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PLATO AND THE VAILALA MADNESS

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THE interpretation of moral and political change is a large topic for a short talk; but like Dr Jarvie in a recent book (Jarvie 1964), I consider it now for the most part in the context of some small communities in New Guinea. There in Papua, just after the First World War, the islanders tried to reform—to abolish even—their traditional way of life by acting in a way that seemed madness to Europeans.

My subject then is rapid social change, a kind of speeded-up history. Plato clearly belongs somewhere in any discussion of social stability and social revolution, hence the title of this talk. So do Professor Karl Popper's severe criticisms of Plato's influence on political thought when, in the first volume of his *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Popper 1945), he condemned many of his contemporaries' Platonic leanings towards a tribalistic, conservative, and inward-looking political philosophy. With Dr Jarvie himself, who acknowledges a great debt to Popper, I hope to suggest how the so-called 'Vailala madness' of some people of Vailala in

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the Gulf Division of Papua connects with the thought of Plato, of Popper, and other social theorists.

In 1919, Mr F. E. Williams was assistant government anthropologist in Papua. Colonial administrations have often given encouragement to anthropologists, partly from a disinterested curiosity about local antiquities and customs, partly because they have hoped for information and advice about the effects of their policies. Also in 1919, Mr J. H. P. (later Sir Herbert) Murray was Lieutenant-Governor of Papua. Sir Herbert was the brother of Professor Gilbert Murray the Greek scholar, whose anthropological interests owed much to that connection. He knew his Plato. His brother had to deal with 'the Vailala madness'. A further Murray, Mr G. H. Murray—Murray is a great name there—was Acting Resident Magistrate. It is from an official report by Mr G. H. Murray that I introduce that 'madness', 'the Vailala madness'. Murray writes:

> 10th September, 1919. Mr —— visited the Government Station on the evening of the 9th September to report extraordinary conduct on the part of the natives from Keuru to Vailala. According to him, the natives were saying that the spirits of their ancestors had appeared to several in the villages and told them that all flour, rice, tobacco and other trade belonged to the New Guinea people, and that the white man had no right whatever to these goods; in a short time all the white men were to be driven away, and then everything would be in the hands of the natives; a large ship was also shortly to appear bringing back the spirits of their departed relatives with quantities of cargo, and all the villages were to make ready to receive them. Platforms were being erected in the villages, and these were being loaded up with presents. Bosses, or big men, were appointed, presumably self-appointed, who seemed to be acting as masters of ceremony in these preparations, and making the other natives 'fall in' with a pretence of drilling them and making them salute. (G. H. Murray 1923: 65)

Mr Murray further reported that the natives were erecting flags, explaining that they were for 'making Christmas' (ibid.: 66), and that he became suspicious that 'after all, there might be some hidden motives behind their Madness' (ibid.). He was afraid of subversion. He therefore began to make very careful enquiries, starting with a native called Hareha. In Murray's words this man, 'came forward very frightened, and after assuring him there was nothing to be alarmed about, as the Government were the friends of the natives, he was prevailed upon to talk' (ibid.). (I should add here that since, according to his own report, Mr Murray had that day already arrested a number of suspects, it is not entirely surprising that this informant was frightened.) He told Murray that his 'head has gone round', making him fall to the ground, and that the sky had opened and Jesus Christ had 'gone through his head'.

Another case, apparently typical of many, has been described by the government anthropologist in the following terms:

> A young man, Karoa (of fine physique and appearance), was displeased because several others and myself had entered the *ahea uvi* [cult house] without consulting him. He poured forth a volume of gibberish which contained a good many Pidgin-English phrases, but was intelligible to nobody. When his harangue was finished he stood aside, stuttering and mumbling in the familiar manner suggestive of teeth-chattering; he made a few symmetrical gestures with both hands, but for the most part motioned with his right hand before his solar plexus as if encouraging his stomach to rise. (Williams 1923: 6–7)

(Here I may mention that a common pidgin English name for this condition was 'belly don't know', inspiration being held to start in the belly.) To continue with Williams's report: 'Meanwhile he heaved long sighs, and looked genuinely distracted. Finally he moved across to the flag-pole, and stamped round and round it, shouting such phrases as "Hurry up!", "What's-a-matter?", "Come on boy!"' (ibid.: 7).

In these extracts from reports, the main features of what have since become known in New Guinea and more widely as 'cargo cults' are already delineated. Those who follow such cults hold that by following certain religious and practical prescriptions, often directly contrary to their own customs and destructive of their own possessions, but also involving acting out some of the habits of Europeans, they will gain real integrity; and also (in the New Guinea cults) they would obtain the cargoes of consumer goods that had hitherto come primarily for their European rulers. In fact, as it has turned out, the spectacular displays of social giddiness which attracted most attention in 'the Vailala madness' seem to be more incidental than they then appeared. They provided the appearances of inspired leadership and purpose; but the central aim of the cults was the attempt to possess fully the attributes of European power and wealth, often in association with a reunion of the ancestral dead with the living. All in the past, present, and future would then be reconciled.

The rather different attitudes adopted towards 'the Vailala madness' by the government anthropologist on the one side, and the Lieutenant-Governor of the territory on the other, suggest the relevance of this behaviour to political philosophy. The anthropologist was intensely, sentimentally even, sympathetic towards the culture of the Papuans. Government, plantations, and missions had certainly undermined their original forms of society, art, and pleasure, leaving them still impoverished, dissociated, and in a state of permanent inferiority. The frequency with which European insults and commands appear in the speech and song of those under the influence of inspiration show the violence of the impression some of those Europeans had made. The anthropologist, then, pleading for the retention of most of the traditional way of life, wrote that 'Whoever, in the name of philanthropy or of Christianity, would discourage them [i.e. the traditional ceremonies] is depriving the native of his best, and giving him in return some unappreciated material reforms and a smattering of strange religion—an exchange which leaves him poor indeed' (ibid.: 63).

The official anthropologist (but you must remember it was in 1919) was particularly anxious that the government should suppress the leaders of the new cults, 'Automaniacs' as he calls them. He wrote:

> These Automaniacs, I believe, hold the others in check. Whether they are sincere, or whether they are schemers, their power is a malign influence upon the villages: and before the ceremonies can burst into life again, this evil restraint will have to be removed.... If the Government officers, and the white men in general, made it their business to ridicule and discredit these men...then the Gulf Division would yet struggle back to life and health. (ibid.)

For those who appreciate the variety and satisfaction of traditional ways of life, and know the many forms of distress caused by thoughtless European contempt for local virtues and arts in many parts of the Empire, the anthropologist's solicitude is clearly right-minded and well-intentioned. Yet, in Melanesian terms, he stands in practice for conservatism and segregation. He adopts what has been called a 'functionalist' theory of human society—a theory which holds that social institutions are functionally interdependent. According to this theory at its more extreme, one change implies total change and hence, logically, the ultimate destruction of the whole traditional form of social life, which the anthropologist himself valued perhaps more than the local people themselves. In social anthropology the name of Malinowski is particularly associated with functionalist theories; and the revolution in social anthropology of which Dr Jarvie writes is partly the revolution initiated by Malinowski when he promised a true science of society based upon this approach. Dr Jarvie feels that the revolution has failed to produce the promised results, partly because it will not allow for the dynamic elements in society represented by 'the Vailala madness', and with some justification, even if he might have said so somewhat more briefly and with more real grasp of social anthropology today.

To return to practical attitudes towards 'the Vailala madness'. The Lieutenant-Governor's views, expressed in a memorandum to the government anthropologist, are less basically conservative in Melanesian terms than the anthropologist's: 'I think that these old customs must probably all die out sooner or later,' he wrote, '...still I do not think that we can do much good by direct efforts to bolster them up' (J. H. P. Murray 1923). He proposed to advise government officers to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards traditional custom. But as far as the leaders of the cults, the 'Automaniacs' were concerned, he was content merely to ensure that none of them should become village constables. If they practised sorcery, police action might then be taken against them on those grounds; but no action was to be taken, he said, that might be construed as implying government opposition to any form of Christianity.

It is clear from later studies of cargo cults—K. O. L. Burridge's book *Mambu* is a good example (see Burridge 1960)—that a central feature there is an effort and intention more-or-less conscious to break, or grow, out of the traditional tribal society, and really to enter the larger world which the native peoples shared with

the European rulers—but on painfully unequal terms for them. Many of the leaders of these movements were in fact men who had more experience of the world outside the village community, who had 'adapted' themselves more vigorously than their more homebound friends. They had felt, more than others, a tension between the local European sets of values and the Melanesian at that time. Burridge (ibid.: 247–8) says that:

> The most significant theme in the Cargo [movement among the Kanaka] seems to be moral regeneration: the creation of a new man, the creation of new unities, the creation of a new society.... And both new man and new society are to be a true amalgam or synthesis, not a mixture of European and Kanaka forms and ideals.

If this is so, then the government anthropologist—though he may have been right in his admiration for the ancient ways of the Papuans, was advising a policy which would in effect have prevented them from entering the modern world as full members of it. The Lieutenant-Governor, on the other hand, was permissive to such a development.

And here that official anthropologist stood with Plato in his social theory and ideals. Professor Popper's criticism of Plato refers to Plato's hatred of the individual in politics, and his conviction of the evil of most social and political change. In this, Plato belongs to and advocates what Popper calls 'the closed society and with it its creed that the tribe is everything and the individual nothing' (Popper 1945: 166). Popper in fact much overestimates the conservatism of the so-called 'primitive societies', but it is probably true that the teaching of tribal elders, elevated to the level of a political philosophy, would express a fear of change. They seem to have done so in the referendum recently organized by Mr Ian Smith in Rhodesia, where his tribal chiefs have been represented as wishing to perpetuate the closed society, which he also thinks better for them. Those who in New Guinea and elsewhere have shown a great apparent concern to preserve traditional modes of life also looked with disfavour on attempts by 'natives', as they called them, to break out from the restrictions of tribal reserves into a world of real influence and power—the world of their erstwhile rulers. So in many cases, to preserve 'the closed society' is also to preserve old inequalities; for the dependence of Europeans on non-European labour is such as to make it impossible for native peoples to enjoy the advantages of the old unrecoverable days of tribal integrity and autonomy.

On the other side, with Governor Murray to some extent, and with leaders of cargo movements themselves—with Professor Popper's 'open' against Plato's 'closed' society—are those who are prepared to let the past die away and new social syntheses arise. A dialogue between these two reactions to a rapidly changing world goes on, of course, in the minds of many outside Papua today. Many people, like those of Vailala if without their dramatic symptoms, feel in themselves a tension between older and newer values. They know or sense themselves growing into a form of society which presents radically different problems of adaptation from that into which they were born. And in some cases, this disturbance has

produced, especially among young people, outbreaks of apparently mad destructiveness, such as occupied so much space in the press not very long ago.

Now in the cargo cults and allied movements of social protest or social adaptation, such destructiveness has also been a common feature. A very early report of cargo activity, dating back to 1894, reads as follows:

> One man named Tokerua...made a great stir among the natives. He gave out that he had seen a 'spirit' in a large tree that told him to tell all the villagers to kill their pigs, burn their houses, and take to the highest peaks in the ranges, as a large wave was coming and would swamp the place for two or three months, and after that they would come down from the hills and they would live in comfort. He (Tokerua) was to form a new government and have a steamer of his own after the style of the 'Merrie England' [the governor's yacht], only larger. The people quite believed him, and built their houses in the bush and killed 300 or 400 of their pigs. (Kennedy 1894: 71)

Such behaviour and beliefs may be paralleled among many groups, all over the world, who have believed in an imminent millennium. But that the actual destruction represents not only an act of faith in a millenarian prophecy but also a doing away with the symbols of the then closing tribal past, is shown by an outstanding feature of 'the Vailala madness'. Amulets and other ancient religious symbols which might now make their owners rich were burnt wholesale, and ceremonies considered essential to the old way of life were totally proscribed. 'It is with the utmost disappointment that one finds in village after village the devastation which this movement has caused', wrote the government anthropologist (Williams 1923: 37). He continues (ibid.): 'It seems nothing less than preposterous that old men, who have been brought up among the ceremonies, and who have taught their sons that their prime moral duty is to carry on the ceremonies, should of their own accord come to despise and abandon them.'

It is clear that in Vailala and other parts of New Guinea affected by such cults, the whole native population, young and old, shared to some extent a common reaction to European paternalism. The protest was against paternalism. Can it be partly this which in our own society sometimes produces behaviour in the young which horrifies the old, or those of the old who respect, and often for good reason, the old ceremonies, but old ceremonies which the young perhaps sense no longer to correspond with their needs? (Do they feel themselves excluded from, or just bored by, an 'adult world of privilege and power'?)

Our commissions and enquiries into social affairs represent, surely, a rational attempt to grapple with social problems of rapid change. There is no one, in truth—nor is there any body of people—who really know in full the circumstances in which we are even now living. For some of the people of Vailala in 1919, such problems, pressing upon people not educated, spiritually, to cope with them, produced that 'madness'. Is it possible that something of the sort happens to some of us today, trying to keep up with 'the times', without knowing what 'the times' really represent?

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