

Chapter 22 of Robert Jay Lifton's book

Below is a reprint of Chapter 22 of Robert Jay Lifton's book, "Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'Brainwashing' in China." Lifton, a psychiatrist and distinguished professor at the City University of New York, has studied the psychology of extremism for decades. He testified at the 1976 bank robbery trial of Patty Hearst about the theory of "coercive persuasion." First published in 1961, his book was reprinted in 1989 by the University of North Carolina Press.

Chapter 22: Ideological Totalism

Thought reform has a psychological momentum of its own, a self-perpetuating energy not always bound by the interests of the program's directors. When we inquire into the sources of this momentum, we come upon a complex set of psychological themes, which may be grouped under the general heading of ideological totalism. By this ungainly phrase I mean to suggest the coming together of immoderate ideology with equally immoderate individual character traits -- an extremist meeting ground between people and ideas.

In discussing tendencies toward individual totalism within my subjects, I made it clear that these were a matter of degree, and that some potential for this form of all-or-nothing emotional alignment exists within everyone. Similarly, any ideology -- that is, any set of emotionally-charged convictions about man and his relationship to the natural or supernatural world -- may be carried by its adherents in a totalistic direction. But this is most likely to occur with those ideologies which are most sweeping in their content and most ambitious -- or messianic -- in their claims, whether religious, political, or scientific. And where totalism exists, a religion, a political movement, or even a scientific organization becomes little more than an exclusive cult.

A discussion of what is most central in the thought reform environment can thus lead us to a more general consideration of the psychology of human zealotry. For in identifying, on the basis of this study of thought reform, features common to all expressions of ideological totalism, I wish to suggest a set of criteria against which any environment may be judged -- a basis for answering the ever-recurring question: "Isn't this just like 'brainwashing'?"

These criteria consist of eight psychological themes which are predominant within the social field of the thought reform milieu. Each has a totalistic quality; each depends upon an equally absolute philosophical assumption; and each mobilizes certain individual emotional tendencies, mostly of a polarizing nature. Psychological theme, philosophical rationale, and polarized individual tendencies are interdependent; they require, rather than directly cause, each other. In combination they create an atmosphere which may temporarily energize or exhilarate, but which at the same time poses the gravest of human threats.

Milieu Control

The most basic feature of the thought reform environment, the psychological current upon which all else depends, is the control of human communication. Through this milieu control the totalist environment seeks to establish domain over not only the individual's communication with the outside (all that he sees and hears, reads and writes, experiences, and expresses), but also -- in its penetration of his inner life -- over

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what we may speak of as his communication with himself. It creates an atmosphere uncomfortably reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984; but with one important difference. Orwell, as a Westerner, envisioned milieu control accomplished by a mechanical device, the two-way "telescreen." The Chinese, although they utilize whatever mechanical means they have at their disposal, achieve control of greater psychological depth through a human recording and transmitting apparatus. It is probably fair to say that the Chinese Communist prison and revolutionary university produce about as thoroughly controlled a group environment as has ever existed. The milieu control exerted over the broader social environment of Communist China, while considerably less intense, is in its own way unrivalled in its combination of extensiveness and depth; it is, in fact, one of the distinguishing features of Chinese Communist practice. Such milieu control never succeeds in becoming absolute; and its own human apparatus can -- when permeated by outside information -- become subject to discordant "noise" beyond that of any mechanical apparatus. To totalist administrators, however, such occurrences are no more than evidences of "incorrect" use of the apparatus. For they look upon milieu control as a just and necessary policy, one which need not be kept secret: thought reform participants may be in doubt as to who is telling what to whom, but the fact that extensive information about everyone is being conveyed to the authorities is always known. At the center of this self-justification is their assumption of omniscience, their conviction that reality is their exclusive possession. Having experienced the impact of what they consider to be an ultimate truth (and having the need to dispel any possible inner doubts of their own), they consider it their duty to create an environment containing no more and no less than this "truth." In order to be the engineers of the human soul, they must first bring it under full observational control.

Many things happen psychologically to one exposed to milieu control; the most basic is the disruption of balance between self and outside world. Pressured toward a merger of internal and external milieus, the individual encounters a profound threat to his personal autonomy. He is deprived of the combination of external information and inner reflection which anyone requires to test the realities of his environment and to maintain a measure of identity separate from it. Instead, he is called upon to make an absolute polarization of the real (the prevailing ideology) and the unreal (everything else). To the extent that he does this, he undergoes a personal closure¹ which frees him from man's incessant struggle with the elusive subtleties of truth. He may even share his environment's sense of omniscience and assume a "God's-eye view"² of the universe; but he is likely instead to feel himself victimized by the God's-eye view of his environment's controllers. At this point he is subject to the hostility of suffocation of which we have already spoken -- the resentful awareness that his strivings toward new information, independent judgment, and self-expression are being thwarted. If his intelligence and sensibilities carry him toward realities outside the closed ideological system, he may resist these as not fully legitimate -- until the milieu control is sufficiently diminished for him -- to share these realities with others. He is in either case profoundly hampered in the perpetual human quest for what is true, good, and relevant in the world around him and within himself.

Mystical Manipulation

The inevitable next step after milieu control is extensive personal manipulation. This manipulation assumes a no-holds-barred character, and uses every possible device at the milieu's command, no matter how bizarre or painful. Initiated from above, it seeks to provoke specific patterns of behavior and emotion in such a way that these will appear to have arisen spontaneously from within the environment. This element of planned spontaneity, directed as it is by an ostensibly omniscient group, must assume, for the manipulated, a near-mystical quality.

Ideological totalists do not pursue this approach solely for the purpose of maintaining a sense of power over others. Rather they are impelled by a special kind of mystique which not only justifies such manipulations, but makes them mandatory. Included in this mystique is a sense of "higher purpose," of having "directly perceived some imminent law of social development," and of being themselves the vanguard of this development. By thus becoming the instruments of their own mystique, they create a mystical aura around the manipulating institutions -- the Party, the Government, the Organization. They are the agents "chosen" (by history, by God, or by some other supernatural force) to carry out the "mystical imperative," the pursuit of which must supersede all considerations of decency or of immediate human welfare. Similarly, any thought or action which questions the higher purpose is considered to be stimulated by a lower purpose, to be backward, selfish, and petty in the face of the great, overriding mission. This same mystical imperative produces the apparent extremes of idealism and cynicism which occur in connection with the manipulations of any totalist environment: even those actions which seem cynical in the extreme can be seen as having ultimate relationship to the "higher purpose."

At the level of the individual person, the psychological responses to this manipulative approach revolve about the basic polarity of trust and mistrust. One is asked to accept these manipulations on a basis of ultimate trust (or faith): "like a child in the arms of its mother," as Father Luca accurately perceived. He who trusts in this degree can experience the manipulations within the idiom of the mystique behind them: that is, he may welcome their mysteriousness, find pleasure in their pain, and feel them to be necessary for the fulfillment of the "higher purpose" which he endorses as his own. But such elemental trust is difficult to maintain; and even the strongest can be dissipated by constant manipulation.

When trust gives way to mistrust (or when trust has never existed) the higher purpose cannot serve as adequate emotional sustenance. The individual then responds to the manipulations through developing what I shall call the psychology of the pawn. Feeling himself unable to escape from forces more powerful than himself, he subordinates everything to adapting himself to them. He becomes sensitive to all kinds of cues, expert at anticipating environmental pressures, and skillful in riding them in such a way that his psychological energies merge with the tide rather than turn painfully against himself. This requires that he participate actively in the manipulation of others, as well as in the endless round of betrayals and self-betrayals which are required.

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But whatever his response -- whether he is cheerful in the face of being manipulated, deeply resentful, or feels a combination of both -- he has been deprived of the opportunity to exercise his capacities for self-expression and independent action.

The Demand for Purity

In the thought reform milieu, as in all situations of ideological totalism, the experiential world is sharply divided into the pure and the impure, into the absolutely good and the absolutely evil. The good and the pure are of course those ideas, feelings, and actions which are consistent with the totalist ideology and policy; anything else is apt to be relegated to the bad and the impure. Nothing human is immune from the flood of stern moral judgments. All "taints" and "poisons" which contribute to the existing state of impurity must be searched out and eliminated.

The philosophical assumption underlying this demand is that absolute purity (the "good Communist" or the ideal Communist state) is attainable, and that anything done to anyone in the name of this purity is ultimately moral. In actual practice, however, no one (and no State) is really expected to achieve such perfection. Nor can this paradox be dismissed as merely a means of establishing a high standard to which all can aspire. Thought reform bears witness to its more malignant consequences: for by defining and manipulating the criteria of purity, and then by conducting an all-out war upon impurity, the ideological totalists create a narrow world of guilt and shame. This is perpetuated by an ethos of continuous reform, a demand that one strive permanently and painfully for something which not only does not exist but is in fact alien to the human condition.

At the level of the relationship between individual and environment, the demand for purity creates what we may term a guilty milieu and a shaming milieu. Since each man's impurities are deemed sinful and potentially harmful to himself and to others, he is, so to speak, expected to expect punishment -- which results in a relationship of guilt with his environment. Similarly, when he fails to meet the prevailing standards in casting out such impurities, he is expected to expect humiliation and ostracism -- thus establishing a relationship of shame with his milieu. Moreover, the sense of guilt and the sense of shame become highly-valued: they are preferred forms of communication, objects of public competition, and the bases for eventual bonds between the individual and his totalist accusers. One may attempt to simulate them for a while, but the subterfuge is likely to be detected, and it is safer (as Miss Darrow found) to experience them genuinely.

People vary greatly in their susceptibilities to guilt and shame (as my subjects illustrated), depending upon patterns developed early in life. But since guilt and shame are basic to human existence, this variation can be no more than a matter of degree. Each person is made vulnerable through his profound inner sensitivities to his own limitations and to his unfulfilled potential; in other words, each is made vulnerable through his existential guilt. Since ideological totalists become the ultimate judges of good and evil within their world, they are able to use these universal tendencies toward guilt and shame as emotional levers for their controlling and manipulative influences. They become the arbiters of existential guilt, authorities without limit in dealing with others' limitations. And their power is nowhere more evident than in their capacity to

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"forgive." 5 The individual thus comes to apply the same totalist polarization of good and evil to his judgments of his own character: he tends to imbue certain aspects of himself with excessive virtue, and condemn even more excessively other personal qualities -- all according to their ideological standing. He must also look upon his impurities as originating from outside influences -- that is, from the ever-threatening world beyond the closed, totalist ken. Therefore, one of his best ways to relieve himself of some of his burden of guilt is to denounce, continuously and hostilely, these same outside influences. The more guilty he feels, the greater his hatred, and the more threatening they seem. In this manner, the universal psychological tendency toward "projection" is nourished and institutionalized, leading to mass hatreds, purges of heretics, and to political and religious holy wars. Moreover, once an individual person has experienced the totalist polarization of good and evil, he has great difficulty in regaining a more balanced inner sensitivity to the complexities of human morality. For there is no emotional bondage greater than that of the man whose entire guilt potential -- neurotic and existential -- has become the property of ideological totalists.

The Cult of Confession

Closely related to the demand for absolute purity is an obsession with personal confession. Confession is carried beyond its ordinary religious, legal, and therapeutic expressions to the point of becoming a cult in itself. There is the demand that one confess to crimes one has not committed, to sinfulness that is artificially induced, in the name of a cure that is arbitrarily imposed. Such demands are made possible not only by the ubiquitous human tendencies toward guilt and shame but also by the need to give expression to these tendencies. In totalist hands, confession becomes a means of exploiting, rather than offering solace for, these vulnerability.

The totalist confession takes on a number of special meanings. It is first a vehicle for the kind of personal purification which we have just discussed, a means of maintaining a perpetual inner emptying or psychological purge of impurity; this purging milieu enhances the totalists' hold upon existential guilt. Second, it is an act of symbolic self-surrender, the expression of the merging of individual and environment. Third, it is a means of maintaining an ethos of total exposure -- a policy of making public (or at least known to the Organization) everything possible about the life experiences, thoughts, and passions of each individual, and especially those elements which might be regarded as derogatory.

The assumption underlying total exposure (besides those which relate to the demand for purity) is the environment's claim to total ownership of each individual self within it. Private ownership of the mind and its products -- of imagination or of memory -- becomes highly immoral. The accompanying rationale (or rationalization) is familiar to us (from George Chen's experience); the milieu has attained such a perfect state of enlightenment that any individual retention of ideas or emotions has become anachronistic.

The cult of confession can offer the individual person meaningful psychological satisfactions in the continuing opportunity for emotional catharsis and for relief of suppressed guilt feelings, especially insofar as these are associated with self-punitive

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tendencies to get pleasure from personal degradation. More than this, the sharing of confession enthusiasms can create an orgiastic sense of "oneness," of the most intense intimacy with fellow confessors and of the dissolution of self into the great flow of the Movement. And there is also, at least initially, the possibility of genuine self-revelation and of self-betterment through the recognition that "the thing that has been exposed is what I am." 6

But as totalist pressures turn confession into recurrent command performances, the element of histrionic public display takes precedence over genuine inner experience. Each man becomes concerned with the effectiveness of his personal performance, and this performance sometimes comes to serve the function of evading the very emotions and ideas about which one feels most guilty -- confirming the statement by one of Camus' characters that "authors of confessions write especially to avoid confessing, to tell nothing of what they know." 7 The difficulty, of course, lies in the inevitable confusion which takes place between the actor's method and his separate personal reality, between the performer and the "real me."

In this sense, the cult of confession has effects quite the reverse of its ideal of total exposure: rather than eliminating personal secrets, it increases and intensifies them. In any situation the personal secret has two important elements: first, guilty and shameful ideas which one wishes to suppress in order to prevent their becoming known by others or their becoming too prominent in one's own awareness; and second, representations of parts of oneself too precious to be expressed except when alone or when involved in special loving relationships formed around this shared secret world. Personal secrets are always maintained in opposition to inner pressures toward self-exposure. The totalist milieu makes contact with these inner pressures through its own obsession with the expose and the unmasking process. As a result old secrets are revived and new ones proliferate; the latter frequently consist of resentments toward or doubts about the Movement, or else are related to aspects of identity still existing outside of the prescribed ideological sphere. Each person becomes caught up in a continuous conflict over which secrets to preserve and which to surrender, over ways to reveal lesser secrets in order to protect more important ones; his own boundaries between the secret and the known, between the public and the private, become blurred. And around one secret, or a complex of secrets, there may revolve (as we saw with Hu) an ultimate inner struggle between resistance and self-surrender.

Finally, the cult of confession makes it virtually impossible to attain a reasonable balance between worth and humility. The enthusiastic and aggressive confessor becomes like Camus' character whose perpetual confession is his means of judging others: "[I] . . . practice the profession of penitent to be able to end up as a judge . . . the more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you." The identity of the "judge-penitent" 8 thus becomes a vehicle for taking on some of the environment's arrogance and sense of omnipotence. Yet even this shared omnipotence cannot protect him from the opposite (but not unrelated) feelings of humiliation and weakness, feelings especially prevalent among those who remain more the enforced penitent than the all-powerful judge.

The "Sacred Science"

The totalist milieu maintains an aura of sacredness around its basic dogma, holding it out as an ultimate moral vision for the ordering of human existence. This sacredness is evident in the prohibition (whether or not explicit) against the questioning of basic assumptions, and in the reverence which is demanded for the originators of the Word, the present bearers of the Word, and the Word itself. While thus transcending ordinary concerns of logic, however, the milieu at the same time makes an exaggerated claim of airtight logic, of absolute "scientific" precision. Thus the ultimate moral vision becomes an ultimate science; and the man who dares to criticize it, or to harbor even unspoken alternative ideas, becomes not only immoral and irreverent, but also "unscientific." In this way, the philosopher kings of modern ideological totalism reinforce their authority by claiming to share in the rich and respected heritage of natural science.

The assumption here is not so much that man can be God, but rather that man's ideas can be God: that an absolute science of ideas (and implicitly, an absolute science of man) exists, or is at least very close to being attained; that this science can be combined with an equally absolute body of moral principles; and that the resulting doctrine is true for all men at all times. Although no ideology goes quite this far in overt statement, such assumptions are implicit in totalist practice.⁹

At the level of the individual, the totalist sacred science can offer much comfort and security. Its appeal lies in its seeming unification of the mystical and the logical modes of experience (in psychoanalytic terms, of the primary and secondary thought processes). For within the framework of the sacred science, there is room for both careful step-by-step syllogism, and sweeping, nonrational "insights." Since the distinction between the logical and the mystical is, to begin with, artificial and man-made, an opportunity for transcending it can create an extremely intense feeling of truth. But the posture of unquestioning faith -- both rationally and non-rationally derived -- is not easy to sustain, especially if one discovers that the world of experience is not nearly as absolute as the sacred science claims it to be.

Yet so strong a hold can the sacred science achieve over his mental processes that if one begins to feel himself attracted to ideas which either contradict or ignore it, he may become guilty and afraid. His quest for knowledge is consequently hampered, since in the name of science he is prevented from engaging in the receptive search for truth which characterizes the genuinely scientific approach. And his position is made more difficult by the absence, in a totalist environment, of any distinction between the sacred and the profane: there is no thought or action which cannot be related to the sacred science. To be sure, one can usually find areas of experience outside its immediate authority; but during periods of maximum totalist activity (like thought reform) any such areas are cut off, and there is virtually no escape from the milieu's ever-pressing edicts and demands. Whatever combination of continued adherence, inner resistance, or compromise co-existence the individual person adopts toward this blend of counterfeit science and back-door religion, it represents another continuous pressure toward personal closure, toward avoiding, rather than grappling with, the kinds of knowledge and experience necessary for genuine self-expression and for creative development.

Loading the Language

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The language of the totalist environment is characterized by the thought-terminating cliché. The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed. These become the start and finish of any ideological analysis. In thought reform, for instance, the phrase "bourgeois mentality" is used to encompass and critically dismiss ordinarily troublesome concerns like the quest for individual expression, the exploration of alternative ideas, and the search for perspective and balance in political judgments. And in addition to their function as interpretive shortcuts, these clichés become what Richard Weaver has called "ultimate terms": either "god terms," representative of ultimate good; or "devil terms," representative of ultimate evil. In thought reform, "progress," "progressive," "liberation," "proletarian standpoints" and "the dialectic of history" fall into the former category; "capitalist," "imperialist," "exploiting classes," and "bourgeois" (mentality, liberalism, morality, superstition, greed) of course fall into the latter. 10 Totalist language, then, is repetitiously centered on all-encompassing jargon, prematurely abstract, highly categorical, relentlessly judging, and to anyone but its most devoted advocate, deadly dull: in Lionel Trilling's phrase, "the language of non-thought."

To be sure, this kind of language exists to some degree within any cultural or organizational group, and all systems of belief depend upon it. It is in part an expression of unity and exclusiveness: as Edward Sapir put it, "'He talks like us' is equivalent to saying 'He is one of us'." 11 The loading is much more extreme in ideological totalism, however, since the jargon expresses the claimed certitudes of the sacred science. Also involved is an underlying assumption that language -- like all other human products -- can be owned and operated by the Movement. No compunctions are felt about manipulating or loading it in any fashion; the only consideration is its usefulness to the cause.

For an individual person, the effect of the language of ideological totalism can be summed up in one word: constriction. He is, so to speak, linguistically deprived; and since language is so central to all human experience, his capacities for thinking and feeling are immensely narrowed. This is what Hu meant when he said, "using the same pattern of words for so long . . . you feel chained." Actually, not everyone exposed feels chained, but in effect everyone is profoundly confined by these verbal fetters. As in other aspects of totalism, this loading may provide an initial sense of in sight and security, eventually followed by uneasiness. This uneasiness may result in a retreat into a rigid orthodoxy in which an individual shouts the ideological jargon all the louder in order to demonstrate his conformity, hide his own dilemma and his despair, and protect himself from the fear and guilt he would feel should he attempt to use words and phrases other than the correct ones. Or else he may adopt a complex pattern of inner division, and dutifully produce the expected clichés in public performances while in his private moments he searches for more meaningful avenues of expression. Either way, his imagination becomes increasingly dissociated from his actual life experiences and may even tend to atrophy from disuse.

Doctrine Over Person

This sterile language reflects another characteristic feature of ideological totalism: the subordination of human experience to the claims of doctrine. This primacy of doctrine over person is evident in the continual shift between experience itself and the highly abstract interpretation of such experience -- between genuine feelings and spurious cataloguing of feelings. It has much to do with the peculiar aura of half-reality which a totalist environment seems, at least to the outsider, to possess.

This tendency in the totalist approach to broad historical events was described in relationship to Chinese Communism by John K. Fairbank and Mary C. Wright:

. . . stock characters like capitalist imperialists from abroad, feudal and semi-feudal reaction at home, and the resistance and liberation movements of "the people" enact a morality play. This melodrama sees aggression, injustice, exploitation, and humiliation engulf the Chinese people until salvation comes at last with Communism. Mass revolutions require an historical myth as part of their black and white morality, and this is the ideological myth of one of the great revolutions of world history.¹²

The inspiring force of such myths cannot be denied; nor can one ignore their capacity for mischief. For when the myth becomes fused with the totalist sacred science, the resulting "logic" can be so compelling and coercive that it simply replaces the realities of individual experience. Consequently, past historical events are retrospectively altered, wholly rewritten, or ignored, to make them consistent with the doctrinal logic. This alteration becomes especially malignant when its distortions are imposed upon individual memory as occurred in the false confessions extracted during thought reform (most graphically Father Luca's).

The same doctrinal primacy prevails in the totalist approach to changing people: the demand that character and identity be reshaped, not in accordance with one's special nature or potentialities, but rather to fit the rigid contours of the doctrinal mold. The human is thus subjugated to the ahuman. And in this manner, the totalists, as Camus phrases it, "put an abstract idea above human life, even if they call it history, to which they themselves have submitted in advance and to which they will decide quite arbitrarily, to submit everyone else as well." ¹³

The underlying assumption is that the doctrine -- including its mythological elements -- is ultimately more valid, true, and real than is any aspect of actual human character or human experience. Thus, even when circumstances require that a totalist movement follow a course of action in conflict with or outside of the doctrine, there exists what Benjamin Schwartz has described as a "will to orthodoxy" ¹⁴ which requires an elaborate facade of new rationalizations designed to demonstrate the unerring consistency of the doctrine and the unfailing foresight which it provides. The public operation of this will to orthodoxy is seen in the Party's explanation of the Hundred Flowers Campaign. But its greater importance lies in more hidden manifestations, particularly the totalists' pattern of imposing their doctrine-dominated remolding upon people in order to seek confirmation of (and again, dispel their own doubts about) this same doctrine. Rather than modify the myth in accordance with experience, the will to orthodoxy requires instead that men be modified in order to reaffirm the myth. Thus, much of prison thought reform was devoted to making the Westerner conform to the

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pure image of "evil imperialist," so that he could take his proper role in the Communist morality play of Chinese history.

The individual person who finds himself under such doctrine-dominated pressure to change is thrust into an intense struggle with his own sense of integrity, a struggle which takes place in relation to polarized feelings of sincerity and insincerity. In a totalist environment, absolute "sincerity" is demanded; and the major criterion for sincerity is likely to be one's degree of doctrinal compliance both in regard to belief and to direction of personal change. Yet there is always the possibility of retaining an alternative version of sincerity (and of reality), the capacity to imagine a different kind of existence and another form of sincere commitment (as did Grace Wu when she thought, "the world could not be like this"). These alternative visions depend upon such things as the strength of previous identity, the penetration of the milieu by outside ideas, and the retained capacity for eventual individual renewal. The totalist environment, however, counters such "deviant" tendencies with the accusation that they stem entirely from personal "problems" ("thought problems" or "ideological problems") derived from untoward earlier ("bourgeois") influences. The outcome will depend largely upon how much genuine relevance the doctrine has for the individual emotional predicament. And even for those to whom it seems totally appealing, the exuberant sense of well-being it temporarily affords may be more a "delusion of wholeness" ¹⁵ than an expression of true and lasting inner harmony.

The Dispensing of Existence

The totalist environment draws a sharp line between those whose right to existence can be recognized, and those who possess no such right. In thought reform, as in Chinese Communist practice generally, the world is divided into the "people" (defined as "the working class, the peasant class, the petite bourgeoisie, and the national bourgeoisie"), and the "reactionaries" or "lackeys of imperialism" (defined as "the landlord class, the bureaucratic capitalist class, and the KMT reactionaries and their henchmen") . Mao Tsetung makes the existential distinction between the two groups quite explicit:

Under the leadership of the working class and the Communist Party, these classes [the people] unite together to form their own state and elect their own government [so as to] carry out a dictatorship over the lackeys of imperialism.... These two aspects, namely, democracy among the people and dictatorship over the reactionaries, combine to form the people's democratic dictatorship to the hostile classes the state apparatus is the instrument of oppression. It is violent, and not "benevolent." . . . Our benevolence applies only to the people, and not to the reactionary acts of the reactionaries and reactionary classes outside the people.¹⁶

Being "outside the people," the reactionaries are presumably nonpeople. Under conditions of ideological totalism, in China and elsewhere, nonpeople have often been put to death, their executioners then becoming guilty (in Camus' phrase) of "crimes of logic." But the thought reform process is one means by which nonpeople are permitted, through a change in attitude and personal character, to make themselves over into people. The most literal example of such dispensing of existence and nonexistence is to be found in the sentence given to certain political criminals: execution in two years' time,

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unless during that two-year period they have demonstrated genuine progress in their reform.

In the light of this existential policy, the two different pronunciations of the word people ("people" and "peepul") adopted by the European group described in Chapter 9 was more than just a practical maneuver. It was a symbolic way to cut through the loaded totalist language and restore the word to its general meaning, thereby breaking down the imposed distinction between people and nonpeople. Since the Westerners involved were themselves clearly nonpeople theirs was an invention born of the negative status dispensed to them.

Are not men presumptuous to appoint themselves the dispensers of human existence? Surely this is a flagrant expression of what the Greeks called hubris, of arrogant man making himself God. Yet one underlying assumption makes this arrogance mandatory: the conviction that there is just one path to true existence, just one valid mode of being, and that all others are perforce invalid and false. Totalists thus feel themselves compelled to destroy all possibilities of false existence as a means of furthering the great plan of true existence to which they are committed. Indeed, Mao's words suggest that all of thought reform can be viewed as a way to eradicate such allegedly false modes of existence -- not only among the nonpeople, within whom they supposedly originate, but also among legitimate people allegedly contaminated by them.

The [function of the] people's state is to protect the people. Only where there is the people's state, is it possible for the people to use democratic methods or a nationwide and all-round scale to educate and reform themselves, to free themselves from the influence of reactionaries at home and abroad to unlearn the bad habits and ideas acquired from the old society and not to let themselves travel on the erroneous path pointed out by the reactionaries, but to continue to advance and develop towards a Socialist and Communist society accomplishing the historic mission of completely eliminating classes and advancing toward a universal fraternity.¹⁷

For the individual, the polar emotional conflict is the ultimate existential one of "being versus nothingness." He is likely to be drawn to a conversion experience, which he sees as the only means of attaining a path of existence for the future (as did George Chen).

The totalist environment -- even when it does not resort to physical abuse -- thus stimulates in everyone a fear of extinction or annihilation much like the basic fear experienced by Western prisoners. A person can overcome this fear and find (in Martin Buber's term) "confirmation," not in his individual relationships, but only from the fount of all existence, the totalist Organization. Existence comes to depend upon creed (I believe, therefore I am), upon submission (I obey, therefore I am) and beyond these, upon a sense of total merger with the ideological movement. Ultimately of course one compromises and combines the totalist "confirmation" with independent elements of personal identity; but one is ever made aware that, should he stray too far along this "erroneous path," his right to existence may be withdrawn.

The more clearly an environment expresses these eight psychological themes, the greater its resemblance to ideological totalism; and the more it utilizes such totalist devices to change people, the greater its resemblance to thought reform (or "brainwashing"). But facile comparisons can be misleading. No milieu ever achieves complete totalism, and many relatively moderate environments show some signs of it.

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Moreover, totalism tends to be recurrent rather than continuous: in China, for instance, its fullest expression occurs during thought reform; it is less apparent during lulls in thought reform, although it is by no means absent. And like the "enthusiasm" with which it is often associated, totalism is more apt to be present during the early phases of mass movements than later -- Communist China in the 1950s was generally more totalist than Soviet Russia. But if totalism has at any time been prominent in a movement, there is always the possibility of its reappearance, even after long periods of relative moderation.

Then too, some environments come perilously close to totalism but at the same time keep alternative paths open; this combination can offer unusual opportunities for achieving intellectual and emotional depth. And even the most full-blown totalist milieu can provide (more or less despite itself) a valuable and enlarging life experience -- if the man exposed has both the opportunity to leave the extreme environment and the inner capacity to absorb and make inner use of the totalist pressures (as did Father Vechten and Father Luca) .

Also, ideological totalism itself may offer a man an intense peak experience: a sense of transcending all that is ordinary and prosaic, of freeing himself from the encumbrances of human ambivalence, of entering a sphere of truth, reality, trust, and sincerity beyond any he had ever known or even imagined. But these peak experiences, the result as they are of external pressure, distortion, and threat, carry a great potential for rebound, and for equally intense opposition to the very things which initially seem so liberating. Such imposed peak experiences -- as contrasted with those more freely and privately arrived at by great religious leaders and mystics -- are essentially experiences of personal closure. Rather than stimulating greater receptivity and "openness to the world," they encourage a backward step into some form of "embeddedness" -- a retreat into doctrinal and organizational exclusiveness, and into all-or-nothing emotional patterns more characteristic (at least at this stage of human history) of the child than of the individuated adult.¹⁹

And if no peak experience occurs, ideological totalism does even greater violence to the human potential: it evokes destructive emotions, produces intellectual and psychological constrictions, and deprives men of all that is most subtle and imaginative -- under the false promise of eliminating those very imperfections and ambivalences which help to define the human condition. This combination of personal closure, self-destructiveness, and hostility toward outsiders leads to the dangerous group excesses so characteristic of ideological totalism in any form. It also mobilizes extremist tendencies in those outsiders under attack, thus creating a vicious circle of totalism.

What is the source of ideological totalism? How do these extremist emotional patterns originate? These questions raise the most crucial and the most difficult of human problems. Behind ideological totalism lies the ever-present human quest for the omnipotent guide for the supernatural force, political party, philosophical ideas, great leader, or precise science that will bring ultimate solidarity to all men and eliminate the terror of death and nothingness. This quest is evident in the mythologies, religions, and histories of all nations, as well as in every individual life. The degree of individual totalism involved depends greatly upon factors in one's personal history: early lack of trust, extreme environmental chaos, total domination by a parent or

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parent-representative, intolerable burdens of guilt, and severe crises of identity. Thus an early sense of confusion and dislocation, or an early experience of unusually intense family milieu control, can produce later a complete intolerance for confusion and dislocation, and a longing for the reinstatement of milieu control. But these things are in some measure part of every childhood experience; and therefore the potential for totalism is a continuum from which no one entirely escapes, and in relationship to which no two people are exactly the same.

It may be that the capacity for totalism is most fundamentally a product of human childhood itself, of the prolonged period of helplessness and dependency through which each of us must pass. Limited as he is, the infant has no choice but to imbue his first nurturing authorities his parents -- with an exaggerated omnipotence, until the time he is himself capable of some degree of independent action and judgment. And even as he develops into the child and the adolescent, he continues to require many of the all-or-none polarities of totalism as terms with which to define his intellectual, emotional, and moral worlds. Under favorable circumstances (that is, when family and culture encourage individuation) these requirements can be replaced by more flexible and moderate tendencies; but they never entirely disappear.

During adult life, individual totalism takes on new contours as it becomes associated with new ideological interests. It may become part of the configuration of personal emotions, messianic ideas, and organized mass movement which I have described as ideological totalism. When it does, we cannot speak of it as simply a form of regression. It is partly this, but it is also something more: a new form of adult embeddedness, originating in patterns of security-seeking carried over from childhood, but with qualities of ideas and aspirations that are specifically adult. During periods of cultural crisis and of rapid historical change, the totalist quest for the omnipotent guide leads men to seek to become that guide.

Totalism, then, is a widespread phenomenon, but it is not the only approach to reeducation. We can best use our knowledge of it by applying its criteria to familiar processes in our own cultural tradition and in our own country.

- Footnotes -

1 Personal "closure" implies abandoning man's inherent strivings toward the outer world as well as much of his receptivity to his own inner impulses, and retreating into what Ernest Schachtel has called "the closed pattern of relatedness to the world institutionalized in ... [a] particular culture or cultural subgroup (Metamorphosis, New York, Basic Books, 1959, 75).

2 Helen Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1958, 57. 1 Personal "closure" implies abandoning man's inherent strivings toward the outer world as well as much of his receptivity to his own inner impulses, and retreating into what Ernest Schachtel has called "the closed pattern of relatedness to the world institutionalized in ... [a] particular culture or cultural subgroup (Metamorphosis, New York, Basic Books, 1959, 75).

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2 Helen Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1958, 57.

3 Alex Inkeles, "The Totalitarian Mystique: Some Impressions of the Dynamics of Totalitarian Society," *Totalitarianism*, edited by Carl Friedrich, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1953, 88 and 91.

4 *Ibid.*, 91.

5 In Camus' novel, *The Fall* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1957, 127), Clamence states: "My great idea is that one must forgive the Pope. To begin with, he needs it more than anyone else. Secondly, that's the only way to set oneself above him. . . ."

6 Helen Lynd, *op. cit.*, 57.

7 Camus, *The Fall*, 120.

8 *Ibid.*, 8 and 138.

9 A somewhat similar point of view is expressed by Hannah Arendt in her comprehensive study, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, Meridian Books, 1958, 468-474.

10 In this respect, thought reform is clearly a child of its era, for Weaver claims that "progress" list the "'god term' of the present age," and also lists "progressive," "science," "fact," and "modern" as other widely-used "god terms" ("Ultimate Terms in Contemporary Rhetoric," *Perspectives* (1955), 11, 1-2, 141). All these words have a similar standing in thought reform. Thought reform's "devil terms" are more specifically Communist, but also included are such general favorites as "Aggressor" and "fascist."

11 Edward Sapir, "Language," *Culture, Language and Personality*, Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press, 1956, 17.

12 John K. Fairbank and Mary C. Wright, "Documentary Collections on Modern Chinese," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, (1957) 17:55-56, intro.

13 Camus, *The Rebel*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1954, 141.

14 Benjamin Schwartz, *op. cit.*, 4-5.

15 Erik Erikson, "Wholeness and Totality," in Friedrich, ed., *op. cit.*, 165.

16 Mao Tse-tung, "On the People's Democratic Dictatorship," Brandt, Schwartz, and Fairbank, *op. cit.*, 456-457.

17 *Ibid.*, 457.

18 I have borrowed the term "peak experiences" from A. H. Maslow (Presidential Address, Division of Personality and Social Psychology, American Psychological Association, Chicago, Ill., September 1, 1956, mimeographed), although my use of it is perhaps somewhat broader than his. In his terminology, he might see the imposed "peak experience" as lacking in genuine "cognition of being."

19 "Openness to the world," or "world-openness," and "embeddedness" are conceptualized by Schachtel (*Metamorphosis*, 22-77), as perpetually antagonistic human emotional tendencies.