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### E.T.H. - Extremely Tenuous Hypothesis

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Date: Tue, 19 May 1998 10:42:55 +0100  
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Subject: E.T.H. - Extremely Tenuous Hypothesis

<http://www.magonia.demon.co.uk/news/clark.html>

E.T.H. - Extremely Tenuous Hypothesis

John Rimmer

Jerome Clark, editor of the influential International UFO Reporter, is a strong proponent of the extraterrestrial theory of UFO origin. His recent booklet, Spacemen, Demons and Conspiracies: the evolution of UFO hypotheses, is critical of the psychosocial hypothesis, and takes a sideswipe at Magonia and some of our contributors. Naturally, we were keen to review the publication, and the publishers, The Fund for UFO Research were kind enough to send us a copy. As with everything Clark writes, it is well worth reading.

The booklet begins with brief summaries of the range of UFO hypothesis, including occult theories - largely Meade Layne, early versions of the ETH connected with the turn of the century airship waves, and a variety of cranky 'UFOs as living creatures' theories. Clark spends a disproportionate amount of space on this extremely minor sub-theory.

The major part of the book is an attack on the 'New-Ufology' ideas of the sixties and seventies, particularly the works of John Keel and Jacques Vallee. Clark himself, like many Americans now settled into middle-aged, middle-class conformity, has problems about the nineteen-sixties. Clark's historicist view of ufology sees it emerging from the original sightings and contacts in the 'forties into two separate strands of thought: the 'saucerians' - pro-contact, space-brothers oriented, and the 'ufologists', scientific and sceptical of contact claims. There is a great deal of truth in this, although the separation between the two streams was never as total as Clark believes, and he has rather starry-eyed views on the scientific rigour of the 'ufologists'. At one point he claims: "To [ufologists] the ETH was something more to be assumed than to be speculated about [true, but hardly scientific]. Ufology's best and brightest had more interest in investigating reports and correlating data than in wondering about the Greater Meaning of it All". In your dreams, Jerry!

In fact it would be hard to find a UFO magazine in the fifties and sixties which did not from time to time waste a great deal of paper in vague, speculative rambling articles - what Hilary Evans memorably describes as 'deserts of arid speculation' - about life and the universe. The magazines that didn't, presumably Clark's data correlators, were simply listings of cases; mostly uninvestigated reports from newspapers. These were, and are

still, very useful in their way, but hardly represent the 'hard work and shrewd analysis' which Clark claims as a hallmark of the scientific 'ufologists'.

This cosy sub-division of the subject came under threat in the seventies with the rise of two of Clark's principal betes-noir, John Keel and Jacques Vallee. I agree that Keel was responsible for introducing a new element of anti-scientific irrationalism into the field of ufology, and in Magonia's '25 Years Ago' columns you will have read how Alan Sharp regularly locked horns with Keel over his lack of scientific credibility. In Keel's favour it must be said that his investigations (and when all is said he probably did more first-hand investigation than most so-called scientific 'ufologists') opened out the field of ufology, and yes, Clark is right, helped undermine the complacent acceptance of the ETH amongst most ufologists.

Vallee is a scientist, and his first two books are still held up as examples of the kind of 'correlative' work that Clark assumes was the standard for ufologists at the time. The fact that they are still worth reading simply serves to demonstrate how little of that type of work was actually going on then. With Passport to Magonia Vallee moved into the realm of 'sixties counterculture', in Clark's view. I suspect that most of Vallee's interest in ufology was fulfilled by the time he published Invisible College in the late seventies, and his later books are largely re-hashes or diaries of his more productive period.

The real problem for Clark's thesis with both these writers is that they showed that the UFO phenomenon was not containable in a simple ETH pigeonhole. The problem was one of perception: the perception of what constituted a UFO report. Clark castigates FSR for carrying articles by the likes of F W Holiday about the Loch Ness Monster, and certainly they were tedious enough to read at the time. But at least they were able to demonstrate that the ETH was not the only unproven theory that could be hung around the phenomenon.

Naturally it is when Clark comes to discuss and dismiss the psycho-social hypothesis (PH) that Magonia's collective ears prick up. We really wanted to see the context in which we were described as giving aid and succour to a 'walking corpse'. Disappointingly there is no context. Clark simply raises the subject then throws it away virtually unexamined. Its proponents are described as 'counterculturalists' (them again, Jerome Clark does seem to have a problem with this concept), Jungians, English majors (I presume he means 'graduates' in British-English, rather than military gentlemen) and librarians. OK, I admit it, I'm a librarian, so is Peter Rogerson. As far as I know the only difference this has made to my life as a ufologist is that I have been able to order obscure books free rather than pay 50p for a reservation card.

His description of the PH is brief: "psycho-social theorists held that cultural imagination and altered states of consciousness caused individuals to undergo visionary experiences which they mistook for 'real' (event-level) ones. Since high-strangeness claims were practically never matched with the sort of evidence needed to sustain them, this was not, on the surface, an unreasonable approach". This is a very fair summary of the psycho-social approach, and I was expecting a counter-argument at least as detailed as his partially-successful demolition of Keel and Vallee. But we are simply told that "as eventually became all too apparent" the theory was suitable only for the dreaded librarians who wrote about ufology as "an exercise in literary criticism".

I think part of the reason why Clark has abdicated on his attempt to counter the PH is that, despite such writers as Martin Kottmeyer and one or two other contributors to Fortean rather than ufological literature, it has never really been seriously promoted in the USA, and as is becoming clearer and clearer, American ufology like much of American society is tremendously insular. This is understandable in a such a huge and diverse country, but it does reduce the range of influences and ideas which impinge on US ufology. To read an average American UFO magazine it would be hard to discern that anywhere else in the world exists which does not have a link with the US: Rendlesham only features in American magazines because it was a US base; the Berwyn Mountain case has no such transatlantic connection so it is largely ignored. The massive dominance of government cover-up

and conspiracy theories in American ufology can be sustained only by ignoring the fact that there are other governments around the world, not all of whom are at the US's bidding. Have the Roswell proponents ever considered what might happen if a similar event occurred in Libya, Iran or China?

On the last page this book is revealed as a prop for the ETH. Clark admits that humans do perceive a remarkable range of anomalous experiences: "as... psychosocial theorist rightly remind us... gods, monsters fairies, even merfolk... we can grant the legitimacy of fantastic experience without taking the further step of confusing it with event", except of course for UFOs. The core UFO phenomenon is the "daylight disc, radar/visual and landing traces (and, perhaps crash/retrieval)". The ETH, in these cases has been shown to be "reasonable, testable and meaningful. At the least it has demonstrated the presence of a physical phenomenon with a technology which interacts with its immediate environment."

Well, Jerome, where are these cases? You quote Trans-en-Provence, yet this has already been effectively demolished by French ufologist Eric Maillot. Maillot's original report is even more devastating than the edited version published in UFOs 1947-1997 (Fortean Times, 1997). We are anxious to see those cases which show the ETH to be reasonable and testable, and ask Jerome Clark, and any other ufologist who claims such evidence to send details to us, and maybe we too will be obliged finally to give the living corpse of the psycho-social hypothesis a decent burial.

Seriously, send details to Magonia at the editorial address, or E-mail me at:

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Mark Pilkington

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Stuck in a particular mindset, consumer perceptions might not necessarily be supported by reality.

P&G

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