

## Review

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# The interior world of the cult

Roshi Naidoo

Alexandra Stein, *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in cults and totalitarian systems*, Routledge 2017

*Terror, Love and Brainwashing* is one of those books - the sort you want to tell everyone to read; the kind you've made copious notes in the margins of (often with a 'yes' followed by an exclamation mark); and one that does that rare thing of moving you out of your familiar disciplinary space, while challenging what you thought you knew already.

Stein brings together social psychology and the insights gained from emerging theories in neuroscience, and couples these with an astute political analysis informed in part by Hannah Arendt's work on totalitarianism: drawing on all these, she uses attachment theory to explore how cults and groups that employ totalising world views isolate, control and disempower individuals, causing them to act against their own interests. The goal of the leader, she notes, is to 'control the very *self*, the interior as well as the exterior world of the follower' (p3), and it is this process of colonisation that she takes us through, so the question of, 'why didn't they leave?' and other-victim-blaming impulses find their answer.

Stein applies the idea of disorganised attachment to map the relationship between leader and follower, and draws on trauma theory to explore how the brain responds to stress. Important to this is understanding 'fright without solution'

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- the process which describes how children respond to situations whereby the caregiver is the source of fear, yet also the only source of comfort. This impossible dilemma disrupts the primary evolutionary and biological need to seek nurturing attachments, and causes 'disorganized attachment', creating disassociation. This is not an explanation of people who get caught in cults though:

My contention is that the system itself acts upon followers and, *regardless of their original attachment status*, attempts to *change* that status, to what is known as disorganized attachment (p28).

Understanding how power operates, both internally and externally, is crucial to her analysis, and from the Khmer Rouge to domestic abuse, she finds parallels in how people are made pliant psychologically, linguistically and economically.

What make this especially compelling and readable are the stories of people who have left totalist groups, especially that of the author herself who escaped from a political cult in the USA. Stein's time as a member of the O. cult not only gives her a unique insider take on the subject, but also allows the voices of the people whose experiences she explores to resonate, not as objects of social research, but as subjects bravely speaking out. And this is particularly important because we learn that such people don't set out to join closed, oppressive, damaging groups but encounter them en route to other things in their lives (they may be between relationships or starting college for example), and are then subjected to processes which at the beginning are innocuous, and often prey on their desire to change themselves or the world for the better. We also learn that, contrary to what we may think, it can happen to anyone.

If we were honest we might admit that, with the emergence of each new and lurid story in the press about people trapped in the thrall of an authoritarian or charismatic leader, we wonder why such people didn't run away, or challenge their oppressor. We silently assume that they have a character flaw, or some irreversible damage, and that we ourselves would not succumb to such obvious nonsense. And this is where the detailed psychological research really comes together to frame Stein's powerful argument, because if we understand the social and psychological processes that such groups employ then any one of us, in the right circumstances, can come under their malevolent influence.

Stein explores a number of other common misconceptions. For example,

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countering the idea that the cult offers 'community', she responds that 'the key experience of membership in a totalist group is one of isolation, not community or comradeship' (p21): relationships both with the outside world and within are closely policed. She also makes us aware of the false dichotomy between 'free speech' and 'repression' that totalist groups can employ when they are prevented from recruiting on university campuses; 'speech that is emanating from organizations that use coercive techniques to recruit and retain members ... cannot be called "free"' (p208).

In a sense the ideologies that the case studies come from are less important than the systems they use to isolate and control members, though they have a key function: 'the ideologies of totalism claim to supply the answers to all possible questions for all time' (p12). This is summed up well in the introduction when Stein talks of her colleagues who have between them escaped from groups as different on the surface as Jehovah's Witnesses, the LaRouche cult, guru-worshippers, Trotskyist cults, Moonies, and neo-Nazi skinheads; yet who share strikingly similar experiences of trauma, terror and powerlessness. This is also illustrated by the fact that cults can radically change their ideological position whilst retaining original members. 'It is the process of how a set of beliefs work in a *totalizing manner* with the presence of charismatic authoritarianism that clues us in to be alert for abuses, and further, that those abuses are likely to be conducted in secret, and with the victims' ability to name, resist and escape the abuse greatly impaired' (pp207-8).

Stein is careful to precisely delineate the characteristics of such groups, and resists the idea that, for example, all religions are cults, a sort of thinking that is not terribly helpful. However, she also cautions against casting the net too narrowly - focusing only on religious groups, to the exclusion of non-religious cults that have a veneer of respectability, such as those selling 'personal growth'. Understanding how secretive organisations with a benign façade operate is a crucial part of being able to challenge them. That, in the end, is Stein's main plea, and her urgent message is for a public health approach, with preventative education on how cult recruitment operates and can be stopped being the key.

The timing for a better understanding of these issues couldn't be more pertinent. This is not just in relation to the bafflement we face at every new act of terror perpetrated by a suicide bomber ('what do they want?'); but also in relation to understanding why people don't immediately speak out about abuse. For me, personally, *Terror, Love and Brainwashing* further illuminates Judith Herman's ground-

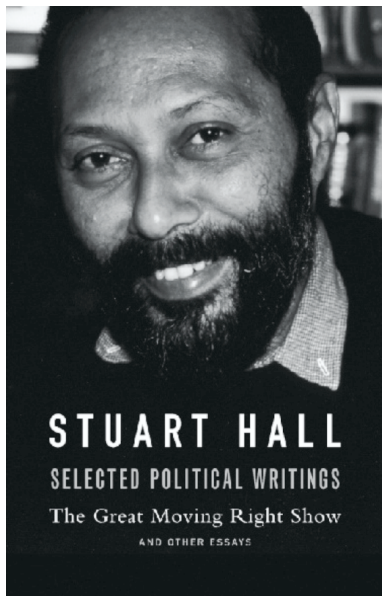
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breaking work on trauma and complex post-traumatic stress disorder, and provides another layer of understanding to how the 'learned helplessness' of trauma-inducing domestic and child abuse can be replicated on a larger scale.

A few years ago, while at a rally in London in support of the public sector, I saw a young man trying to sell a newspaper from his political group to a middle-aged man preparing to march. 'No thank you', the man said politely. To which the younger man exploded, 'Oh, so you agree with austerity and what the Tories are doing do you?'. 'Obviously not', said the older man, 'as I wouldn't be here'. 'You should buy this paper to make you understand what's going on', he persisted. 'I know what's going on, I'm an economist!', the man shouted back.

*Terror, Love and Brainwashing* gives a context to this absurd, illogical, yet familiar, encounter - and I now look back at it with more sympathy and empathy for the younger man than I had at the time.

**Roshi Naidoo** is a member of the *Soundings* editorial collective.



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