

PHILOSOPHY

CARGO CULT SCIENCE

21.01.2009

Robert Feynman introduced that term 1974 in his Caltech commencement – an analogy to natives to Samoa who created mock airports

I think the educational and psychological studies I mentioned are examples of what I would like to call Cargo Cult Science. In the South Seas there is a Cargo Cult of people. During the war they saw airplanes land with lots of good materials, and they want the same thing to happen now. So they've arranged to make things like runways, to put fires along the sides of the runways', to make a wooden hut for a man to sit in, with two wooden pieces on his head like headphones and bars of bamboo sticking out like antennas – he's the controller – and they wait for the airplanes to land. They're doing everything right. The form is perfect. It looks exactly the way it looked before. But it doesn't work. No airplanes land. So I call these things Cargo Cult Science, because they follow' all the apparent precepts and forms of scientific investigation, but they're missing something essential, because the planes don't land.

This looks like a description of current genetic associations studies – true degrees, true universities, true journals, true papers but I see the two wooden pieces on the head, yea, yea.

So I wish to you – I have no more time, so I have just one wish for you – the good luck to be somewhere where you are free to maintain the kind of integrity I have described, and where you do not feel forced by a need to maintain your position in the organization, or financial support, or so on, to lose your integrity. May you have that freedom.

