
Terror and Love

A Study of Brainwashing

Alexandra Stein

In the 1970s I was a young political activist in San Francisco. Toward the end of that decade I tut-tutted as various of my friends abandoned the loose left-wing collectivities that had developed in the Bay Area and disappeared, one by one, into a variety of closed groups: a chauvinistic Hasidic Jewish cult; an unpleasantly aggressive left-wing political group; a therapy group; an organic-vegetable-growing, mountain-living group; an Indian guru-led ashram. These groups pulled my friends away from me, arranged new relationships for them, moved them out of their homes to live with strangers, sometimes far away, and, as alcohol can do with alcoholics, made all of them utterly single-minded and therefore very boring.

You can imagine then, perhaps, how I felt when, in 1991, I myself emerged after a ten-year tenure in a supposedly “Marxist-Leninist” group that had arranged my marriage to a comrade, instructed me to have two children, told me what work to do, made me apply for permission to see my family, and involved me (unknowingly) in the cover-up to a murder. I imagine I, too, had become very boring. As someone who had been independent, intellectual, and a generally well-informed critical thinker, how, I asked myself, as I recovered in a rage, shame-and-

terror-filled daze, how on earth had this happened? *To me?*

First, I wrote a memoir—*Inside Out*. I needed to trace the moment-to-moment lived experience of my submission to this group, known to me only as “The O.” Then I embarked on my graduate education at the University of Minnesota in sociology with this same question as my motivation: how could someone like me have been drawn into a group where my critical thinking had been suspended in such an extreme way? Scholars have a variety of terms for this process: thought reform, brainwashing, coercive persuasion, resocialization, or mind control being just some of these. The end result is what sociologist Ben Zablocki calls *hyper obedience* and *hyper credulity*.

I decided to study—not my group: I knew too much about them already—but another group that I considered to be a political cult: the Newman Tendency, a group based in New York City, active in third-party politics, and run by Fred Newman, a former university lecturer. I wanted to see if the structure and processes of that group fit the criteria for brainwashing that I had experienced in my own group and had since read about in Lifton’s study on the thought reform methods practiced by totalitarian states, and in Lofland’s classic study on the Moonies. Scholars such as Singer, Zablocki, Lalich, and Tourish had more recently extended this work to a range of groups from religious to

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New Age and from human potential to political groups on both right and left. I was interested in how the particular structures and processes of such groups affect the thought processes of their members. Had they experienced the same shutting off of critical thinking that I had? How had this happened? I suspected it was to do with a form of chronic trauma and fear under which people isolated in such systems live. Was this in fact the case?

The late Fred Newman (he died last year at the age of 76), a charismatic and authoritarian figure, founded the Newman Tendency in New York City 40 years ago. It was then called the If . . . Then Collective. A 1972 group publication referred to him as a “benevolent despot.” Sydney, a former member, said:

I liked him! I would have a problem disliking him now even after 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?” [laughs]—“Are you still screwing eighteen women at the same time?” or trying to. But you know, he was a likeable guy! It's true. He had a different aura than a lot of the traditional cult leaders, not like he was unapproachable—you could approach Fred, and he would talk to you at whatever level was appropriate, and he never made you feel like you were nothing or that you were insignificant. He didn't do that, that's not how he ruled—he was much more sophisticated in how he got you.

Former members told me how Newman exerted high degrees of control over their

lives, including personal relationships with family, romantic partners, and children. They spoke of women being instructed to have abortions, children being neglected, existing relationships being broken up while relationships with other members and “bed-hopping” were encouraged. Members devoted all their time to the organization with little sleep and no time off. At the center sat Newman, surrounded by a cadre of lieutenants and a group of members known by former members as the “Lifers.” At its peak, the Tendency had up to 500 full-time members who ran political programs, cultural and theater activities, and always, at the core of things, participated in Social Therapy, a Newman-invented group “therapy.” Members also performed personal services for Newman, who lived in a Greenwich Village brownstone with his inner circle—known as the “Wives” or the “Harem”—largely made up of women who had first attended his therapy group, and then entered into sexual relationships with him.

Like many closed groups, the Newman Tendency was not easy to study. First, one cannot easily talk to current members—I tried. I called one of my old disappeared San Francisco friends to see if she would talk to me. She was polite and friendly but when I asked if I could talk to her about her life in Newman's group she said, “Let me get back to you on that.” She never replied. During my fieldwork attending public events I asked several other members if I could chat to them about their experiences. In the friendliest of ways they would put me off: “Let me get back to you.” None ever did. This was as I expected—in their shoes (which I had indeed been in) I would have done the same.

That is, I would have contacted “leadership,” forwarding as much information as possible, and waited for permission. Apparently Fred Newman didn’t permit.

Fieldwork—in particular overt observation—is also difficult. I had made a decision not to flaunt my background as a former cult member and now researcher of cults, but neither would I attempt to hide it. Besides, an Internet search of my name quickly reveals my background to any interested parties. This resulted in some interesting incidents. The University of Minnesota purchasing department tried to purchase a \$250 ticket on my behalf for a publicly advertised Social Therapy Awards benefit dinner. The check was returned to the purchasing department with a note stating that I would not be “an appropriate attendee.” Purchasing called my department quite confused as they had never before had a vendor refuse a check.

Later I visited the Atlanta Social Therapy office and asked the lead therapist for an interview about their activities. He put me off but invited me to observe a public meeting for their theater project volunteers. He told me: “Let me think about if I have time for an interview. Check back tomorrow.” When I called back he said neither he nor anyone else had time to talk and further, the meeting I had been invited to was just for volunteers and I wouldn’t be an “appropriate” participant.

How is the researcher to research such an organization? In addition to archival research and observation I decided to focus on interviews with former members. Along with unstructured interviews, I also crossed fields into psychology, building on an exist-

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ing methodology that uses a close analysis of how participants speak. Memories of unresolved trauma, according to this method, can be observed in the way a participant uses language to narrate their experience to an interviewer.

I decided to do a comparative study. I chose another third-party group, the Green Party, as a non-coercive organization, in order to highlight differences in the operation of an open organization compared with the coercive methods of the closed Newman Tendency. I identified the following five elements of a “totalist” organization, drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt and Robert Jay Lifton. The Newman Tendency met all five criteria, while the Green Party matched none.

Leadership: The Existence of a Charismatic Authoritarian Leader

Fred Newman was the undisputed and idealized leader of the Tendency: a “benevolent despot,” according to his own publication. Celia described how her anger about his control and contemptuous behavior toward members was turned around by his charisma in therapy sessions:

By the end of the group, I was so elated and happy and thankful for the wisdom that I thought he had imparted, and it was like, you know, dependent on whether he picked me to make a point or asked me a question or said “Yes, you’re right!” And those were the moments of, you know, elation in therapy where—where I did something right or I said something right or I got it. [. . .] By the end of the group, I—I mean, those feelings of uneasiness in the beginning would turn into feelings of guilt. Why are you feeling this way towards him? Look at what he’s saying or doing. You know, and that would turn into feelings of love and euphoria for our—the work we were doing. It was just this weird roller coaster ride.

The Green Party, in contrast, has no single leader and it consciously promotes a policy and structure of “weak leadership” to combat the emergence of such “cults of personality.” For example, at a party meeting I attended, the chair performed strictly administrative and facilitative roles. In fact, the chair was the outgoing chair and was handing the role over to someone else—the Green Party encourages rotating leadership.

Structure: A Hierarchical Closed Structure

Newman was surrounded by the closed inner circle of his “Harem” and then by a further group of “Lifers.” Beyond that the rank and file membership are organized into secret cells who are, according to former member Marina Ortiz, under group discipline “24/7.” Nearly all members are in So-

cial Therapy (which they pay for), and they work in the various internal and public parts of the organization. There are three overlapping sets of front groups that have a public presence. Social Therapy exists as both a public and internal operation and has been in place since the very start of the group. The Tendency also operates as a political entity—most recently in the Independence Party. And it runs various cultural activities, such as the Castillo Theater that produces plays—the vast majority are written by Newman.

Members’ lives are almost entirely encapsulated within the group. A typical day might include up to 18 to 20 hours of group activity. Linda worked a 9 to 6 shift doing administrative work for a variety of the front groups. She then ate at her desk and from 6 to 10 or 11 p.m. she worked a fundraising phone shift (others might go out door knocking). After that, she could expect to have a staff meeting or “have a drink with some leadership people—leadership people were always organizing drinks [. . .] so there was always something.” These late night “drinks” involved discussing the group’s work, politics, or one’s political development. Linda estimates she got an average of four hours of sleep a night for the eight years of her membership. Members find it hard to leave the group, or, in some cases, even to imagine life outside. Those who are able to leave find it a highly traumatic experience.

The Green Party, on the other hand, has a structure that is flat, decentralized, and demands only a partial commitment from its members. Green Party locals are autonomous, and may choose whether or not to affiliate with the national organization.

Ideology: A Total Belief System

The total ideology—meaning a single belief system that covers all areas of life for all time and all circumstances—was dictated by Newman. Members speak a kind of jargon filled with repetitive words and phrases taken from Newman’s speeches and writings: “development and growth,” “performance,” “being conflicted” are just a small sample. Over the years Newman moved the ideology from a vaguely anarchic anti-capitalism through a Marxist-Leninist phase of “working-class revolution,” to its current “post-modern” view: a “historical totality that has no beginning, middle, or end, no starting point. In fact it has no point at all.” Newman responded to dissent by purging and expelling those who disagreed with him.

Although this may seem bizarre, many totalist groups radically change their ideologies at the leader’s whim while managing to retain followers. For example, Lyndon LaRouche, (briefly in coalition with Newman) runs an international group that began in 1968 as a leftist group emerging from the student movement. A few years later, however, he began to turn the group into its current anti-Semitic, homophobic, and racist right-wing incarnation. Nonetheless, he retains many of the original members. How

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leaders manage to achieve this remarkable feat is the very question at the heart of the study of brainwashing. In fact, it is not the ideology *per se* that controls followers—the ideology works within the context of the other controlling elements of the totalist system.

Ideologically the Green Party has a unifying set of Ten Key Values, ranging from “Grassroots Democracy” to “Ecological Wisdom,” but within these discussion, disagreement and voicing of opinions are encouraged. Unlike Newman Tendency members, Greens are not expected to give up other activities or belief systems (i.e. particular religious beliefs) in service to the party. Dissent and a plurality of views are seen as healthy attributes.

Process: The Use of Coercive Persuasion/Brainwashing

Newman created Social Therapy, a form of group therapy that functions as a recruitment tool, fundraising operation, and, most importantly, as a key site for the maintenance of loyalty and obedience to the group. All group members, at one time or another, attend Social Therapy, a form of attack-therapy where patients find themselves on the “hot seat,” where they have their real or imagined weaknesses exposed and attacked:

It was the most intense thing I’ve ever been through. When I think back, I’m surprised I survived, but it was real intense. [. . .] They would push you on an issue past your breaking point.

Once consolidated in the group, Social Therapy ceased being about individual problems but became about maintaining the indoctrination of group members. Myrna describes the full time cadres' group therapy:

We had to learn how to be political. Because everything we do is political and, if we have personal problems it's because we're not political enough. If we, if our focus is on our political work, we don't have time for personal problems [laughs]. But that, that's, that was their basis, that you had to be thinking and being political all the time. So there's no time to worry about your personal problems, and if you, you know, like with me, not being able to do the phones [for solicitations], I mean at first it was well, you just have to push yourself, you just have to do it. And I couldn't. I literally couldn't get myself to make these damn phone calls and, but they tried to tell you that [. . .] if you are thinking of what you're doing, what the goal is, the revolution, you know, you have to give up your personal life, your personal needs, your personal wants, for the betterment of the working class, eventually, and the revolution. And, you feel guilty if you don't! If you want time, if you want a day off, you want an afternoon off to go swim in the summertime, want to go to the movies, you feel, you're made to feel guilty because you're taking away from, you know, helping people, helping poor people. I'm one of the poor people goddammit! [laughs]. *I'm working class, I'm poor, I need help!*

Yeah, the biweekly cell meetings were more geared to information passing. The

therapy groups were just more into, you know, buckle up! Work! work! work! work! Don't think of anything else.

Social Therapy implements coercive persuasion through (largely non-violent) means of social influence by isolating members from their prior sources of social support, presenting the group as the only remaining support, and bringing to bear a new totalistic belief system through intense group pressure and psychological attacks.

There is no evidence of the practice of coercive persuasion seen in the Green Party. Neither is there evidence of attempts to isolate members from their pre-existing social contacts.

Result: Exploitation of Followers

Newman Tendency members reported enormous amounts of unpaid labor, coercion to donate assets, high dues (with punishments for lack of payment), breakup of sexual relationships for the purpose of providing Newman with additional sexual partners, and in general the control of relationships with family, lovers, children, and friends. Money, labor, and sexual favors flowed up the chain of command, while orders and the total ideology were passed down from Newman to the membership. The Tendency maintained an arms cache and engaged in weapons training to protect Newman and the assets he controlled. Levels of loyalty were extreme. As Celia told me, "I remember feeling like I would take a bullet for Fred."

Greens did not report exploitation. Participation was strictly voluntary and based

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on what each individual wished to contribute at a given time. Greens' personal lives and relationships were largely unaffected by their party membership.

Although both groups were involved in third-party politics, Newman Tendency members were isolated within a rigid structure and belief system, while Greens simply added their activities in the party to their existing social worlds. So, did Newman Tendency former members show evidence of trauma in describing their experiences? And would this differ from the narratives of former Greens?

I did in-depth interviews modeled on the Adult Attachment Interview, which explores the use of language as a marker of how memory has been stored in the brain. People who have experienced unresolved trauma tend to be less able to recount these experiences in a coherent way—rather they show lapses of various kinds in thinking and in how they speak. So, even if the incident took place a long time ago, the ability to recount experiences in a coherent narrative may be affected. I thought this would work well with evaluating the retrospective accounts of former members, especially as current members were unavailable to participate.

Below are a selection of accounts of traumatic episodes which are recounted in a va-

riety of non-coherent ways. That is, they are not fluid or balanced, but, rather, indicate a continued trauma response, sometimes decades after the fact.

Myrna had left the Tendency a decade earlier. Here she describes her tenure on the security team that guarded overnight the various group-run facilities—such as the theater and Social Therapy centers:

So once the—it was our job, once it was closing time, to make sure everybody left the building then lock up downstairs, lock up upstairs, go through the upstairs, make sure nobody was hiding and make sure we knew where the guns were, where the alarms were, who to call in case of trouble—not the police! Of course not. [...]

And just the idea that I might have to shoot somebody—or that we might get broken into, get shot, you know. I mean I, I felt confident that, I also, before, when I was living in [City 1] I took self defense courses and then I taught self defense, so I knew I could handle myself physically—um, but I didn't know about running across people with guns, you know. So there was always, there, at the back of your mind you're always, when you're on the security shifts, worried about you know, you know, if something would happen to like one of your, you know, "I wish I was home," you know.

A kind of vague fear was reported by several participants. For example:

I had a fear of the void of not being involved—that something bad was going to

happen to me—it was just really, it really all, it was just, all con, all consuming—and I don't mean that positively.

Ruiz describes how he was “frightened all the time” while in the group, and says: “I mean, it's—it's hard to—I went in so young it's hard to judge, you know, what I would be like if I didn't go in um—go in, it sounds like prison.”

Denise talks about a time 20 years prior to the interview when she was on the road petitioning to get the Newman presidential candidate, Lenore Fulani, on the ballot:

In State 5, well, in City 3—I can't remember to be honest with you, I think I was in State 5 second 'cause in State 5 is where my body physically just stopped. I got, and I was so afraid—um—of not being able, of what, what they might do to me. I was just, like, so—you know that, that story about the elephant and he's hooked up with a, a chain on the pole, and he's trying to, you know, little elephant and he's trying to get, break free—then there's, as, ele—eventually you can hook the elephant up with a rope because in their mind, in that animal's mind it, like, believes that it can't break free, and that's what it was like for me, looking back.

Finally, leaving the Newman Tendency was a traumatic experience for former members. Gillian described it as:

... unbelievably bad. I can't even begin to explain. It was just, I, I, I honestly don't know how I did it, how I didn't end up in a

hospital or something. I mean I really performed well. I mean, I kept up with all my kids, and my responsibilities but [. . .] oh my god, I would just, I couldn't stop crying. I could not. I mean, just. . . I can't even, I just felt like screaming, I, it was horrible for the first few months, just horrible.

Former Greens, on the other hand, recounted their experiences easily, with neither stories of abuse, nor with the kind of disoriented language reflecting a memory of trauma. They certainly had disagreements, and even some anger on leaving, but leaving the group was not a traumatic split. For example, Kelly describes her post-Green life in a fresh, balanced, humorous, and coherent way,

Hmm, yeah, I just think it's like, it would be like we're neighbors but we, and we don't even need a big fence between our yards [laughs,] you know, we're just, we're just co-existing, we're not, we don't really have a relationship.

Former Newman Tendency members said that they felt a great relief in telling me their stories—even years after the fact, they still were absorbed and tangled in their memories; they were glad of the opportunity to try to piece their stories together in the presence of a sympathetic and interested listener. The Greens were friendly and helpful, but there wasn't a sense that telling the story itself was important to them.

In the Newman Tendency the group member is isolated from former sources of

support and is then put under intense pressure, whether through Social Therapy, overwork, lack of sleep and time, or other forms of pressure. They no longer have anyone to turn to for support other than the group itself, which is in fact the source of the fear and stress. This double-bind is known as a situation of “fright without solution” and is also seen in controlling domestic violence, in hostage situations, and some forms of child abuse. When leaders or other dominant persons employ a strategy of combining isolation, terror, and “love,” persons subjected to this may experience this “fright without solution,” with consequent impairments in cognitive and emotional functioning.

I remember well the feeling of pushing back critical thoughts about my group, “The O”—there was no-one to share them with, and I was bound to get punished in some way if I expressed them. It was almost a physical feeling of pushing the thoughts from the front of my head to the back, much as one pushes a hot pan to the back burner. My emotional life, too, was largely suppressed during my tenure in the group.

We have examples throughout history of people becoming subject to this type of control—from small cults like the suicidal Heaven’s Gate, to whole nations under the genocidal sway of charismatic authoritarian leaders such as Hitler or Pol Pot. Yet still, despite the involvement of whole populations, we focus on individual vulnerabilities rather

than on understanding the methods of these types of totalitarian organizational forms and processes.

Given the current resurgence of grassroots activism, and in particular the very open, democratic form of the Occupy movement, this is an important time to understand these dangers. Highly disciplined, isolating, and closed groups can enter into these open forums and recruit those who do not have an understanding of these processes. A disciplined group with a clear message can seem, from the outside, to be very appealing. But beware—it may not be what it appears. An isolating group led by a charismatic authoritarian leader wielding a totalist ideology can cause most of us to lose our minds.

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Suggested Reading

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