Cargo Cult Politics

When Europeans came into contact with the people of the Southern Pacific islands, they brought with them many goods which were, from the point of view of the islanders, so technologically advanced, and so desirable, as to appear magical. After the Europeans left, the natives wanted them to come back with more of the goods. This led to the religious practices known as **cargo cults**, which later gained new impetus because of World War Two when large quantities of supplies were frequently dumped, abandoned, or washed up on Pacific shores. In one cult in Papua New Guinea in 1942 the islanders set up fake armies with fake officers and dummy equipment in the hope that it would turn into real equipment. In another, on the island of Tanna, cultists built fake landing strips with control towers and warehouses and so on, in the hope that planes would land there. Of course, the problem with all this is that it imitated only the form, not the substance of what wealth creation is really all about.

The physicist Richard Feynman **pointed out** that many scientists have a cargo-cult attitude towards scientific knowledge. There is a similar and fairly widespread habit in politics, practised by people whom one might call *cargo cult politicians*.

Many dictatorships nowadays have elections and parliaments that ape the form of Western liberal democracy with embarrassing crudeness, while behind the scenes people are beaten and tortured and the ballot papers only have one name on them. Socialist governments think that if only they order the construction of factories and hospitals and employ doctors and teachers, just as free people would in a free economy, they can achieve what free economies do – only better, because after all, it's fairer isn't it? Some libertarians think that a free market and small government (or no government) are the **sole criteria** of a free society (and so many of them blithely force their children to go to school, do chores, and generally obey their every **whim**). Such people are best described as libertarian **statists**, partly because it annoys them, but mainly because they are convinced that it is the malevolent State, rather than bad authoritarian ideas and lack of knowledge, that is the basic obstacle to human progress. So they want to mimic the form of a future society in the hope that the substance will magically follow.

Just as participants in a cargo cult didn't understand how much

complexity is required to produce technological goods, what is missing in all these cases is an understanding of the complexity of the human condition.

Just as the people of the cargo cults sooner or later get bored and angry about the world's complexity and its failure to fit their unrealistic expectations, so the cargo cult politicians nurse a grudge against a civilisation that does not fit their preconceptions. They deny or sneer at its achievements and become cynical, twisted, and bitter. We have much more sympathy with those who appreciate the greatness of what the West has achieved – even those with whom we have substantial disagreements – than with any of the cargo cult politicians, regardless of what ideals they profess.

Vision and Serious Work

In one sense, adopting the form of something and then hoping it will lead to the substance of the thing following on, makes sense. It is a form of conjecture. So, as you say, the problem with cargo cultism is not form-emulation but failure to do the work of making the vision come true; expecting it to happen all on its own by magic.

People might approach any school of knowledge, including TCS, with a cargo cult mentality, thinking that all they have to do is make one imaginative and intellectual leap (the paradigm shift) and their family futures will be bright and easy. But the process of building the future is likely to be more complex and difficult the more deep the paradigm shift: in other words, the most promising institutions are also the most demanding! Compared with forcing change revolutionary-style, or waiting for magic to occur, painstaking piecemeal knowledge-growth is very hard work indeed.

So, what if we have an exciting new vision, and are convinced that it is good, but lack the knowledge of how to bring it about? If neither institution-smashing nor reliance on the supernatural are viable, where do we begin?

The best approach would seem to be to hold the vision in mind, maintaining consciousness of its fantasy status, and then begin the process of conjecture and refutation of the many piecemeal ideas that might move us towards than vision. Individual moral choices must be made on the way, with reference to our vision, which should be constantly checked and adjusted as new information throws new light on its right or wrongness. A big conjecture can only be tested by a process of lots of other smaller ones *plus* their interactions with the big one. Growth is complicated.

Any idiot can be a backseat Prime Minister. But if a person is not prepared to undertake the work required actually to get into government, growing ideas is *all* the political change he can achieve. So he had better have some faith in the institutions he is working from within: otherwise, according to his own thinking, all that work will have been pointless. Which seems an immoral waste

of time.

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by **Alice** on Wed, 04/16/2003 - 11:25 | **reply**