

lent and are frequently abducting people, especially bored and lonely housewives, and carrying out unpleasant experiments on them. John Mack, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard University, got himself into a load of trouble by taking these stories literally.

Of course the US government was held to be hiding things from the start. Probably the US air force made a mistake in setting up Project Blue Book in 1948 to look into flying saucer reports. It was all quite innocent, but it created the ineradicable

## Ancient & modern

THE Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, has decreed that failing schools shall be named. 'Naming and shaming', screamed the headlines the next day, as if 'shame' were somehow a wicked emotion to make people feel. On the contrary, it is, like guilt, an excellent response to induce, as any Homeric hero would have told you.

*Aidōs*, the ancient Greek word for 'a sense of shame', covered a wide range of feelings, including awe, fear (particularly of punishment) and respect. It was generated by acting wrongly, or below one's best, in front of friends or gods.

For example, Homeric heroes urge on their men to stand firm, or reproach them in retreat, by saying, 'Put *aidōs* in your hearts.' They urge on themselves in precisely the same way. When the Trojan hero Hector is standing outside the gates of Troy awaiting Achilles' attack, he admits he should have taken earlier advice to lead a retreat back into the city. As it is, he says to himself, 'I have destroyed my people by my rash actions, and now feel *aidōs* in front of the Trojan men and women in case someone more cowardly than I shall say of me, "Hector, trusting in his strength, destroyed his people." ' So he concludes that the only thing to do now is fight, and either kill Achilles and return, or be killed by him in front of the city and win renown by a noble death.

The point is that without *aidōs* there could be no honour. Unless a hero was able to judge what others considered shameful, he could not expect the status or high valuation in other people's eyes that he craved. That he was so able to judge indicates that there was broad agreement about what constituted honourable and shameful behaviour.

Fear of what others might think of you kept you up to scratch in the Homeric world. Mr Blunkett is carrying out a commendable social experiment to see if the same applies to failing schools.

Peter Jones

*Peter Jones helps to run Friends of Classics and lectures at Newcastle University.*

impression that the air force knew there was something going on. Actually the air force had no idea what was going on in 1947, but by 1950 had come to the conclusion that there was no great flying saucer mystery. But in the post-Watergate environment of the later 1970s that conspiracism became rampant.

For example, the alleged Roswell incident took place in 1947 when a farmer found some debris — probably from a secret military balloon — on his farm near Roswell, New Mexico. This was about a month after Arnold's sighting near Mount Rainier. There was quite a song and dance for a while about a 'crashed saucer', but it was soon forgotten.

Thirty years later, however, Roswell was being cited as evidence of alien visitation and official deceit. In the Roswell case — which has been the subject now of half a dozen books and one feature film — aliens and their spaceship are alleged to have been spirited away and hidden by the air force. Some, like the UFO conspiracy author Stanton Friedman, have called it 'the cosmic Watergate'. American space technology, however, has a very lucid history from the space shuttle back to the German V2s acquired in 1945. It would have been different if they had had access to alien technology.

Conspiracism, of course, has an independent history and is usually associated with the political Right. *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* was a forgery concocted by the old Tsarist Russian secret police and was intended to show that the Jews had a plan for world domination. Some of this was incorporated by Nesta Webster in her *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements*, first published in 1923. Nearly all the right-wing conspiracist writers since then have drawn on Webster, with or without acknowledgment. She propounded the theory of the Jewish-masonic conspiracy going back to ancient times. Her works were praised by such celebrities as Winston Churchill and H.G. Wells. Later she joined Mosley.

Her successors, such as A.K. Chesterton



(not to be confused with Gilbert), Gary Allen and Robert Eringer, have developed the model of the secret world government, consisting of bankers and big businessmen, all intent on making us subject to a world dictatorship. They belong to a masonic breakaway society called the Illuminati and are behind the so-called Bilderberg Group and the Trilateral Commission. American right-wing militia share many of these notions.

At the root of conspiracism lies the belief that the world is not a chapter of accidents but that, on the contrary, everything is under control and going according to plan — somebody's plan. In America such journals as *Critique*, published in California, and *Conspiracy Tracker*, published in New Jersey, maintain a running commentary on the various conspiracies.

This mode of thought — shorn of some of its fascist implications — has been taken over by the American UFO movement. Instead of Jewish bankers it is space aliens, and *The X Files* mirrors their state of mind with great precision. On the wilder shores of it you will find it maintained that a secret human colony has been established on Mars because human life on Earth is going to be destroyed by a huge asteroid in the near future.

In Britain the atmosphere is far less fevered. Researchers such as Jenny Randles, Hilary Evans and Paul Devereaux seem a touch uncritical at times, but they inhabit the same universe of the mind as do the rest of us. Jenny Randles, who usually keeps a clear distinction between fact and speculation, in her recent book *Time Travel* suggests that UFOs may be not from another planet but from another time — tourists, in fact. In general, space aliens are not much fancied in Britain and British ufologists are more inclined to put UFO reports into the category of the paranormal, along with telepathy, precognition and ghosts. Sceptics will certainly agree that UFO stories — and all that we can examine of UFOs are the stories — should be put in that department.

Most of us at this point would be happy to shut the door quietly and silently make off. My own Boring Theory of History (BTH) states that the true explanation of any mystery is the most tedious explanation consistent with the facts. In the case of the UFOs the BTH predicts that when you have eliminated regular aircraft, irregular aircraft, balloons, the planet Venus, lunatics, liars and film producers and other conventional categories, what you will be left with is nothing.

It is a smart point about *The X Files* that at the end of each episode the evidence of UFOs or some other strange phenomenon always disappears, or is stolen by the chief conspirator, the dreaded Cigarette-Smoking Man. Mulder and Scully have nothing to show. At the end of the dream we wake up to our mundane world where things are what they seem to be — most of the time.