



Cargo cults

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Cargo cult—the term—appeared in 1945, at the end of the Pacific War. Anthropologists rapidly embraced the neologism to label the Melanesian social movements that had come to their attention during the colonial era (which began in the region in the second half of the nineteenth century) as well as post-war movements that captured ethnographic attention. A southwest Pacific example of messianic or millenarian movements once common throughout the colonial world, the modal cargo cult was an agitation or organised social movement of Melanesian villagers in pursuit of ‘cargo’ by means of renewed or invented ritual action that they hoped would induce ancestral spirits or other powerful beings to provide. Typically, an inspired prophet with messages from those spirits persuaded a community that social harmony and engagement in improvised ritual (dancing, marching, flag-raising) or revived cultural traditions would, for believers, bring them cargo. Ethnographers suggested that ‘cargo’ was often Western commercial goods and money, but it could also signify moral salvation, existential respect, or proto-nationalistic, anti-colonial desire for political autonomy. Although some one-time cargo cults have been institutionalised as indigenous churches or local political organizations and remain active, few new movements of the classic cargo sort emerged after most of the Melanesian colonies achieved national independence in the 1970s. Cargo cult stories, however, today continue to circulate widely beyond Melanesia, serving as useful metaphors of contemporary unrequitable desire, both ordinary and peculiar.

Introduction

Anthropologists have invented or cultivated a number of important keywords, including ‘culture’, ‘[ethnicity](#)’, ‘worldview’, ‘socialization’, ‘[ethnography](#)’, and ‘rite of passage’. Among these terms is ‘cargo cult’ which, although more particular in scope, has enjoyed surprising popularity both inside the discipline and beyond. Peter Worsley, who compiled an early overview of cargo cults in *The trumpet shall sound* (1957), offered what had already become the standard definition. Cargo cults are:

strange religious movements in the South Pacific [that appeared] during the last few decades. In these movements, a prophet announces the imminence of the end of the world in a cataclysm which will destroy everything. Then the ancestors will return, or God, or some other liberating power, will appear, bringing all the goods the people desire, and ushering in a reign of eternal bliss (1957: 11).

In the Melanesian islands of the southwest Pacific, ‘cargo cult’ provided a handy label which could encompass a variety of forms of social unrest that ethnographers elsewhere tagged millenarian, messianic, nativistic, vitalistic, revivalistic, or culture-contact or adjustment movements. After the Second World War, anthropological attention (including Worsley’s) had shifted from functionalist accounts of simpler social

systems to issues of social change, and how to describe and explain that change. The label presumed that these Melanesian movements typically focused on the acquisition of ‘cargo’ or *kago* (supplies, goods) in the Pidgin Englishes of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu (then the New Hebrides). Anthropologists offered a variety of explanations for cargo cult outbreaks, within the broader context of global social transformations that the War had caused. Simple greed and cupidity, fundamental Melanesian cultural and religious belief systems, or colonial inequality and oppression variously accounted for cult outbreaks. The term fell out of anthropological favor by the 1970s when Melanesian colonies obtained national independence (Fiji in 1970; Papua New Guinea in 1975; Solomon Islands in 1978; and Vanuatu in 1980). Active social movements continue, however, in colonised West Papua, the western half of New Guinea that Indonesia annexed in 1962. Some have tagged these anti-Indonesian liberation movements as cargoistic (e.g., Giay & Godschalk 1993; Timmer 2000), but caution is warranted insofar as the label undercuts the political gravity and legitimacy of organised liberation efforts. Although most anthropologists have abandoned ‘cargo cult’ as misleading, and even embarrassing (although, see Otto 2009 and Tabani 2013, who defend the label’s merits), the term enjoys a post-ethnographic afterlife and continues to pop up frequently in popular commentary and critique.

Cargo cult erupts

Anthropologists briskly adopted, but did not invent, the term ‘cargo cult’. The label first appeared in print, as a calumny, in the November 1945 issue of the colonial news magazine *Pacific Islands Monthly* (Bird 1945). Norris Mervyn Bird, an ‘old Territories resident’, wrote to express worries that wartime upheavals, a more liberal postwar colonial regime, and ill-digested Christian teaching would unsettle local people and spark cargo culting. Bird introduced the term as an alternative to an earlier cultic label, ‘Vailala Madness’:

Stemming directly from religious teaching of equality, and its resulting sense of injustice, is what is generally known as ‘Vailala Madness’, or ‘Cargo Cult’. . . . A native, infected with the disorder, states that a great number of ships loaded with ‘cargo’ had been sent by the ancestor of the native for the benefit of the natives of a particular village or area. But the white man, being very cunning, knows how to intercept these ships and takes the ‘cargo’ for his own use. . . By his very nature the New Guinea native is peculiarly susceptible to these ‘cults’ (1945: 69-70).

F. E. Williams, Government Anthropologist employed by the Australian Territory of Papua, had investigated curious incidents around Vailala in 1922 (Williams 1923). Predictions circulated about the return of ancestral spirits on ghost steam ships carrying desirable cargo. Enthusiasts abandoned the traditional male initiation ceremony and destroyed ritual artifacts, mimed Australian tea parties at flower-bedecked tables, and took up marching, drilling, and ecstatic [dancing](#). By the time Williams arrived to investigate, colonial officials and others had tagged all this as ‘Vailala Madness’, and Williams adopted the label as ‘the most distinctive and suitable’ of various alternatives (Williams 1923: 2).

‘Cargo cult’ bested ‘Vailala Madness’ as a movement cover term as it was not tied to a particular locale, elevated madness to cult, and featured catchy alliteration. Australia-based anthropologists including Lucy Mair and H. Ian Hogbin, who then lectured at the Australian Army School of Civil Affairs in Canberra and had served as anthropological consultants during the War, embraced the label, importing this into anthropological circles (see Mair 1948; Hogbin 1951). ‘Cargo cult’ quickly spread through Australian academia and beyond as anthropologists and journalists borrowed the term to label almost any sort of organised, village-based social movement with religious and political aspirations—movements that were increasingly on the colonialist and academic radar throughout Melanesia, as elsewhere. Anthropologists retrospectively applied the new term to pre-1945 Pacific movements, including Vailala Madness itself.

Although anthropologists had occasionally grappled with social change (e.g. Malinowski 1945), post-War transformations focused [ethnographic](#) attention on disorder and disruption, including social movements. Several important analyses of historical movements appeared in the 1950s, including Norman Cohn’s *The pursuit of the millennium* (1957) and Eric Hobsbawm’s *Primitive rebels* (1959). The Melanesian cargo cult expanded the catalogue of notable global movements, old and new, including Handsome Lake’s (Wallace 1956) and the Ghost Dance in North America, China’s Boxer Rebellion, Kenya’s Mau Mau, and more (see Lanternari 1963). By 1952, seven years after *Pacific Islands Monthly* introduced the versatile label, South Pacific Commission librarian Ida Leeson found enough ethnographic and administrative material on cargo cults to produce a robust bibliography. Peter Worsley’s comparative compendium, *The trumpet shall sound: a study of ‘cargo’ cults in Melanesia*, which tracked 60-some movements across the southwest Pacific from Fiji to New Guinea (including West Papua), followed in 1957.

Celebrated cultists

Melanesian social movements before and after the 1950s were each distinct and particular, but similar enough to come under the cargo cult label. Steinbauer (1979) tallied 185 of these. The new term disposed observers to find common elements and themes, including: desire for cargo (however imagined); expectation of spiritual assistance, whether from the ancestral dead or Christian figures, as locally reimagined; mimetic ritual reflecting European colonial or wartime practices (flags and flagpoles; marching and drilling); the washing and other manipulation of [money](#); and ecstatic dancing and other forms of paroxysm. Cargo prophecy varied from movement to movement, although a common assertion was that ancestral spirits (who governed natural forces and fertility) were equally implicated in the production of manufactured goods. A technologically wise ancestor, perhaps, had sailed off to America, or Europe, or Australia and there was taught the secrets of cargo. Or, wily Europeans were filching cargo that ancestral spirits were beneficently shipping to their descendants.

The period between 1956 and 1964 was cargo cult research’s golden age. During these years, five important cargo ethnographies were published: Jean Guiart (1956) on Tanna’s (New Hebrides) John Frum

Movement; Margaret Mead (1956) and Theodore Schwartz (1962) on the Paliau Movement, Admiralty Islands; Kenelm Burridge (1960) on movements in Madang Province; and, not too far away, Peter Lawrence (1964) on the Yali Movement. One might also include here Robert Maher's (1961) *New men of Papua: a study in culture change* about the Tommy Kabu Movement of the Purari River delta area, except that Maher did not use cargo cult idiom to frame his analysis. The term only appears as a bit of an afterthought on the book's final page, where Maher warns that Purari people, although pragmatic, might turn to cargo culting should their desire for social change be thwarted. Malaita's Maasina (Marching) Rule also was labeled a post-war cargo cult, although Keesing (1978; see Akin 2013) and others argued that it was rather a nationalist movement with only minor spiritual rudiments.

On the island of Tanna, the shadowy figure who people called John Frum (or Jon Frumm, or John Broom) appeared in the late 1930s and instructed new devotees to return to original lands, resume kava drinking and dancing, and in general maintain island tradition, or *kastom* (Guiart 1956). Presbyterian missionaries had attempted to prohibit kava (*Piper methysticum*) drinking as men, when under its mild psychoactive influence, communed with their ancestral spirits, with local kava-drinking grounds serving also as burial grounds. John Frum foretold reversals of land and sea; mountains and plains; and black and white. He also predicted American material assistance that, indeed, eventuated in 1942 when US forces landed to establish military bases in the archipelago. A series of mostly male leaders (in spiritual contact with John Frum) originated movement rituals shaped by both Christian liturgy and wartime experience. As did Vailala adherents and cultists elsewhere in Melanesia, movement rituals included marching and drilling, flags and poles, and flowers. Followers gathered weekly, each Friday evening, to dance through the night. On 15 February 1957, leaders raised two red flags hoarded from American ammunition dumps, and this day remains the main annual movement holiday. Over the years, John Frum talk of cargo has shifted from new money and goods, to local autonomy, to economic development projects (Lindstrom 1993).

On Manus and neighboring Admiralty Islands, the Pacific War likewise stimulated and shaped the Paliau Movement (known subsequently as The Noise, Makasol, or Wind Nation). Paliau Maloat, a mature man returning [home](#) from conscript service with the Japanese military, and drawing on Christian teaching, proposed a 'New Way' wherein people could better pursue economic development through cooperation. He proposed that people from different communities join to [share](#) garden and sea resources, working together to advance economically. Younger followers, claiming spiritual contact with Jesus, predicted Christ's imminent return alongside the ancestral dead. Expecting impending arrival of cargo planes, ships, bulldozers, sheet metal, money, and tinned food, followers destroyed property, danced ecstatically, shared ancestral inspirations, and waited (Schwartz 1962: 227, 268). Over the years, the movement morphed into a political bloc (Makasol) and independent church (Wind Nation) (Otto 1992). Paliau was elected to Papua New Guinea's pre-independence Parliament in 1968 and then to the Provincial Council in 1979. Wind Nation and Makasol continue to enjoy some support on Manus.

In Madang, Peter Lawrence (1964) followed the [history](#) of regional social movements through five phases, between 1871 and 1950. *Road belong cargo*'s opening chapter on the 'native cosmic order' is a magisterial summary of the cultural context of these disturbances, culminating in the poignant story of Yali, Madang's most recent and celebrated prophet.

Yali Singina from Sor village on Papua New Guinea's Rai (Madang Province) coast, like Paliau, was caught up in the Pacific War, working with Australian forces including coast-watchers (during the Pacific War, Australian and American servicemen, with Indigenous support, manned a chain of remote outposts, reporting on Japanese military movements.) At war's end, also like Paliau, Yali returned home to push economic development through cooperation, attracting followers across Papua New Guinea's Rai Coast. Weekly on Tuesdays (the movement's holy day), 'flower girls' decorated ritual tables:

At the core of this cult was ritual sexual intercourse between Yali and these women, following which the sexual fluids were collected in a bottle decorated with specific flowers (*codiaeum variegatum*). The bottle was placed on a table in the hope that the ancestors worshipped would offer their help by producing money at the bottom of the bottle (Hermann 1992: 58).

Yali also ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the colonial House of Assembly. His son James Yali, however, was elected several times to Papua New Guinea's national Parliament.

The Mambu Movement, which developed in the Bogia region on the western side of Madang Province in the 1930s, was still active in the 1950s when Kenelm Burridge (1960) arrived to undertake investigative cargo fieldwork. Mambu, a former plantation worker and Catholic convert from Apingam village, near Bogia, had disappeared during the Pacific War, but his prophecies continued to echo around the region. These foretold that ancestral spirits living inside Manam Island's volcano were preparing cargo for shipment to the faithful, and that followers would no longer need to pay colonial head [taxes](#). Waiting for tinned food, axes and bush knives, soap, cloth, and the like, people built cargo sheds near cemeteries and cult temples adorned with red flags, abandoned mission churches, gave up minding their crops and drying coconut for the market, underwent cultic rebaptism in [water](#), enjoyed promiscuous if ritualised sexual intercourse, and adopted European clothing. Colonial authorities jailed Mambu for six months, as they would Yali and also John Frum leaders on Tanna, to little avail, as upstart prophets and new movement leaders carried the message over several decades.

Following Lawrence, anthropologists have suggested several aspects of Melanesian cultures that shaped these renowned cargo movements, along with many others. These cultural elements include the traditional importance of wealth, presumptions of necessary spiritual contribution to economic production, a disjunctive temporality, and village polities wherein big-man leadership facilitated that of cult prophets.

New cultic orders

Many movement leaders and prophets, where these existed, were typically concerned with social harmony and order, insisting on new orders for cargo to arrive, and blaming disorder when it failed to do so. Worsley argued that cargo cults functioned to ‘weld previously hostile and separate groups together into a new unity’ (1957: 228); and that ‘by projecting his message on to the supernatural plane’, a cargo cult leader demonstrates that his authority ‘transcends the narrow province of local gods and spirits associated with particular clans, tribes or villages’ (1957: 237).

[Ethnographers](#) have repeatedly documented Melanesian dreams of unity alongside attendant fears of social disintegration—the difficult political balance between ideals of social harmony and competitive status [games](#). People’s ongoing pursuit of status and power subverts the sociability they strive to achieve. Social movements cultivated new orders, new ways, and new men that might transcend Melanesia’s fissiparous social systems. The prophet of the Kekesi Rites—an early twentieth century Papuan movement – commanded: ‘the people are to observe the moral code of the tribe’ (Chinnery 1917: 453). Within the cult, totalitarian social orders could be imagined as a new ‘Law’ (*lo* in Pidgin) or social regime (Lindstrom 2011). BurrIDGE called such totality ‘rigorism’, noting that ‘every millenarist believes he has grasped the secret and is driven to enforce it on others’ (1969: 127, 135; see also Guiart 1962: 133). Worsley, too, documented the new orders’ new moralities:

All prophets, therefore, stress moral renewal: the love of one’s cult-brethren; new forms of sexual relationship; abandonment of stealing, lying, cheating, theft; devotion to the interests of the community and not merely of the self (1968: 251; see BurrIDGE 1969: 165).

Marching and drilling, and communal dancing, embodied these new social unities and orders that cults, at least for a time, made possible.

Cult luminaries frequently instituted regularising, and sometimes repressive, mechanisms to protect a new Law’s totality. Some leaders commissioned guards, police, and courts to enforce this (Guiart 1956: 173). Sex and sorcery were particular worries, given their capacity to roil social order. In some movements, sexual morality was relaxed, and customary restrictions of exogamy and incest ignored (see, e.g., Worsley 1957: 251; Kolig 1987: 189). During Espiritu Santo’s Naked Cult, for example,

the sexual act was to take place in public, since there was no shame in it; even irregular liaisons should be open affairs. Husbands should show no jealousy, for this would disturb the state of harmony which the cult was trying to establish (Worsley 1957: 151).

In other places, cultists concluded that the best way to deal with sexual conflict is not to have any sex at all. New Laws and orders also often promised to vanquish sorcerers and the disruptions they caused.

Money, too, which people found alien and difficult to acquire or comprehend, was often targeted as a threat to unity. Burridge (1969) argued that money, as this became a new measure of personal value and prestige, created Melanesian moral crises and sparked cargo cults. Leaders of many movements, including John Frum bosses on Tanna, urged followers to rid themselves of old money by hurriedly spending it all or dumping it at sea (Guiart 1956: 155; Worsley 1957: 154-55). Prophets instead promised new money that would replace colonial coinage. When every believer acquired money and other desired cargo, people would be free at last from the onerous personal [debts](#) and economic obligations that the region's complex reciprocal exchange systems engendered.

Cargo cult explanation

Beyond describing cargo movements, anthropologists also ventured to explain them. Cargo theorists argued whether cults spontaneously combusted in many communities given a shared, volatile Melanesian culture, or whether cultic elements originated in fewer places and then diffused across the region. They also compared the roles of charismatic prophets; whether cults were nativistic (concerned with reviving waning traditions) or iconoclastic (focused on replacing local culture with modern [Western] substitutes); who, exactly, was charged with bringing home the cargo (returning ancestral spirits; the American military); why cults broke out in certain areas but not others; and also what 'cargo' meant. Was this simple cash or tinned foods? Did cargo stand for proto-nationalist desire for autonomy, the removal of colonial authority, even independence? Or did cargo represent existential concerns with respect and spiritual salvation?

Explanation hinged particularly on what, exactly, cargo signified. What was the object of Melanesian desire? Some in early days took cargo literally, as did Lucy Mair: 'the motive force of cargo cult is a feeling of hopeless envy of the European with his immensely higher material standards' (1948: 67). Seemingly cupidinous Melanesians of course desired European commodities including tinned foods, cloth, tools, money, and (perhaps curiously) refrigerators (Lindstrom 1993: 139-42). Simple education could thus 'cure' cargo culting when Melanesians learned the value of hard work and the intricacies of modern manufacture (e.g., Burridge 1960: 228).

Anthropologists, however, soon complicated cargo explanation, rooting cargo cults within essential elements of Melanesian culture itself (e.g., Lawrence's [1964]), or colonial oppression and disruption of local communities, or both. Those who argued that fundamental Melanesian culture led to culting focused on key elements thereof. These included concepts of economic production that presumed the necessity of both human and spiritual effort; the significance of various forms of wealth for personal prestige; belief in spiritual inspiration rather than individual creativity to account for novel ideas; notions of episodic time with expectation of sudden jumps from one period to another, rather than of constant temporal progress (McDowell 1988); and big-man leadership systems that easily incorporate charismatic prophets as big-

manlike leaders. Some, because of these cultural elements, argued that Melanesians are inherent cargo cultists, inexorably imbued with 'cargoism', 'cargo thinking', or 'cargo sentiment' (Harding 1967). Or, reverting to earlier Vailala Madness themes, even a cargo psychology, whereby pervasive, underlying anxiety or schizophrenia (Burton-Bradley 1973; Lidz, Lidz, & Burton-Bradley 1973), paranoia (Schwartz 1973), or other mental disorders induced cargo culting. Following this train of thought, a few suggested that cargo culting is an antique Melanesian phenomenon, antedating the arrival of European colonialists (Berndt 1954: 269; Salisbury 1958: 75; cf. Iteanu 2017).

Others, while acknowledging that aspects of Melanesian culture facilitated cargo cults, pointed instead to the existential and political effects of colonial domination. The desired cargo, here, was emancipation of spirit and body. Burridge (1960: 215) was exquisitely sensitive to the painful condition of Papua New Guineans, distressed by European [colonialism](#) and [racism](#). They desired to be New Men because Australians mostly treated them as [animals](#) or [children](#). Drawing on substrate culture, they thus spun out cargoist 'myth-dreams' to self-medicate: 'The most significant theme in the Cargo seems to be moral regeneration: the creation of a new man, the creation of new unities, the creation of a new society' (1960: 246-47).

Some writers, more religiously inclined, took cargo desire to symbolise human yearning for spiritual salvation. John Frum, Mambu, and the rest were indeed avatars of Jesus to their followers (Steinbauer [1979] favored the term 'new salvation movements'). Cunning missionaries therefore might step in and redirect cargo desire to Christian ends.

Those with a more critical perspective rooted cargo cults in post-war political and economic relationships. Rather than pointing at Melanesians and Melanesian culture for cargo culting, cults erupted because of insufferable social conditions. Some, like Mr. Bird, continued to cast cargo cult blame on liberal Christian missionaries whose preachings about man's brotherhood natives might ill-digest. But most explained cargo culting as a desperate reaction to colonial inequality and oppression. They were, as Guiart put it, 'forerunners of Melanesian nationalism' (1951: 81). Worsley's observation that cults functioned to weld scattered, autonomous local and kin groups together into wider 'new unities' (1957: 228) echoed the contemporary political expectation that classes-in-themselves might transform into classes-for-themselves, on the road towards some sort of future political independence. Explanations by the 1980s favored the critical stance: 'Cargo thinking was a product of the forced interaction between two economic systems, the gift economy and the capitalist economy, with their religious support structures' (Buck 1989: 164; see Kilani 1983). When taken to be spawned by colonial inequalities, as social disruption caused by an intensifying world system, cargo cults were reframed as a Melanesian sort of 'globalization movement'—this term replacing earlier adjustment or culture-contact movement labels.

Sackett (1974), along these lines, proposed to explain why cults occurred in some places but not others.

Key factors were distance and degree of local and colonial authority. Remote communities at the fringes of administrative systems had yet to develop hostility towards them. Those located nearby colonial centers had better access to cargo, in its material form, and the knowledge of ruling regimes. But those at some middle distance who suffered colonial meddling and lacked access to cargo (goods and knowledge) were ripe for cargo culting (this essentially is a theory of relative deprivation [Aberle 1962]). Moreover, cults mostly flared up in locales with weak local authority structures. Effective leaders, where these existed, could step up to quash any upstart, troublesome cargo prophet. This might also explain the post-1970s decline in cargo culting, insofar as authority structures have strengthened and social distances shortened.

Cargo cult embarrassments

Anthropologists since the beginning have not been altogether comfortable with their adopted term. 'Cargo', they knew, meant more than mere manufactured goods. And 'cult' could be discourteous, even insulting, deprecating people's fervent beliefs. 'Movement' often read better than cult. Some [ethnographers](#) refused to use the term, defaulting instead to local appellatives (e.g., Rimoldi & Rimoldi 1992), or relying on Pidgin English *kago* to signpost cargo's complexity. Kaplan (1995) insisted that Fiji's Tuka Movement was 'neither cargo not cult'.

Others have deconstructed cargo cult as a misleading analytical artifice, an observer's false category. It bundles together diverse and particular uprisings, disturbances, and movements that may have little in common (McDowell 1988; see Lindstrom 2004). Hermann argued that "'cargo cult" should be written under erasure for the good reason that it is an inadequate concept' (2004: 44). The scare quotes that often bracketed the label when cargo cult emerged in the 1940s are back, as ethnographers distance themselves from its discomfiting implications. Others, however, defend the term as ethnographically useful, even if it has been applied to 'heterogeneous, uncertain, and confusing ethnographic reality itself that, after all, cannot be claimed to exist in the minds of Western observers alone' (Jebens 2004: 10). Although some find cargo cult to be at least historically useful, setting the bounds for comparative analysis, few ethnographers apply the label today. This partly reflects disciplinary embarrassment but, more directly, shifting forms of organised and disorganised Melanesian desire that, today, takes the form of charismatic, 'health-and-wealth' Christianity, new interests in [Islam](#) or the lost tribes of Judaism, bingo and numbers [games](#), and dubious Internet money-making scams.

Cargo cult echoes

Several Melanesian movements remain active but, whatever their 'cargoist' heritage, these certainly no longer are cargo cults – rather, they have institutionalised themselves as indigenous churches and/or regional political organizations. These include John Frum on Tanna, Makasol/Wind Nation in the Admiralties, the Peli Association of the eastern Sepik region, the Pomio Kivung and Kaliai movements on

New Britain (Lattas 1998), Tutukuval Isukal Association of New Hanover, and the Lo-Bos Church descending from the Yali Movement in Madang. To these, some would add Vanuatu's Nagriamel Movement and New Georgia's Christian Fellowship Church. Some adherents, like John Frum supporters on Tanna, earn a little income by performing as cargo cultists for bemused international [tourists](#).

Cargo culting may have died away in Melanesia but cargo cult—the term—has jumped into global popular media where it thrives, alive and well. As in Melanesia, cargo culting anywhere can be appreciated or deprecated. Cargo cult originated as invective, and it retains its sting. Any sort of woeful or forlorn desire for material goods or other coveted objective, joined with a seemingly irrational program to obtain this, can be blasted as a wrongheaded cargo cult. It is instructive to run an Internet search on the term (text and image). This turns up a wild tangle of popular cargoist discourse. One finds entire parliaments of cargo cult politicians, cargo cult computer code, cargo cult development plans, cargo cult trade policies, cargo cult [science](#), and much, much more (Lindstrom 2013). Brexit is cargo cult (Kuper 2017). Donald Trump is a cargo prophet (Davis 2017). Melanesians themselves continue to lob the term at one another, when outraged by the ludicrous plans or claims of political rivals.

Oppositely, cargo culting and wild desire can signify personal development, creativity, and individual freedom: the noble [resistance](#) to oppression by the state, global forces, or any intrusive authority. Just as John Frum supporters on Tanna battled [colonialism](#), so might we all defy troublesome authority. Moreover, cool cargo cult can boost market share. Far beyond Melanesia, we might enjoy cargo cult rock band music, purchase cargo cult art, or read cargo cult literature. Fervent consumers sip John Frum rum, spray John Frum perfume, or enjoy the 2015 Portuguese film *John From* which, of course, featured rash, unrequited love. Held in the Nevada desert, the trendy Burning Man Festival's 2013 theme was Cargo Cult. John Frum got torched.

If Melanesian cargo cults have faded away, why have cargo cult stories persisted and spread? Our interest in cargo cult tales reflects normative modern desire as much as it does anything actually happening in the Pacific (Lindstrom 1993). Cargo stories are desire stories. They function to remind us how modern, consumerist desire operates. This is desire—for things as for others—that is never sated. We seek perfectibility but we would be astonished should we one day actually achieve this. Self-development is a lifetime's work. We find reassurance and desirous echoes in strange tales of people who are madly in love with what they cannot have. The marketplace, where one may never stop shopping, never fully satisfies. Even when cargo does arrive, this fails to quash desire and may even make things worse. It turns out to be not at all what one really wanted in the first place and, worse, often causes unexpected injury and suffering when it arrives. If cargo is potentially dangerous, culting and myth-dreaming are honorable, even essential human capacities. Unending desire is our human duty. Although cargo cults have vanished in the southwest Pacific, cargo cult stories of foolish, unrequited, but necessary and understandable love, remind us of our modern condition.

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