

Chariots of the Gullible

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Erich von Däniken's theory that human civilization is the legacy of ancient visitations by extraterrestrial beings is a leading example of a host of similar notions that have become surprisingly popular in recent years. This article will not add to the chorus of denunciation that answered von Däniken's irresponsible claims (Story 1977; Omohundro 1976; Wilson 1970, 1975; Lunan 1974). Rather, it will begin to answer the important question of why so many people react favorably to the myth of ancient astronauts. The data come from a pair of questionnaire studies completed with the help of 235 university students.

Questionnaire A ($N = 114$ students): On the first day of the study, the students were shown the film *In Search of Ancient Astronauts*, which presents von Däniken's basic ideas in a clear and vivid manner. The following day, I gave a short lecture presenting the main tenets of *biorhythm theory*, another pseudoscientific doctrine. Then students filled out Questionnaire A, which focused on biorhythms but also included items measuring students' acceptance or rejection of von Däniken's theory.

The findings reported in this article are expressed by three standard measures of statistical association: Pearson's r , Kendall's tau, and gamma. Although they are computed with different formulas, they can be interpreted in the same way. The coefficients range from -1.00 through zero to $+1.00$. A strong *positive* coefficient linking questionnaire statements X and Y indicates that people who agree with X tend to agree with Y also. A strong *negative* coefficient indicates that people who agree with X tend to disagree with Y. Coefficients close to zero indicate that there is no relationship between X and Y.

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Questionnaire B ($N = 121$ students): Several months later, a similar two-day sequence was carried out. First, students were shown *In Search of Ancient Astronauts* so they would be familiar with von Däniken's ideas. On the second day, students were given Questionnaire B, which is rather long and contains items designed to test a number of theories. After each questionnaire had been completed, I gave a lecture debunking von Däniken, so that students would be informed rather than deceived by the material presented in the studies.

The 235 student volunteers were recruited from two sections of a low-level university course in sociology. Students majoring in the social sciences are overrepresented (about 25 percent of each class); but the course is frequently used as a distribution credit by students who are not even interested in sociology, and a majority of those taking it have not yet declared a college major. Analysis of the data from both questionnaires indicated that students' academic interests and experience did not seem to influence their opinions on von Däniken. For example, an item in Questionnaire A revealed that the theory of ancient astronauts was equally well accepted by those who preferred either the social sciences or the physical sciences ($\tau = -0.01$). While not perfectly representative of our student body, this large group shows great diversity in interests and opinions. A random sample of the general population would have been ideal, of course; but college students are more than merely expedient and inexpensive research subjects. They are also one of the most interesting segments of the American public. A recent national poll (Gallup 1976) found that persons in the 18–24 age group were twice as likely as older citizens to believe in astrology. Once we learn why many students accept occult and pseudoscientific beliefs, we can design efficient research to determine whether the same factors explain belief among nonstudents.

The questionnaires were designed to test the comparative success of four types of theory in explaining acceptance of von Däniken's space-age mythology. Frequently used to explain many different kinds of deviant behavior, these four types are: strain theory, control theory, cultural-deviance theory, and trait theory (Stark 1975). Travis Hirschi has described the first three concisely:

According to *strain* or motivational theories, legitimate desires that conformity cannot satisfy force a person into deviance. According to *control* or bond theories, a person is free to commit delinquent acts because his ties

to the conventional order have somehow been broken. According to *cultural-deviance* theories, the deviant conforms to a set of standards not accepted by a larger or more powerful society. (Hirschi 1969:3)

Trait theory holds that persons deviate from conventional standards because of individual characteristics, whether innate or acquired. These traits may be either handicaps that prevent them from behaving like other people or unusual desires and perceptions that compel them to violate norms. There are several variants of each type of theory, and here we will restrict ourselves to a few of those with the greatest relevance and plausibility. It is convenient to discuss the major types in pairs, beginning with *strain* and *control*.

Strain Theory and Control Theory

Strain theory holds that a person will deviate from standards of conventional or correct belief when he suffers from personal unhappiness caused by a failure to satisfy normal desires within the context of an ordinary life. Unhappiness and psychological tension may drive people to seek new alternatives, to accept exotic beliefs, as well as to experiment with novel lines of action (Smelser 1963; Lofland and Stark 1965).

In Table 1 we can see that strain theory apparently fails to explain belief in von Däniken among our students. In this table and in the others based on Questionnaire B, we show the associations (expressed by Kendall's tau) between several questionnaire items and agreement with two logically opposite statements: "Von Däniken's theory of ancient astronauts is probably true" and "Von Däniken's theory of ancient astronauts is probably false." Thirty-four (28 percent) of the 121 students had agreed with the first statement, while 37 (33 percent) agreed with the second. Naturally, people who agree with one of these statements tend to disagree with the other ($\tau = -0.75$, $\gamma = -0.90$). By including both statements in our tables, we provide important confirmation of apparently significant findings. To be at all convincing, a relationship between any questionnaire item and acceptance of von Däniken's theory has to show two statistically significant coefficients of opposite sign, for example, a strong positive correlation with the opinion that von Däniken's theory is true and an approximately equal negative correlation with the opinion that it is false.

The first item in Table 1 is a question frequently used by the Gallup Poll: "On the whole, would you say you are satisfied or dissatisfied with

TABLE 1

Correlations (tau) Between Opinions About
von Däniken and Five Strain Variables

(N = 121 students)

Strain Variable	Von Däniken's Theory Is True	Von Däniken's Theory Is False
Student is "satisfied with the future facing you and your family."	-0.10	0.11
"I am often bothered by the feeling of loneliness."	0.10	-0.07
"I am fairly satisfied with the progress I am making at college."	-0.03	0.05
"I often wonder about the meaning and purpose of life."	0.06	0.00
"I am a basically happy person."	-0.05	0.02

(In most cases, the student was asked to respond to the statement on a five-point agree-disagree scale.)

the future facing you and your family?" There is a slight tendency for satisfied students to reject the idea that von Däniken's theory is true ($\tau = -0.10$) and to accept the idea that it is false ($\tau = 0.11$). However, these coefficients are extremely small. Statistical analysis shows that we really cannot have any confidence in figures this low, and we would have to see numbers near 0.20 before we could be reasonably sure that dissatisfaction was in fact a cause of belief in ancient astronauts. The four other measures of strain or unhappiness show even smaller coefficients.

Although strain theory has proved useful in explaining many kinds of deviant behavior, control theory is often more successful. Control theory holds that persons who are strongly tied to the conventional intellectual establishment will be prevented from accepting unconventional speculations. Conversely, people who are less strongly attached will be free to adopt deviant beliefs. A student who is committed to college, who is deeply involved in his studies, and who has received much instruction in standard studies should be less likely to fall for the pseudoscientific

notions of von Däniken. Enthusiasm for conventional science and a positive attitude toward technological progress should indicate that a person is committed to the standard intellectual establishment against which von Däniken rails with such vehemence and therefore that he will reject such a deviant belief.

Unfortunately for control theory, Tables 2 and 3 show that these apparently reasonable propositions have no power to explain acceptance of von Däniken's theory. Students who were seniors and about to graduate from college were *not* more likely than freshman students to reject the theory. It did not matter whether students had taken courses in astronomy, anthropology, ancient history, social science, or physical science.

TABLE 2
Correlations (tau) Between Opinions About
von Däniken and Eight College (Control) Variables

(N = 121 students)

College Variable	Von Däniken's Theory Is True	Von Däniken's Theory Is False
Year in College (Freshman-Senior)	0.02	0.01
"I have not yet taken any college courses in astronomy."	-0.03	0.09
"I have not yet taken any college courses in anthropology."	-0.04	0.09
"I have not yet taken any college courses in ancient history."	-0.06	0.04
"I have already taken several courses in the social sciences."	-0.06	0.14
"I have already taken several courses in the physical sciences."	0.08	0.03
Number of correct answers on the astronomy quiz.	0.04	0.02
Student agrees "a college education is pretty much a waste of time."	0.02	0.02

Questionnaire B included a simple eight-item true-false astronomy quiz, designed to measure the student's basic knowledge of this subject. Students ignorant of astronomy were not more likely to accept the theory than those who were somewhat knowledgeable. The final item in Table 2 measures the student's personal commitment to college; those who felt college was a waste of time were not the slightest bit more likely to accept the theory.

Similarly, positive attitudes toward science and technology seemed to have no power to inhibit belief. If anything, Table 3 shows a slight tendency for students who hold favorable attitudes toward science and technology to accept the idea of ancient astronauts. But the coefficients are so small that we must conclude there is no significant relationship.

TABLE 3

Correlations (tau) Between Opinions About
von Däniken and Attitudes Toward Science and Technology

(N = 121 students)

Attitude	Von Däniken's Theory Is True	Von Däniken's Theory Is False
"Science has done a lot more good than harm for the world."	0.11	-0.09
"The potential dangers of nuclear energy are outweighed by its potential benefits."	-0.03	0.07
"Machines have thrown too many people out of work."	0.02	0.07
"Technology does more good than harm."	0.07	-0.14
"It would be nice if we would stop building so many factories and go back to nature."	0.04	0.03
"Technology has made life too complicated."	-0.12	0.11

The failure of strain and control theories is not only sociologically interesting but also surprising and shocking. Both theories have shown their worth in explaining other kinds of deviance, such as crime, drug

abuse, and even mental illness (Stark 1975; Faris and Dunham 1939). The failure of control theory is probably most remarkable. Apparently our university does not give students the knowledge to protect them from intellectual fraud. Of course it is rare for a college professor to mention von Däniken. Teachers of anthropology and ancient history never bother to refute the theory that human culture was received from ancient astronauts. Astronomers seldom debunk astrology or discuss UFOs. Psychology textbooks do not contain chapters on ESP or on such exotic spiritual practices as Yoga, Zen, or Transcendental Meditation. Thus, the failure of control theory may simply reflect a failure of higher education.

The failure of control theory may explain the failure of strain theory. If the intellectual establishment fails to define truth and to enforce conformity, then no special motivation is required to explain deviance. If there is no penalty for believing in unsubstantiated speculations, then anyone might do so. Strain theory explains why some people break free from social control. If there is no control, then there is no need to break free.

Cultural-Deviance Theory and Trait Theory

According to cultural-deviance theories, a person will believe von Däniken because he belongs to a subculture, to a group or social network of people who share beliefs and values that favorably dispose them to believe. There are at least four subcultures that might be important influences in causing belief in ancient astronauts: antiscience, the occult, traditional religion, and the youth counterculture. We used Table 3 to show the inadequacy of control theory, but it also shows that belief in von Däniken is not simply a reflection of the antiscience and antitechnology cultural trends that have emerged recently in the United States and Europe.

Table 4 presents data from Questionnaire A showing the associations between belief in von Däniken and belief in five other theories. Students were asked to indicate their opinion of the chance that each theory was true. It is not surprising that believers in ancient astronauts also think "there is intelligent life on other planets." Much more interesting is the fact that they also tend to accept the pseudoscientific biorhythm theory and tend to believe in ESP. These two strong associations support the impression that von Däniken's theory is part of a generalized occult subculture.

TABLE 4

Correlations (Pearson's r) Between Acceptance of
von Däniken's Theory and Five Other Theories

(N = 114 students)

Acceptance of Other Theories	Von Däniken's Theory Is True
There is intelligent life on other planets.	0.43*
Biorhythm theory is true.	0.38*
Extrasensory perception exists.	0.52*
Miracles actually happened just as the Bible says they did.	0.01
Darwin's theory of evolution is true.	0.01

* Significant beyond the 0.001 level; the others are not significant. (Students were asked to indicate the chance each theory was true on an eleven-point scale, marked from "0%" = no chance that the theory is true, to "100%" = absolute certainty that the theory is true.)

The insignificant correlation ($r = 0.01$) with belief that "miracles actually happened just as the Bible says they did," suggests that the traditional religious culture is unrelated to belief in chariots of the gods. While von Däniken draws on a variety of religious sources in his books, some of the most intense criticism of his work has come from religious writers (Wilson 1970, 1975). Three items in Questionnaire B measured involvement in traditional religious culture: "I definitely believe in God," "God has a very powerful influence on my life," and "Much of the time, suffering comes about because people don't obey God." Added together, these three produced a reliable index of conventional religion. This index showed no relationship with acceptance of von Däniken's theory ($\tau = -0.01$), or with rejection of it ($\tau = 0.07$). The final item in Table 4, the opinion that "Darwin's theory of evolution is true," measures *both* acceptance of modern science and rejection of fundamentalist religion. Persons who believe in biblical miracles tend to reject Darwin's theory ($r = -0.46$). It is clear that neither the culture of modern science nor the culture of traditional religion is related either positively or negatively to acceptance of von Däniken's theory.

Table 5, based on data from Questionnaire B, confirms that the idea of ancient astronauts is part of a generalized occult and pseudoscientific subculture. Very strong associations link it with belief in UFOs, astrology, ESP, and such exotic spiritual practices as Yoga, Zen, and Transcendental Meditation. Only the last item in the table is unrelated. This suggests that believers did not directly learn von Däniken's theory from participation in the subculture. Apparently, the subculture rests on some very basic modes of thought that encourage acceptance of any new belief that fits the pattern.

TABLE 5

Correlations (tau) Between Opinions About
von Däniken and Other Occult and Pseudoscientific Theories

(N = 121 students)

Other Occult Statements	Von Däniken's Theory Is True	Von Däniken's Theory Is False
"UFOs are probably spaceships from other worlds."	0.54	-0.59
"UFOs are probably illusions."	-0.42	0.40
"I myself have had an experience which I thought might be an example of extrasensory perception."	0.30	-0.35
"Extrasensory perception probably exists."	0.39	-0.35
"Some Eastern practices, such as Yoga, Zen, or Transcendental Meditation, are probably of great value."	0.36	-0.23*
"There is much truth in astrology."	0.40	-0.38
"I was not really at all familiar with von Däniken's theory about ancient astronauts until I saw the movie yesterday."	-0.09**	0.11**

* Significant beyond the 0.005 level

** Not significant

(All other coefficients are significant beyond the 0.001 level.)

One explanation frequently given for the contemporary occult revival blames the influence of the youth counterculture that emerged in the mid-1960s (Wuthnow 1976, forthcoming). Table 6 examines the relationship between acceptance of von Däniken's theory and four plausible measures of involvement in this subculture. Contrary to what the hypothesis would lead us to expect, we find that left-wing politics, drug use, severe criticism of the government, and opposition to police surveillance of dissidents show no connection to acceptance of the theory.

TABLE 6

Correlations (tau) Between Opinions About
von Däniken and Youth Counterculture Items

(N = 121 students)

Counterculture Items	Von Däniken's Theory Is True	Von Däniken's Theory Is False
Student is politically left-wing.	0.05	-0.07
"I have experienced being 'high' on drugs at least once, not counting medical uses."	0.02	-0.07
"Our form of government needs a major overhaul."	0.08	-0.02
Disagreement with the idea that "the police should keep their eye on members of revolutionary groups."	-0.10	0.08

Cultural theories are easily integrated with trait theories. A person's behavior may be determined by his characteristics, but those characteristics are often a result of involvement with cultural alternatives. Unfortunately, this means that the task of pulling the two kinds of theory apart is frequently very difficult. Perhaps Tables 4 and 5 indicate nothing about a subculture but reflect the fact that persons with a certain character type are susceptible to deviant ideas.

Table 7 lists six traits and opinions that might indicate underlying characteristics of the person. We see, first of all, that males and females respond equally favorably to the theory of ancient astronauts.

TABLE 7

Correlations (tau) Between Opinions About
von Däniken and Personal Characteristics of Student

(N = 121 students)

Personal Trait or Opinion	Von Däniken's Theory Is True	Von Däniken's Theory Is False
Sex of student is female	-0.01*	0.08*
"It is good to live in a fantasy world every now and then."	0.18	-0.17
Rank of science fiction among five kinds of adventure fiction.	0.19	-0.18
"It is all right for an unmarried couple to have sexual relations."	0.23	-0.20
Student has a low grade-point average (GPA)	0.20	-0.20
Number of "true" responses on true-false astronomy quiz.	0.01*	-0.09*

* Not significant. (All others are significant beyond the 0.01 level.)

There is a weak but statistically significant association between acceptance of the theory and agreement with the statement that "it is good to live in a fantasy world every now and then." One item in Questionnaire B asked students to rank five kinds of adventure fiction, from the one they liked best to the one they liked least. Preference for science fiction correlates weakly with acceptance of the theory. Although we should not rely too heavily on these weak associations, one possible interpretation is that some people accept von Däniken's theory because they characteristically respond favorably to stories of fantasy.

There is a moderate but respectable association between acceptance of the theory and the feeling that "it is all right for an unmarried couple to have sexual relations." To some extent this item reflects involvement in the youth counterculture and estrangement from traditional religious culture. But neither of these cultures relates to acceptance of von Däniken. The item on sexual freedom may therefore reflect an important

character trait as well. The trait might be a readiness to follow feelings and desires rather than be guided by facts and daunted by practical limitations. Such a trait could find expression in acceptance of emotionally stimulating theories as well as in approval of sexual freedom.

Another moderate association links acceptance of the theory with low grade-point average. Because I wanted to protect my students' confidentiality, I did not look up their actual grades at the university but relied on their responses to an item on Questionnaire B. Inaccuracy in student reporting of GPAs may have reduced the apparent magnitude of the association. Grade-point average reflects several factors, most notably intellectual ability and motivation to achieve. Earlier we found that acceptance of the theory was not related to a number of school variables, including responses to the statement that "a college education is pretty much a waste of time." Students who feel this way almost certainly lack motivation to achieve in college. Therefore, it is probable that here GPA is just a weak indicator of intellectual ability. Less intelligent students are more likely to believe in ancient astronauts. Is this trait equivalent to gullibility?

The true-false astronomy quiz in Questionnaire B can be used to test the hypothesis that some students simply accept anything they are told. The quiz consisted of eight statements, four of which were in fact true, and four false. The average score of students was 55 percent correct. Students who are "gullible" might be more likely than others to give "true" responses on the quiz, accepting its statements whether true or false. As Table 7 shows, however, the number of "true" responses was not associated with acceptance of von Däniken's theory. Other tests of this hypothesis, based on measurement of students' tendencies to agree or disagree with several other questionnaire items, and too complex to present in detail here, gave the same negative result.

A very different exploration of "gullibility" was carried out with Questionnaire A that focused on the pseudoscientific biorhythm theory. Like a simplified brand of astrology, biorhythms is an occult means for predicting one's future fortunes. Using the sole empirical input of a person's date of birth, it estimates for any day whether the person will be above or below average in three aspects of his condition: physical, emotional, and intellectual. As explained elsewhere (Bainbridge 1978a), each student was given a personalized copy of Questionnaire A, including on its last page what purported to be his own biorhythms for that day. Although these were in fact fake biorhythms, determined by the flip of a

coin, students accepted them as correct descriptions far more often than would be expected by chance—74.7 percent of the time, rather than the expected 50 percent.

As Table 8 shows, students who believed the biorhythm theory were especially likely to accept the fake statements of their rhythms for that day. Students who accepted von Däniken's theory and students who believe in ESP were also likely to accept the fake rhythms. We might think that the seemingly authoritative movie and my lecture had persuaded impressionable students to believe the theories presented in them. But no movie or lecture had presented the idea of extrasensory perception, and the highest coefficient in the table (0.30) indicates that ESP believers were likely to accept the fake rhythms. Apparently, some enduring characteristic, perhaps a habitual mode of thought, facilitated acceptance of the fake rhythms. It was not simply a matter of some students being more susceptible to authoritative appeals. Whether this characteristic is a true trait of individual gullibility or an inferior style of intellectual response taught by the occult subculture is a question for future research.

TABLE 8

Correlations (Pearson's *r*) Between Acceptance of Fake Biorhythms and Acceptance of Six Theories

(N = 114 students)

Acceptance of Theory	Student Accepts the Fake Biorhythms as Accurate Descriptions of His Own Condition
Biorhythm theory is true.	0.26*
Von Däniken's theory is true.	0.26*
Extrasensory perception exists.	0.30*
There is intelligent life on other planets.	0.16
Miracles actually happened just as the Bible says they did.	0.15
Darwin's theory of evolution is true.	-0.02

* Significant beyond 0.005 level. (All others are not significant.)

Conclusions

We have seen that two popular theories of deviance fail to explain acceptance of von Däniken's theory by the students. *Strain theory* fails because dissatisfied students were not especially likely to accept the theory. *Control theory* fails because acceptance is not related to the number or kinds of college classes the student has taken, nor to the student's evaluation of college, nor to the student's attitudes toward science and technology.

Both *cultural-deviance theory* and *trait theory* seem much more promising, although we cannot yet specify the exact sources of von Däniken's support. The strongest associations linked belief in ancient astronauts to other occult and pseudoscientific beliefs. Weaker but significant correlations suggested that personal habits of thought were also involved. The most obvious conclusion would be that the occult subculture was responsible for poor individual judgment. This interpretation rests on a consideration of the nature of subcultures.

The word *subculture* is used in two very different senses, referring to two conceptually distinct kinds of social phenomena: (1) a cohesive *group of people* sharing opinions, values, and habits not shared by members of the larger society; (2) a coherent *set of ideas* that are not necessarily held by any specific group of people but are spread throughout society and appeal to various individuals. An example of the former would be an ethnic subculture in which people are closely linked by ties of language, tradition, and family structure. The occult subculture is probably an example of the latter. Although cohesive groups frequently emerge within the occult, as a whole the subculture is not tightly organized and recruits people from many different segments of society (Lofland 1966; Evans 1973; Bainbridge 1978b). The occult is a *set of ideas* that share common root qualities. This fact explains the high coefficients in Tables 4 and 5. The subculture is not based in any cohesive *group of people*. Individuals may find the occult attractive for a large number of different reasons. We would expect to find relatively weak associations linking these factors with acceptance of occult beliefs, perhaps considerably weaker than the associations connecting the beliefs into a set. Clearly, the findings reported in this article demonstrate the need for further research to overcome our ignorance of the sources of deviant beliefs.

We are also ignorant of the consequences of belief. Certainly belief in quack medicine can lead to tragedy. The consequences of belief in

nonmedical occult and pseudoscientific theories are less clear. Although acceptance of von Däniken was associated with low grade-point average in this study, students were apparently quite able to complete college without ever being forced to give up favorable attitudes toward the occult. In a recent sociological book on the development of modern space rocketry (Bainbridge 1976), I speculated that popular movements excited by notions of flying saucers or other extraterrestrial fantasies might provide significant financial and political support for real future space projects. Some of the miscellaneous findings from Questionnaire B appear to confirm this conjecture. Students who accepted the theory of ancient astronauts were likely to favor increased expenditures for the space program ($\tau = 0.24$) and tended to feel that the space program will have a big payoff for the average person ($\tau = 0.23$). These students seem ready to take the next logical steps beyond von Däniken's doctrine. They give strong support ($\tau = 0.35$) to the proposition that "we should attempt to communicate with intelligent beings on other planets, perhaps using radio."

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