

# CONWAY HALL



## Cults and Brainwashing: The hidden – and not so hidden – epidemic

**Estimated reading time: 14 minutes**

**Monday, 11th May, 2015**

**Lecture date: Sun, 7th Jun, 2015**

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**Introduction**As I was preparing this talk I considered what my latest examples might be – this is the part I always have to update as so many new cults come and go. So, the groups I've come across this week that fit my definition of a cult are:

ISIS, of course, and related Islamist extremist groups, with their continuing recruitment. The latest from the UN is that over 22,000 of ISIS's fighters come from fully half the countries in the world.

Jewish cult (sect, if you prefer) Belz with their new edict on women not driving cars to pick up their kids at school. And all the female interviewees claiming they were quite happy with that.

The Lyndon LaRouche right wing and anti-semitic and anti British cult – there was a recent inquest here in London about the death and, some suspect, murder, of Jeremiah Duggan, a young man from Golders Green.

And then there are the yoga cults I've been running into where you start attending a yoga class and end with having to more or less constantly meditate on the person of the leader. Several of these I've recently dealt with have female leaders.

Let's not forget the so-called "personal growth" cults: How to be a better person, more effective, more "conscious". There's endless versions of these, many like baby Scientologies, or Landmark, which itself was spawned from Scientology.

And as I was walking through past Birkbeck and SOAS the other week at lunchtime,

**Speaker:**

**Alexandra Stein**



Alexandra Stein is a writer and lecturer specializing in the social psychology of cults, totalitarianism and other dangerous social relationships, and their opposites: "small d" democracy, inclusivity and healthy social networks. She is an associate lecturer at Birkbeck, University of London, and the Mary Ward Centre. She consults in the areas of prevention of recruitment to extremism, and recovery from cults and extremist groups. Alexandra is a former member of a political cult and has described that experience in her book, *Inside Out: A Memoir of Entering and Breaking Out of a Minneapolis Political Cult* (2002, North Star Press). See more at: [www.alexandrastein.com](http://www.alexandrastein.com) (<http://www.alexandrastein.com>)

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there were the Hare Krishnas or ISKCON, serving their free food. But I know that the free food is free because the labour that makes and sells that foo is free. And hungry. And permanently exhausted.

Finally is the US Bible-based ATI cult: these are right-wing fundamentalists, with tentacles that reach into the highest echelons of the US government.

I'd like you to see that these is something for everyone. Perhaps some of you here are interested in philosophy, for example, and have happened upon the School of Economic Sciences. Cult.

As for me, I got interested in cults and brainwashing because, well, because I was in one. For ten long and dreary years I was part of The O., a so-called Marxist-Leninist group based in the mid-western United States. When I emerged, almost 25 years ago, from this dreadful experience I decided to try to understand how such a crazy thing could have happened to me. How could I, as an intelligent, independent, curious, and thoughtful person, have given up my critical abilities for so long?

First I wrote a memoir, INSIDE OUT, detailing my experience in order to understand it. Later I went on to earn a doctorate studying the topic and I now teach and write about it.

What is it about these groups? And why is it that they so often seem to threaten family relationships or the wellbeing of the children within them? They are a fixture of modern life. Sad anniversaries roll by: last year saw one of the most gruesome: the 30th anniversary of the murder of over 900 people, including 276 children, at Jonestown where Jim Jones forced his followers to take poison while trapped in the jungles of Guyana.

Cults come in a great variety of forms: from the largely religious examples above, to political cults on both right and left – including terrorist groups that train suicide bombers – and from get-rich-quick to personal growth groups. Although they are not all violent, they do share common structural and ideological features that create situations in which they are able to exert extraordinary levels of control over their members.

After the horrors of World War II, followed swiftly by Stalin and Mao’s totalitarian regimes, scholars did groundbreaking work to try to understand the forces at work that produced extreme obedience to charismatic leaders. This period saw, among others, Hannah Arendt’s great work, The Origins of Totalitarianism; Milgram’s extraordinary experiments where ordinary people administered seemingly excruciating electrical shocks to strangers, and Robert Jay Lifton’s insightful work on brainwashing crystallized in his eight criteria for Totalist Thought Reform. There have now been seven decades of scholarship on the topic, including, most recently by scholars like myself who have themselves been victims of this process.

Although some scholars dismiss the concepts understood by the terms “cult” and “brainwashing”, these organizations and processes of extreme control have not abated.

What are cults, and how do they work? A useful definition of a cult builds on the work of Lifton, Singer, Arendt and others and encompasses the following five points:

The group is led by a charismatic and authoritarian leader

- It has a closed, steeply hierarchical inner structure
- The group adheres to an exclusive or total belief system
- Processes of coercive persuasion (or brainwashing) are used to retain followers
- Followers are exploited

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JULY 2015						
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20	21	22	23	24	25	26
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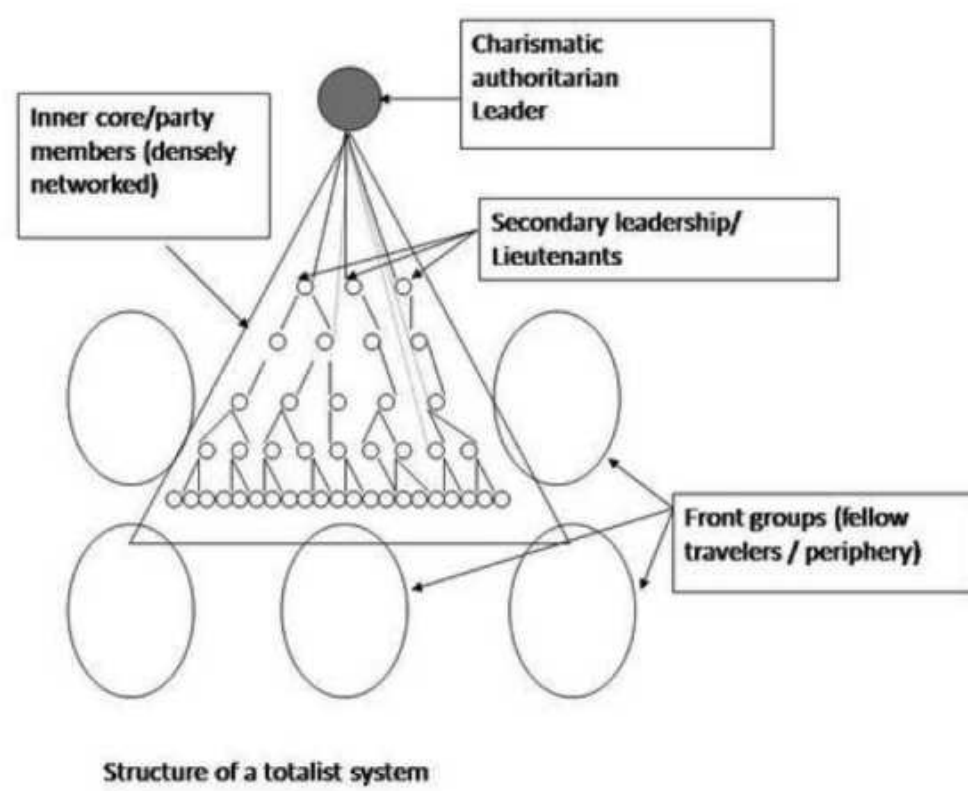
London

Thinks – The Science and Ethics of Doctor Who

Wednesday 29th July @ 7:30 pm - 9:00 pm

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Cultic or ideologically extremist groups are controlled by a *leader who is both charismatic and authoritarian*. Both charisma and authoritarianism (or bullying) are required as they are the source of the group’s central organizing dynamic of “love” and fear. For example, this is how a former member of the Newman Tendency political cult described its leader:

I liked him! I would have a problem disliking him now, even after what I already know about him. If he sat down right there next to me, I’d say, ‘Hey Fred, how are you doing? Are you still corrupting people?’

At the same time this former member recounted how Newman would “unleash the dogs” on followers who were not toeing the line.

The inner structure of a *cult is closed, and steeply hierarchical*. At the top sits the leader whose every whim must be obeyed. Followers must renounce ties to outsiders – unless they can be recruited or used in some way. Yet within the group itself, belying the stereotype of close “community” that exists within cults, followers are, in important ways, isolated from each other, allowed to communicate only within the narrow confines of the group’s belief system.

In fact, if within-group relationships become too close, they are often broken up in order to prevent competing with the primary relationship to the leader or group as a whole. And woe betide the follower who expresses doubts, or worse, who leaves and criticizes the group – then, as for example with the Scientology Disconnect policy – they are “fair game” for threats, intimidation and shunning. Jenna Miscavige, a woman who was raised in Scientology (and has now left) illustrates both of these forms of isolation. She tells how she was separated from her parents from the age of 12 while they were all still in the organization. Her parents finally left Scientology when she was 16, but she, having been “thoroughly engulfed in the beliefs of the Church since birth decided not to go with them. Not only was I not allowed to speak to them, I was not allowed to answer a phone for well over a year, in case it was them calling me.”

While the inner structure is rigid and closed, looser front groups often (though not always) exist in cults for recruitment, funding and influence purposes. Arendt refers to these as “transmission belts” between the inner world of the cult and the rest of the world. Sociologist John Lofland documented hundreds of front groups (from youth groups to businesses to media ventures) run by The Unification Church in his classic study, *Doomsday Cult*.

The closed hierarchy is supported and represented by an *exclusive belief system, also known as a total or extremist ideology*. This all-encompassing belief system rejects all other points of view entirely, claiming to have the one truth that explains everything for all time. The single truth is a reflection of the single point of power of the leader, and often changes at the leader’s whim. Lyndon LaRouche’s political cult, currently



recruiting on US campuses, is a good example of this: he veered from a leftist Trotskyist stance early in his career to the right-wing, anti-semitic position he now holds as head of the Worldwide LaRouche Youth Movement. The cultic total ideology is also used to justify followers’ separation from loved ones in the name of a higher commitment. In *A Life in Orange*, Tim Guest quotes Bhagwan Rhajneesh, the leader of the cult he grew up in: “In a commune you will not be too attached to one family – there will be no family to be attached to.” This removal from one’s family would supposedly enable the children to “have a richer soul”.

Processes of *coercive persuasion or brainwashing* are used to isolate followers and control them through a combined dynamic of “love” and fear. These processes take place within the isolating cultic structure and can lead to group members following the group’s orders even when it puts their own interests or even their lives at risk. Many isolating, weakening and influence strategies are used in this effort such as sleep deprivation, control of relationships, lack of privacy, control of information, diet, and so on. Isolation – especially from very close relationships, as described above – is of particular importance. The fundamental process is to induce in the follower a traumatic state known as “fright without solution” which is more fully described below.

Finally, as a result of these processes, *followers are exploited*. Regardless of what the group may claim, the flow of resources in cultic groups moves upwards to the leadership, typically in the form of money and other material assets, labor and sexual favors. For example, both the FLDS leader Warren Jeffs and Joseph Kony of the Lord’s Resistance Army are thought to have at least 60 wives. Groups such as Scientology or the Unification Church have amassed global fortunes. Financial gain is, however, merely a useful by-product of what I consider a cult leader’s fundamental motivation: that of seeking guaranteed attachments. And of course, once a leader has succeeded in controlling group members’ attachment to him or herself, then other benefits can accrue: sex, financial wealth and political power among them – though there is definite variation in if and how leaders take advantage of these possible benefits.

While resources flow up, orders and ideology flow down to the followers. But not all followers need to be controlled entirely as long as they contribute in some way – thus many groups have peripheral members who may give money, time or other resources through front organizations. However, when consolidated in the group most followers may demonstrate uncritical obedience, regardless of their own survival needs. The ISIS recruits and suicide bombers are extreme and tragic cases of the utter loss of self-interest of these deployable agents, with, of course, terrible consequences for their victims.

How do followers become controlled, and why don’t they just fight back or leave? Attachment theory can help us to understand this. This theory states that an evolutionary adaptation fundamental to humans is the drive to seek proximity to others (initially as infants to caregivers) in order to gain protection from threat, thus improving chances for survival. A child seeks its parent when ill, tired, frightened, or in any other way under threat. The parent then functions as a safe haven for the child from whom they may gain protection and comfort. But once comforted, the child eventually wishes to explore its world again, and now the parent functions as a secure base, from which the child explores and to which they can return when protection and comfort is once again needed. Similar dynamics take place with adults in their very close relationships with spouses, partners or close friendships.

However, attachment relationships do not always function well. In particular, when the caregiver is not only the source of potential comfort, but also the source of threat, a relationship of disorganized attachment results. Seeking comfort from the source of fear is a failing strategy: it not only brings the individual closer to the source of fear, instead of escaping the threat, but it also fails to produce the required comfort, thus impeding a later exploration phase from a secure base. The person freezes – like a deer in the headlights. They are in a situation termed “fright without solution”; they cannot escape the threat. This failing attachment strategy causes dissociation and

disorientation regarding the relationship in question. It creates what is termed a “trauma bond” or disorganized attachment; the individual is in a state of trauma and can no longer think clearly about their condition. This is a dynamic we often see in relationships of controlling domestic violence, in child abuse, or in the Stockholm Syndrome where kidnap or hostage victims identify with their captors.

In these situations of “fright without solution” there are severe impacts on how the mind processes experience: cognitive processing in the neo cortex and language areas of the brain is impeded while the “older” areas of the brain – the brain stem and central nervous system – continue to record sensory information. It is in this creation of dissociation that the group can hijack the follower’s normal survival instincts – the group unhooks the follower’s perception of experience from their ability to think about what is happening, and so can now insert their own ideology and orders. Thus it is in this separation of cognitive from emotional or sensory processing that the power and dangers of brainwashing lie.

Within cultic groups the isolation of followers from the outside world and from trusting relationships with others in the group, leaves the group as the sole “safe haven” available to the follower. Cults will involve followers in numerous group activities, and discourage them from maintaining relationships with family and friends outside of the group. As involvement in the group increases, and outside involvements decrease, the group can then ramp up its demands. Part of this stage is also to induce fear, or some other kind of threat. This can be fear of the outside world, fatigue, fear of some kind of apocalyptic event, or any other form of threat. In certain religious cults stories of a wrathful God serve this purpose, while in the Lord’s Resistance Army rape and simple physical terror are used. Sometimes simple exhaustion, or bullying that one is not working hard enough at one’s “development” may be the sources of threat.

Once the follower is isolated, the arousal of fear causes them to turn to the group – their only remaining “safe haven” – to seek comfort and protection, even though it is the group itself that is causing the fear. This is the emotional glue that binds the follower. In the ensuing “fright without solution,” with the follower’s thoughts disoriented and dissociated, the group can now further insinuate its exclusive belief system and exert even more control over the follower. This is the cognitive impact – the follower’s disoriented thoughts are colonized by the group. The follower may now become a deployable agent, and, with their own survival needs no longer in play, they can carry out the group’s orders. It is in this context that those incomprehensible actions – such as suicide bombings – take place. As one Newman Tendency member said, “I remember feeling like I would take a bullet for Fred.”

What helps to break the situation of “fright without solution” is alternate trusting or attachment relationships that allow an escape, a solution to the threat which in turn allows the person to think clearly again, to reintegrate their thought processes. It is thus imperative that the cult prevent any such trusting relationships from developing. This is why we can predict that cults will systematically attempt to interfere in followers’ close relationships.

It is vitally important to understand these dynamics to which most of us are vulnerable – they operate based on universal human (and usually adaptive) responses of seeking comfort and connection when afraid. We must teach young people these mechanisms in order that they may protect themselves from these predatory groups. As Solomon Asch said:

The greater man’s ignorance of the principles of his social surroundings, the more subject is he to their control; and the greater his knowledge of their operations and of their necessary consequences, the freer he can become with regard to them.

🔪 [brainwashing](http://conwayhall.org.uk/tag/brainwashing/) (<http://conwayhall.org.uk/tag/brainwashing/>), [cults](http://conwayhall.org.uk/tag/cults/) (<http://conwayhall.org.uk/tag/cults/>).

🚩 [Thinking on Sunday](/taxonomy/thinking-on-sunday) (</taxonomy/thinking-on-sunday>)

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