



A SMOKE on the porch — Maia Biala, the Chief of Rutland Islands and his wife on the steps of their hut as photographed by G. E. Dobson in 1872. Taken from *Anthropology and Photography, 1860–1920* edited by Elizabeth Edwards. Introductory essays and historical and theoretical perspectives precede a collection of over 150 fascinating photographs focusing on British anthropology. Now published in paperback by Yale University Press, £14.95.

Global supermetaphors

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Metaman: The Merging of Humans and Machines into a Global Superorganism. By Gregory Stock. Simon and Schuster: 1993. Pp. 365. \$24.

THE day England won the soccer World Cup, I was a guest of Magnus Pyke, the eccentric popularizer of science. We were touring his estate and came upon his croquet lawn — a large expanse of turf encircled by a narrow, thinly stocked flowerbed. “You know my style, Edge”, Magnus said, with a grand sweep of his arm: “the vast generalization with a few trimmings.”

No one could accuse Gregory Stock of neglecting the flowerbeds: whereas his lawn (omitting the figures and spare space, and allowing for differing type-sizes) covers about 130 pages of written text, his glossary and notes occupy 100 — a pretty *bricolage* of cuttings (assiduously culled, mainly, from recent issues of *Nature*, *Science*, *Scientific American*, the *New York Times* and their like), all set in a mulch of degutted key texts and reference encyclopaedia.

The lawn’s the thing, however. What is

Stock’s vast generalization? To quote the dust cover: “that human society has become an immense living being — a global superorganism in which we humans, knitted together by our modern technology and communication, are like cells in an animal’s body”; that this is “more than a metaphor: it is an actual living creature”; and “convincingly arguing” that “present-day problems . . . are the ‘birth pains’ of Metaman”. In other words, Stock propounds a new vision. How his superorganism relates to, and differs from, earlier versions (such as Teilhard de Chardin’s ‘noosphere’, or Gaia) is left unclear; and, while much of what Stock says is consistent with sociological analysis of the institutionalization of modern science and technology, and anthropological discussions of culture, these powerful and well established bodies of theory and scholarship yield no cuttings for the flowerbeds. Stock’s vision is essentially a restatement of technological and evolutionary optimism, yet his chosen form is apocalyptic: he presents a vision of hidden forces with which we must contend but of which we are unaware, sweeping us remorselessly on. And he necessarily falls

into the traps of the genre. Three are worth mentioning here.

First, apocalyptic literature walks a tightrope: it must present a picture that is sufficiently dramatic to attract attention, but not so predetermined as to encourage inaction. If these things are going to occur anyway, why not just let it all happen? Like all such prophets, Stock is equivocal: his predictions often sound like hard technological determinism: “Some social changes are the inevitable consequence of these larger forces . . . beyond our control”, “the unavoidable product of . . . technological advance”. But the sting is usually drawn: “Such possibilities . . . are *almost* inevitable extrapolations of the scientific and technological advances of recent decades”, “*largely* not a matter of choice” [italics added]. This tension is not resolved: the reader is often left unclear as to which changes are “inevitable” and which are “the product of modifiable human influences”.

Second, the pattern is assembled without any explicit, critical methodology: it’s just put together (mainly out of scientific bits); there are no criteria by which to assess whether it is being done ‘better’ or ‘worse’, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Tricky issues, contentious judgements and political disputes are all discreetly wrapped up with a convenient citation, so that the overall optimism is not clouded. Controversy and conflict are glossed over: these nasty weeds are just birth pains, which we can expect eventually to fade away. No underlying theory guides this process of patterning. It’s simply a matter of “here’s what I see — don’t you see it too?” The reader must accept the author’s authority.

Third, propounding metaphors is a dangerous business, especially when one hints that they are literally true. Stock claims that Metaman has “the functional equivalent of a nervous system”, although this “does not *necessarily* mean that [it] is conscious”; earlier he states that “Metaman . . . is aware of the crucial aspects of its environment and is responding to them in its own self-interest. This ‘awareness’ does not require what we think of as consciousness, but merely the capacity to interpret sensory input.” Luckily, there is a simple word to describe such claims: nonsense. But any metaphor, by definition, is literally absurd: perhaps Metaminds are almost inevitably drawn to propound them.

Stock claims that his metaphor “helps to make sense of the underlying forces shaping our world”. But I doubt whether any readers will find substantial novelty here (especially if they are familiar with recent scholarship in the social sciences). I also doubt (*contra* Gaia) whether Metaman suggests any scientific predictions or conceptualizations that lend themselves to experimental elaboration. Is Stock, then, offering us a religious worldview? In a