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### Failure Of The 'Science' Of Obergian Debunking

From: Jerome Clark <[jkclark@frontiernet.net](mailto:jkclark@frontiernet.net)>  
Date: Sat, 03 Oct 98 17:01:57 PDT  
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List:

This paper was written in response to a James Oberg paper which won an award from a committee of UFO skeptics sponsored by a whiskey manufacturer. It was subsequently published in the British weekly New Scientist.

The rejoinder was accepted for publication but never printed, apparently because of a strike which shut the magazine down that fall. It later appeared in Frontiers of Science (November/December 1980). It is a useful corrective to Oberg's characteristically one-sided, self-serving view of things.

Ron Westrum, Ph.D., was and is a professor of sociology at Eastern Michigan University.

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The Promise Of Ufology  
by Ron Westrum

In its October 11, 1979, issue New Scientist printed an article by James Oberg entitled "The Failure of the 'Science' of Ufology." This article had won the 1000-pound New Scientist/Cutty Sark Whiskey prize. In it Mr. Oberg argues that although "ufology" may sound scientific, there is really very little scientific about it. His essay contains many perceptive and useful comments, but falls short of a truly objective portrait of an area of study about which he appears to have some serious misconceptions.

As a sociologist who has been professionally involved for several years with UFO groups and UFO research, I believe it is important to clear up some of the confusion to which Mr. Oberg contributes and to give a more fair and judicious picture of the nature of ufology.

Let me summarize Mr. Oberg's arguments briefly. Ufology, he argues, has failed to become a science because its practitioners are unwilling to abide by the rules of the scientific method. They are careless about the authenticity of the cases they publish and they have little interest in developing falsifiable theories. Given these general observations, he feels that ufology cannot be even a protoscience, since an indifference to such issues automatically deprives it of any kind of scientific status. He supports these contentions with examples of exaggerated claims made mostly by the press but also by some

ufologists.

Let us consider how much truth there is in Mr. Oberg's claims.

What Is Ufology?

Ufology is the study of UFO sightings, a fraction of which remain unexplained after competent investigation. It should be observed that the great majority (about 90%) of reported "UFO sightings" turn out to be explainable in terms of natural or manmade phenomena. A small percentage are hoaxes.

The competent ufologist is therefore conversant with a wide range of phenomena which can give rise to spurious reports. The true objective of ufological activity, however, is the search for cases which resist explanation. The careful study of these cases and their patterns is the focus of ufology. If there is to be any significant contribution to our knowledge of the universe from ufology, it will come from such study of "unexplained" cases.

Mr. Oberg claims that ufologists assert that such cases must be the result of some exotic cause since they are unexplained. He argues that in fact they are a hodge-podge which scientists have no real need to explain. This is a serious misconception. It is patterns among unexplained cases which make them significant to ufologists. Serious ufologists are not particularly interested in collections of cases which bear little relation to one another.

Science in general is a well-institutionalized activity in Western society. Ufology is not. Ufologists seldom claim that what they do is science; they do not possess a body of well-tested principles and laws, verified by dozens of replicable experiments.

Ufology is a proto-science, an area of study which aspires to become a science but which, its practitioners recognize, has a considerable distance to travel before this goal will be reached. Major involvement of scientists in UFO research is a recent development, less than a decade old. The amateur origin of ufology is evident in the unevenness of ufological work. Some researchers, particularly those with technical training, do good, solid, careful work. Others pursue research in such a casual manner that their results are worthless. One can, as does Mr. Oberg, lump them all together and make the serious researchers responsible for the faults of the non-serious ones, or point to certain well-known gaffes and assert that these demonstrate the unscientific quality of the field. The real point, however, is not what the worst ufologists do, but what the best do: is there good ufological practice as well as bad?

To respond to this question, we must confront two more serious misconceptions on the part of Mr. Oberg. The first of these is his assertion that most ufologists have a "total disregard for the authenticity of evidence." This assertion, while dramatic, merely demonstrates Mr. Oberg's lack of acquaintance with his subject matter. He is apparently unaware that the great majority of exposures of mistakes and hoaxes are the work of ufologists and that debates over the authenticity of cases fill the pages of ufological publications.

Even more serious is Mr. Oberg's misconception that "ufologists reject the concept of 'falsifiability' of scientific theories." Ordinarily, of course, theories themselves are not considered falsifiable but rather hypotheses derived from them. Nonetheless, if it were true that ufologists were unconcerned about the falsifiability of hypotheses, Mr. Oberg's assertion that ufology cannot be even considered a proto-science might have some merit.

To demonstrate the falsity of his contention one has only to open the UFO Handbook (1979) written by Allan Hendry of the Center for UFO Studies. Here one finds careful critical examinations of data, hypotheses tested -- sometimes verified and sometimes proven wrong -- and theories scrutinized. Can it be that Mr. Oberg knows so little about ufology that he has never heard of such eminently falsifiable hypotheses as "orthoteny," the "Wednesday phenomenon," the "law of the times" or the "inverse population density" hypothesis?

All of these had been examined (and in some cases rejected) in the light of data of which Mr. Oberg appears unaware. That this process is not yet institutionalized in refereed journals is symptomatic not of ufology's unscientific aims, but rather its nascent state.

#### What Can Be Learned from Ufology?

The most obvious answer to this question is that ufology may reveal the existence of new natural phenomena. A great many sightings investigated by ufologists appear to be natural phenomena similar to the controversial "ball lightning." Since the existence of this latter is still questioned by some persons, it is evident that much remains to be discovered about the properties of these plasmalike manifestations. Our main evidence for them, however, is human testimony. Their transitory and frightening nature usually allows them to escape the camera. Even Philip Klass, the most prominent critic of ufology, feels these phenomena should be more carefully studied, as he recommends in his book UFOs -- Identified (1968).

The more exotic motive for studying UFO sightings is the possible detection of artifacts of non-human intelligence. Even after the "plasma" UFOs are eliminated from the "unexplained" category, there still remains a residue of cases which include features strongly suggestive of non-human intelligent origin.

Is it sensible to believe that artifacts of non-human intelligence could reach our atmosphere? A priori speculation on this issue is valuable. Ultimately, however, to use the phrase of Albertus Magnus, "in these matters only experiment makes certain." Looking through the UFO literature and finding hundreds of cases with alleged physical effects, "humanoid" sightings and kidnappings, it is difficult to avoid the feeling that these are matters which ought not to be dismissed out of hand, but should be carefully investigated.

Huge sums have been proposed to construct radio telescope arrays to detect signals from intelligent life in distant solar systems. One of them, Project Cyclops, was to have cost some \$116 billion. If we can consider this type of funding to detect possible signals from life in distant star systems, we can certainly contemplate spending more moderate sums to investigate alleged manifestations of such life in our own atmosphere.

Such research might present some problems not ordinarily met with in the natural sciences. The object of investigation, after all, could be intelligent -- even more intelligent than we are -- and contrary to what many people simplistically assume, might well engage in activities difficult for us to interpret.

One of the characteristics of intelligent life is its ability to display strategic behavior. This might not necessarily make a visit to the United Nations the first priority. As a sociologist I am well aware of the difficulties of understanding human behavior. The possible complexities of the behavior of extraterrestrial intelligent life stagger the imagination.

Nonetheless, the potential payoffs from such research would make it seem well worth the effort, if not indispensable. As an intelligent species aware of the possibility of life elsewhere we have no alternative but to be involved in ufology. The only question is whether such research will be carried out with adequate funds and scientific talent. Ufology has not failed, it has just begun. Our effort should be not to stifle it, but to push it further along the path from proto-science to scientific discipline.

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