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# CONTINUUM

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## CENSORING THE PARANORMAL

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**W**riter Charles Fort called them "the damned." Debunkers call them superstitious nonsense that threatens to undermine the fabric of science. Christian fundamentalists call them satanic manifestations that undermine faith in God. Other people simply call them anomalies.

Anomalies are things, or alleged things, that don't fit. They can be minor oddities, of no interest to anyone except a scientist in a highly specialized discipline. Or they can be something else, something hinting at dramatic possibilities and attracting widespread attention and controversy: a UFO sighting, a psychic experience, an encounter with a poltergeist, a report of an unusual animal not known to conventional zoology. Anomalies are nothing new. As long as there have been human beings, people have claimed experiences with phenomena that, according to the prevailing religious or scientific orthodoxy, were not supposed to exist. Some, such as those unfortunates who made such claims during the Inquisition, were burned at the stake for it. Today the burning goes on, if only metaphorically.

In 1977 a group of prominent academics and journalists—few of whom had firsthand experience with anomaly research—formed the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). The committee, whose members included such luminaries as Carl Sagan and Harvard zoologist Stephen J. Gould, declared as their mission nothing less than the salvation of Western civilization from "irrationality" and "dangerous sects," which, because they accepted the reality of anomalies, opposed science—or so CSICOP charged.

Not long afterward CSICOP complained to the Federal Communications Commission about an NBC documentary that treated paranormal phenomena more sympathetically than the debunkers liked. Although CSICOP alleged that the point of view the documentary represented was harmful to the public, the FCC, unimpressed, refused to act.

In one strange incident CSICOP official Philip J. Klass, learning of a forum on anomalies research that the University of Nebraska was sponsoring, called the school to protest that CSICOP's views were not being represented and that, moreover, in questioning the United States government's word on the nonexistence of UFOs, speakers at the conference were seeking "what the Soviet Union does—to convey to the public that our government cannot

be trusted, that it lies, that it falsifies. . . . As a patriotic American, I very much resent [this]." After Klass threatened legal action against the university, it canceled its sponsorship of future conferences of this kind. Klass withdrew the threat and pronounced himself satisfied with the university's action.

Since then satellite groups of debunkers have proliferated all around the country, determined to do battle with "pseudoscience" real and imagined. Not content simply to argue the issues on their merits, they have harassed colleges and universities into dropping (usually noncredit) courses in parapsychology, conducted vituperative campaigns against anomaly proponents, and done—in the words of Philadelphian Drew Endacott, one of their number—"anything short of criminal activity" to get "the point across to people who have no demonstrated facility to reason."

As the antianomaly hysteria has escalated, even some skeptics have begun to express alarm. Psychologist Ray Hyman, a respected critic of parapsychology, speaks of a "frightening fundamentalism" in all this, a "witch-hunting" mentality that has nothing to do with real science. CSICOP cofounder Marcello Truzzi, a sociologist who left the organization when he grew concerned that it was becoming an "inquisitional body," says that some debunkers have gone "berserk."

In fact, many scientists do not share these skeptics' certainty that all anomalies are bogus. In 1969 the Parapsychological Association was accepted as an affiliate of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Ten years later the AAAS's newly elected president, Kenneth Boulding, declared, "The evidence of parapsychology cannot just be dismissed out of hand." In recent years polls of scientists and academics have revealed a considerable degree of open-mindedness on the subject. And in 1976, when physicist Peter Sturrock polled the members of the American Astronomical Society, fully 80 percent agreed the UFO phenomenon deserves scientific attention. Several of the astronomers described their own UFO sightings.

If history is any guide, most supposed anomalies will eventually be explained in conventional terms, either as delusions or as misinterpreted, mundane events—and a few will prove rather more interesting than that. Meanwhile, it's time to defuse the hysteria and get back to the serious business of dispassionate investigation.—JEROME CLARK