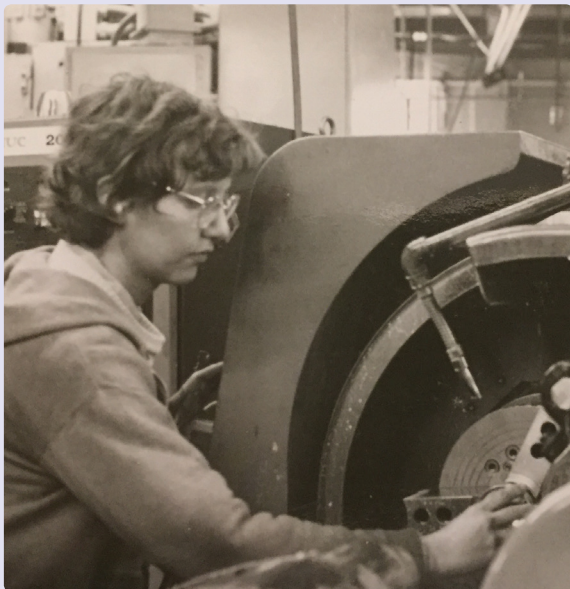


‘I don’t want people to experience what I experienced’

Ian Florance meets Alexandra Stein, a writer and educator specialising in the social psychology of ideological extremism and other dangerous social relationships

‘We know how totalitarianism works and could educate students about it, but we don’t. What I would hope for is to see the issue addressed at a policy level.’ This is only one point, but a central one, that Alexandra Stein wants to make in our chat.

The photographs with this article show Alexandra in the 1980s when she was a member of The O.



What is totalitarianism? It’s sometimes used to describe dictatorial one-party states, but Alexandra uses it to describe totalitarian parties, fundamentalist religions, cults of any kind and extremist organisations that use the same underlying techniques to recruit and retain followers. One of her passions as a social psychologist is to spread this understanding as extremism grows. But this is not a purely theoretical issue for her. Her first book, *Inside Out*, recounted her 10 years as a member of a Minneapolis-based political cult: the story of that involvement informs and underpins much of our talk.

I suggested it was difficult to sum up what she now does. ‘I’m an academic – a social psychologist... I’m an author, a creative writer and an activist.’ What does she mean by activism? ‘I am involved politically and also raise awareness and help those affected by totalist groups. I was brought up breathing left-wing air. My maternal grandfather worked on the *Daily Worker*; my father was a Jewish South African involved in the anti-apartheid movement. Our house in London was always full of political, artistic and literary figures, and I was a young veteran of the Aldermaston marches and the Grosvenor Square demonstration.’

She clarifies another of her self-descriptions. ‘I’d probably have been a creative writer all along but got diverted! So, I’m not really a conventional academic. I’m an Orwellian about language – I want my work to be understood and used by as wide an audience as possible. I want to be useful. I describe myself as a public scholar; becoming an academic so late in life meant that I couldn’t build a standard academic career.’ Alexandra was told she was too old to do her PhD in a psychology department in Minneapolis. ‘I’ll always remember the professor there said that the psychology department wouldn’t take me because they “want young students who’ll run rats through mazes”.’ She looked for another department who would have her and ended up in sociology.

It didn’t seem crazy to be secretive

I asked Alexandra to tell me about her experience as a member of the left-wing cult The O. ‘In 1972 I went to San Francisco. I was 18, lively, naive and committed to the left. I stayed there for some while. By the end of that decade Thatcher and Reagan were in power and the AIDS epidemic was about to happen, though we obviously didn’t know that. Several of my peers had originally moved to San Francisco motivated by the idealism of the 1960s. Now they were migrating back to their home states and settling down.’

‘I met someone who was doing union organising very well. I admired that and asked him how he did it. That was the start of my journey into a political organisation in which I hoped to help make the



world a better place. It might seem crazy that I joined a secret group, structured around small cells, in which written instructions, criticisms and rules arrived from a leadership group I did not know. I have never met the overall leader to this day, though I know people who knew him and some who had relationships with him. But it didn't seem crazy to be so secretive then. Leftists were being persecuted, even assassinated. That made secrecy seem essential. In retrospect of course, silence and secrecy are classic techniques used in totalitarianism to control members. As I got more involved, I moved to Minnesota.'

The O's early history, under different names, involved taking control of food co-ops in the mid-1970s. 'By the time I joined it had gone completely underground. It ran a bakery, a very bad childcare centre and a book store. It had a print shop, but in those days every left-wing movement had one!'

Alexandra describes her behaviours and attitudes at that time as 'ego-dystonic': at odds with her fundamental pre-cult beliefs and personality. She comes across as warm, funny, fiercely independent and holding strong opinions. So, it came as a surprise to learn that she entered into 'an approved – not arranged – marriage to another cult member. To be clear, at that stage we didn't know it was cult. I didn't make the connection till I was out of it.'

Didn't your family worry about you? 'I'd run away at 15 so they were used to me being off on an adventure. And they really didn't know anything about what I had become involved in. They didn't know enough to worry. But there's a fundamental point here that psychologists, in particular, should bear in mind. Psychologists – and others – not trained in understanding how cults operate tend to say things like, "It sounds like you lived in an unstable, left-wing, unconventional family, so no wonder you joined a cult." My family had difficulties; so do others. Everybody from such a family doesn't rush away to

become a Scientologist. Some people I knew in The O came from quite stable families. There is no data to support the idea that a certain type of person joins a cult or extremist organisation. Look at extremist Islam: we simply don't have data to identify the sort of people who might drive a bus into a crowd or plant a bomb. We must avoid that fundamental attribution error and look at the external situation not immediately leap to explanations inside people.'

The O was not the clichéd cult of much film-making. Members lived in houses, often with families and had jobs. 'I lived with my husband and our two adopted children and held down two jobs. I worked in the bakery and in IT – The O had told me to train in computer work. But we had to keep our organisational commitment secret and we lived a psychologically and emotionally isolated and miserable existence. It was a miserable existence. I was – at least at first – rebellious and questioning, and that meant I was often criticised and kept in the lowest rank of the group.'

Putting the right glasses on

Over the years Alexandra became exhausted, had panic attacks and 'secretly went to a therapist. Like most cults, The O had no time for therapists or psychologists. Then the pressure lifted for a year. Although we didn't know it, the leader was in prison for killing a man and so not able to send directives. This gave us time, and that's the last thing a cult should give its members. I started talking with another member, and we finally admitted to each other that we thought there were power problems in the organisation. She had talked to her husband about it and from there we formed an island of resistance. Cults rely on dissociation as a primary technique. They must destroy all attachments because with an ally you can start to reintegrate your dissociated thinking. We were recreating attachments and trust.'

I wondered whether the 'sudden revelation' of what had been happening was a fictional trope. 'It happened to me. Ten years of experience suddenly erupted. It was like realising you were short-sighted and putting the right glasses on. They'd taken writing away, but I rediscovered it and started on my first book.'

"What am I going to do with the rest of my life?" was an obvious question to ask. It took me time to extricate myself from the cult, but I'd become a pretty good systems integrator and wasn't broke. My husband left the cult a year after me, but you don't really know each other till you leave and so the marriage ended soon after. We both looked after the children and we still see each other.'

Three months after leaving, Alexandra saw a small ad headed 'Combating Cult Mind Control' and she began to realise what The O was. 'The scales fell from my eyes and I started to read, discuss and write about the issue. My first book was to understand the experience. Later I signed up for a university class on Cults and Totalitarianism, where I first read Hannah

Arendt, then got a master's in liberal studies and grew interested in attachment theory. It left me with a question which I needed to answer. I got on to a PhD programme largely on the strength of a paper I'd written on mothers in cults, an area that hadn't been researched before. For my PhD I came up with the idea of comparing a cult with an organisation that wasn't a cult using an attachment theory framework. The whole experience was a great privilege.'

After finishing her PhD Alexandra came back to the UK and wrote *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*, which was published in 2016. 'I wrote the book, lectured at Birkbeck – where I currently hold an honorary research fellowship – and the University of Westminster. I did and do some post-cult recovery counselling. This is a specialist field, and, because of the common misunderstandings, a regular therapist can do more harm than good. A colleague and I are currently developing a workshop to train therapists. I am on the board of the Family Survival Trust and lecture at the Mary Ward Centre, a central London adult education college. I'm also very involved in trying to spread understanding of totalism and what we need to do about it.'

Alexandra argues passionately that people need more knowledge of extremism. 'We didn't know about political cults in the 1970s – we thought cults were religious weirdos. And it's still true that we know too little. There are cults in religion, politics, yoga, lifestyle, art, therapy, among academics. As you've suggested, some businesses are cults.' So, this issue is not about the content of an organisation's beliefs. 'No, it's the structure of control and of the ideology that matters. It isn't what you believe unless you hold that your beliefs are exclusive and explain everything. Hannah Arendt is brilliant on this point.'

Alexandra gave a practical example. 'Islamic fundamentalists tried to recruit students at a university where I lectured. Now, people have a right to hold the opinions they want – what's important is understanding the organisation behind those beliefs. Is it dangerous? I look at this via my five-point definition of a cult: (1) The leadership is charismatic and authoritarian; (2) The structure of the group isolates people; (3) A total, exclusive ideology meaning other belief systems have no relevance whatsoever; (4) The process of brainwashing: isolation from safe relationships, engulfment within the group and



instilling of chronic fear; and (5) The result, which is followers who do what you say, ignoring their own survival interests.'

Alexandra wanted to stress an important point here. 'It is critical for families who are affected by this to make every effort to keep in touch with someone who has become involved in a cult group.'

In another interview you suggested Trump has the makings of a cult leader. 'His government has many of the characteristics of a cult. Arendt is relevant again – cults are rule-bound but have no bureaucracy. A single point of power – a leader or a leadership team – controls everything.'

You see this as an increasing problem. 'Extremism is on the rise. It was a largely hidden phenomenon until ISIS, which is rightly described as a death cult, as well as the growing global crisis of right-wing extremism. I don't want people to experience what I experienced, the key to which was not my stupidity but not knowing what to look out for. Let me make a comparison – if you know the ways AIDS is transmitted you can take steps to protect yourself from it. You may want sex, but you don't want HIV. The same is true of cults. You may want to help people but not join a cult. If you know the ways in which cults recruit and indoctrinate people, you can protect yourself. Appropriate education about safe versus dangerous relationships is key. It will help combat extremism and as a side-effect, help young people avoid damaging 1:1 relationships. Prevent and related strategies try to train teachers to spot radical students. My view is we need to give students the tools to spot radicalism themselves. We need to empower them, and that's not being done.'

Might you have an interesting story to tell about your career path, the highs and lows of your current role or the professional challenges you are facing? **If you would like to be considered for a 'Careers' interview** in *The Psychologist*, get in touch with the editor Dr Jon Sutton (jon.sutton@bps.org.uk). Of course there are many other ways to contribute to *The Psychologist*, but this is one that many find to be particularly quick, easy and enjoyable.