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Psychology of Cargo Cults and Contemporary Cargo Security

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A cargo cult comprises cognitions, emotions, motivations, and associated behaviors—all considered superstitious, i.e., irrational and supernatural. The construct originally was ascribed by more developed to less developed societies. The construct core is that certain rituals will lead to obtaining more modern and highly desirable material goods. These cults have been described at least as far back as initial contact in the late 19th century between more developed Western societies and less developed Melanesian ones.

Examples include the building of mock airplane runways and airports, communication devices made of coconuts or wood, ersatz Western insignia painted on bodies—all intended to attract through non-material forces highly desirable Western goods, viz., *cargo*, via Western airplanes, less often ships. Goods might include manufactured clothing, canned food, and weapons. Other goods-inducing rituals might include mimicking Westerners—their dress styles and social behaviors often misunderstood out of context. Fires often were started as signaling devices to guide the airplanes or ships presumably brought by the supernatural.

Cargo cults have been presumed to more often appear during crises and the arising of a new charismatic leader and social movement. Ironically, leader and movement may advocate for a return to traditional morality coupled with rituals to induce the appearance of the new. Simultaneously, there may be fetishes for the past, the future, desired Western goods, and the relationships of those practicing the rituals. Cargo cults may reflect a myth, a dream, a colonial false consciousness. And the cults seem employed as a means of social control by leader and social movement.

And now to contemporary cargo security. Security is presumed necessary, to protect valuable cargo. The value lies in cargo's fetishization. Without this value, security becomes unnecessary.

But is today's cargo fetishized? Fetishization has at least two distinct meanings. The first is a sexualization in which gratification is linked to some object to some inordinate degree. The second is worshipping some object, because there is some spirit within to be worshipped, or because the object itself is somehow magical. In cultures characterized as commodity capitalist, sex as magic reigns and sex is magic. The self-worth of many people depends on what objects are obtained, controlled, or otherwise accessed when desired. And often enough, the thrill is gone. The sex and magic are no longer there. And, thus, many people go on the prowl for new sex and new magic. The need for cargo security remains.

But then there's the other kind of cargo security. It's not to help secure the sex and magic of objects, but to identify and neutralize yet other objects that are threats to sex and magic. For example, cargo as weapons and weapons within cargo. And an associated magical thinking applies to assessments of threat, vulnerability, and risk—of what layers of security are more or less effective in what situations with what objects for what services.

In a world wherein terrorism and so-called non-political crime like illicit trafficking, extortion, and scamming all are security threats to transportation, the primary source of our security concerns is constituted by our own irrational and supernatural. Winners and losers are thus identified in a world wherein those who die with the greatest number and quality of toys wins. These toys—material goods or services—also are tickets to power and social control. And by some sacred and secular religions, indications of who has been preordained for salvation. Our own cargo cults.

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Keywords: Aviation. Cargo. Cult. Fetish. Magic. Security. Supernatural. Transportation.

Abstract/Description: This article describes a convergence between the psychology of cargo cults and contemporary cargo security.

Disciplines: Other Psychology, Philosophy, Philosophy of Science. Political Science, Other Political Science, Psychology, Defense and Security Studies, International Relations

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