Sustainable Development as Cargo Cult: Strange Tales of Scale Making from Melanesia and Beyond

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Abstract

While the hyper-exotic discourse of 'cargo cult' continues to draw attention in popular media representations of Melanesia, many anthropologists have noted that the movements thus labeled represent a more general Melanesian form of sociality which emphasizes the creation of social unity as a means of obtaining wealth. This paper contrasts 'Cargo Cults' with corporate and environmentalist discourses of sustainable development, which seeks to unite stakeholders in a state of social unity in order to obtain wealth and the good life. In both cases the success of desired change at the macro-level depends on micro-level subjects taking "ownership" of the proposed changes to social life. The difference is that some 'cargo cults' such as the Christian Fellowship Church in the Solomons and the John Frum movement in Vanuatu have created social orders which have endured for decades while the vast majority of 'development' projects in Melanesia have failed. This paper asks: how and why do white discourses render credible, believable, and intelligible discourses of 'sustainable development' 'fighting corruption' and 'capacity building' while the macro-level aspirations of grassroots aspirations slip constantly back into the derogatory and exoticizing label of 'cargo cult'? Can our sense of an unproblematic notion of 'credibility' emerge unscathed in a world where Melanesian enthusiasm for organizations like 'integrated conservation and development areas' is now continuous with white dreams of reforming Melanesian social orders in the name of the environment?

"A social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the co-operation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned. A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted. There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming."

-- William James, The Will To Believe

"The New Guinea native is not unreliable. He is worse -- he is unpredictable."

- N.M. Bird, Pacific Island Monthly 1945

How can we use the notion of 'regimes of credibility' to make sense, anthropologically, of environmental politics in the Pacific and Southeast Asia? This paper is an attempt to answer these questions through an extended riff on two ethnographic situations -- the promises made by 'cargo cults' in Melanesia and the similar, but differently credible (in most people's opinions), promises made of 'sustainable development' made by the Porgera gold mine. So this paper focuses on the 'environment' not in the sense of its 'preservation' but rather in the way in which it is destroyed and put elsewhere -- into waste dumps, tailings, and so forth. Sorry about that.

As the quotes from my slide indicate, I am interested in how 'social organisms' in James's sense, come to be taken for granted. I seek, in other words, to understand not how environmental politics becomes "not only intelligible but believable and convincing to particular audiences" (as our session abstract puts it) but how collective subjects become *actors* whose existence and efficacy come to seem credible in particular places and time.

James's invocation of precursive faith in social organisms is an early statement of a social-scientific common place: That in any particular situation actors invoke macrosociological categories as the 'context' within which their interaction takes place and which entail roles for them inhabit. To telegraph very briefly my larger scholarly project, I am interested in replacing the notion of 'visibility' suggested by James C. Scott and the optical metaphor which presumes a pre-constituted, viewing collective subject for a notion of 'feasibility' which examines the process by which, in particular places and times, people come to convince others and themselves that they are personating a collective subjectivity (Hanks 1996:233).

My work thus examines Porgera and Papua New Guinea as a natural laboratory. Historically New Guinea (and the Pacific more generally) has been considered a 'natural laboratory' in the sense that an assortment -- excuse me, an 'assemblage' -- of cultural and ecological juxtapositions were to provide a clean identification of the causal factors that shape society (Hunt 1995). I would argue that Papua New Guinea acts as a 'laboratory' in the STS sense of the word because of the way it problematizes the purification of corporate and government identities in ways that render their credibility-making processes (normally invisible) visible and available for analysis[1]. At issue is not the prexistence of a macro actor who 'sees' (or, rather, is pathologically myopic) or who 'reads' the subjects made 'legible' to it. Instead the question is how people's assumptions about the existence of this actor inform the precursive faith which guides their actions such that the actor in question appears. Opening, as it were, the 'black boxes' into which, as Latour and Callon put it, Leviathans stuff themselves (Latour and Callon 1981).

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[1] Obviously I'm not the only person to do this. For STS and historical sociology see James Carrol's "Science, Technology, and the State". Then of course there is the work of Tania Li, Ferguson and Gupta, Mitchell on the state. To a certain extent this is people kicking over the coals of STS in order to recover its original incarnation as the 'social problems' literature.

Sustainability -- the world-ordering efficacy necessary to create a peaceful and prosperous future -- is more about Leviathans than Latour and Callon may realize. In the Ancient Near East -- where scale making and collective subjectivities first really began to take off -- the world was ordered and made fertile after a deity *defeated* the Leviathan in a massive cosmogonic battle of order versus chaos[2]. Kings often legitimated their rule via their connection with diety, and their reigns were seen as recreations of a higher cosmic 'order'[3]. The whole point was that god *defeated* the Leviathan. By the times Hobbes had gotten his hot little protestant hands on the concept, the king *was* Leviathan. So much for the native anthropology of Western cosmology[4].

It would be interesting to read the corporate literature on sustainability with a eye towards cosmogonic ordering rather than superhuman punishment. Let me give this a run in Papua New Guinea.

Located in the far west of Enga province in the highlands of Papua New Guinea and operated by its majority shareholder, the Toronto-based transnational Barrick Gold, most people would say that the Porgera gold mine 'exists'. Proof of its efficacy as a collective subject is usually given with reference to its ability to coordinate action through space and time. In 1992 – its second year of production – when it produced 1,485,077 ounces of gold, making it the third most productive gold mine in the world (Jackson and Banks 2002). In 2001 it moved roughly 200,000

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[2] Smith, "Origins of Biblical Monotheism", Levinson, "Creation and the Persistence of Evil" Day, "God's Battle with the Dragon", Gunkel, "Schopfung und Chaos"

[3] On "Order" see Baines and Yoffee. Although I'm not touching on other classic 'early civilizations' here I think the Chinese and Egyptian cases have similar examples of Order (but not really Leviathans). This is a classic trope in tons of other 'complex' societies (Polynesia, Mesoamerica, Inca etc.) of course.

[4] 'native cosmology' -- Sahlins. These protestant hands were, of course, in the service of Catholic Stuarts. And of course it's not Hobbes's fault that this battle got edited out of Genesis and not the Psalms and Job.

tons of earth daily. In 2004 the mine produced roughly 740,000 ounces of gold. In 2007 its ware-

house held over one million unique inventory *kinds* of inventory. The mine logistics manager

schedules cargo shipping from ports as far away as Singapore. As Adam T. Smith has noted[5],

landscape is not about politics, it *is* politics, and the mine's ability to inscribe proof of its regime

in the valley -- namely, by tearing up large swaths of it -- provides a literally monumental dem-

onstration of its puissance as a collective subject.

The apotheosis of corporate puissance is, of course, the discourse of sustainability. The

mine's ability to establish a new modus vivendi that will persist after its own actions stop and it

closes represents the ultimate exemplification of the mine's claim to technical mastery. This is

particularly clear in the case of sustainability which, by all accounts, is "more than just mine clo-

sure" but rather the permanent and ongoing state of affairs called 'life after the mine'. Narratives

of 'sustainable development' after closure envision a collective subjectivity so powerful that it

will continue to effect large-scale and long-duration change *even after it ceases to exist* through

its regimentation of existing conditions. Creating a sustainable future for the valley requires en-

gineering a set of social conditions and routines that will persist even when the engineer (the

mine) is no longer present.

How do you convince people that there is a macrosociological order of which they are a

part? Let me take here a very brief example of the slippery nature of role inhabitance in the cor-

porate discourse of sustainability. Consider, for instance, the original sustainability policy of

Placer Dome (the former operators of the Porgera gold mine) from 1999. The cover of the docu-

ment -- printed on textured, organic-looking paper -- features an image of earth from space with

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5 Smith, "The Political Landscape"

an adorable picture of an adorable girl of elusive but brown ethnicity holding two baby chicks. "This policy doesn't mean a thing..." say the bold words on the cover. On the recto side of the opening spread read the words '...without you'. Immediately beneath them in small caps is the phrase "We're committed". On the lower right hand corner of the page is the then-CEO of placer dome, John Wilson, leaning against a tree dressed in jeans, and a sweater with a pair of binoculars around his neck caught impromptu, perhaps, in the act of birding. The closing paragraph of the page reads

"The [sustainability] policy has been developed with the consultation and contribution of Placer Dome employees. It is our policy and our commitment. This ownership ensures the support of the policy and elaboration into action."

Here readers are figured as employees and are enjoined to 'take ownership' and act as if the policy was their own since it was generated with 'consultation' and 'contributions' by other employees who were – theoretically – of the same mind as them despite the fact that – given Placer's 10,000 or so employees – they never met those (unspecified) coworkers. This double mediation – the will of the company is personified in our executives who personify the will of someone like you – is typical of the construction of corporateness in the mine. Ownership -- the internalization of a certain emotional disposition -- is facilitated by positive (paternalistic?) feelings one is (I assume) supposed to have for the child on the cover.

The network of executives who make decisions about sustainability [6] have decided that the mine is not to be seen as evil or weak. And yet at the same time it is strategically necessary to create situations in which the mine is not omnipotent. Denotationally, discussions of closure are

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[6] I don't have time here to untangle them in front of you, unfortunately, but they are quite small.

descriptions of future actions, but pragmatically they are about aligning social relationships in the course of ongoing negotiations with the state and grassroots people. Admission of its own finitude can in fact be a key way for the mine to avoid positioning itself as liable for future plans, particularly those that touch on "sustainability." Here, the mine's ability to plan for the future – which should, as the result of it technical mastery, be unproblematic, hinges on the uncertain and uncontrollable decisions of fellow stakeholders.

As a result the mine portrays itself as the agent of positive change and not negative change, since negative change is the result of other stakeholders failing to go along with the mine's plans. By delineating the mine as an entity whose powers and external boundary can be clearly delineated, mine representatives limit the mine's liability in situations where outcomes are uncertain and the moral author of chains of actions remains ambiguous. "Quite simply," as one document puts it, "a sustainable future for the people of Porgera and the surrounding areas cannot be achieved by PJV alone, but requires substantial commitment from all stakeholders" {PJV 2002 @ 33}. A footnote cites another study which claims that "communities need to own this process and organise themselves accordingly" {PJV 2002 @ 33}. As one often hears around Porgera, "the mine cannot be responsible for all of the social problems in the valley" except, of course, for the ones that it ameliorates through it generous social programs – for which it takes credit.

Utopic unity is at the heart of a great deal of Melanesian organizing. As Lamont Lindstrom puts it[7], Melanesia is the place where people " hope and work for community and for consensus but expect the worse." This is more than just Peter Worsely has argued that cargo cults

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[7] Lindstom, "Dreaming of Unity and Cargo in Melanesia" -- which is excellent, btw. Much of this section is copping his stuff.

"weld previously hostile and separate groups together into a new unity". This is more than just encouraging shareholders to take ownership. Leaders of these movements -- which we may or may no want to call Cargo Cults -- justify their rule by virtue of their contact with a divine force which has a plan for us (even if it has not, in this case, slain leviathan). The "totalitarian dream" that Lindstrom notes in cargo culture -- " a dream of law and order—a vision of obedience, regularity, and totality. Everyone observes the moral code. Everyone obeys in all things. No one straggles. Utopian unity is made naturally obvious in collective drilling and marching" -- is of course model of bureaucratically regimented action used by the mine to eliminate the contingent and maintain operations through standard operating procedure.

Of course, it is important not to overplay the similarities between the Porgera Gold mine and the movements Lindstrom discusses. Despite discourses of 'modern' mines and 'ancient stone age New Guineans', I have argued that it is in fact the other way around -- bureaucratic, hierarchically organized institutions such as corporations are 'cold' because, as Weber might say, they seek to eliminate the coningent and reproduce the order ensonced in standard operating procedure. Papua New Guineans, on the other hand, 'ransack the present for novelty' (Rumsey and Merlan) in a way similar to a certain sort of Benjaminian-Baudelarian modern might. They are, thus, 'hot'. The problem, as N.W. Bird, the creator of the term 'cargo cult' pointed out so many years ago, is not that Melanesians are unreliable, it is that they are unpredictable. It is difficult to maintain this analysis because it immediately threatens to collapse into binaries that people are much more familiar with: either Melanesians are either ecologically noble savages or they are

nasty savages with a predilection to predate the charismaic megafauna that environmentalists cherish[8].

And yet... some 'cargo cults' have in fact proven to last far longer than some mines. The Yali movement, of course, doesn't move 200,000 tons of earth a day but it has managed to be a decades-long regional force which has managed to elect Yali's scion, James Yali, to national office despite his incarnarceration for raping his wife's sister. Similarly, John Frum is still alive and well on Tanna, and the Christian Fellowship Church is now on its second generation of leader who has recently been knighted by the Queen (of England).

Not only do 'cargo cults' have enviable longevity, they are taking forms that make it difficult to automatically discredit them -- what else are they, after all, then community based organizations? Nick Bainton's description of the "personal viability" system on Lihir -- wasp self-improvement courses with a Melanesian wist -- blur the line between 'realistic' development and 'cargo cult'. Similarly, the Christian Fellowship Church is currently negotiating contracts for sustainable forestry and development projects (Fa'anunu 2006).

In conclusion, as my invocation of Leviathan indicates, issues of the credibility of macro-actors are, like most important perennial problems in social science, extremely old and criticisms of pretensions to puissance are equally ancient. Mines may be able to (as the psalmist writes) makes the earth melt like wax and move mountains -- literally -- but in the end everything (to quote a different axial age thinker) is impermanent and "all is vanity and frustration" (Kohelet).

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[8] I never speak of cargo cult in my work, although the implications are obviously there. I just say "PNGians aren't cultish they're just 'modern' -- more 'modern' than us".

As we move forward in our analyses of credibility and social organization, I have suggested, it would be interesting to shift the analytic gaze from cargo cultsto the unexamined half of this us-them contrast: the taken for granted 'capacity' of 'Western' forms of organization. It is salutary to re-examine the claims of capital to efficacy, as well as credibility-dismissing claims of the merely 'cult' status of Melanesian movements today.