are resistant to these sorts of interpretation, because they usually stand at a juncture where standing, ordering and integrating structures are being eroded, challenged, undermined by the cult, where symbolic pictures of the world are being added to, changed, overthrown. Hence at the very best cargo cults can be seen as though they were presaging future integration of society, at some time when the present turbulence is passed.

Integrationist theories have difficulty in accounting for situations of change or flux, when lack of integration is precisely what is happening. Feuds and witchcraft accusations are stabilizing and integrating factors by comparison. There is a repetitive, patterned and cyclical character to them, making them integral parts of the social fabric. Cargo cults are bizarre, infrequent, individuated, and sometimes highly disruptive of all forms of normal social life. Cultists may destroy their wealth or property, cut themselves off from their neighbours, withdraw their wage labour, engage in collective building and ritual activities that set them apart from those not involved, and so on. Of course, in the long run some case can be made that they are integrative. But then everything is integrative. That such disruptions are responses to plights goes without saying, and that these responses are forms of coping and hence over-coming is clear also.

2. Attraction

Attraction and repulsion are of course opposites that often contain the other. Thus it might seem that one reason archrationalistic anthropologists made a study of 'primitive peoples' was because of a hidden attraction to the irrational. Thus Frazer seems positively to wallow in ever more bizarre and sanguinary customs. Impeccably atheistic anthropologists meticulously

10. Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger, London 1966.

document the detail of ceremonial and belief among their subject peoples, a courtesy they would be unlikely to extend to the practices and ideas of their co-cultural cohorts. But in others the attraction was nearer the surface, especially in those of High Church or Roman Catholic leanings. There we see the fascination with the things divine, the tendency to take religion at face value, the desire, in the case of Evans-Pritchard, to write for the Nuer the sort of account of their religion they themselves would have written had they theologians to hand. The resultant book, Nuer Religion, alarmingly assimilates the Nuer to a conception of religion and belief that is unmistakably ethnocentric and sent, I remember, a frisson through the anthropologists at the LSE when it was published.¹¹

Rightly so, for what Evans-Pritchard had done was to confront the irrational, the dark forces and to try to defuse them by bringing them into coherent comparison with things thought to be more familiar or accessible, western theological concepts. This makes the book a sad sequel to his masterpiece, The Nuer, and to his tour de force, Witchcraft Oracles and Magic Amongst the Azande. Absorbing and ramified as is Evans-Pritchard's account of Zande beliefs, the reader is given a coherent system of ideas that are then dismissed out of hand as ideas. There are no witches. This robust attitude is no longer present in Nuer Religion. We long for and do not get the assertion: of course, there is no kwoth.

Beginning perhaps with Peter Winch's astonishing 1964 attack on the Azande book¹² we have gradually seen anthropologists looking for arguments to get out of those necessary sceptical denials. Instead we have western scientists off in the wilds arguing away to themselves that maybe there is something credible in mumbo jumbo. Winch argued that Evans-Pritchard's assertion that there are, after all, no witches, was impermissible. In an argument so tortuous none of his critics has been able to reproduce it to

11. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Nuer Religion, Oxford 1956.

12. Peter Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society,' American Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 1, 1964, pp. 307-24.

his satisfaction, Winch reasoned that the witch system of the Azande constituted a complete universe of discourse, and there was no meta-universe of discourse in which the adequacy, accuracy or truth of that universe of discourse could be appraised. His motive was clearly infatuation. He wanted to be able to find an argument that would prevent the assertions 'God doesn't exist.' or, 'religious beliefs such and so are mistaken' being legitimate. Not being legitimate, they could hardly be a condition of social science.

Widely discussed by philosophers down to this day, I suspect that the implicit (and denied) relativism of Winch's account was what percolated through to a whole new set of anthropologists who were off to their own confrontations with the dark forces of religion in the Far East, and Africa. From being a curiosity, the savage had moved towards being a repository of wisdom, living in harmony with nature and perhaps in communion with forces and things not vouchsafed to jaded and science-satiated westerners. Leaving aside the pragmatic paradox of the assertion of this idea by westerners, we can look instead at its more extreme forms in phenomenological anthropology.

Here the attack goes right down to the basic premiss that there is a sustainable distinction between the subject and the object of anthropological inquiry. We shall set aside the obvious objection that if there is not such a distinction then it is unclear who is studying whom, why and why bother? Fabian has suggested a milder version of this: that what anthropologists study or, perhaps more accurately, what anthropologists constitute, is an interactive process between the participant observer and his subjects in which a social reality is constituted and it is this the anthropologist so to speak writes up.¹³ Fabian, who studied the Jamma, seems to have retained his detachment from life in the Congo, but another student of the area, Jules-Rosette went so far as to herself become a believer in the religion she was studying.¹⁴

13. Johannes Fabian, 'Language, History and Anthropology,' Philosophy of the Social Sciences, Vol. 1, 1971, pp. 19-47.

14. Bernadetta Jules-Rosette, 'The Veil of Objectivity: Prophecy, Divination and Social Inquiry,' American Anthropologist, vol. 80, 1978, 549-70.

Jules-Rosette I shall come back to in my final section. Fabian's argument I have discussed independently.¹⁵ What I want to do here is diagnose. Fabian's own encounter with a diffuse movement like Jamaa, and the encounters of like-minded colleagues,¹⁶ seems to flow from attraction and sympathy with his anthropological subjects. While it may be understandable that I criticize being repelled or ambivalent towards the irrational dark forces, I can imagine puzzlement that I should frown on attraction and sympathy. The reason is because there is confusion over what anthropology is about. It is about intellectual problems involved in explaining the unintended consequences of human action.¹⁷ That the subjects of study are humans with many irrational attitudes is part of the problem, not a solution. It is irrelevant and confusing to allow either attraction or repulsion to influence one's work. More appropriate is to be detached and sceptical. Neither the rational nor the irrational is its own explanation.

Cargo cults have produced their western adherents too. Edward Rice in his forceful and impassioned John Frum Be Come gives an account of life on Tanna and of the cult of John Frum that is so sympathetic the author more or less declares that he accepts that John Frum is a reality for the Tannese, and hence is a reality.¹⁸ This reality may be denied the colonialists, but he, Rice was made privy to it. Preposterous as these conversions may seem, and as destructive as they undoubtedly are of any anthropological perspective, I propose to treat them as important indicators. The error behind them seems to have to do with observationalism. If you conceptualize anthropology as a field, with subjects and topics that have to be observed and recorded, then you must concede that sympathy and the insider's viewpoint is to be acknowledged. But then you are a perfect patsy for the Winchian pitch that only believers can discuss the nature of the reality of God.

3. Neither Repulsion nor Attraction

15. I. C. Jarvie, 'Epistle to the Anthropologists,' American Anthropologist, Vol. 77. 1975, 253-66.

16. See his special issue of Social Research, Vol. 46, No. 1, 1979.

17. I. C. Jarvie, Concepts and Society, London 1972.

18. Edward Rice, John Frum He Come, New York 1974.

My discussion of the third view will turn around two concepts. One is encounter between the self and others (anthropology) and between the self and the former self (anthropologists). The other is commitment, whether to anthropology as a humane enterprise, to one's self, or to the people studied. Encounter, it seems is always a threat to commitment: it is not easy to maintain one's commitments in alien surroundings; the ways of alien people have a way of challenging the assumptions one may not even have noticed one was committed to. Encounter with the dark forces can be so harrowing that the anthropologist may be repulsed; or may convert; or may come to look at anthropology as itself a form of social and cultural adaptation to a changing world, a form of cult or magic itself; that the anthropologist is like the prophets and magicians he studies, using the dreams, fears and desires of the culture in the presentation of their message.¹⁹

Though encounter has this effect on commitment we still seek it: this might seem ordinary enough: encounter is a part of our experience, and we all hope to learn from experience. Yet two things are worth nothing here as rather extra-ordinary. One is that commitments are often taken to be just those things on which we predicate our learning; not at all the sorts of things it is possible for us to chop and change in the course of learning and under the impact of new experiences. Commitments are usually thought to lie behind a protective belt of epistemological and psychological devices that prevent experience inflicting any damage on them.²⁰ Yet George Orwell noted (Clergyman's Daughter) that commitments come and go and cannot be kept; that their changes are somehow linked with experience, with encounter. The other point is that among the commitments being challenged here are not just first order but also the metacommitments -- commitments, that is, to this or that tradition of enquiry.

One might not normally expect that experience would penetrate the protective belt and affect both commitments and metacommitments. For if and when it does so, it invalidates commitments as the (unquestioned) grounds of enquiry, and for logical reasons. That is to say, even if facts can threaten commitment, this suffices to deprive it of its ascribed

¹⁹. Mercene Marcoux, in an unpublished paper.

²⁰. R. G. Collingwood held this view in a most interesting form, see Essay on Metaphysics, Oxford 1940, chapter V; An Autobiography, Oxford 1939, ch. VII.

foundational status. So: either the protective belt does its job unfailingly; or, other grounds for inquiry must be sought. A third conclusion is possible: enquiry needs no grounds; presuppositions are always only for the sake of argument and can at will become themselves subject to further argument. Such a third alternative is one that I have explored for many years, trying to draw the consequences it appears to have for anthropological enquiry.

The clash between encounter and deep commitment or metacommitment is one that I can hardly but welcome. In my first book I tried to show how cargo cults, or rather, the attempts of anthropologists to grapple with cargo cults, could tell us something about anthropology itself.²¹ There seemed to me to be deeply buried philosophical commitments in anthropology that cargo cults could show up to be the prejudices that they were: inductivism, sensationalism, and essentialism were among those I picked out. It was and is my view that there are no commitments so deep as to be unreachable. Everything is negotiable with experience, including the notions of experience and of the objects of experience. In a way, precisely such negotiation is what (western) philosophy is.²² So, it is not unexpected that anthropologists prepared to follow the argument wherever it leads might detect a clash between their field experience and the endeavour which brought them to the field in the first place—attraction or repulsion.

The question I want now to pose is whether they should take the further step of concluding that it is not commitments that yield to experience, but the principle of commitment itself, the idea that commitment is the foundation of all experience. The step, that is, of arguing that once one's commitments have been shaken, one can no longer settle as

21. The Revolution in Anthropology, London 1964; see also 'On Theories of Fieldwork and the Scientific Character of Social Anthropology,' Philosophy of Science, vol. 34, 1967, 223-42; 'The Problem of Ethical Integrity in Participant Observation,' Current Anthropology, vol. 10, 1969, 505-8; 'On the Objectivity of Anthropology,' in R. J. Seeger and R. S. Cohen, eds., Philosophical Foundations of Science, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. XI, Dordrecht 1974, pp. 317-24; 'Cultural Relativism Again,' Philosophy of the Social Sciences, vol. 5, 1975, pp. 342-53.

22. Here I follow Ernest Gellner's intriguing idea that the centrality of epistemology in western philosophy is explainable. See his Legitimation of Belief, London 1975.

comfortably into new commitments as before. For once shaken, commitments no longer have that feeling of being entrenched clauses, out of reach, lived by rather than intellectualized.²³ The commitment to a way of doing anthropology leads to discoveries that shake the commitment to anthropology itself, and that in turn shakes confidence in commitment itself. Or does it?

My hesitation stems from a remark of Bernadetta Jules-Rosette, which I say frankly, quite took me aback. The diviner John Narinke asks her: 'Are you skeptical of African science?' And she shakes her head. This is in the course of an absorbing and sensitive paper that repudiates romanticism, and strives (wo)manfully to regain the enterprise of science. She has it that in the end, whatever understanding the anthropologist has gained must be translated back into the language of social science.

Why am I taken aback? Because I take the oxymoron 'committed science' to be in fact a contradiction in terms.²⁴ It would seem to me incumbent upon anyone purporting to be a social scientist to answer the question with a nod of the head. (Perhaps adding a disclaimer like, 'And also of many other things.'²⁵ And here I find it terribly hard to disentangle my own personal scepticism from the sceptical attitude I feel to be a deep part of science, especially science that has been engaged in self-reflection.²⁶ If I was studying the arcana of nuclear physics or medicine and was asked whether I was sceptical of western science, I am afraid I should nod my head as vigorously as I would were I asked the same question about Uri Geller. John Marinke is not Uri Geller and Bernadetta Jules-Rosette is not ICJ.

23. Cp. Gellner's remarks on Husserl in 'Ethnomethodology: the Rechantment Industry, or the Californian Way of Subjectivity,' Philosophy of the Social Sciences, Vol. 5, 1975, 446-47

24. She does not, and her explicit allegiance to the brilliant but irrationalist Michael Polanyi, confirms this point. Cf. note 39 and 40 below.

25. She does not justify her answer by saying information would otherwise be withheld. Whether deception is justified as a means of getting anthropological information is an issue I avoid here.

26. The word 'attitude' should not be taken to mean that science depends upon psychological variables. 'Attitude' can be cashed out as, 'dispositions to act in certain ways,' miniature individual versions of the formal laws, rules, and procedures of the institutions of science. These institutions -- schools, departments laboratories, universities, libraries, journals, seminars, conferences, colloquia, books—indeed the invisible college itself, institutionalize scepticism.

Scepticism, I would hazard, is a mandatory part of the scientific attitude, because only scepticism allows one to be ruthlessly critical not only of the ideas of others, but, more especially, of one's own pet ideas. The very thought of being unsceptical towards African science gives me vertigo. Scientists -- anthropologists included -- are, or should be, professional sceptics. They are reporters, commentators, on the human condition; a condition in which they participate, of course. But they are not reporting on those aspects of it in which they participate with all men, they are reporting on those aspects of it which seem different, alien, exotic, inexplicable, irrational. They are professionally marginal people. It is often remarked that the sorts of people who become sociologists and anthropologists are people marginal to their society: outsiders, immigrants, members of minorities, etc., and that the social sciences as it were rationalize their situation. Perhaps so. Social science might also be seen as the struggle to become marginal; the effort to differentiate oneself from the rest of mankind; to free oneself from the assumptions and preconceptions other men take for granted, live by; the attempt to transcend one's society in order the more clearly to see it and oneself. Social understanding does not mean one ceases to be a social being: that is impossible. Similarly, self-understanding does not imply that one ceases to be a self. What one endeavours to do is to achieve distance from one's society, to achieve distance from one's fellow man, ultimately, to achieve distance from oneself. This distancing, which we already experience unreflectively in what we call self-consciousness, and which ethnomethodologists achieve by 'throwing'²⁷ is very hard to achieve, and even harder to maintain. There are those who question its value or its legitimacy. My argument would be that there is no going back now: it is rather like being naive or unselfconscious; once one has lost those pristine states, they are gone forever. Social naivete and unself-consciousness went out long before the Greeks. Men have been able to view themselves and their social arrangements with detachment at least since then. Given that there is no going back, no lost community of self, society and fellowship that we can regain, the most rational policy is to try to do the job well.

27. I borrow the term from Gellner, *op. cit.*, note 23, above, p. 437.

Part of the problem here has to do with commitment. If we could get rid of commitment, that is, if we could get rid of the commitment to commitment, the anthropology of religious experience might be more progressive, we might learn from encounter more than we now do. Far too many anthropologists take religion suspiciously seriously. When I say 'suspiciously,' what I am suspicious of is that they may themselves be believers, or former believers, who remain committed to the view that religion is an authentic experience to which the anthropologist must do justice, pay due respect, etc, and take this pretext to be commitment to scientific anthropology. Thus, in a classic case, Evans-Pritchard is scathing about Durkheim's views on religion, when one suspects this is because Durkheim is not committed to religion, is neither attracted nor repelled. Perhaps this is a problem that will never be solved, for it arises in philosophy as well as anthropology: the problem, namely, of whether or not one should allow oneself to be committed to religion. Not to this or that specific religion, but to religion as such or in general. Committed to religion or to the religion of anti-religion, anthropologists undergo an encounter which makes them change or modify self and commitment, including commitment to self. Were they from the start more professionally or methodologically sceptical -- of themselves, of science, of anthropology, certainly of religion, of all human activity - cognitive as well as behavioural - perhaps their unease would be lessened. But their aim to preserve commitment effects their habit or methodology. This is as it should be, of course, for recommendations about methods turn on views of aims. I therefore think we need to discuss the aims of anthropology. A standard view is that anthropology aims to describe. This aim can be criticized as inadequate since it does not specify what is to be described, and because an argument can be made that everything can be described in infinitely many different ways. Another view is that anthropology aims to explain why people do things. This seems to be a misunderstanding. Freud may tell us why we do things, but subjects like anthropology, sociology and economics concentrate instead on the consequences of the fact that we simply do do things.²⁸ My present view is that the social sciences aim to explain what might be called the unintended consequences of people's actions,²⁹ and I follow Popper in holding that anthropology is best regarded as the general,

28. See F. A. Hayek, The Counter-Revolution of Science, Glencoe 1953, p. 39.

29. See my Concepts and Society, op. cit., note 17 above.

cross-cultural form of sociology.³⁰ Take automobile accidents. The social scientist's aim is not to explain automobile accidents, unless they are true accidents, when we seek those unintended aspects of the physical and human situation that brought them about (bad weather, poor signs, distractions, etc.); otherwise, the reasons road signage is poor, or the reasons the driver is distracted or drunk, what one might call the causes of the accident, are the purview of applied rather than theoretical social science. Rather, theorists concern themselves with things like markets, kinship systems, land tenure, political arrangements, religious ceremonies, and the like. Malinowski on the kula, Mauss on the potlatch, Durkheim on the elementary forms, Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer lineage and feud, Radcliffe-Brown on Australian marriage rules, Fortes on Tallensi kinship, etc., all these great anthropologists were exploring the unintended consequences, the systemic outcome, of the actions of actors: in the immortal phrase of Adam Ferguson, the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design. Because no human design is involved, such results, outcomes, systems, are problematic, require explanation. Or, to be more precise, many will be taken for granted, even unnoticed. It is when some theory goes wrong, when human design is thwarted, that we notice the gap in our understanding of our own social system. An anthropologist merely magnifies this. He finds almost the entire system he is endeavouring to enter problematic, the more so as his efforts to enter it are thwarted. From this encounter, anthropology stems; this encounter is the individual microcosm of the global and persistent phenomenon of culture contact and culture clash, which may be the engine of all intellectual and cultural progress.

Problemstellung, which can by no means be taken for granted, can be seen as contrasted with, even opposed to, a different aim, one so diffuse it is hard to formulate, but one might caricature and call it 'acting out one's love for mankind,' and hence stressing empathy, engagement, understanding, mutual interaction, shared reality production, and the like. All this is very moral and very earnest. One might ask what it is all for? What problems is it supposed to solve? The problem perhaps of human misunderstanding, or lack of

30. K. R. Popper, 'The Logic of the Social Sciences,' in T. W. Adorno, et al., The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology, London 1976, pp. 87-104, especially the Eighth Thesis, pp. 91ff. (The original of this important paper appeared in German in Kolner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, vol. 14, 1962, 233-43).

communication? If this, then I would argue it is both misconceived and naive. No class of mediators is needed to cope with the problem of communication. Nations and societies can communicate through their diplomats, their interpreters, travellers, etc. There is no point in financing people to go on expensive expeditions to the ends of the earth to gratify a yearning for empathy with their fellowman, or to chisel away at problems of human communication. The naivete is to think of the problem of communication as a specifiable and hence solvable problem like the problem of whether to grant diplomatic immunity. Communication problems, even within the same culture, the same family, are a part of the human condition with which we all continually struggle, but which can hardly legitimate a specific academic endeavour like anthropology.

My view is, I acknowledge, and intellectualist view. And I note how few allies I have in anthropology. The ordeal-by-fieldwork has been replaced by fieldwork-as-personal-odyssey-and-self-discovery. So I find myself in the awkward position of speaking for the older anthropological tradition, which concerns not the doer but the deeds. Following that tradition I ask, 'What problems have we solved, with what theories, to which tests have they been put, and to which further ones should they be put?

One might compare the situation, as Jules-Rosette does, to the learning of a language. One reason to learn the language of a faraway place might be that one wants to go and live there. This is rather an odd aim if one has never been there; but never mind. Another reason might be that one wants to learn the language in order to be able to translate from that language back into one's own, to tell people things. This is a public purpose, to which the method of total immersion, empathy, etc., may be appropriate, as may many other methods, including course-work and private study. In the first case the end is private. If you don't wish to bring them to us (or us to them, as medical missionary, e.g.) then the purpose is private and of no legitimate intellectual or academic concern. Empathy may be all right as a moral or methodological stance, but it is not itself sufficient.

Jules-Rosette says that unless this translation back is accomplished then why call the result of one's endeavours science? This is too weak. What needs to be said is that science has presuppositions -- among them a basic realism. Realism has notoriously many philosophical difficulties, as has a realistic empiricism. Bishop Berkeley thought that that showed one had

to retreat into idealistic phenomenism.³¹ This is a mistake. Phenomenism and idealism have even more notorious difficulties. That the basis of science is realistic, more so in the social sciences, seems to me blindingly obvious. We do not allow the problem of other minds to drive us into solipsism; no more should we allow arguments from the social construction of reality to drive us away from realism.³² For all the difficulties of realism, it still has obvious and very powerful arguments in its favour, including those from evolution.

Having come so far, and having focussed the issue in philosophical terms, I now turn to a brief autobiographical offering.

By profession, I am a philosopher of science. I teach in a philosophy department and am without formal standing among social scientists.³³ My B.Sc. Econ. is in social anthropology, but my Ph.D., also within the Faculty of Economics, is in Scientific Method. This, I suppose, makes me an officially certified methodologist. Anyway, whatever I am, or take myself to be, I seem to be a stranger or outsider to anthropologists.³⁴ Especially when their concern is reflections on their field experience, and their estimate of the impact is has had upon themselves and their ideas. However, I have long been struggling with my own fieldwork and conversion experience. The experience in question was with a secular cult known as British social anthropology.³⁵ Unlike some anthropologists, my struggle was to avoid conversion, to refuse assent to the community, to stay marginal, to insist on accepting only what I chose: to avoid attraction and repulsion. It was in this posture that I commenced my research into cargo cults twenty-three years ago. My desire to do a

31. See J. O. Wisdom, The Unconscious Origin of Berkeley's Philosophy, London, 1963, pp. 1-80.

32. See J. O. Wisdom, 'The Phenomenological Approach to the Sociology of Knowledge,' Philosophy of the Social Sciences, Vol. 3, 1973, 257-66.

33. I have never, for example, been invited to join the Association of Social Anthropologists of the British Commonwealth, presumably because their basic qualification is an academic teaching post in social anthropology.

34. In 'The Problem of Ethical Integrity . . .,' op. cit., note 21 above, I suggested that doing anthropology essentially involves exploiting the ambiguities of the stranger-friend role.

35. The sociology of religious movements seems to me to incorporate the sociology of intellectual endeavour as its secularized version. Popper has a fascinating distinction between

philosophical-cum-methodological Ph.D. thesis in the library, rather than an anthropological-fieldwork one, was an expression of my resistance to conversion to anthropology, whose high priests at that time considered fieldwork mandatory.³⁶ I had no desire whatever to do fieldwork, even in a remote part of Britain as was then fashionable, as I imagined it to be a form of brainwashing, an irrational condition.

It was a blow to me when my mentor, the late lamented Maurice Freedman, told me that my philosophical/methodological research proposal was unacceptable to the anthropologists even though he had kindly passed it on to the philosophers. They, it turned out, were very willing to help me develop my ideas, and so I became a student of philosophy quite despite myself. This crisis of identity has never been resolved, and I have learned to exploit the status of a marginal man: to play philosopher to anthropologists, anthropologist to philosophers; to exploit an intellectual niche, whether it be called interdisciplinary studies, philosophy of the social sciences, or methodology.

In the course of developing my critique of social anthropology, under the auspices of philosophy, a critique which could fairly be described as my apologia for not converting, I decided that cargo cults, being weird but fascinating, might give me a clue as to why conversion was not for me. Unexpectedly, the harvest was very great. These cults taught me to deethnocentrize myself (so far from being weird and bizarre, they approximate closely to the religious norm of much of the world over much of recorded time), and to see the institutionalized religion of my native Britain as the exception not the norm. They also taught me that the anthropology of anthropology, indeed the anthropology of the intellectual world, was a rich seam which could be mined for many years to come.

Religion, I confess, always had been rather distasteful to me. Virtually my only background was the diffused Protestantism of secular British culture (school hymns and prayers, public ceremonies, etc.). From early adolescence I had decided the arguments for

religious or dogmatic schools and critical schools of thought in Conjectures and Refutations, London 1963, chapter 5, especially pp. 149-50.

36. Gellner refers ironically to the theories of cognition by trauma and knowledge by total immersion in Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences London 1973, p. 126.

agnosticism, at the very least, were overwhelming.³⁷ Later on, however, my resistance to conversion became stronger, perhaps because of my tussle with social anthropology, and I concluded that the utter absurdity of religious beliefs and practices forced me to be atheistic.³⁸

Omitted from these autobiographical comments so far is my encounter with the system of ideas to which I do attach myself, a unique system of ideas that does not demand, indeed discourages, conversion; does not articulate and defend particular beliefs, but encourages a certain policy towards all beliefs. This is the philosophy of Karl Popper. As indicated, I had already developed something of a sceptical temperament where it came to attachment to systems of ideas. In my first year at the London School of Economics, I took logic and scientific method under Popper. After that, I thought no more about him for a while, until I began to miss the critical stimulation of his lectures. This was during my second year. So, as a substitute (he gave no second- or third-year lectures in those days), I decided to read The Open Society and Its Enemies -- the only book of his then available in English. This must have been in the Spring of 1957. Here suddenly was a coherent articulation of my scepticism; here was a critical philosophy which explained to me why I resisted intellectual conversion experiences, whether studying economics or social anthropology. Soon after, I decided to take my honours degree in anthropology, and requested permission, as a senior undergraduate, to sit in on Popper's graduate seminar. This was granted. That seminar, which I attended regularly for the next four-and one-half years, gave me completely new aspirations in the world of ideas. It was an institution in which diverse people came together to reason about all sorts of topics. Research students and visiting academics from diverse fields came and aired their latest ideas for critical scrutiny. In practice, Popper's philosophy consisted of no more than the endeavour to carry these explorations forward with the utmost vigour and rigour. Some people could not stand this; their open-mindedness and critical attitude had limits. Religion, I soon realized, was often at the root of the trouble, since it meant taking some ideas for granted, rendering some immune from scrutiny. Limits of open-mindedness seemed

37. I recall the deep impression made on me by Fred Hoyle's The Nature of the Universe, Oxford 1950, and by the radio debates between Bertrand Russell and Father Copleston, and A. J. Ayer and Father Copleston. Such was the calibre of the education one used to get from that magnificent institution known as the BBC Third Programme.

38. I suppose my views are closest to Richard Robinson's An Atheist's Values, Oxford 1964.

intellectually indefensible, yet I began to detect something like them at work in social anthropology. Social anthropology was not just a field or a method, it seemed like a system of methodological and substantial ideas which the student was expected to swallow. This indeed, is how Polanyi and Kuhn have since described science.³⁹

Hence, when I was passed on to the philosophers as a research student, I was able almost immediately to settle down to my main problem: disentangling the open- and closed-minded aspects of anthropology. I took as my case study, disentangling the open- and closed-minded aspects of Malanesian thinking as embodied in their cargo cults, and of anthropologists as embodied in their thinking about cargo cults.

Where did all this leave me? The answer is, rather distant from the anthropological commitment. A sceptic and a marginal man who very much wanted to remain one, and did not secretly admire or yearn for the security of a lost faith or lost community. Someone not prepared to be more charitable to the religious ideas and systems of native peoples than he was to the religious ideas and system of his own people. Hence, when Jules-Rosette is asked whether she believes in African science, she replies yes; and proceeds to be initiated. I had in effect been asked whether I believed in social anthropology and had replied 'no'; so my initiation was strictly circumscribed. That was fine by me. If someone asks me whether I believe in western science, Chinese science, or African science, my answer is 'no.' As E. M. Forster said, 'I don't believe in belief.'⁴⁰ Belief takes away from me a distance, a scepticism, a reservation, which I want always to have, and which I think is essential to intellectual integrity.⁴¹

39. Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, London 1958; Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Chicago 1962.

40. See E. M. Forster, in I Believe, London 1940, pp. 42-50.

41. More puzzling is the social marginality such intellectual distancing induces or reinforces. One can read it two ways: either reflection induces and entails marginality, or, reflection is an effort to overcome marginality and achieve re-integration. The latter I find unconvincing. The open-minded society, the reflective, critical society is one in which the bonds of unreflective community cannot exist. See Walter Kaufmann, Without Guilt and Justice, New York 1973.

Coming, then, to the literature on cargo cults, was a bit like coming to any ancient or remote text. All sorts of error and nonsense would likely be buried there, but this was not my main concern. Starting from a sceptical point of view, I did not feel that it was false or nonsensical ideas that needed explanation; it seemed to me that all ideas were in need of explanation. Perhaps we have made a little progress in the small realm of scientific ideas, however, that was a debatable matter, and the debate itself highlighted the precariousness and need of explanation of even such minimal claims. Rather, the problem seemed to me to be to employ imagination and insight in a manner that would make sense of the cargo cults whilst preserving the apparent falseness, even absurdity, of some of their ideas. This involved neither attraction nor repulsion. Surrounded in my own society by committed people, I felt only the greatest respect for the sceptical overturning of religious theories of the world that cargo cultists seemed to go in for.

As I struggled to understand cargo cults, and anthropologists' understanding of cargo cults, I seemed to see a pattern at work. In remote Melanesia, the eruption of culture contact created an intellectual problem: what is going on? Cargo cult doctrines, garbled, confused and syncretic as they were, made sense as conjectures intended to explain what was going on, and rectify what was perceived as a worsening or intolerable state of affairs.⁴² That their ideas were tied to specific expectations at specific times had the disadvantage that the cult might collapse,⁴³ and the advantage that error would be exposed. (Note how rationalist or intellectualist I was being.)⁴⁴ Such an idea had escaped most anthropologists, who had instead displayed their bafflement by the bewildering array of putative explanations of the cults they offered: stupidity, psychological derangement, irrationality, lack of contact with reality,

42. K. O. L. Burridge in Mambu, London 1960, and New Heaven, New Earth, Oxford 1969, and Glynn Cochrane, Big Men and Cargo Cults, Oxford 1970, are very good on this; but then so is Peter Worsley, The Trumpet Shall Sound, London 1957.

43. Although Leon Festinger in When Prophecy Fails suggested another scenario. See note 7, above.

44. This was quite deliberate, and led me to a fierce defense of Tylor and Frazer and the subsequent controversy. See Robin Horton, 'NeoTylorism Sound Sense or Sinister Prejudice,' Man vol. 3, 1968 pp. 625-34.

nativism, oppression, class struggle and so on.⁴⁵ Yet I could see pretty clearly that much more research was needed.

Soon after my book appeared, Peter Lawrence's masterpiece Road Belong Cargo (1964) came to hand, carrying out a programme very close to what I had thought necessary. Little remained for me to do but hail it, analyze it, and note that even in their character as cults, cargo cults were part of a traditional Malenesian mode of response.⁴⁶

But anthropologists were not prepared to come out and debate the issues. Instead, in classic religious or dogmatic school fashion, they closed ranks, made surreptitious changes and modifications, watered down their ideas, and chased hares and fads (structuralism, network theory).⁴⁷ Anthropology is like a craft guild, insisting on its master-apprentice initiation through fieldwork, but trading in uncommunicable mysteries, Personal Knowledge, as Polanyi called it.⁴⁸ This I felt to be explicable only by taking quite literally the idea that they were a tribe held together by a cult, an ancestral-cum-cargo cult. The religion was the tribe. Festinger predicted that disappointed cultists retreat in on themselves and present a brave face to the world.⁴⁹ They then attempt to reduce dissonance by further proselytizing. This certainly seems to have happened in anthropology. Sceptics and wreckers are shoved aside, and the subject tramps on, going nowhere, whistling noisily to keep its spirits up.

When I say this, I speak of anthropology conceived of as an attempt to understand and hence come to terms with the human condition.⁵⁰ On these matters the subject is not

45. For details see my 'Theories of Cargo Cults: A Critical Analysis,' Oceania, vol. 34, 1964, 1-31, 108-36.

46. See my 'On the Explanation of Cargo Cults,' European Journal of Sociology, Vol. 7, 1966, 299-312.

47. For more details see 'Epistle to the Anthropologists.' American Anthropologist, op. cit., note 15, above.

48. Hence the appositeness of Jules-Rosette's reference to Polanyi, whose philosophy of science strikes me as dogmatic and irrational.

49. Leon Festinger, op. cit., not 7, above.

50. A sketch for a reading of the history of anthropology in these terms is my The Story of Social Anthropology, New York 1972.

progressing satisfactorily. Exploring cults is also self-exploration; understanding cults can increase self-understanding. They can, indeed, increase our understanding of the academic role itself.

4. Lessons

My argument so far has been that my encounter with cargo cult religion led us to sociological discoveries: to spotting parallels between the study of an ostensibly 'academic' subject like anthropology, and millenarian religion. This involves not taking academic subjects altogether seriously at their face value either.⁵¹ The parallel has its limitations, no doubt, but it also has hidden strengths. For example, I found that when bringing my thinking up to date in a more recent paper, it felt a bit like writing an epistle.⁵² What I had not seen, although it now seems clear enough, was that the parallel can be generalized. I was brought to see this not by reading social scientists, but by reading a novel, one which I propose now to describe and discuss.

Alison Lurie has written a series of novels about academic and intellectual life, among the most brilliant of which is Imaginary Friends.⁵³ This is relevant here simply because it is about the study of a small millenarian cult in upstate New York. The protagonists, besides the cultists themselves, are two university professors; one very young and in his first job, the other middle-aged and securely established as the author of a sociological classic, since which he has not published much. Upstate New York is not far from Cornell, where Ms Lurie teaches, and has for long been an area of intense fringe religious activity. Otherwise, much of the general scheme of the cult has obviously come from reading Festinger's When Prophecy Fails.

What the novel does that I had not seen and which illuminates the theme of this volume is simple enough. She shows how the presuppositions of a sociological enterprise like this

51. For further discussion of this problem of how seriously to take religious and anthropological doctrines, see my 'On the Limits of Symbolic Interpretation in Anthropology,' Current Anthropology, vol. 17, 1976, pp.687-91 and 700-1.

52. 'Epistle to the Anthropologists,' note 15, above.

53. Her novels in sequence are: The Nowhere City, New York 1965; Imaginary Friends, New York 1967; Real People, New York 1969; Love and Friendship, New York 1972; and The War Between the Tates, New York 1975; Only Children, New York 1979. Page numbers refer to the Avon paperback edition.

doom it from the start: the sociologist would dearly love to be invisible, but cannot hope to be; the sociologist wishes to be immune and aloof, self-contained and untouched, but he cannot be; the sociologist is either attracted or repelled, and both lead to disaster. The study of the cult affects the cult and, more significantly, affects those who study it. McMann the older professor, ends up straddling the border between madness and sanity. The hubris of trying to be god and man at the same time, student and creator, human and super-human, sane and mad, attracted and repelled becomes manifest in McMann. Zimmern, the younger investigator, only just manages to cope and somehow salvage his career. Yet he is unable to understand what has happened; not what went wrong, but what is wrong. Ms Lurie's novel challenges the very enterprise of studying people in society.

Roger Zimmern, an untenured young professor, stands in awe of Thomas McMann, author of the sociological classic, We and They: Role Conflict in River City. However, a bond grows between them, and McMann proposes they engage in a joint study of a small cult in the nearby town of Sophis. It transpires that a small group there called the Truth Seekers, meets in the home of middle-aged Mrs. Elsie Novar, where resides also a nineteen-year-old medium called Verena Roberts. Verena has received messages ostensibly from a distant planet, Varna, and its leader, Ro. The group is quite small, eight or ten people, and both small town and kin. Commuting from the university, Roger and Tom pretend to be itinerant businessman, although this pretense is later exposed and dropped. Soon after their joining, the group becomes more intense, and a date is set for the arrival of the space men. Rituals are enacted, including dietary and clothing prohibitions. When the prophecy fails to be fulfilled Verena concludes that Ro has arrived and entered all of them, and that now life can return to normal. Elsie, however, struggling to interpret the 'message,' concludes that Ro has entered Professor Tom McMann who now is Ro of Varna.

At this point, Verena's boy friend tries to take Verena away, and is himself driven away by Tom, who accuses him of being in league with jealous academic colleagues out to sabotage his study. Ken returns with the police, and McMann resists. In the final scene, Roger visits McMann in the asylum, where the latter maintains that he is playing at being mad in order to do another sociological project. Moreover, he continues, when he gets out, he intends

to lead the group forward into a mass movement. Roger's doubts enrage McMann and he chases him away.

So much for summary. Among the fascinating aspects of the novel are how, for example, the two academic strangers give additional weight to the group, the more so after it is discovered that they are among the despised professoriate. It illustrates the virtual impossibility of sticking to non-directive responses to everything. Roger is very conscientious about this, and as a result becomes the kind of group idiot. McMann, bluff and confident, constantly sails close to the wind, justifying himself in relation to The Study. Allegory, too, is used. The group is called the Truth Seekers, and they meet near a small college town. Explicit parallels are drawn with the University:

The Seekers didn't seem any less crazy, but now everyone else, especially my students, was starting to resemble them. Essentially, they were all converts to the same religion, or victims of the same illusion: they believed in education, in science, in the voice of authority (p. 60).

As the time of The Coming approaches:

The Seekers had lectures, they had readings in approved texts, they had assignments (twenty minutes of meditation on set topics before breakfast every day, short essays on matters of special interest). They were expected to take notes at meetings, and copy out the messages received. Between times, they had to study the "lessons" and memorize the prayers, lists, and definitions dictated by Ro and his friends, preparing themselves to be questioned on them at any time: in effect, called on to recite in class. . . . The whole thing got to be like a relentless parody of higher education. There was the same intense seriousness about a body of accumulating data which was, to say the least, unverifiable; the same assumption that here was a small group of enlightened, thinking persons who understood the universe correctly. As for the messages from Varna, aren't articles in most professional journals a form of automatic writing? It is another self who speaks there, solemn and oracular, in a cryptic jargon the real man would never use (p. 110).

Just before The Coming, talking over the plan with McMann:

I saw something else too: a connection between McMann's hypothesis about the Truth Seekers and his position in the Department, even in the world. Opposition would never shake his own convictions, so he wanted and expected the Seekers to hold to theirs (p. 184).

Earlier on, when Roger expresses concern about Verena not eating:

"Listen Verena may look pathetic to you," he said in his seminar manner, bluff but highly educated. "But she can take care of herself. You've got to remember, that girl has already changed a number of people's lives rather profoundly. Elsie, Milly, Rufus, the whole lot of them. Don't let her fool you. . . ." There were two more lives Verena had changed, I thought, that McMann had overlooked: his and mine (p. 115).

My reasons for bringing up this novel, rather than say some field encounter, should now be fairly obvious. It is true the fieldwork experience has a deep effect on those in it, emotionally, morally and cognitively. It is also true that the endeavours of cultists have great similarities to doing sociology. Moreover it seems that education itself, perhaps especially autonomous higher education, is similar too. This seems to show that there is something universal in the experience of encounter: encounter with new people, new groups, and also encounter with new ideas, dark forces. Since, except for the solitary scholar, most encounters of this kind take place in a social context, where new people, new groups and new ideas are all encountered together, it should cease to surprise us that the encounter with the religious cults of remote peoples has had such an effect on anthropologists and anthropology. Religious experience is after all that place in most societies where individual, group and cognitive encounter are found most frequently and most intensely. In everyday work people are frequently scattered and busy. But at the times of ceremony, rites, religious meetings, etc., they engage with each other and with ideas in their most general form and are attracted or repelled.

Nevertheless, to generalize further, I continue to be impressed by the everyday character of the struggle to be curious and sceptical, not attracted or repelled. Entering a new town, a new university, every term a new classroom, always seems to me to involve these elements, and hence always, to a degree, to affect one cognitively as well as emotionally. Ms Lurie may intend her allegory as a criticism of social science. I do not take it as such. I take it that all human encounter is self-making, and human encounter with the ideas and attitudes of others can be self-transcending. But this is an arduous and precarious endeavour that can leave us disillusioned or mad, as easily as enlightened and renewed.

