The events of January 6, 2021 gave new currency to the idea of brainwashing. Some claimed that Trump’s followers had been brainwashed, while others insisted that a “deep state” had brainwashed most Americans into accepting a rigged election. Scholars who explain that brainwashing theories have long been rejected by most academics and courts of law find it difficult to be heard. Brainwashing nevertheless remains a convenient explanation of how seemingly normal citizens convert to unusual religious or political ideologies. This Element traces its origins to the idea that conversion to deviant beliefs is due to black magic. A more scientific hypnosis later replaced magic and the Cold War introduced the supposedly infallible technique of brainwashing. From the 1960s, new religious movements, more commonly called cults, were accused of using brainwashing. Most scholars of religion reject the theory as pseudoscience, but the controversy continues to this day.

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BRAINWASHING

Reality or Myth?

Massimo Introvigne
CESNUR, Center for Studies on New Religions
Brainwashing

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Elements in New Religious Movements

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Abstract: The events of January 6, 2021 gave new currency to the idea of brainwashing. Some claimed that Trump’s followers had been brainwashed, while others insisted that a “deep state” had brainwashed most Americans into accepting a rigged election. Scholars who explain that brainwashing theories have long been rejected by most academics and courts of law find it difficult to be heard. Brainwashing nevertheless remains a convenient explanation of how seemingly normal citizens convert to unusual religious or political ideologies. This Element traces its origins to the idea that conversion to deviant beliefs is due to black magic. A more scientific hypnosis later replaced magic and the Cold War introduced the supposedly infallible technique of brainwashing. From the 1960s, new religious movements, more commonly called cults, were accused of using brainwashing. Most scholars of religion reject the theory as pseudoscience, but the controversy continues to this day.

Keywords: brainwashing, mind control, mental manipulation, cults, new religious movements, cult controversies, cult wars

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Introduction

On January 6, 2021, Trump supporters assaulted the US Capitol and interrupted a joint congressional session convened to certify Joe Biden’s victory in the 2020 presidential elections. International media started paying more attention to a large network of conspiracy theorists called QAnon, which had played a role in preparing for the January 6 events.

One question many asked was: How was it possible that otherwise ordinary Americans, some with college degrees, followed QAnon and proclaimed their belief that the elections had been stolen by a cabal of corrupt politicians whose leaders worshipped Satan through pedophile rituals? One answer that emerged was that QAnon was a cult that used brainwashing to recruit followers. A larger pro-Trump network was also accused of using brainwashing. Activists who, since the 1970s, had accused new religious movements of gaining converts through brainwashing were interviewed by mainline media (see e.g., Milbank 2021). Sometimes they were taken more seriously than scholars who tried to explain that brainwashing theories had long before been rejected as pseudo-scientific by the majority of academics who had studied them.

Why do theories of brainwashing resurface so often? This Element explores the question historically. Since ancient times, all societies have considered certain forms of belief and behavior as deviant. They have asked why some individuals embrace doctrines and practices that the majority regard as strange, bizarre, heretical, or harmful. Section 1 shows that this question is old. Several ancient cultures believed that those who embraced deviant beliefs did not do so freely, but were manipulated by the gods, Fate, or evil humans through black magic. In the nineteenth century, the theory that those converting to deviant religions, including Mormonism, were manipulated through black magic was secularized by claiming that they were victims of hypnosis.

These theories, as discussed in Section 2, were not applied to aberrant beliefs in the field of religion only. Political ideologies were also targeted. From the 1920s, German Marxist and Freudian scholars tried to explain why, contrary to what their theories might predict, not only the bourgeoisie but a sizable number of blue-collar workers were enthusiastically joining the National Socialist Party. Their answer was that the Nazis had developed new effective techniques of mind control. After World War II, the same questions were raised in the United States with respect to Communism, an ideology also considered so absurd that no normal citizen would willingly embrace it.

While scholars struggled to confirm the existence of these techniques empirically, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), unencumbered by such scholarly subtleties, launched a massive propaganda effort to denounce mind control as
allegedly practiced by the Soviets and the Chinese. The word “brainwashing” was coined in 1950 by Edward Hunter, a CIA agent who had a cover job as a journalist. Several publications followed. A popular 1959 novel, *The Manchurian Candidate*, adapted as a movie in 1962, made brainwashing a household word. To some extent, the CIA believed its own propaganda and tried to replicate the alleged Communist brainwashing through its own project, MK-ULTRA, with inconclusive results.

**Section 3** follows the scholarly efforts of the 1960s to document brainwashing as reportedly practiced in China. Early on, scholars such as Robert Jay Lifton and Edgar Schein believed they had found some empirical evidence of the existence of unusual Chinese persuasion techniques. Lifton called them “thought reform,” and Schein “coercive persuasion.” The section also follows Lifton and Schein’s subsequent careers, and their application of mind control models beyond Communist regimes.

In **Section 4**, I show how brainwashing theories were transferred from politics to religion by a leading British psychiatrist, William Sargant, who argued that mainline religions had learned to practice brainwashing long before Communism. Not surprisingly, Sargant’s book did not please religionists. More popular was the theory developed in the 1970s by American psychologist Margaret Singer, which argued that not all religions, only cults, used brainwashing. Meanwhile, the proliferation of new religious movements in the United States and elsewhere had led to the creation of anticult organizations. They adopted the ideology of brainwashing and promoted the practice of deprogramming, aimed at reversing the brainwashing allegedly operated by the cults. The section follows the so-called cult wars, in which Singer and those who shared her theory – the anticultists and the deprogrammers – crossed swords with scholars of new religious movements. The latter argued that brainwashing was a pseudoscientific concept used to discriminate against unpopular religions. The opponents of brainwashing achieved important legal successes in the 1990s in the United States, although anti-brainwashing laws were passed in some European countries and Russia and China also officially adopted anticult theories.

**Section 5** concludes the Element by showing that, while rejected by a solid majority of academic scholars of religion and American courts of law, brainwashing is still very much part of popular culture. It often resurfaces in media accounts of controversial religions. It has also emerged in new incarnations such as parental alienation syndrome (PAS) theory, which claims that one divorced parent often brainwashes children into hating the other parent. The events of January 6, 2021 showed how much brainwashing language is still with us, while
some of those who stormed the Capitol also believed their critics were brainwashed.

While “cult” is a pejorative word that describes religions of which broader society disapproves, I will nevertheless use it throughout the Element because those who subscribe to brainwashing theories employ it. The distinction between legitimate religions, which do not utilize brainwashing, and cults, which supposedly do, is not part of accepted social science. The scholarly community that studies new and alternative religions ultimately rejected brainwashing theories, finding that they are circular. While proponents of brainwashing claim they are considering only deeds and bracketing creeds, in fact they are targeting unpopular beliefs. These theories claim that some groups are cults because they use brainwashing – sometimes called mind control, thought reform, coercive persuasion, menticide, and other euphemisms that basically have the same meaning. Proponents “know” that cults use brainwashing because nobody, without being brainwashed, would embrace the strange beliefs of these religions.

Scholars of new religious movements, including myself, who reject the theory of brainwashing are often accused by anticult activists of being cult apologists, for whom no cults are dangerous or criminal. Others see them as extreme cultural relativists who are persuaded that deviance is a purely subjective notion. I do not know any mainline scholar of new religious movements who would support this position. I myself created the category of “criminal religious movements” to designate religious groups that commit real crimes – such as terrorism, physical violence, pedophilia, and sexual abuse – as opposed to the imaginary crimes of being a cult or practicing brainwashing (Introvigne 2018). Criminal religious movements exist within both the oldest and the newest religious traditions. Pedophilia, for example, is statistically more prevalent in the Catholic Church and other mainline denominations than in new religious movements, although cases have been found in the latter as well (Shupe 1995, 2007).

I believe that criminal behavior should never be tolerated under the pretext of religious liberty. Criminals should be prosecuted. I also believe that chasing imaginary crimes often leads to overlooking real ones.

1 Free Will, Black Magic, and Hypnosis
The Search for Free Will

Every day, we are confronted with shocking news. A seemingly well-adjusted youth murders his parents. A model employee runs away with the company till. A promising graduate student drops out of college to become a full-time disciple
of a controversial Eastern guru. We naturally wonder whether these acts derive, in fact, from free choices. Did that person really commit the act, or was she acted upon by external forces?

The question is not new. Greek tragedy suggested one possible answer: that we are not free but are instead like branches tossed about by a domineering wind called Fate or Destiny, or by the whims of unpredictable deities. Oedipus commits what to all appearances are horrible crimes, such as patricide and incest, yet Sophocles (497–406 BCE) suggests he is not guilty, having been deceived by Fate and the gods.

Asia had its own explanation of apparently absurd human actions and beliefs. They are the results of karma, an inexorable law causing our past lives, that we do not normally remember, to affect our present lives.

In several cultures, those who performed inexplicable deeds or embraced deviant beliefs were regarded as possessed by demons or evil spirits, or as victims of black magic performed by sorcerers. Others offered astrological determinism as an explanation, believing that stars can force people to a certain behavior.

If such is the case, humans are not ultimately responsible for their actions, and nobody should be punished by the law. The ancient Roman legal system solved the problem by maintaining that, when judged by courts of law, human actions should conventionally be considered as responsible acts imputable to their actors, no matter what their ultimate cause (Daube 1969). Let’s imagine, for example, that Caius murdered his neighbor. Perhaps the ultimate reason for his actions stemmed from a joke that the supreme god Zeus played on him, or from Fate’s inexorable web. The Roman judge, however, would not have been interested in such ultimate issues and would have attributed the proximate responsibility for the murder to Caius.

Christianity radically changed this state of affairs. After centuries of theological elaboration based on clear Jewish precedents, Christians, like Jews, regarded humans as fully responsible for their actions. Both the Christian doctrine of original sin and its New Testament interpretation stress that humans are free to choose between good and evil. Eventually, the Christian Church banned astrological determinism and doctrines of reincarnation. It did not ban belief in demons, however, but taught that if the Devil does tempt human beings, temptation can always be resisted. Thus, those who yield to temptation are guilty (Ogliaro 2003).

The triumph of this theory of free will was, however, short-lived. The crisis of the Middle Ages and the rise of Renaissance magic carried with them a return to astrological determinism and the belief that others can control our choices through black magic. Rationalism also raised its own doubts about free will.
One thinker who promoted such doubts was the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who was also the originator of the theory that certain religious choices are so strange that we cannot consider them as free. Well before Hobbes, many had suggested that deviant or heretical religions could not truly be embraced as the result of a free choice. Hobbes, however, widened the field to include any religion that went beyond a vague Deism (Hobbes 1651).

Hobbes’ criticism of religion was continued by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Count of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), and by David Hume (1711–76), the leading British Enlightenment philosopher. Hume believed that psychology was the science to which religion, except perhaps the blandest form of liberal Christianity, must succumb (Yandell 1990). Most Enlightenment thinkers were not atheists. Rather, they followed Shaftesbury’s distinction between a reasonable religion and a fanatical variety generating “pannick” (in modern English, panic: Shaftesbury 1708: 25), which was also adopted by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) in his Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason (Kant 1793).

Eventually, however, Kant’s criticism of the “religion of fanatics” passed to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and opened the door to the philosophers of the so-called Hegelian Left. One of them, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), was a self-professed atheist who proclaimed that religion was a “psychic pathology” (Feuerbach 1841: 89). Karl Marx (1818–83) tried to move Feuerbach’s theory of religion into a more rigorous sociological context, by arguing that “religious consciousness” is a “product of society.” But he still alluded to forms of manipulation hidden beyond religious belief and conversion in his famous formula that “religion is the opiate of the masses” (Marx 1844: 72).

Black Magic and Persuasion, West and East

While a post-Marxist critique of religion would suspect that all conversions have a pathological root, the idea that some religions are so abhorrent that it would be impossible for those in full possession of their mental faculties to freely embrace them is much more ancient. It is not by chance that Paul the Apostle (ca. 5–65 CE) said of Christianity that it was “foolishness to the Gentiles” (I Corinthians 1:23). Actually, Roman scholars did consider Christianity a form of madness, and believed that no solid Roman citizen would freely convert to the new religion. Early Christians were also suspected of secretly using black magic and spells to attract their converts (Stark 1996: 28–29). In turn, in the Middle Ages Christians accused heretics such as the Waldensians of the same black magic practices (de Lange 2000: 49).
As Michel de Certeau (1925–96) indicated, attributing bizarre beliefs to the effects of witchcraft and black magic was even more prevalent in the early modern era than in the Middle Ages, as confidence in free will had weakened (de Certeau 1990). That those professing peculiar beliefs had been bewitched by evil leaders skilled in sorcery was still a popular theory in eighteenth-century Italy, where otherwise skeptical philosophers continued to support it (Ferrone 1989).

The idea that witchcraft and sorcery explained conversions to heterodox religions was not only European. In China, the expression xie jiao was first used by Daoist Tang courtier Fu Ji (554–639 CE) to designate Buddhism, which he denounced as an evil heresy to be eradicated (Wu 2016: 8–9). Today Chinese anticult activists translate xie jiao as “evil cults,” but Western and Chinese scholars agree that the translation is wrong and somewhat anachronistic (Palmer 2012; Zhang 2020).

Xie jiao, or heterodox teachings, have been identified since the seventh century CE as religious movements that threatened the stability and harmony of China. There were two main criteria that identified heterodoxy. The first to be labeled xie jiao were millenarian movements, which announced the end of this world and the imminent advent of a new era when a messianic figure – often, the movement’s own leader – would replace the Emperor. Second, unlike legitimate religions xie jiao were accused of converting their followers through the use of black magic, with secret techniques involving spells, charms, magic mirrors, and poisons (Wu 2017: 57–92).

Apart from the very Chinese theory that the victims may be rescued through the use of “dog blood, a common method for dispelling sorcery” (Wu 2017: 63), the logic was not different from the one sustaining Western accusations that Waldensians and other heretics lured their followers through witchcraft.

Secularizing Black Magic: Conversion through Mesmerism and Hypnosis

Gradually, the black magic theory was secularized. As psychopathological explanations of religious conversion began to take hold, some started to argue that there were psychopaths who knew how to induce madness in their followers. The prophet of Islam, Muhammad, was offered as an example of such a dangerous psychopath. Writing in 1723 in the most influential English newspaper of the time, The London Journal, Thomas Gordon (1695–1750) described Muslims as fanatics “animated by a mad prophet, and a new religion, which made them all mad” (Gordon 1723). Soon, thanks to Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), a mad prophet’s power of converting his followers to madness...
and overcoming their free will took the new scientific name of Mesmerism or hypnotism.

A paradigm similar to hypnotism (the word hypnotism entered into common use much later) was already at work when critics tried to understand how apparently normal citizens converted to a strange new religion such as Mormonism, whose most scandalous feature was polygamy. At first, it was argued that Mormons converted their victims through black magic. Mary Ward – probably a pseudonym for Elizabeth Cornelia Woodcock Ferris (1809–93) – wrote that she based her report, *Female Life among the Mormons* (1855), on direct experience. She stated that the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith (1805–44) “exerted a mystical magical influence over me – a sort of sorcery that deprived me of the unrestricted exercise of free will” (*Ward 1855: 38*).

But we were then in the scientific nineteenth century, when sorcery was no longer an acceptable explanation of how respectable American women could be deprived of their free will. Thus, Ward’s heroine was made to discover that the Mormons’ secret weapon was what “is now popularly known by the name of Mesmerism.” Joseph Smith “came to possess the knowledge of that magnetic influence, several years anterior to its general circulation throughout the country.” *Ward* (1855: 230) added that the Mormon prophet “obtained his information, and learned all the strokes, and passes, and manipulations, from a German peddler, who, notwithstanding his reduced circumstances, was a man of distinguished intellect and extensive erudition. Smith paid him handsomely, and the German promised to keep the secret.”

Historians of Mormonism failed to discover any evidence of a German peddler connected to Joseph Smith, but Mesmerism or hypnotism as secularized black magic became a common nineteenth-century literary device. Its most famous example is Svengali, the diabolical Jewish hypnotist of the 1894 novel *Trilby*. This novel, written and illustrated by a French-born cartoonist and novelist who lived in London, George du Maurier (1834–96), inaugurated the modern phenomenon of the bestseller (*Pick 2000*). Before becoming anathema today because of its antisemitism, the novel was made into several films in the twentieth century. Using his hypnotic powers, Svengali succeeds in turning a girl with no sense of melody into the greatest opera singer of all time. In the process, he subjugates her morally and sexually so completely that he eventually causes her death (*du Maurier 1894*).

In the nineteenth century, it gradually became a cliché to attribute conversions to new religions to Mesmerism. The Adventists, and the more enthusiastic among the Protestant revival movements, were among the religions so accused (*Taves 1999*: 132–35, 161–65). Mormons continued to be targeted as well (*Givens 1997*: 138). The hypnosis paradigm was linked to the fear of the
Other. The Mesmerist who allegedly taught the technique to the Mormons was a stranger, a German, reflecting the Otherness of the Mormon world view (Winter 1998), and Svengali was a Jew.

The definition of Otherness, however, varied with historical context. While it was the Methodists who mostly accused the Mormons of using Mesmerism, in the eighteenth century several patients (ninety-three in just one year in one single London hospital) had been admitted to English bedlams for a mental illness whose simple diagnosis was “Methodism” (Malony 1996: 20).

Anti-Mormonism also introduced another claim later used by anticultists, namely, that movements using hypnosis to convert their followers could not be bona fide religions. In 1877, in an article in the popular Scribner’s Monthly, anti-Mormon John Hanson Beadle (1840–97) confessed that,

Americans have but one native religion [Mormonism] and that one is the sole apparent exception to the American rule of universal toleration . . . Of this anomaly two explanations are offered: one that the Americans are not really a tolerant people, and that what is called toleration is only such toward our common Protestantism, or more common Christianity; the other that something peculiar to Mormonism takes it out of the sphere of religion

(Beadle 1877: 391).

Beadle’s observation held the reader hostage, forcing him to conclude that Mormonism was not a religion. It was only by asserting that Mormonism was not really a religion that the image of the United States as the country of religious freedom could be reconciled with the American reality of anti-Mormon discrimination.

2 Brainwashing and Cold War Propaganda

Theories of Nazi Mind Control

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) offered a novel contribution to the centuries-old negation of free will. While most human beings believe that their choices are free, they are, he argued, largely determined by the unconscious and by our forgotten childhood experiences.

Although Freud was also influenced by his family’s Judaism, his opinions on religion were predominantly negative. For him, religion is the attempt to remain within a childish stage that is fixated on pleasure, rejecting pain and, with it, the real world. He wrote in The Future of an Illusion (1927) that religion was a neurosis, and a childish one at that.

Freud did not, however, believe that religious delusions always arise spontaneously. In most cases, they are instilled through effective techniques that fix their victims in a permanent state of infantilism. In his 1907 article, “About the
Sexual Enlightenment of Children,” Freud approved the anticlerical measures introduced in France and hoped they would protect French children from the sinister techniques of indoctrination that he believed were used by the Catholic Church (Freud 1907).

Around 1920, three students of Freud, all socialist sympathizers, extended their teacher’s critique of religious indoctrination to conservative politics. Paul Federn (1871–1950) was the first to define a psychoanalytical concept of authoritarianism in 1919 (Federn 1919), which came to be shared by Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957) and Erich Fromm (1900–80).

With Freud’s support and approval, Federn, Reich, and Fromm further developed the concept of the authoritarian personality (Anthony 1996: 165–77). They traced its origins primarily to sexual repression and authoritarian childhood education. The belief in an authoritarian worldview, they argued, is the product of a combination of a sadomasochistic predisposition formed in childhood with a cunning ideological indoctrination that manipulates it (Federn 1919; Reich 1933; Fromm 1941).

From 1929, Federn, Reich, and Fromm applied the authoritarian personality model to explain why so many Germans embraced the Nazi ideology. Although their conclusions did not exactly coincide, they all believed that the Nazis had developed a technique of highly effective psychological manipulation and used it on sexually frustrated German workers. This explained why, contrary to what Marxist theory would have predicted, millions of Germans from the working classes had been converted to Nazi ideology.

The idea that reactionary regimes use techniques to indoctrinate individuals who have been so predisposed by the repressive education they had received in childhood became a trademark theory of the so-called Frankfurt School, which proposed a combination of psychoanalysis and Marxism (Jay 1973). The Nazi regime persecuted the leaders of the Frankfurt School, both because they were anti-Nazi and because most of them were Jews. The school’s leaders fled to the United States, where they further explored the manipulative psychological techniques believed to be used by Nazism and Fascism.

**Stalinist Mind Control**

After World War II, the United States turned from its anti-Nazi alliance with the Soviet Union to the Cold War. Communism was by then perceived as just as evil and illogical as Nazism. How seemingly reasonable citizens may become Communist needed to be explained, and it seemed natural to assume that the same sinister techniques of psychological manipulation once used by the Nazis
to convert blue-collar progressive German workers into reactionary Third Reich warriors were known to the Soviets.

In fact, in the 1930s the spectacular trials that Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria (1899–1953), the head of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), staged in the Soviet Union, with the defendants making inexplicable self-incriminating confessions, attracted the interest of the US and German intelligence services. They wondered whether Beria had discovered new persuasion techniques, and whether it would somehow be possible to learn what they were in order to use them for their own purposes. In the 1930s and 1940s, both the US and German intelligence services independently engaged in experiments that made use of hypnosis and drugs to enhance their persuasion capabilities (Schefflin and Opton 1978: 223–24).

In 1943, Canadian American psychologist George Hoben Estabrooks (1895–1973) wrote a book on hypnosis that would later be often quoted in support of brainwashing theories (Estabrooks 1943). In 1945, together with Richard Lockridge (1898–1982), a novelist, Estabrooks published *Death in the Mind*, a popular espionage novel that describes how the Nazis developed a secret weapon for the mental control of American military officers, who then committed unexplainable acts of sabotage (Lockridge and Estabrooks 1945). The secret Nazi weapon was very similar to what five years later would be attributed to the Communists, and identified by a new name – brainwashing.

**Edward Hunter, the Inventor of Brainwashing**

In 1949, two American academics, George Sylvester Counts (1889–1974) and Nucia Perlmutter Lodge, a Russian émigré (1894–1983), published a study of the Stalinist trials in which they accused the Soviet regime of widespread mind control of the Russian population and of attempting to export it to the West (Counts and Lodge 1949). In the same year, a novel by George Orwell (Eric Arthur Blair, 1903–50), *1984*, quickly became a best seller. It was a disturbing depiction of totalitarianism where, among other things, regime bureaucrats claimed that,

> We make the brain perfect before we blow it up. No one whom we bring to this place [the “Ministry of Love” facility, which serves as a concentration camp for dissidents] ever stands out against us. Everyone is washed clean. There is nothing left in them except sorrow for what they have done and love of the Party. It is touching to see how they love the Party. They beg to be shot quickly so that they can die while their minds are still clean

(*Orwell 1949: 113*).

Orwell’s fictional account made a deep impression on Edward Hunter (1902–78), a CIA agent whose cover job was that of a reporter, first with...
English language publications in China and later at the *Miami Daily News*. Testifying before the House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities on March 13, 1958, Hunter repeated under oath that he had coined the expression brainwashing, which he had used for the first time in the *Miami Daily News* on September 24, 1950 after meeting a young Chinese man in Indochina. The man had used the expression *hsi nao* (“wash brain”) when referring to what could happen in China “when somebody said something the Peiping Government wouldn’t like” (Committee on Un-American Activities 1958: 14). However, Hunter also mentioned the “semantics of the Newspeak language described with such genius by George Orwell in his book, *1984*” (Committee on Un-American Activities 1958: 17). Indeed, Orwell’s reference to a “brain [...] washed clean” was the most likely source for Hunter’s invention of brainwashing rather than Chinese acquaintances (Anthony 1996: 69).

Around 1950, the CIA needed to explain why a significant number of apparently normal Westerners had accepted Communist ideology. Hunter played a useful role in offering brainwashing as an answer. Between 1951 and 1960, he published several books on the subject, in addition to giving lectures and testifying before Congress. His *Brain-Washing in Red China* (Hunter 1951), first published in 1951, was reprinted in 1953 to include an account of the Korean War. Known as a primer on brainwashing, the book is, for the most part, a reconstruction and a critique of the Chinese Communist propaganda found in literature, school textbooks, cartoons, and newspapers. In 1956, after the Korean War, Hunter published *Brainwashing: The Story of Men Who Defied It* (Hunter 1956), followed in 1957 by *The Story of Mary Liu* (Hunter 1957), and in 1958 by *The Black Book on Red China* (Hunter 1958).

*Brainwashing: The Story of Men Who Defied It* was purportedly written with the assistance of a Baltimore psychiatrist, Leon Freedom (1897–1969), and later reprinted in an expanded edition under a new title (Hunter 1960). More than *Brain-Washing in Red China*, the 1956 book extensively describes the mind control techniques that were allegedly being used by Russian and Chinese Communists. *The Story of Mary Liu* tells of a heroic Chinese woman who resisted brainwashing. *The Black Book on Red China* is an attack on the atrocities of the Chinese regime, with a chapter on brainwashing.

As was the case for many CIA agents, Hunter’s retirement and the end of the hot phase of the Cold War was a cause of bitterness and disappointment, which led him to become a right-wing extremist. He privately published a magazine, *Tactics*, devoted to reiterating the kind of anti-Communist rhetoric for which he had been famous in the past. By the 1970s, it had become an anachronistic and marginal enterprise.

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For Hunter, the main proof that Communists use brainwashing lies in the absurd nature of Marxist theories that are “so ridiculous and so patently false that an American would be inclined to laugh them off” (Hunter 1951: 224). Only brainwashing can explain why someone would accept them.

Hunter, however, made a distinction between brainwashing (hyphenated at first, later written as one word) and brain-changing. The first is “a system of befogging the brain so a person can be seduced into acceptance of what otherwise would be abhorrent to him” (Hunter 1956: 203). It is brought about by various kinds of pressure that might include beatings and threats, or simply the repetition ad nauseam of a propaganda message. For example, Hunter wrote that the repetition of Communist slogans to a driver who had been stopped in China for driving through a red light was “a form of brainwashing”:

Chiang Kai-shek [1887–1975, the Chinese nationalist leader who fled to Taiwan, from where he opposed the Communists] is no good; it is very bad to pass a red light; America is an imperialist aggressor nation; you should always watch out for red lights; Chiang Kai-shek is a bad bandit; and America is an aggressive, imperialist nation; next time, watch out for the red light (Hunter 1951: 144).

Hunter believed that brainwashing was universal in the Communist world. “A child has to begin indoctrination – brainwashing – from the cradle,” he wrote, and “every man, woman, and child under communism must experience it” (Hunter 1956: 257). But this universal brainwashing was not irresistible: in China “the communist regime knows that vast numbers of people are waiting for the moment when open opposition will be practicable” (Hunter 1956: 278).

Brain-changing, however, is more sinister than brainwashing, Hunter explained. It is “the complete job in all its wickedness.” “Brain-changing means alterations in thinking” (Hunter 1956: 233), brought about through the use of drugs, torture, and neurosurgery. After his early writings, however, Hunter realized that his promotion of the term brain-changing had not been successful, as nobody except himself was using it. He admitted that the word brain-changing “became obscured as brainwashing began to embrace all the available pressures that could be utilized to bend a man’s will and change his attitudes fundamentally” (Hunter 1956: 233). Hunter’s last book on the subject, The Black Book on Red China, listed “hunger, fatigue, tension, threats, violence, and on occasion even drugs and hypnotism” (Hunter 1958: 131) as constituent elements of brainwashing, while torture and drugs were only used in brain-changing.

On the cover of his 1956 book, brainwashing is defined as witchcraft and even a “black Mass” (Hunter 1956: 242) – black magic dressed in the modern
garments of science “like a devil dancing in a tuxedo” (Hunter 1956: 4). Progressing through Hunter’s writings, we find that this return to black magic language goes hand in hand with a growing alarm that “the danger now was not only from underestimating the effects of brainwashing, but of overestimating them!” (Hunter 1956: 12). In fact, Hunter insisted that individuals with strong religious beliefs, or a deep sense of patriotism, could resist brainwashing (although perhaps not brain-changing). For example, he reported that a group of Freemasons captured in the Korean War had succeeded in “keeping themselves whole” and operating a Masonic lodge, even while in jail, thus resisting brainwashing (Hunter 1956: 126).

Toward the end of his life, Hunter claimed that American prisoners in Vietnam had also been subjected to brainwashing programs. This time, they had resisted because, thanks to his books, brainwashing was now known to the American Army (Hunter 1975: 10).

**Brainwashing and Menticide: Joost Meerloo**

The CIA was aware that it needed scientific justification for theories that had, after all, been originally put forth by a humble newspaper reporter. For this reason, it researched European scholarly literature and, encountering the works of Dutch psychologist Joost Abraham Maurits Meerloo (1903–76), decided to support his research on brainwashing.

Meerloo offered a more scientific version of Hunter’s brainwashing theory, introducing at the same time colorful expressions such as menticide (Meerloo 1951) and “rape of the mind.” Meerloo’s eclectic approach combined the theory of conditioned reflexes promoted by Soviet scientist Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936), Cold War propaganda, and psychoanalysis. The Dutch scientist studied Pavlov’s famous experiments, in which a dog accustomed to hearing a bell ring every time it was given food then salivated when the bell rang but no food was served.

In 1944, when he was director of the psychology department in the Dutch government-in-exile in London, Meerloo had already accused the Nazis of using a propaganda technique based on mass hypnosis (Meerloo 1944: 38). The latter, he wrote in 1949, “can convert the civilized being into a criminal sleepwalker” (Meerloo 1949: 83). Later, in his major work, published in the United States in 1956 under the title *The Rape of the Mind* and in England in 1957 as *Mental Seduction and Menticide* (Meerloo 1956), Meerloo noted that Nazi brainwashing was less effective than the Soviet version because the Nazis had not applied Pavlov’s techniques (Meerloo 1956: 48).

The distinction between brainwashing and menticide is not always clear in Meerloo’s writings. Sometimes, he seems to consider brainwashing as a blander
form of menticide, which is also at work in advertising and widespread in modern society; menticide is much more dangerous and may cause “psychic homicide,” as the mind killers may lead the victims to suicide and death (Meerloo 1962: 93–97). Elsewhere, however, he used brainwashing and menticide synonymously (Meerloo, 1957: 91–92).

According to Meerloo, ancient cultures had an insight into brainwashing when they mentioned black magic and the evil eye (Meerloo 1971: 130). In modern times, however, “[n]o brainwashing is possible without totalitarian thinking” (Meerloo 1957: 106). In the end, Meerloo distinguished good from bad “Pavlovian” (i.e., mind control), based on the content of the implanted messages. “One suggestion [that] is not intended,” he wrote, “is that Pavlovian as such is something wrong” (Meerloo 1957: 52), because it is at work every day in all forms of societies (Meerloo 1960). It becomes brainwashing or menticide only when used to promote totalitarian ideologies. Meerloo also cautioned about the use of theories of brainwashing by lawyers:

The concept of brainwashing has already led to some legal implication, and these have led to new facets of imagined crime. . . . Several lawyers consulted me for information about clients who wanted to sue their imaginary brainwashers. The same concept . . . could be used maliciously to accuse and sue anybody who professionally gave advice to people or tried to influence them. . . . The shyster lawyer is now able to attack subtle human relationships and turn them into a corrupt matter. . . . What new possibilities for mental blackmail and sly accusation are open! (Meerloo 1957: 155–57).

Eventually, these cautious remarks were forgotten, and what remained of Meerloo’s work was the fact that a distinguished European psychologist had given some credit to Hunter’s brainwashing allegations. The CIA used this to bolster its own propaganda.

In a speech in May 1953 at a national meeting of Princeton University Alumni, Allen Welsh Dulles (1893–1969, 55), then CIA director, again claimed that only brainwashing could explain why people became Communists. Dulles said that Communists

washed the brain clean of the thoughts and mental processes of the past and, possibly through the use of some “lie serum,” create new brain processes and new thoughts which the victim, parrotlike, repeats . . . . The brain under these circumstances becomes a phonograph playing a disc put on its spindle by an outside genius over which it has no control (Dulles 1953).

The CIA continued to look for scholars ready to confirm these claims for many years. Eventually, it recruited a new generation of younger experts including University of Oklahoma psychiatrist Louis Jolyon (“Jolly”) West
(1924–99), who went on to become director of the Department of Neuropsychiatry at the University of California at Los Angeles and later served as a link with the anticult movement (Marks 1979: 59).

A Brainwashing Manual

Scientology is perhaps the new religious movement most often accused of using brainwashing. It may thus seem surprising that in 1955 the Hubbard Association of Scientologists International – which served as the membership organization for the Church of Scientology until 1984 – published its own booklet titled Brain-Washing: A Synthesis of the Russian Textbook on Psychopolitics. Different theories point to the author as Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard (1911–86), right-wing extremist Kenneth Goff (1909–72), or an anonymous American intelligence agent (Introvigne 2017).

Hubbard was familiar with Hunter’s word “brainwashing,” and in his 1951 book Science of Survival claimed to have uncovered a dangerous form of hypnosis called “pain-drug-hypnosis,” which was similar to the Chinese brainwashing described by Hunter. Hubbard insisted that, “The extensiveness of the use of this form of hypnotism in espionage work is so wide today that it is long past the time when people should have become alarmed about it” (Hubbard 1951: 223).

In a 1956 lecture at the Games Congress – a conference he organized about game theory – Hubbard called Hunter’s text on brainwashing “a fascinating book,” revealing that he was familiar with the latter’s claim that brainwashing originated from Pavlov (Hubbard 2005). At the Games Congress, Hubbard also made the surprising announcement that he was in possession of an obscure book allegedly written by Pavlov that included the most secret techniques of brainwashing:

I happened recently to have gotten hold of the totality of information contained in the book written by Pavlov for Stalin and which hitherto has never been outside the doors of the Kremlin. I have that book. That book never left the Kremlin. Pavlov was not permitted to leave the Kremlin while he was writing that book and he was later more or less held in arrest, but he did not realize it to the end of his life (Hubbard 2005).

It is in this context that the 64-page booklet Brain-Washing was published in 1955. Shortly thereafter, Hubbard mailed it to the FBI and other federal agencies. The FBI’s reaction was that,

the authenticity of this booklet seems to be of a doubtful nature since it lacks documentation of source material and communist words and phrases. Also, there are no quotations from well-known communist works as normally
would be used in a synthesis of communist writings. In addition, the author himself admits that he cannot vouch for the authenticity of this booklet (SAC Los Angeles 1956).

Hunter did not welcome the competition and stated that “the book is a hoax, and what it has mostly achieved is to fool people who think they are getting my *Brain-Washing in Red China* which was based on first hand sources, and put the word into the language” (Kominsky 1970: 544–45). On the other hand, the evaluator at the Operations Coordinating Board of the National Security Council wrote that “if the booklet is a fake, the author or authors know so much about brainwashing techniques that I would consider them experts, superior to any that I have met to date” (Seed 2004: 44).

On December 13, 1955, Hubbard wrote that “there is no political significance attached to it [the booklet]. We couldn’t be less interested [in politics], but brainwashing happens to be a facet of the human mind and it has been necessary to make available to our own people any and all texts which exist on the subject” (Hubbard 1976: 310). In January 1956, Hubbard withdrew the *Brain-Washing* booklet from circulation and asked that all copies be returned to Scientology, following (or so he claimed) “the friendly opinion of the government” (Hubbard 1976: 328). Scientology never reprinted it.

Hubbard’s *Brain-Washing* claims to be a synthesis of manuals circulated in the Soviet Union by Beria before he was executed for treason in 1953 on charges of selling Russian secrets to foreign intelligence agencies. The booklet opens with a speech Beria allegedly gave to the “American students at the Lenin University.” After recalling a few fundamental principles of historical and dialectical materialism, the speech embarks on a detailed discussion of psychopolitics and how pain-drug-hypnosis works. First, the subject is brought to the point of an “artificial breakdown” using beatings and drugs. Then, through hypnosis, the victim is “implanted” with specifically Communist content (*Brain-Washing* 1955: 36)

In the 1950s, a frequent objection to brainwashing theories was that, ultimately, persons under hypnosis would never act in ways radically contrary to their will or self-interest. According to the manual, this objection was itself Communist propaganda, which “may be true of light, parlor hypnotism: it certainly is not true of commands implanted with the use of electric shock, drugs, or heavy punishment” (*Brain-Washing* 1955: 32–33). A note on the back cover of *Brain-Washing* indicates that it was “published as a public service by the Church of Scientology.” An editorial comment was signed by an unknown, and probably nonexistent, Professor Charles Stickley.
One name not mentioned in the Scientology edition of the manual was Kenneth Goff, a former member of the US Communist Party in the 1930s who later converted to a fundamentalist and antisemitic form of Protestantism and became the leader of a Christian Identity educational facility, the Soldiers of the Cross Training Institute (Goff 1948). Goff claimed that before his conversion he had been “conditioned” to Communism by Soviet agents and knew brainwashing through direct experience (Goff 1954). He also insisted that he, rather than Hubbard, was the original compiler of Brain-Washing (Kominsky 1970: 547–49).

In 1970, Morris Kominsky (1901–75), a former Communist Party candidate for governor of Rhode Island in 1938, published a detailed study of Brain-Washing in his book The Hoaxers. Kominsky believed that the author of Brain-Washing was Goff. He included a letter in the book in which Goff insisted that he had privately circulated copies of the booklet before Hubbard published it (Kominsky 1970: 547–49), although Goff’s edition was undated (Goff n.d.) and he could not supply any evidence of when it had been printed.

Opponents of the Church of Scientology believe that it is obvious that Hubbard authored Brain-Washing. For example, ex-Scientologist Bent Corydon regarded as conclusive a statement by Hubbard’s son, L. Ron Hubbard, Jr. (Ron DeWolf, 1934–91), that “Dad wrote every word of it” (Corydon and Hubbard 1987: 108). Corydon also claimed that John Sanborn (1922–2011), who had assisted Hubbard in editing his works, recommended that a fake Soviet manual be produced connecting Communism with Scientology’s worst foe, psychiatry, in order to discredit the latter. Hubbard then “disappeared into this little front room [of his home in Phoenix] which was sort of bedroom and study, and you could hear him in there dictating his book” (Corydon and Hubbard 1987: 108).

Hubbard reported his version of the origin of Brain-Washing in two of his Operational Bulletins, dated December 13 and 19, 1955. According to the second Bulletin, “fortuitously, in Phoenix there came into our hands two manuscripts . . . left there at the front desk with the request that they be mailed back to their owner” (allegedly “Charles Stickley”) and “we are not sure exactly from whom these came.” Subsequently, as the first Bulletin related, “Some of the mystery concerning the manuscript on brainwashing which came into our hands in Phoenix was resolved when it was discovered that a book called Psychopolitics (spelled with a K) is in the Library of Congress. It is in German. It was written by a man named Paul Fadkeller, and was published in Berlin in 1947” (Hubbard 1976: 309 and 312).
Hubbard added, “Although I may be misinformed, and I definitely do not read German, this book [Brain-Washing] is probably the Russian translation.” He also noted in the second Bulletin that “we read it off onto a tape, compiling the two manuals and removing from them some of their very verbose nomenclature,” and decided to publish the booklet as an aid to Dianetics auditors who might have to work with brainwashing victims (Hubbard 1976: 309 and 312).

On “Fadkeller,” Hubbard was indeed misinformed. The actual name was Paul Feldkeller (1889–1972), and he was a German neo-Kantian philosopher. The only elements that his work (Feldkeller 1947), indeed published in Berlin in 1947 and a copy of which was in the Library of Congress, shares with Brain-Washing are some references to hypnosis and Nazi mass manipulation, and the use (but with a different meaning) of the term psychopolitics. Feldkeller’s book is definitely not the German original of Brain-Washing.

That Hubbard wrote the booklet remains possible, perhaps even probable. An alternative possibility is that, given the interest of the American government and the CIA in the subject, a governmental agency prepared one or more manuscripts based on Soviet and American Communist tracts and Hunter’s writings. The manuscripts were then forwarded, more or less anonymously, to Hubbard, and possibly to Goff as well. That the FBI doubted their authenticity does not exclude the possibility that the CIA might have produced them. Sometimes the FBI was not kept informed of the projects of the CIA or other agencies. The whole story of American intelligence involvement in the brainwashing controversy is so convoluted that this hypothesis cannot be excluded.

The reason why critics of Scientology insist that Hubbard wrote the booklet is that they claim it was later used as a manual to practice brainwashing in the Church of Scientology. The smoking gun, critics argue, is a July 22, 1956, Technical Bulletin of Dianetics and Scientology in which Hubbard claimed “We can brainwash faster than the Russians (20 secs to total amnesia against three years to slightly confused loyalty)” (Hubbard 1976: 474).

Critics read in these words an endorsement of brainwashing. On the contrary, however, Hubbard’s works denounced brainwashing as something that should not be practiced, both on moral grounds and because it represents the triumph of everything Scientology found reprehensible and harmful in modern psychiatry. Hubbard also believed that brainwashing was useless, as it would reduce its victims to human shipwrecks, rather than converting them to new ideas.
I repeat that. It is not effective. It does not do a job. . . . It is a hoax – a hoax of the first order of magnitude. The Communist cannot brainwash anybody who is not [already] brainwashed. He cannot do it; he does not know how. It is one of these propaganda weapons. That’s all it is. They [Communists] say, “We have this terrific weapon called brainwashing – we’re going to brainwash everybody.” Well, it would be awfully dangerous if they could. But do you know there is practically not a person in this room that would be permanently harmed by brainwashing, except as it related to being starved and kept under conditions of duress. In other words, if you put a guy into a military stockade and fed him poorly for two or three years, he is going to be in secondhand condition, isn’t he? Well, that’s just exactly the effect brainwashing had on them. It had no more effect than this (Hubbard 2005).

As we will see in the section “The CIA’s Brainwashing Experiments: MK-ULTRA,” the CIA experimented with brainwashing and came to the same conclusions as Hubbard. Brainwashing, or pain-drug-hypnosis, can destroy its victims, but not convert them to new beliefs.

The Manchurian Candidate

*The Manchurian Candidate*, a novel published by Richard Thomas Condon (1915–96) in 1959, was probably more influential than any nonfictional account of Communist mind control in making brainwashing a household concept in the United States and beyond. The 1962 film adaptation, directed by John Frankenheimer (1930–2002), was released at the height of tension between the United States and the USSR due to the Cuban missile crisis. (The 2004 remake, in which the Gulf War replaces the Korean War, drops the theme of Communist brainwashing.)

In the book, and in the 1962 movie, US sergeant Raymond Shaw (played by Laurence Harvey, 1928–73) and his unit under the command of Captain Ben Marco (played by Frank Sinatra, 1915–98) are captured by the North Koreans. Shaw is taken to a tent where the sinister Dr. Yen Lo drugs the whole American patrol and subjects them to hypnosis. In the movie, Yen Lo was portrayed by Khigh Alx Dhiegh (Kenneth Dickerson, 1910–91). The actor looked very much Asian but was in fact of mixed Egyptian and English ancestry, although he later founded a Taoist Sanctuary in Hollywood.

In the novel, Yen Lo organizes a demonstration of his results for the benefit of visiting Soviet KGB agents. The doctor’s opening speech recaps the ideas on brainwashing that the CIA had disseminated. He reconstructs the origins of brainwashing in Pavlov’s experiments. Yen Lo prefers to use the word conditioning, stating that it is “called brainwashing by the news agencies” (Condon
Echoing Hubbard’s *Brain-Washing*, but going further – in the novel physical pain is not mandatory and drugs are used only in the initial stage – Yen Lo states, “I am sure that all of you have heard that old wives’ tale . . . which is concerned with the belief that no hypnotized subject may be forced to do that which is repellent to his moral nature, whatever that is, or to his own best interests. That is nonsense, of course” (*Condon 1959*: 48). On the contrary, according to Yen Lo, given sufficiently advanced techniques, hypnosis could create unrepentant criminals.

The Communist doctor chooses Raymond Shaw because he is overwhelmed by resentment, which makes him an ideal candidate for brainwashing. He hates his mother for having deserted his father (who committed suicide) and having married Johnny Iselin, a corrupt senator. During Yen Lo’s demonstration, Raymond is persuaded to strangle a fellow soldier and shoot another, for the sole purpose of demonstrating the effectiveness of brainwashing. The whole troop is then emptied of memories and led to believe that Raymond performed extraordinary acts of heroism to save them from overwhelming enemy forces. No violence, Condon insists, is involved, only a “deep mental massage” (*Condon 1959*: 34, 42). The whole process is accomplished in three days. Because of the brainwashing, the members of Raymond’s patrol regard him as a hero, and he receives the Medal of Honor from the President’s hands in a Washington ceremony.

Raymond is also manipulated by his devious mother (portrayed in the movie by Angela Lansbury, later of *Murder, She Wrote* fame), who wants to further her husband’s political aims. But the Communists have different plans. Every time an American agent working for the Soviets invites Raymond to pick up a deck of cards for a game of solitaire, he reacts immediately as a result of his post-brainwashing state, which is permanent and irreversible. When he sees the queen of diamonds, he falls into a trance, ready to follow murderous instructions and then immediately forget his misdeeds. In this way, through a mysterious American agent who remains in the shadows, the Soviet KGB instructs Raymond to commit several murders.

In the end, though, Soviet plans do not work out as expected. Raymond meets his former commander, the now Major (and later Colonel) Marco. With assistance from the FBI, Army intelligence, and the CIA, Marco reconstructs the true sequence of events. However, even the best American experts cannot overturn Yen Lo’s brainwashing, which is irreversible. Nor do they know all the details of the Communist plan, since they are unaware of a major element: The Soviet agent in Washington is none other than Raymond’s mother. Her ultimate goal is
to have Senator Iselin, her corrupt husband, win the vice presidential nomination, then have Raymond murder the presidential candidate and usher Iselin into the White House.

The plot thickens when Raymond’s mother instructs him to murder the father of the girl he is in love with. Caught by the girl’s mother, he kills her also. Because of the brainwashing, he immediately forgets the murders. Marco, however, tells him the truth, throwing Raymond into a state of utter despair. Nevertheless, through the usual queen of diamonds trick, Raymond’s mother instructs him to ambush and kill the presidential candidate. Marco understands the plot, and tries to thwart it. In the end Raymond, an excellent sharpshooter, fires on the convention stage, but instead of targeting the presidential nominee he kills his stepfather and his mother. Then, following Marco’s orders, he shoots again, killing himself. “No electric chair for a Medal of Honor Man,” are Marco’s final words (Condon 1959: 311). Marco was apparently convinced that a defense based on brainwashing would not have saved Raymond in an American jury trial.

Brainwashing and American POWs in the Korean War

Psychologist Dick Anthony popularized the expression “CIA brainwashing theory” to designate the version created by Hunter (and cautioned by Meerloo) that inspired Condon’s novel and distinguish it from the academic studies of Lifton and Schein that we will examine in the next section (Anthony 1999). The CIA model included two stages. The first was called “softening up” by Hunter, and “deconditioning” by Meerloo. It called for emptying the brain of preexisting ideas, leading to a state of apathy induced by sleep deprivation, fatigue, hunger, and mistreatment. Physical pain was not always necessary. Meerloo insisted that inducing terror, fear, or despair sufficed to empty the brain and rape the mind, without need of physical violence or drugs (Meerloo 1957: 90). Once the brain was emptied, the second phase – the reconditioning performed through hypnosis – could begin, as it did in The Manchurian Candidate.

Hypnosis remains a rather vague concept in this literature. It could just be the obsessive reiteration of the same concepts that led to reconditioning. But Hunter presented the Communist lectures as almost miraculously effective. Why the lectures of Communist propagandists should be more successful at brainwashing than the no less boring or repetitive indoctrination of other ideologies was not explained. Again, we see a shift from an ostensibly neutral evaluation of techniques of brainwashing and menticide to a political value judgment on the absurdity of Communist doctrines.
In the CIA brainwashing theory, it went without saying that Communist brainwashing was based on Pavlov’s famous experiments with dogs. The Pavlov connection was, however, disputed. Schein and his team (discussed in Section 3) wrote in 1961 that “in neither the Chinese nor the Soviet case has any evidence been turned up of any connection with Pavlovian psychology or any systematic use of his findings” (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 17). Others stated that when preparing prisoners for the show trials of the 1930s through “severe stress, sleep deprivation, and meticulous attention to reward and punishment,” Stalin’s prosecutors were indeed using findings by Pavlov (Dimsdale 2021: 32).

The CIA theory was also based on the idea that Chinese brainwashing techniques used against American POWs (prisoners of war) captured in the Korean War were remarkably effective, which was factually untrue. Hunter testified before Congress that “many” brainwashed American POWs “swallowed the enemy’s propaganda line and declined to return to their own people” (Committee on Un-American Activities 1958: 15).

Albert D. Biderman (1923–2003), a psychologist with the US Air Force Scientific Research Office who wrote a report critical of Hunter, admitted that 39 percent of American POWs captured in Korea signed propaganda statements or letters in support of Communism (Biderman 1963: 38). However, at the end of the war, 4,449 American prisoners were given the choice of either returning to the United States or becoming citizens of China or another Communist country; only 21 (some 0.5 percent of the total) refused to return to their homeland (Biderman 1963: 30). This was not exceptional, Biderman wrote, since at the end of every war similar or higher percentages of POWs usually refuse to return home for a variety of reasons. As for the other 99.5 percent, clearly they had signed the statements to avoid mistreatment, without really believing them. If brainwashing was at work, a process with permanent effects on just half of 1 percent of the victims did not seem to be particularly effective.

Additionally, when their situation was reviewed a few years later, eleven of the twenty-one who had remained in China had asked for and received permission to return to the United States. Only ten had apparently become integrated in Chinese society (Pasley 1955). As scandalous as the choice of the “twenty-one who stayed behind” was for American public opinion, it did not constitute proof that Communist brainwashing worked. On the contrary, it demonstrated its failure.

North Korean and Chinese POWs who remained in American hands at the end of the Korean War were much more numerous than the American prisoners. Around 88,000 of them refused to go back to their homes in North Korea and China, preferring to stay in the West. Even if we take economic factors into

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account, the fact remains that a striking 51 percent of Chinese and North Korean prisoners refused repatriation, compared to 0.5 percent of American prisoners (Biderman 1963: 198–99). Perhaps capitalism was the real brainwashing.

The CIA’s Brainwashing Experiments: MK-ULTRA

The CIA did not simply accuse Communists of brainwashing, knowing that this was propaganda produced by its own agents. It also tried to understand the true situation. Among other initiatives, in 1953 it commissioned Harold George Wolff (1898–1962), a Cornell University neurologist, and his colleague Lawrence Hinkle (1918–2012), to conduct a study on Stalinist Russia’s techniques that had resulted in spectacular confessions in the Moscow show trials and their possible link to Chinese programs. The two authors published the study in 1956 in a scientific journal. They concluded that a public confession should not be confused with a genuine conversion, and that confessions in the Stalinist trials did not prove the effectiveness of brainwashing (Wolff and Hinkle 1956). In a sense, however, the CIA believed its own propaganda. It dreamed of creating its own Manchurian candidates by reproducing and improving the brainwashing techniques that were allegedly being used in China and Russia.

This project was code named MK-ULTRA. Originally, it was only mentioned in a handful of publications critical of the US government, and often dismissed as supporting conspiracy theories (Bowart 1978; Marks 1979; Gillmor 1987; Thomas 1989; Collins 1997). Later, however, the CIA became the defendant in several lawsuits, the most important of which resulted in a 1988 settlement. Through the lawsuits, several key documents became public (Bain 1976; Weinstein 1990; Collins 1997: 244–45). It was thus confirmed that, to further its brainwashing experiments, the CIA had secured the cooperation of several leading American universities and scholars, including Wolff, who were on the cusp of advanced research on behavioral sciences. Not all of them were fully aware of the ultimate aims of the project. The CIA concealed its involvement under three front foundations that were ostensibly private research organizations.

The first results were not encouraging. Each research team adopted one or more specific methods – such as hallucinogenic drugs, psychotropic medications administered in higher-than-normal doses, sensorial deprivation, repeated electroshock treatments, lobotomy and other forms of psychosurgery, and hypnosis. Some of the subjects were prison inmates, others were psychiatric patients of the researchers, or destitute volunteers who had been promised significant cash remuneration.
The CIA project took a quantum leap when Donald Ewen Cameron (1901–67), a distinguished Scottish psychiatrist who had been Professor of Psychiatry at McGill University in Montreal since 1943, joined the effort. Cameron would later become president of the American Psychiatric Association and found the World Psychiatric Association. In a protracted series of experiments on his Canadian patients, he combined many of the techniques that had formerly been tested separately. The CIA also appreciated that Cameron was working in Canada, thus circumventing legal restrictions forbidding such experiments in the United States and allowing the agency to funnel money into his research (Dimsdale 2021: 120–21).

Cameron based his experiments on a two-stage theory. In the first stage, which he called depatterning, he set out to eliminate the subject’s existing ideas, habits, and attachments, generating a sort of selective amnesia. The outcome of this stage, in the words of a CIA executive, was the “creation of a vegetable” (Marks 1979: 142), not an especially useful subject for counter-espionage purposes. But then Cameron moved to the second stage that he called “psychic driving.” Here, the subject was reconditioned to adopt new, permanent behavioral models and ideas.

In fact, Cameron was even too successful in creating vegetables. Some of the techniques he used included electroshock treatments that were between twenty and forty times stronger than the average doses administered in psychiatric hospitals. He gave them to the patients three times a day for several days. He also administered medication to induce sleep deprivation for periods of fifteen to sixty-five days. He gave his patients cocktails of psychotropic prescription medicine and hallucinogens, in quantities much higher than in their normal recreational use. Not surprisingly, as court cases were to reveal in later years, most of the patients succumbed to mental and other illnesses and never recovered. Some died.

Moreover, the passage from depatterning to psychic driving never succeeded. Cameron recorded on tape his own instructions, as well as phrases spoken by the patient. The vegetable-like patients produced by the depatterning were compelled to listen to the tapes for up to sixteen hours a day. Sometimes, microphones were inserted in football helmets that patients could not remove. Microphones were also hidden under their pillow, so they could continue to listen to the tapes even in their sleep. But nothing worked.

If anything, Cameron’s experiments proved that brainwashing a victim into changing her fundamental ideas or orientation was not possible. Having reached the same conclusions, the CIA ended the MK-ULTRA project, including the part that Cameron had conducted, in 1963 (Marks 1979: 144–45). To use Hunter’s unfortunate metaphor, the CIA learned that it might be possible to
wash the brain until it loses its color and becomes white, as the patient is reduced to the sad state of a human wreck. But recoloring it with new ideas is not possible.

3 The Scientific Study of Communist Brainwashing: Lifton and Schein

Erik Erikson and Totalism

While the CIA promoted a somewhat primitive theory of brainwashing for propaganda and military purposes, other branches of the US government supported the work of credentialed academics who studied the persuasion techniques allegedly used by the Chinese. They came from the tradition of the Frankfort School, and were all indebted to the recently proposed theory of totalism.

In the early 1950s, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1902–94) developed his concept of totalism, which encompassed totalitarian personalities irrespective of their right- or left-wing beliefs (Erikson 1954). According to Erikson, the unresolved crises of childhood development coupled with an authoritarian education play a key role in the origin of totalism. The propaganda spun by political and religious totalitarian ideologues skillfully manipulates these predispositions, although for Erikson it does not create them.

Psychological manipulation techniques, Erikson insisted, do not convert everybody to totalistic ideologies. They work only on those who are already predisposed to such a conversion because of their childhood experiences (Erikson 1954, 1956; Anthony 1996: 182–206; Murariu 2017: 73–92). These principles guided the scholars commissioned by the US government to study brainwashing as allegedly practiced in China and North Korea.

Robert Jay Lifton: Totalism and Thought Reform

An author frequently quoted in the debate about brainwashing is American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton. His work owes much to Erikson’s concept of totalism. Lifton’s book Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China was originally published in 1961. Apart from the book’s title, he rarely used the word brainwashing and always put it in quotation marks. He reported the results of his study of twenty-five Westerners who had been detained in Chinese Communist jails and fifteen Chinese who had also undergone thought reform processes, but outside of prisons. Referring frequently to Erikson, Lifton described Chinese thought reform as a totalistic technique more extreme than the Soviet or Nazi routines discussed in earlier debates on manipulation.
However, Lifton did not present the Chinese Communist brainwashing as infallible. Of the forty subjects he studied, only two retained a more favorable attitude toward Communism after their release and emigration than they had before their indoctrination. It was true that all forty subjects had signed pro-Communist statements. In most cases however, the acceptance of Communist ideology turned out to be either false or short-lived, induced by fear of punishment. Once they were at a safe distance from their reformers, most prisoners promptly rejected Communism.

In two cases out of forty, however, and perhaps in another four not included in his final study for lack of sufficient information, Lifton found something approaching a long-lasting conversion to Communism. Quoting Erikson, he explained it as a predisposition to totalism, perhaps derived from childhood problems.

In all cases of apparent conversion (the two I studied in detail, the two I met briefly, and two others I heard of) similar emotional factors seemed to be at play: a strong and readily accessible negative identity fed by an unusually great susceptibility to guilt, a tendency toward identity confusion . . . a profound involvement in a situation productive of historical and racial guilt, and finally, a sizable element of totalism (Lifton 1961: 131).

Chapter 22 of Lifton’s book was often quoted in subsequent brainwashing controversies. Here, he identified the causes of conversion to political or religious totalitarian ideologies in the interaction of three elements: a philosophical motivation, a psychological predisposition, and totalitarian manipulation techniques. “They require, rather than directly cause, each other,” he claimed (Lifton 1961: 420). A philosophical motivation is indeed the starting point. “Behind ideological totalism,” Lifton wrote, “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” (Lifton 1961: 436).

Not all those who look for ultimate meaning embrace totalistic ideologies and the question why some do “raises the most crucial and the most difficult of human problems,” Lifton suggested. He was not convinced that a single answer could explain all cases and focused his attention on “factors in one’s personal history.” “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” (Lifton 1961: 436–37).

Totalitarian ideologues know how to manipulate these predispositions. They use, Lifton argued, eight themes. The first theme is that of Milieu Control, understood as “control of human communication,” isolation, and removal of
any interaction with the outside environment. The second, Mystical Manipulation of emotions, plays on trust and mistrust, alternating them. The third theme is Demand for Purity, an obsessive distinction between the pure and the impure which leads to feelings of guilt and shame since complete avoidance of contact with the impure is impossible. The fourth theme is the Cult of Confession, which asks that contacts with impure persons and thoughts are confessed. The fifth is Sacred Science, whereby the totalitarian ideology is introduced as absolute scientific truth. Ultimately, the ideology is God, and denying it is both immoral and unscientific, which is especially important since our modern age puts such a premium on science. The sixth theme is Loading the Language with strong emotional overtones, which reiterate the distinction between good and bad in every conversation. The seventh is the predominance of the Doctrine over the Person; people are no longer defined by their humanity, but with reference to ideological clichés. An individual is regarded either as a proletarian or as an enemy of the people, rather than as a person first and then categorized politically. The eighth and final theme is Dispensing of Existence, whereby human life is no longer deemed to be important. The ideology therefore counts more than the person, an easy justification for all sorts of crimes (Lifton 1961: 419–35).

Hundreds of books and articles have applied Lifton’s eight themes to religious cults. He regarded this application as feasible (Lifton 1987a: 209–19), although he also warned that some totalistic features are present in all religions. He also noted that in certain circumstances even a “full-blown totalist milieu” may offer positive rather than damaging experiences (Lifton 1961: 435).

Lifton insisted that Milieu Control, which implies a physical separation of the individual from his surrounding society, is “the most basic feature of the thought reform environment.” It requires “group process, isolation from other people, psychological pressure,” as well as “geographical distance or unavailability of transportation, and sometimes physical pressure” (Lifton 1987a: 212). The Chinese Communists were only occasionally successful in their thought reform program, with a mere 5 percent of the individuals Lifton analyzed showing any signs of long-lasting conversion. This relative lack of success was even more remarkable because, in addition to controlling prisons and concentration camps, the Chinese also controlled thousands of square miles of surrounding territory, thus giving the physical and geographical impression of total control (Lifton 1961: 420).

Obviously, a religious movement would only rarely replicate similar conditions, although it may create totalistic islands within nontotalistic societies (Lifton 1987a: 213). Lifton did not like cults, but believed they were a cultural rather than a medical or legal problem.
Cults are not primarily a psychiatric problem, but a social and historical issue. I think that psychological professionals can do the most good in the area of education. I myself feel critical of much of the totalistic inclination in many cults, but I do not think that pattern is best addressed legally. Not all moral questions are soluble legally or psychiatrically, nor should they be (Lifton 1987a: 218–19).

As to the term brainwashing, Lifton suggested that scholars “do not use the word brainwashing because it has no precise meaning and has been associated with much confusion” (Lifton 1987a: 211).

Throughout his career, Lifton continued to be concerned with the subject of totalism and thought reform, which he saw at work in Communism and Nazism (Lifton 1987b), but also in the Western obsession with nuclear weapons (Lifton and Falk 1982) and the American defense of the death penalty against European objections. Later, Lifton defined religious fundamentalism as “the most extreme expression of totalism” (Almqvist and Wallrup 2005: 3).

According to Lifton, contemporary cults are either totalistic or fundamentalist in varying degrees, but are also capable of evolving over time to become non-totalistic and non-fundamentalist (Lifton 1987a: 219). Lifton studied Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese new religion responsible for the March 1995 deadly sarin gas attack in a Tokyo subway and other serious crimes. He recognized that there is a “controversy surrounding the use of the word cult because of its pejorative connotation, as opposed to the more neutral new religion” (Lifton 1999: 11). He advocated using the term cult to identify those “groups that display three characteristics: totalistic or thought-reform-like practices, a shift from worship of spiritual principles to worship of the person of the guru or leader, and a combination of spiritual quest from below and exploitation, usually economic or sexual, from above” (Lifton 1999: 11).

Scholars of Asian religions criticized Lifton’s book on Aum Shinrikyo, noting that guru worship is an intrinsic feature of many religious movements regarded as perfectly legitimate in Asia. They also noted that lack of familiarity with Japanese language sources led Lifton to portray an image of Aum Shinrikyo as somewhat monolithic and fixed in time, while the movement went through deep changes throughout its history. Different categories of members had different experiences. One well-known scholar of Japanese religion called the book “woefully undocumented,” noting that “much written in this book about Aum and Japan will strike some as not quite right if not in fact wrong” (Gardner 2001: 126).

More generally, Lifton often expressed his personal disapproval of cults because they were at odds with his liberal political ideas. He insists that the mark of a balanced personality is its openness to diversity, change, and
ambiguity, which he believed was lacking in the black-and-white world of cults. On the other hand, he did not believe that all cults present a threat to society, nor should they be suspected of potentially lethal criminal actions and kept under watch by law enforcement. Only what he called “world-destroying cults” should be the object of such surveillance (Lifton 1999: 202–3).

World-destroying cults such as Aum Shinrikyo, Lifton wrote, are not simply totalistic. They promote “a vision of an apocalyptic event or series of events that would destroy the world in the service of renewal,” and an “ideology of killing to heal, of altruistic murder and altruistic world destruction.” Their leaders easily succumb to the “lure of ultimate weapons,” including nuclear weapons and toxic gas. And in Aum Shinrikyo Lifton saw an “extreme technocratic manipulation” that went beyond his model of thought reform by using powerful hallucinogenic drugs (Lifton 1999: 202–13).

Lifton realized that few cults can be compared to Aum Shinrikyo, and suggested that law enforcement should concentrate on identifying which cults are or can become world-destroying, separating them from the broader field of totalistic movements that use forms of thought reform that are unpalatable but not, in his opinion, illegal (Lifton 1999: 329).

Edgar Schein and Coercive Persuasion

In 1961, the same year as Lifton’s Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism was published, Edgar H. Schein and his team published another important study of Communist persuasion techniques. The son of a Jewish Hungarian academic who escaped first from Stalinist Russia and later from Czechoslovakia just before the Nazi invasion, Schein was exposed from his early youth to the horrors of twentieth-century totalitarianism (Schein 1993). After migrating to the United States, he gained a psychology degree from Harvard University. He then served in the US army as a psychologist. In 1953, he was sent to Korea to examine POWs that China and North Korea had released to the United States, and who had reportedly been subjected to brainwashing.

Schein studied popular brainwashing theories but found them esoteric, because they called into play mysterious, unknown forces to explain processes of persuasion that, he believed, could be explained more simply. He thus became “a spokesperson for this more common-sense way of looking at the Korean prisoners of war episode” (Schein 1993: 39). Schein concluded that Chinese and North Korean persuasion tools did not differ from other known techniques. Additionally, they were not highly effective. Most POWs, like those submitted to Chinese thought reform in Lifton’s studies, had merely stated that
they believed in Communism in order to survive, without experiencing a genuine conversion (Schein 1956; Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 8, 18). In fact, he regarded the experiences of American businessmen and missionaries who had been jailed under China’s thought reform campaigns, and subsequently released, as more interesting than the Korean POWs for evaluating the effectiveness of Communist indoctrination. In 1961, Schein’s research on the topic was included in Coercive Persuasion, which he co-wrote with two colleagues after he had retired from military life and joined Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1956 (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961).

In Coercive Persuasion, Schein and colleagues criticized the brainwashing theories developed by the CIA, referring to them as demonology (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 254). They did not believe brainwashing, as understood in popular literature, to be a scientific theory, claiming that it referred to mysterious forces whose very existence could not be demonstrated. Coercive Persuasion tackled two major issues. The first was the relationship between conformity and conversion; the second, the connection between persuasion techniques and the contents of the message. The case of the POWs and others who signed statements in favor of Communism, but repudiated them once liberated, was an instance of conformity rather than conversion. Conformity, Schein and colleagues argued, is common, while conversion is rare. They claimed that in the sample they examined there were no genuine conversions to Communism obtained through brainwashing, not even a single case (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 164–65).

And yet, for Schein, the simple distinction between conformity and conversion “is not sufficiently sophisticated,” and did not exhaust the analysis of Chinese thought reform. What happens in a totalitarian environment such as Communist China is “that the sphere of private activity becomes restricted or eliminated, that the belief system becomes ritualized and comes to serve solely an adjustment function, and that such ritualization may leave the individual without the cognitive tools to lead a creative private life” (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 267).

Schein did not suggest that, after a period of time, private thoughts end up conforming to public acts. Rather, he thought that in a totalitarian environment the distinction between public and private disappears. Ironically, he noted, this is not a good result for the totalitarian institution that initiated the process: “It may lead to a ritualization of belief and a gradual atrophy of creative abilities, which presumably the institution wishes to preserve and harness toward its own goals” (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 285).

The second issue discussed in the 1961 book is whether the coercive persuasion – the expression Schein used to avoid the demonological word
brainwashing (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 18) – practiced in Communist China differs from other forms of indoctrination that are customarily accepted and practiced in the West. These include indoctrination and propaganda in schools, prisons, military academies, Catholic convents and monasteries, the marketing of certain products, and corporate life. If a difference exists, Schein asked whether it lies in the method of persuasion or, rather, in the contents of the indoctrination.

To answer this question, Schein and colleagues developed a three-stage framework of coercive persuasion: “unfreezing” the former identity, “changing” it, and “refreezing” a new identity. Fueling the process are feelings of guilt and the identification with a person who is looked upon as a role model. False information is also supplied. However, “coercive persuasion involves no more or less of such distortion than other kinds of influence, but our popular image of ‘brainwashing’ suggests that somehow the process consists of extensive self-delusion and excessive distortion. We feel that this image is a false one” (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 239).

Schein agreed with Lifton and Erikson that an identity crisis and “childhood conflicts, particularly around problems of authority” (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 145) are useful tools for identifying those with a predisposition toward embracing totalitarian ideologies. He also agreed that past political ideas may be relevant (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 252). Unlike Lifton, however, Schein rejected the idea that coercive persuasion or thought reform is fundamentally different from forms of persuasion practiced daily in Western societies and regarded as fully legitimate. “Chinese Communist coercive persuasion is not too different a process in its basic structure from coercive persuasion in institutions in our own society which are in the business of changing fundamental beliefs and values” (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 282).

It could be claimed that Western institutions such as “educational institutions, religious orders, AA [Alcoholics Anonymous], psychoanalysis, revival meetings, fraternities, and so on ... are entered voluntarily and ... the individual may withdraw voluntarily” from them, unlike Chinese prisons. While this is true, Schein argued that in Western institutions “the social pressures which can be generated can be as coercive as the physical constraints” of the Chinese jails (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 275).

In later works, Schein studied aspects of corporate life such as IBM’s Sands Point Center in New York, whose goal was to transform executives into full-time “IBM men,” and General Electric’s Indoctrination Center whose name, as Schein noted, spoke for itself. He concluded that corporate indoctrination was similar to Chinese thought reform. Salaries – “golden
handcuffs” – and the fear of being fired were just as intimidating as the physical walls of the Chinese prisons (Schein 1993: 44). When we disapprove of Communist coercive persuasion while admiring the very same methods at work in the training of Catholic nuns, the rehabilitation of prison inmates, or international corporations, Schein concluded, we may believe that we are, respectively, censuring or approving a technique, but in reality we are judging results rather than being concerned about the methods used to achieve them.

Unlike Lifton, who believed that thought reform was mostly a morally deplorable process, Schein argued that coercive persuasion could be acceptable and even socially useful. In the conclusion to the 1961 book, Schein and his colleagues wrote that,

there is a world of difference in the content of what is transmitted in religious orders, prisons, educational institutions, mental hospitals, and thought reform centers. But there are striking similarities in the manner in which the influence occurs, a fact which should warn us strenuously against letting our moral and political sentiments color our scientific understanding of the Chinese Communist approach to influence (Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961: 285).

Schein’s later career was living proof of this conclusion. He decided to focus his studies on the psychology of corporate management, working both as a college professor and a consultant to leading European and American corporations. He did not consider managers’ indoctrination through coercive persuasion to be a negative phenomenon. On the contrary, he assisted corporations in perfecting their techniques, although he also insisted that they should not try to absorb individuals’ identities into the corporate one. By doing so, they would inhibit the managers’ creativity to the ultimate detriment of the corporation (Schein 1985). Coercive persuasion by Chinese Communists was bad, Schein argued, while coercive persuasion by IBM, General Electric, and other corporations he worked for was good – not because the persuasion techniques were different, but because they were used to persuade people to adopt different beliefs and lifestyles.

4 The Cult Wars

Brainwashing Meets Religion: William Sargant

In the view of several scholars of totalism, many religious organizations were totalistic. These scholars came from a psychoanalytic tradition generally suspicious of, if not outright hostile to, religion since the days of Freud. While studies supported by the CIA or the US government did not include slandering religion among their purposes, the terminology of brainwashing was first systematically
applied to religious conversion by English psychiatrist William Walters Sargant (1907–88).

Sargant had conducted studies on the mental problems of English soldiers during World War II. In 1944, he discovered Pavlov and, as he narrated in his 1967 autobiography, while reading some religious writings in his father’s house he noticed that “all these books reported changes in brain function similar to those we had witnessed while abreacting [reliving] severe war neuroses and to those that Pavlov had noted in his terrified dogs” (Sargant 1967: 116). Several years later, he witnessed various religious revivals in the United States and found a confirmation of his 1944 intuition. Later on, in 1957, when he was convalescing in Majorca after a bout of tuberculosis, he wrote and published *Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing* (Sargant 1957). The book was to sell more than 200,000 copies (Sargant 1967: 118).

The brother of a churchman who would become an Anglican bishop in Bangalore, India (Sargant 1967: 15), Sargant nevertheless held a reductionist view of religion. Starting from Pavlov’s canine experiments, he observed that when they were stimulated transmarginally (i.e., beyond their normal reaction capabilities) the dogs exhibited an anomalous behavior in three stages. In the first, called equivalent, they reacted similarly to either weak or strong stimuli. In the second stage, called paradoxical, they reacted to the weak stimulus in a more meaningful way than to the strong one. In the third, ultra-paradoxical stage, the dogs’ habitual responses were inverted. For example, reactions of sympathy to the researcher changed into hostility (Sargant 1957: 38–39).

Sargant was persuaded that Soviet and Chinese forms of brainwashing confirmed that “though men are not dogs, they should humbly try to remember how much they resemble dogs in their brain functions, and not boast themselves as demigods” (Sargant 1957: 239). By employing a wide range of transmarginal stimuli – from the rolling of drums to intense fear, from the obsessive repetition of jingles to some types of singing and dancing – a human being could be led, just like Pavlov’s dogs, to the ultra-paradoxical stage where “people can be switched to arbitrary beliefs altogether opposed to those previously held” (Sargant 1957: 26).

The central argument in Sargant’s work is that Communists did not invent brainwashing. At most, thanks to Pavlov they reached a better understanding of the process, which they adapted from preexisting religious revivalism and conversion processes. He wrote: “Anyone who wishes to investigate the technique of brainwashing and eliciting confessions as practiced behind the Iron Curtain (and on this side of it, too, in certain police stations where the spirit of the law is flouted) would do well to start with a study of eighteenth-century American revivalism from the 1730’s onwards” (Sargant 1957: 148). In Sargant’s
estimation, the leading precursor of Communist Pavlovian techniques was John Wesley (1703–91), the founder of Methodism. Sargant made frequent, if uncomplimentary, parallels between Wesley’s followers and Pavlov’s dogs. The great English preacher was said to have been able to “disrupt previous patterns of behavior” and belief and instill new ones through “assaults on the brain,” just as Pavlov did with his dogs (Sargant 1957: 98).

Nor did Sargant stop at Wesley. He also offered examples from the American preachers Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) and Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875), as well as Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the Catholic founder of the Jesuits (Sargant 1957: 131). Speaking of Jonathan Edwards, Sargant observed that “all the physiological mechanisms exploited by Pavlov in his animal experiments, short of glandular change by castration, seem, in fact, to have been exploited by Edwards or his successors” (Sargant 1957: 152).

Even the Apostle Paul’s conversion as recorded in the New Testament, Sargant argued, might be explained through a Pavlovian scheme, with the Christian Ananias brainwashing the Jewish, and originally anti-Christian, Paul. “A state of transmarginal inhibition seems to have followed his [Paul’s] acute stage of nervous excitement . . . [and] increased his anxiety and suggestibility . . . . Ananias came to relieve his nervous symptoms and his mental distress, at the same time implanting new beliefs” (Sargant 1957: 121).

Lest he be accused of anti-Christian prejudices, Sargant was quick to add that brainwashing was already at work in pre-Christian religions. Among Sargant’s closest friends was Robert Graves (1895–1985), a British poet influential in the modern neopagan revival. Graves edited Battle for the Mind, giving it the literary form that made it a bestseller, and later Sargant’s autobiography as well (Sargant 1967: 174). Graves also agreed to write a chapter of Battle for the Mind, entitled “Brain-Washing in Ancient Times” (Sargant 1957: 175–84). Its conclusion was that “almost identical physiological and psychological phenomena” are at work in “conversion techniques, equally in the most primitive and the more highly civilized cultures,” and “they may be added as convincing proofs of the truth of [any] religious or philosophic beliefs.” But since these contradictory beliefs cannot all be equally true, it follows that what they share is the “mechanistic principle” of conversion (Sargant 1957: 94; Sargant 1967: 175). Religions convert people to many different beliefs, but what they have in common is that they all convert through brainwashing.

On November 5, 1968, Sargant was invited to give the premiere annual public lecture of the British psychiatric world, the 43rd Maudsley Lecture, before the Royal Medico-Psychological Association. His topic was “The Physiology of Faith.” In the lecture, published in 1971 as an introduction to
the third edition of *Battle for the Mind* (Sargant 1971: 1–35), Sargant was unrepentant in defending his controversial 1957 work. He insisted that the Pavlovian model had been applied “at every time in man’s long religious history” (Sargant 1971: 25), up until recently created religions such as Scientology (Sargant 1971: 19). Sargant denied that it was his purpose to destroy religion. On the contrary, he said, there is a need for religion and, in any case, brainwashing is omnipresent in social life.

Although all religions use brainwashing, Sargant maintained that to distinguish useful ones from those that are harmful, we ought to inspect the kind of conduct that each religion inspires – “what it results in and makes of the lives of those who come to believe in it” (Sargant 1971: 35). As Sargant had written in *Battle for the Mind*, “the proof of the pudding lies in the eating” (Sargant 1957: 118). Although Wesley treated his followers like Pavlovian dogs, he saved many Englishmen from drunkenness and political rebelliousness.

As to the future of religion, “it seems possible” concluded Sargant in 1968, “that modern tranquilizers, such as chlorpromazine, if given continuously, will diminish the average person’s chances of acquiring sudden faith” (Sargant 1971: 31). For the time being, lobotomy was a possibility to reverse the consequences of religious brainwashing. Sargant reported that through lobotomy he had once persuaded a Salvation Army worker who was enthusiastic about the Holy Ghost to proclaim after the surgery that “[t]here is no Holy Ghost” (Sargant 1957: 89).

"Only Cults Brainwash": Margaret Thaler Singer

Sargant believed that all religions use brainwashing. In this respect, he made no substantial distinction between religions and cults. In the United States, however, a significant movement opposing cults developed in the late 1960s and became interested in brainwashing theories.

In 1993, I made a distinction between a sectarian countercult and a secular anticult movement, which has been widely adopted since (Introvigne 1993). The countercult movement started in the early nineteenth century, when Protestant and later Roman Catholic theologians systematically criticized what they considered to be heretical cults that departed from Christian orthodoxy. This movement continued into the twentieth century and is still present today. Countercultists were mostly interested in doctrines they identified as heretical, and wanted to bring cultists back to the orthodox Christian fold. They rarely asked governments to legislate against cults, but instead fought their battles through books, articles, and lectures.
The anticult movement, on the other hand, was created in North America by parents of young adults who, in the late 1960s and 1970s, had joined new religious movements as full-time members, renouncing secular careers. The missions of these movements, both coming from Asia (such as the Unification Church) and born in America (e.g., the Children of God), were successful among college students who were influenced by the hippie movement. They saw in the new religions an alternative to pursuing what some considered dull bourgeois careers.

Most parents had no quarrel with what mainline Christians regarded as unorthodox theologies. However, they strongly objected to the fact that their children had decided to drop out of college and serve as full-time missionaries. The anticult movement was thus born and had three important differences from the old religious countercult movement. First, it proclaimed not to be interested in creeds, only in deeds, and it defined a cult not on the basis of its theology but on the social harm it caused. Second, it only aimed at persuading the cultists to abandon the cult and go back to pursuing a normal career. It was not interested in converting them back to their parents’ religion. Third, it tried to enroll the cooperation of governments and courts of law, which would not be open to theological criticism of heresies but might perhaps be persuaded by secular arguments.

An organization called Free Our Sons and Daughters from the Children of God (FREECOG) was founded in 1971–2 by the parents of some who had joined the Children of God. Parents of young adult members of controversial groups other than the Children of God, and professionals such as lawyers and psychologists, also joined the new anticult movement, creating the Citizen’s Freedom Foundation (CFF). FREECOG and CFF later merged to become the Cult Awareness Network (CAN). Soon, it also started targeting human potential or neo-gnostic groups such as the Church of Scientology. At the same time, a number of anticult movements were created in Western Europe, including FAIR (Family, Action, Information, Rescue) in the United Kingdom in 1976, and ADFI (the Association pour la défense des valeurs familiales et de l’individu [Association for the defense of family values and individuals], later Association de défense des familles et de l’individu [Association for the defense of families and individuals]) in France in 1974, where several local ADFIs federated in a national UNADFI in 1982.

Psychologists brought to the anticult movement Sargant-style theories of brainwashing, but claimed that they did not apply to genuine or mainline religions. Only cults, they said, use brainwashing and, conversely, the use of brainwashing identifies a movement as a cult.
The anticult movement pursued its aims through three different tools. First, it launched a number of public awareness campaigns claiming that brainwashing was real and cults were a major threat. It managed to establish close relationships with several media personalities, who created a sinister image of the cults that persists to this day.

Second, the anticult movement lobbied US local and state legislators to introduce anti-brainwashing statutes and supported some well-publicized court actions in which former members who had left new religious movements claimed they had been brainwashed and sued for damages. Ultimately, constitutional concerns prevailed, and no anticult legislation was passed in any state. Some of the court cases were successful, while most were not.

Third, the anticultists supported a new practice called deprogramming, which had been created by Ted Patrick, a California state bureaucrat whose son had encountered the Children of God (now called The Family International). Patrick was among the founders of FREECOG and developed a technique involving the kidnapping of cultists and their detention in secluded facilities. Here, they were bombarded with negative information about their cult until they surrendered and deconverted. Other parents joined and deprogramming as a mirror image of brainwashing became a lucrative, if not always successful, profession (Shupe and Bromley 1980). Patrick insisted that the violence inherent in deprogramming was needed because the victims had previously been brainwashed (Patrick 1976). After some initial tolerance, the courts eventually disagreed. Some deprogrammers had to pay heavy damages, and some went to jail.

Anticultists became concerned about their potential liability in cases against the deprogrammers and decided to keep a lower profile. Some decided to abandon the pro-deprogramming CFF and to focus more on research, education, and propaganda. In 1979, these moderates eventually established the American Family Foundation (AFF), later renamed the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA).

“Jolly” West – who, as mentioned earlier, had participated in CIA projects – and Margaret Thaler Singer (1921–2003) became leading figures in the anticult movement. West rarely testified in the courts on the matter of cults. His epidemiological theory of brainwashing, which considered the joining of cults to be a disease and an epidemic (West 1989), found only limited acceptance (Galanter 1990). The brainwashing theory applied to the cults by the anticult movement in the 1970s and 1980s is largely a construction of Singer. She was a clinical psychologist who had collaborated in the past with Schein and coauthored some articles with him (Strassman, Thaler, and Schein 1956; Singer and Schein 1958; Schein and Singer 1992). Singer was also an adjunct
lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley from 1964 to 1991. She appeared in court as an expert witness testifying against the cults so often that, in a sense, she invented a new profession as a psychologist, almost full-time, in the service of anticult lawsuits and initiatives. Singer made frequent use of terms such as Schein’s coercive persuasion and Lifton’s thought reform, treating them as synonyms for brainwashing (Singer and Lalich 1995: 53, 381). Her theory of brainwashing was, however, largely original.

Singer suggested a framework of six conditions for brainwashing: “keep the person unaware that there is an agenda to control or change the person”; “control time and physical environment (contacts, information)”; “create a sense of powerlessness, fear, and dependency”; “suppress old behavior and attitudes”; “instill new behavior and attitudes”; and “put forth a closed system of logic” (Singer and Lalich, 1995: 64). She did not just claim that a cult is quantitatively different from other institutions committed to changing ideas and behavior – including the army, jails, and mainline religions – because it indoctrinates more intensely than others. She believed she had identified the brainwashing process used by the cults as something qualitatively different from the methods employed by legitimate institutions and not connected with the doctrines or the “content of the group” (Singer and Lalich 1995: 61).

Singer insisted that the marines, prisoner rehabilitation programs, and mainline religions practice a legitimate type of indoctrination, while the cults use brainwashing. An important difference, she insisted, is deceit. According to Singer, recruits to the marines or the Jesuits know exactly what sort of organization they are joining, while those who approach the cults are recruited by deception. “Marine recruiters do not pretend to be florists or recruiters for children’s clubs. Nor do Jesuits go afield claiming they are ‘just an international living group teaching breathing exercises to clear the mind of stress’” (Singer and Lalich 1995: 98–101).

Approaching potential converts without disclosing the movement’s name or identity is something that has certainly been practiced by some new religious movements criticized as cults, but not by all, nor by the majority of them. In almost all cases where she testified in court, Singer quoted her research on the Unification Church, founded by the Korean self-styled messiah Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012). She could rightly state that at a certain point in its history, and in a specific location (Oakland, California), Moon’s church was in fact enticing young people to attend its seminars without revealing the organizing group’s identity. This practice was, however, restricted to a special subgroup of the Unification Church, the so-called Oakland Family. It was never generalized in Moon’s organization and was comparatively short-lived (Barker 1984). Critics of Singer maintained that generalizing the Oakland Family’s practices
as if they were typical of the Unification Church everywhere, or of cults in general, was grossly unfair.

From the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Singer, together with sociologist Richard Ofshe (Ofshe and Singer 1986; Singer and Ofshe 1990) regularly cooperated with anticult organizations and attorneys, testifying in courts of law in the United States and elsewhere that brainwashing was a reality and a crime, and that cults were guilty of it. Although they tried to introduce some distinctions, Singer and Ofshe were often perceived as justifying deprogramming. This made their advocacy even more controversial, particularly after some deprogrammers were accused of resorting to drugs, physical violence, and even sexual abuse to deprogram their victims (Shupe and Darnell 2006).

**The Cult Wars**

From the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the outcome of the legal battles about cults in the United States looked uncertain. The lower court judges, especially in small town courts far from the large cities, were sympathetic to the parents’ arguments. Sometimes, they even cooperated with the deprogrammers by entrusting into the custody of the parents, for periods of time, grown-up children who were ruled to be temporarily mentally incapacitated so that they could be deprogrammed without objection. But most of these decisions were overturned on appeal.

A brainwashing defense was also rejected in the sensational 1976 trial of heiress Patty Hearst, who had been kidnapped by the left-wing group Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) in 1974. She had subsequently participated in bank robberies and other crimes perpetrated by the SLA. Singer and West stated that Hearst was not responsible for the crimes, as she had been brainwashed by the SLA. The brainwashing defense, however, was not accepted by the jury and Hearst was sentenced to thirty-five years in prison, later reduced to seven, then to twenty-two months by an act of President Jimmy Carter, until President Bill Clinton granted her a full pardon in 2001 (Richardson 2014).

In its well-known 1977 ruling, *Katz v. Superior Court*, a California Court of Appeals overturned an order that had granted temporary custody to parents of members of the Unification Church. In their decision, the Court of Appeals judges asked whether investigating if a conversion “was induced by faith or by coercive persuasion is . . . not in turn investigating and questioning the validity of that faith,” which is clearly prohibited under the US Constitution (*Court of Appeals of California 1977*). Coercive persuasion was Schein’s terminology, although the judges used it in the sense that Singer had since given it. For all
purposes, Katz put an end to temporary custody orders issued on behalf of deprogrammers. It also suggested that too often brainwashing theories functioned as no more than an attempt to use a pseudoscientific language to mask value judgments about unpopular beliefs.

In 1978, one year after Katz, the Peoples Temple homicides and suicides in Guyana created panic against cults all over the world, breathing new life into the anticult movement. In this new climate, deprogramming found fresh impetus. Some attorneys linked to the anticult movement pursued new strategies meant to induce former, deprogrammed members to claim damages for the brainwashing to which the cults had allegedly subjected them. For a number of reasons, the legal battle focused on the lawsuit of David Molko and Tracy Leal, two teenagers (by then of age) who had joined the San Francisco Unification Church despite their respective parents’ strong opposition. Six months after joining, they had been successfully deprogrammed, to the extent that they brought a lawsuit against the Unification Church for damages they claimed to have suffered as a result of brainwashing.

In 1983 and 1986, two California courts rejected Molko and Leal’s complaints. Two opposed camps on the issue of brainwashing existed at the time. On one side were the anticult associations, the deprogrammers, a small group of scholars who applied brainwashing theories to new religious movements, and several journalists. In the other camp were the new religious movements and their lawyers, NGOs that promoted religious freedom, some psychologists of religion, and most sociologists and historians who were busy defining the study of new religious movements as a new specialized academic field. In the latter group, the leading figures were psychologists Dick Anthony (1990, 1999, 2001) and H. Newton Malony (1931–2020), historian J. Gordon Melton, and sociologists James T. Richardson in the United States and Eileen Barker in Great Britain. In 1984, Barker had written what became the standard critique of brainwashing theories with respect to the Unification Church (Barker 1984). In a series of seminal articles, which would continue into the twenty-first century, Richardson dismantled the idea that cults can be distinguished from religions based on their alleged practice of brainwashing (Richardson 1978, 1993a, 1993c, 1996a, 2014, 2015).

The two camps faced each other in the courts, where they traded accusations of partisan advocacy. Those who supported the brainwashing theory were accused of covering up the illegal activities of the deprogrammers. They replied that the scholars of new religious movements were ignoring the similarly illegal activities of the cults, and were cult apologists paid by the new religions. For various reasons, the American Psychological Association (APA, not to be confused with the American Psychiatric Association that uses the same
acronym) was caught in the eye of the storm. Similar problems also surfaced in the American Sociological Association (ASA), but these were less serious since, irrespective of the ASA, it was clear that an overwhelming majority of sociologists of religion did not agree with the brainwashing hypothesis and sided against Singer and Ofshe.

In 1983, during the Molko lawsuit, the APA accepted the proposal of forming a task force, known as DIMPAC (Deceptive and Indirect Methods of Persuasion and Control), for the purpose of assessing the scientific status of these theories. Margaret Singer, who headed the task force, chose the other members including Louis “Jolly” West and Michael D. Langone, a psychologist active in the AFF. The task force continued its work for several years. In the meantime, the Molko case reached the Supreme Court of California. According to a reconstruction of the events prepared in 1989 by the APA, “on 5 February 1987, during its winter meeting, the APA Board of Directors voted for APA to participate in the case [Molko] as an amicus” (American Psychological Association 1989: 1).

In the US legal system, an amicus curiae is an independent entity or individual that spontaneously submits to the court elements regarded as relevant to decide a case. On February 10, 1987, the APA and others filed an amicus brief in the Molko case. The brief stated that the theory Singer had labeled “coercive persuasion” was not “accepted in the scientific community,” and that the corresponding methodology “has been repudiated by the scientific community.” The brief went on to specify that the choice of labels, such as brainwashing, mental manipulation, or coercive persuasion (as used by Singer), was irrelevant because none of those theories could be considered to be scientific (American Psychological Association 1987a).

The filing of the brief provoked numerous protests. The community of psychologists and psychiatrists was divided on the subject: several clinical psychologists disagreed on the substance, while others denounced the method. How could the APA, after asking the DIMPAC task force to prepare a report on the subject, presumably to be accepted or rejected by the association, proceed to take an official position before having read and passed judgment on the report?

Several APA officials replied that there was no time to wait for the report of the DIMPAC committee if the APA wanted to have an impact on the ruling on the Molko case, which was expected soon and would presumably become an important precedent. The procedural argument found favor with many, while others were afraid that clinical psychologists would be persuaded by a campaign organized by Singer and West that suggested they resign from the APA en masse. For this reason, according to the APA’s 1989 reconstruction of events, “the [APA] Board of Directors, in the spring of 1987, reconsidered its prior decision to participate in the brief and voted, narrowly, to withdraw” (American Psychological Association 1989: 1).
Psychological Association 1989: 1). This meant, the Association said, that the “APA’s decision to withdraw from the [Molko] case was based on procedural as opposed to substantive concerns. APA never rejected the brief [of February 10, 1987] on the grounds that it was inaccurate in substance” (American Psychological Association 1989: 2).

On March 24, 1987, the APA filed a motion in which it withdrew from the Molko case. In it, the APA stated that, “by this action, APA does not mean to suggest endorsement of any views opposed to those set forth in the amicus brief [of February 10, 1987]” (American Psychological Association 1987b: 2). In the meantime, the APA decided to reach some kind of conclusion about the DIMPAC task force, which had been functioning since 1983. At the end of 1986, the task force submitted to the Board of Social and Ethical Responsibility (BSERP), the APA board in charge of public policy, a draft of its report. Subsequently, Singer and others claimed that it was not a final draft. In actuality, according to BSERP, the draft had been filed as a “final draft of the report, minus the reference list” (Thomas 1986).

The DIMPAC report presented two main theses. The first was that cults are not religions. They should not be labeled new religions or new religious movements since the use of these terms “results in ... an attitude of deviance deamplification toward extremist cults, and a tendency to gloss over critical differences between cultic and non-cultic groups” (DIMPAC 1986: 13).

The second thesis answered the question regarding how it is possible to differentiate between cults and religions. Unlike a religion, the report claimed, a cult is a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative (i.e., deceptive and indirect) techniques of persuasion and control designed to advance the goals of the group’s leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community (DIMPAC 1986: 14).

These techniques include “isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individuality or critical judgment, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it, etc.” (DIMPAC 1986: 14). In short, “totalist cults ... are likely to exhibit three elements to varying degrees: (1) excessively zealous, unquestioning commitment by members to the identity and leadership of the group; (2) exploitative manipulation of members; and (3) harm or the danger of harm” (DIMPAC 1986: 14).
The BSERP found that the draft had sufficient information to warrant issuing a statement and forwarded it to two internal and two external auditors. The latter were Jeffrey D. Fisher, from the University of Connecticut, and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, from the University of Haifa, Israel. With the BSERP statement, the APA not only rejected the DIMPAC report; it directed that it could not be referred to as an APA report – which was rightly perceived by APA members as a strong indictment of the document’s content.

In the “publicly distributed” version of the BSERP statement (Singer and Ofshe 1994: 31), the only attachments were the opinions of Fisher and Beit-Hallahmi, the two external auditors. In a later lawsuit however, the opinion of one of the internal auditors, American psychologist and academic Catherine Grady, was also filed. According to Grady, in the task force’s estimation the coercive persuasion techniques used by new religious movements “are not defined and cannot be distinguished from methods used in advertising, elementary schools, main-line churches, AA [Alcoholics Anonymous], and Weight Watchers.” Moreover, the references to “harm” in the DIMPAC report were extremely confused: “It’s all unsubstantiated and unproved newspaper reports and unresolved court cases. It’s not evidence” (Grady 1987: 1–2).

Fisher wrote that the report was “unscientific in tone, and biased in nature” and “sometimes . . . characterized by the use of deceptive, indirect techniques of persuasion and control – the very thing it is investigating.” He also observed that, “At times, the reasoning seems flawed to the point of being almost ridiculous.” Fisher added that the report’s historical excursion on the cults “reads more like hysterical ramblings than a scientific task force report.” On the DIMPAC task force’s criticism of the use of the expression new religious movements and argument that the term cults should be retained, Fisher countered that “the reasoning becomes absolutely some of the most polemical, ridiculous reasoning I’ve ever seen anywhere, much less in the context of an A.P.A. technical report” (BSERP 1987: 2–3).

In his review of the report, Beit-Hallahmi asked,

> What exactly are deceptive and indirect techniques of persuasion and control? I don’t think that psychologists know much about techniques of persuasion and control, either direct or indirect, either deceptive or honest. We just don’t know, and we should admit it. Lacking psychological theory, the report resorts to sensationalism in the style of certain tabloids (BSERP 1987: 4).

He added that,

> psychotherapy as it is practiced most of the time (private practice) is likely to lead to immoral behavior. I have no sympathy for Rev. Moon, Rajneesh, or
Scientology, but I think that psychologists will be doing the public a greater favor by cleaning their own act, before they pick on various strange religions (BSERP 1987: 5).

A scholar hostile to the cults, Beit-Hallahmi nevertheless offered a radical conclusion: “The term ‘brainwashing’ is not a recognized theoretical concept, and is just a sensationalist ‘explanation’ more suitable to ‘cultists’ and revival preachers. It should not be used by psychologists since it does not explain anything” (BSERP 1987: 5).

Although the DIMPAC report declared that the task force had succeeded in finding a secular test to distinguish between cults and religions, which was not based on their “professed beliefs” but on their “actual practices” of persuasion and control (DIMPAC 1986: 14–15), the APA reviewers disagreed. They suspected that, contrary to what the report stated, the task force first classified some groups as cults because it regarded their beliefs as so irrational that nobody would freely embrace them. Then they introduced “deceptive and indirect techniques of persuasion and control,” that is, brainwashing, as an explanation for otherwise inexplicable conversions.

On May 11, 1987, as a result of the reviewers’ opinions, the BSERP, speaking on behalf of the APA, issued a Memorandum evaluating what it called the “task force’s final report.” The BSERP rejected the DIMPAC report on the grounds that it “lacks the scientific rigor and evenhanded critical approach necessary for APA imprimatur” (BSERP 1987: 1). In subsequent years, this Memorandum became the object of extensive controversy as Singer did not accept the APA verdict. She remained convinced that it was the result of a sinister “Conspiracy” (she always capitalized the word) plotted by APA’s top management and leading international scholars of new religious movements who acted together “fraudulently, intentionally, falsely, and/or in reckless disregard for the truth, with intent to deceive and in furtherance of the Conspiracy” (Singer and Ofshe 1994: 30).

Singer and her colleague Ofshe did not stop at verbal accusations. They filed a complaint in the US District Court, Southern District of New York, against APA, ASA, and several individual scholars, accusing them of forming a racket and, as such, of being subject to anti-racketeering statutes that had originally been conceived to pursue organized crime. On August 9, 1993, the Court ruled that anti-racketeering laws “can have no role in sanctioning conduct motivated by academic and legal differences” (United States District Court for the Southern District of New York 1993). After losing in federal court, Singer turned to the laws of the State of California, producing what she believed was solid evidence of the Conspiracy. But she lost again. On June 17, 1994, Judge James R. Lambden ruled that “plaintiffs have not presented sufficient evidence to establish any
reasonable probability of success on any cause of action” (Superior Court of the State of California in and for the County of Alameda 1994: 1).

In the 1990s lawsuits, Singer took it for granted that the 1987 BSERP Memorandum constituted “a rejection of the scientific validity of [her] theory of coercive persuasion” and was even described by the APA as such (Singer and Ofshe 1994: 31). Later, however, some of Singer’s supporters focused on the Memorandum’s note in its fourth paragraph that “after much consideration, BSERP does not believe that we have sufficient information available to guide us in taking a position on this issue” (BSERP 1987: 1). Contrary to Singer’s opinion, they argued that the Memorandum was not, in fact, a rejection of her theory of brainwashing, which had neither been accepted nor rejected by the BSERP.

But what was “this issue” on which the APA refused to “take a position”? It could not be the DIMPAC report, because the Memorandum did take a clear position on it. Nor could it be the subject matter of the DIMPAC report, that is, the brainwashing theory as presented by Singer and the anticult movement, because that theory was comprehensively illustrated in the report. It seems safe to conclude that the intent of the 1987 Memorandum was to argue that Singer’s anticult brainwashing theory lacked scientific rigor, while not evaluating which different theories of persuasion may be acceptable or not – a much broader question on which understandably the Memorandum did not wish to take a position (see Introvigne 2014b).

Brainwashing in American Courts: From Molko to Fishman

We now return to the Molko Unification Church lawsuit. In 1988, Judge Stanley Mosk (1912–2001) of the California Supreme Court issued a ruling that over-turned the lower courts’ judgment on the admissibility of Singer’s and others’ testimony on brainwashing theories. Judge Mosk held that, the Katz decision notwithstanding, it was constitutionally admissible to ascertain whether or not a group practices brainwashing. The Molko ruling did not consider the latest APA developments, and was supported by two arguments. First, Judge Mosk held that brainwashing theory had its supporters within academia, although it remained quite controversial. “Some commentators,” he wrote, “conclude that certain religious groups use brainwashing techniques to recruit and control members. . . . To the contrary, other authorities believe brainwashing either does not exist at all . . . or is effective only when combined with physical abuse or physical restraint” (Supreme Court of the State of California 1988: 54).

Second, the judge asked the question whether accepting brainwashing theories would imply allowing into the case a distinction between good and
bad religion, which was not allowed by the US Constitution. His answer was that considering whether a religious group had used deception, by attracting potential converts without telling them which movement had approached them, did not involve any judgment on theology. Mosk acknowledged that, from a structural point of view, the coercive influence to which participants to Unification Church sponsored seminars were exposed was no different from what novices underwent in a Catholic convent. But the differentiating factor, he said, was deceit: in the Oakland Family – the branch of the Unification Church that Molko and Leal had joined – those who attended workshops did not know, at least in the first few days that are crucial to decision-making, what organization they had been asked to join.

Catholic religious orders, the judge said, use the same coercive influence but do not deceive novices by hiding the name of the order. “It is one thing when a person knowingly and voluntarily submits to a process involving coercive influence, as a novice does on entering a monastery or a seminary. . . . But it is quite another when a person is subjected to coercive persuasion without his knowledge or consent” (Supreme Court of the State of California 1988: 60). Judge Mosk did not conclude that coercive influence, that is, brainwashing, was illegal per se. He said it was only illegal when it was accompanied by deceit.

Although the Molko lawsuit was later resolved in an out-of-court settlement, controversies continued. Singer and her critics crossed swords again in 1988 in the Kropinsky v. World Plan Executive Council case, when the Federal Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia unanimously overturned a lower court decision that had admitted her testimony about brainwashing in a case involving Transcendental Meditation. According to the Court of Appeals, the plaintiff “failed to provide any evidence that Dr. Singer’s particular theory, namely that techniques of thought reform may be effective in the absence of physical threats or coercion, has a significant following in the scientific community, let alone general acceptance” (United States Court of Appeals, District of Columbia Circuit 1988).

Singer responded by starting what some of her critics nicknamed her “manual wars.” What was in the mainline scientific manuals, she claimed, was not partisan advocacy but accepted science. The short entry in the diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association 1980: 260) about brainwashing, said to have been practiced on “the captives of terrorists or cultists,” she claimed, had been written by herself. Singer’s critics responded that, although the DSM-III manual was indeed an authoritative text, placing a short entry there did not in itself constitute sufficient proof that a controversial theory had found general acceptance (Richardson 1993b). In fact, in 1994, the DSM-IV that replaced DSM-III
eliminated the reference to cultists in its coverage of unspecified dissociation disorders, although it retained the expression brainwashing, without defining it, and associated the practice with being a prisoner in a scenario of physical segregation (American Psychiatric Association 1994: 490). For several years, however, the DSM-III reference continued to be quoted to support the claim that brainwashing was part of mainline science (Anthony 1999: 436).

All of this became less relevant after the decisive battle between the two camps took place in the US District Court for the Northern District of California in 1990, in the United States v. Fishman case. Steven Fishman was a professional troublemaker, who attended the stockholders’ meetings of large corporations for the purpose of suing the management with the support of other minority stockholders. He then signed settlements and pocketed the money paid by the corporations, leaving the other stockholders who had trusted him empty-handed. In a lawsuit brought against him for fraud, Fishman claimed in his defense that at the time he was temporarily incapable of understanding or forming sound judgments because he had been a member of the Church of Scientology since 1979 and, as such, had been subjected to brainwashing.

The case was not easy for Singer and Ofshe, who served as expert witnesses for Fishman’s defense. In addition to Scientology not being part of the case, and having nothing to do with Fishman’s fraudulent activities, the prosecutor easily showed that the defendant had been guilty of similar practices even before being introduced to Scientology. Notwithstanding this, Fishman’s defense insisted on calling Singer and Ofshe to the stand.

On April 13, 1990, Judge D. Lowell Jensen ruled on the issue. He pointed out that, unlike the earlier Kropinsky case, here it was possible to review hundreds of academic documents on brainwashing. Unlike Judge Mosk in the Molko ruling, Jensen had a large file on his desk about the APA’s position on the DIMPAC task force. He largely relied on the expert opinions rendered for the prosecution by Dick Anthony and psychiatrist Perry London (1931–92). Jensen stated that brainwashing theory as Singer presented it first emerged with journalist and CIA operative Edward Hunter and did not concur with the thought reform theory put forth by Lifton and Schein. Although Singer and Ofshe argued that they were faithfully applying Lifton and Schein’s theories to the matter of cults, the judge noted that their claim “has met with resistance from members of the scientific community.” Even though some of Singer’s positions on brainwashing had been included in respected psychiatric manuals, “a more significant barometer of prevailing views within the scientific community is provided by professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association” (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990: 12–13).
Judge Jensen retraced the APA’s intervention, stating that “the APA considered the scientific merit of the Singer–Ofshe position on coercive persuasion in the mid-1980s,” by setting up the DIMPAC task force. It also “publicly endorsed a position on coercive persuasion contrary to Dr. Singer’s” by submitting a brief in the Mollo case in which it was argued that the theory of brainwashing as applied to “cults [. . .] did not represent a meaningful scientific concept.” It is true, Judge Jensen argued, that the APA subsequently withdrew its signature on this brief, but “in truth the withdrawal occurred for procedural and not substantive reasons,” as confirmed by the fact that soon thereafter the APA “rejected the Singer task force report on coercive persuasion.” The judge recalled that similar events had transpired in the ASA. Therefore, the documents “establish that the scientific community has resisted the Singer–Ofshe thesis applying coercive persuasions to religious cults.” Jensen added that even Lifton, a scholar who had no sympathy for the cults, had expressed reservations about the Singer–Ofshe model (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990: 14).

To serve as the foundation for a legal decision, a scientific theory should find general acceptance in the academic community. In the case of brainwashing, Jensen said, “the Singer–Ofshe thesis lacks the imprimatur of the APA and the ASA . . . . Theories regarding the coercive persuasion practiced by religious cults are not sufficiently established to be admitted as evidence in federal courts of law” (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990: 14).

Three important conclusions were reached in the Fishman ruling. The first was that the APA did not simply refuse to approve the DIMPAC task force report; in 1987, it expressed disapproval of DIMPAC and Singer’s theory of brainwashing more generally. Second, the size of the minority of scholars supporting brainwashing theory was too small to argue that there were two competing positions in academia. Rather, Fishman confirmed that there was a large, although not unanimous, consensus among scholars that brainwashing theories belonged to pseudoscience. Third, expert testimony on brainwashing should be excluded in cult cases. With this, Fishman established a precedent that continues to be followed in most cases in the United States to the present day (although the situation may be different in other countries).

Perhaps Jensen exaggerated Lifton’s reservations about Singer’s theories. Although he was aware that Singer’s theory was different from his model of thought reform, Lifton repeatedly endorsed the anticult movement while resisting direct involvement in court cases. In 1995, Lifton wrote a three-page preface to Singer’s popular book Cults in Our Midst, cowritten with Janja Lalich, which began by stating that “Margaret Thaler Singer stands alone in her extraordinary
knowledge of the psychology of cults,” although he also noted that “one person’s cult, of course, is another’s religion” and that any generalization was dangerous (Lifton 1995: xi–xiii).

Undoubtedly, the fact that Lifton agreed to write the preface was an important political achievement for Singer. In 2001, Lifton and I debated the issue of cults at a conference organized by the Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation in Sweden (Almqvist and Wallrup 2005). Lifton made it abundantly clear that he regarded cults as part of a harmful constellation of conservative, authoritarian forces using thought reform to limit the human capability for autonomous thinking. He included in this galaxy the US Republican Party of then-President George W. Bush. In 2017, Lifton would gladly join a group of psychiatrists in arguing that Donald Trump’s mental state made him unfit to continue to serve as president (Lee 2017); and in 2019, he would compare the Trump movement with cults such as Aum Shinrikyo (Lifton 2019).

As much as he despised what he regarded as different incarnations of totalism, Lifton’s libertarian ideas also made him cautious in approving anticult legislation and lawsuits. He saw the dangers for religious liberty, as well as the risks that a primitive, simplistic idea of brainwashing – of which he had never approved – would prevail. For him, freedom from religionists and politicians who continuously try to manipulate us should be achieved through culture and education.

After Fishman, it became more difficult for Margaret Singer and other anticult advocates to be accepted in US federal courts as expert witnesses on brainwashing, and this eventually created problems for them in state courts as well (Ginsburg and Richardson 1998). Deprogrammers found still less tolerance, even in local courts. The Fishman ruling did not spell the definitive end of the use of anticult brainwashing theories in US courts. However, a chain of events had been set in motion that would eventually lead to the end of deprogramming in the United States and the demise of CAN.

In 1995, deprogrammer Rick Ross was involved in a civil trial after he had unsuccessfully tried to deprogram Jason Scott, a member of the United Pentecostal Church, a five-million strong Christian denomination few would regard as either a cult or a new religious movement. Scott was supported by lawyers and detectives from the Church of Scientology, who demonstrated that his mother was referred to Ross by CAN. The latter was sentenced to pay millions of dollars in damages (United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit 1998) and went bankrupt. CAN’s name and assets were purchased by a Scientology-related group, which allowed sociologist Anson D. Shupe (1948–2015) and his team free access to the CAN archives. They concluded that CAN’s practice of referring the parents of cult members to deprogrammers
was not an occasional but rather a habitual occurrence. In return for the referrals, the deprogrammers kicked back to CAN hefty (and probably illegal) commissions (Shupe and Darnell 2006).

**Have Brainwashing Theory, Will Travel: US Experts Abroad**

While Singer and others were prevented by *Fishman* from testifying about brainwashing in most American cult cases, they could still do so abroad. In the 1970s, an anticult movement had emerged in Europe, Canada, Australia–New Zealand, and in some South American countries in close contact with US organizations. US deprogrammers also started operating abroad (Shupe and Bromley 1994). By the 1980s, most claimed they were now using exit counseling or intervention, nonviolent processes that did not include kidnapping or detention, although some were accused of having changed their techniques in name only. Having experienced problems with deprogramming, the British anticult organization FAIR changed its name from “Family, Action, Information, Rescue” to “Family Action, Information, Resource” (and later to The Family Survival Trust). The word “rescue” was too easily associated with deprogramming.

The ambiguity of terminology was clearly demonstrated by the 1999 novel and movie *Holy Smoke!* by New Zealand screenwriters and directors Anna and Jane Campion (Campion and Campion 1999). An ambiguous sexual relation develops between the deprogrammer (played by Harvey Keitel) and the young female devotee of an Indian guru (portrayed by Kate Winslet) he tries to deprogram. What we see is a classical deprogramming; the girl is clearly told she is not free to leave the Australian farm where she has been confined, yet the man styles himself as an “exit counselor” (Introvigne 1999).

Although some countries made financial contributions to anticult organizations, the interest of governments outside the United States in campaigns or legislation against cults was initially not high. Italy was a special case, because of its century-old tradition of statutes on “*plagio*.” The word came from the Latin *plagium*, which in Roman times indicated two different crimes: appropriating somebody else’s literary or artistic creations (hence the English word plagiarism) and appropriating free will and freedom by reducing into slavery a Roman citizen who was not legally a slave. In the second meaning, *plagio* came to indicate “reduction to slavery.” In 1930 the Fascist regime codified it as a crime not only of physical, but also of mental enslavement. Something similar to brainwashing had thus been introduced into the Italian Criminal Code twenty years before the word brainwashing was invented by Hunter. The provision was
used very rarely. Although it remained in the Criminal Code for fifty-one years, no conviction was based on it until 1968 (Usai 1996).

In 1964, the law on plagio was used to prosecute Aldo Braibanti (1922–2014), a gay Communist poet. The father of a young man who had decided to live with him accused Braibanti of having brainwashed his heterosexual son into homosexuality. Based on the statute on plagio, Braibanti was arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced to a jail term of nine years in 1968. The sentence was confirmed up to the Court of Cassation, notwithstanding a national campaign led by prominent intellectuals, who denounced both the decisions against Braibanti as homophobic and the plagio statute as a dangerous Fascist residue the Constitutional Court should eliminate (Moravia et al. 1969).

Braibanti’s case never reached the Constitutional Court, however. The poet was liberated after two years in jail, thanks to a law that granted sentence reductions to those who had valiantly fought against the Fascist regime in the Italian Resistance, as he had done. The Braibanti decision led prosecutors to start a handful of other plagio cases in the 1970s. No convictions were obtained, however.

Among those prosecuted for plagio was Father Emilio Grasso, a popular Catholic priest from Rome who in 1978 was accused by parents of having brainwashed their sons and daughters into dropping out of college to serve as full-time lay missionaries for his movement, Redemptor Hominis. Rather than making a decision – unlike in the Braibanti case, and perhaps because Catholic priests were at that time more popular in Italy than gay poets – the judges in Rome requested a preliminary ruling from the Constitutional Court. They asked the Constitutional judges to determine whether the statute on plagio, which dated to 1930, was compatible with the new democratic Constitution of 1947. On June 8, 1981, the Constitutional Court decided that it was not. The justices stated that the plagio statute was a “bomb” hidden in the Italian legal system, “ready to explode” at any time against members of unpopular minorities. Noting that the scientific community had not established criteria distinguishing resistible and irresistible persuasion, the Court concluded that some situations of psychological dependency . . . can reach high degrees of intensity even for long periods, including in a love relationship, a relationship between priest and believer, teacher and pupil, physician and patient . . . But in practice, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish, in all these cases, a licit psychological persuasion from an allegedly illegal psychological manipulation, and to differentiate between them for legal purposes. No firm criteria exist for separating and defining the two activities, nor can a precise boundary between the two be traced (Corte Costituzionale 1981: 831–33).
During the cult wars and beyond, anticultists in Italy repeatedly tried to reintroduce provisions against *plagio* or brainwashing, but this proved impossible because of the binding nature of Constitutional Court precedents (Introvigne 2014a).

In Europe in general, anticultism was revitalized after the homicides and suicides perpetrated by the Order of the Solar Temple – a new religious movement based on a mixture of esoteric ideas and apocalyptic expectations – in Switzerland, France, and Canada, in 1994, 1995, and 1997, respectively. Several of those who died in the Solar Temple tragedy were wealthy professionals, which contrasted with the popular image of cults finding their followers mostly among marginal or poor segments of the population. This led both the media and authorities to suspect brainwashing (Introvigne and Mayer 2002).

In the wake of the Solar Temple incidents, parliamentary or administrative committees were appointed in many Western European countries (with the significant exception of Great Britain) that produced reports about cults or about specific groups. In some countries, the reports called for the appointment of anticult agencies, new bills, or amendments to existing laws that would make brainwashing a crime. Perhaps the most active anticult governmental agency is MILS, the Inter-Ministerial Mission for Combating Cults, which was created in France (later renamed MIVILUDES, Inter-Ministerial Mission for the Vigilance and Fight against Cultiic Deviations).

In a study I coauthored with James T. Richardson, we reviewed the reports published between 1996 and 2000 (Richardson and Introvigne 2001), distinguishing between what we called Type I and Type II documents. Type I documents (Assemblée Nationale 1996; Chambre des Représentants de Belgique 1997; Groupe d’experts genevois 1997; Commission pénale sur les dérives sectaires 1999) were all published in French, in France, Belgium, and the French-speaking part of Switzerland, adopting the Singer-style model of brainwashing and calling for new legislation. Type II reports, including a Dutch report (Witteveen 1984) and a long document approved in Germany (Deutscher Bundestag 1998), considered the scholarly criticism of the anticult brainwashing model and were more nuanced in their conclusions.

In the end, Belgium did not legislate on brainwashing, but in 1998 created an administrative task force and an information center to combat cults. In 2001, France introduced a new provision in the Criminal Code (article 223–15-2), punishing with a jail penalty of up to three years those who use techniques creating a state of “physical or psychological subjection.” Spain, which had not created a commission to study the issue of brainwashing, amended article 515 of its Criminal Code in 1995, declaring illegal associations that use “techniques to
change or control the personality” of their members and threatening their
leaders with a three-year jail sentence (Motilla 1999: 325–40).

These laws were mostly enforced against small, local cults in France (Palmer
2011) and elsewhere. The larger groups, including Scientology, successfully
resisted prosecution based on concepts such as psychological subjection, which
were difficult to prove in court against the objections of skilled defense lawyers
and expert witnesses.

Margaret Singer continued to serve as an expert witness in several European
cases. I was on the opposite side of the then-aging American psychologist in two
cases in the 1990s, in France and Switzerland, respectively. Her side lost both
cases. In France, she was gradually replaced as the leading anticult expert
witness in the main court cases where cults were accused of brainwashing by
French psychiatrist Jean-Marie Abgrall, who championed Singer’s theories
while presenting them in psychoanalytic jargon (Abgrall 1996; Anthony 1999).

European supporters of the theory that cults used brainwashing also relied on
a handful of North American scholars who lectured in support of campaigns
against Scientology and other new religious movements (Richardson 1996b).
Janja Lalich, who had coauthored the classic Cults in Our Midst with Singer and
based her writings on what she described as her personal experience in a
political cult, the Marxist-Leninist Democratic Workers Party, has continued
the Singer tradition into the twenty-first century. In the subsequent generation of
anticultists, a similar role is played by South African-born Alexandra Stein,
a social psychologist based in England (Stein 2016). Like Lalich, she also
encountered brainwashing theories when reflecting on her time in what she
also called a political cult, the Minneapolis Maoist group known as The O (Stein
2002). Self-styled cult experts who had been active in deprogramming, such as
Steven Hassan and Rick Ross, also lecture internationally and keep alive
Singer’s model. As late as 2020, Hassan was still promoting the classic theory
of brainwashing and even Singer’s idea that it had been marginalized in
academia through a conspiracy of scholars who were paid by the cults
(Hassan 2020: 8).

In his history of the academic study of new religious movements, W. Michael
Ashcraft noted that a handful of scholars seceded from the majority of their
colleagues to create a new discipline they called cultic studies. This branch
accepts the distinction between religions and cults and identifies cults by their
use of heavy psychological manipulation techniques, for which some scholars
retain the word brainwashing. As Ashcraft observed, cultic studies was never
accepted as mainstream scholarship. It continued as “a project shared by a small
cadre of committed scholars” but not endorsed by “the larger academic com-

munity, nationally and internationally” (Ashcraft 2018: 9).
The two main exponents of cultic studies realized that brainwashing theory, as originally formulated by Singer, could not survive decades of heavy scholarly criticism. Brainwashing, they believed, should be presented differently. Canadian sociologist Stephen A. Kent noted that most critics of anticult theories, and perhaps L. Ron Hubbard when he published *Brain-Washing*, denied that brainwashing was possible in the absence of extreme physical coercion yet accepted that it would be possible to overcome free will by using confinement or torture (*Kent 2000: 10*). Kent argued that new religious movements scholars wrongly believe that imprisonment and torture, while practiced by thought reformers in Maoist China, are not present in the cults. He insisted that institutions for reeducating “sinful” members – such as the Rehabilitation Project Force in the Church of Scientology or the Victor Camps created by The Family International (formerly Children of God) to reform rebellious teenagers – were brainwashing facilities where victims were “subjected to veritable forms of torture” (*Kent 2000: 14*). The argument has failed to convince scholars of new religious movements, who have objected that Kent has mostly relied on partisan accounts by apostates (*Melton 2018*), but the Canadian scholar has become a popular lecturer in the international anticult circuit.

Another scholar who proposed a somewhat revised theory of brainwashing was American sociologist Benjamin Zablocki (1941–2020). He presented brainwashing as “a technique for retaining members, not for obtaining members” (*Zablocki 1997, 1998: 218*). His analysis of brainwashing as a “maximization of exit costs” was different from Kent’s, because Zablocki considered the search for physical coercion a “false path” (*Zablocki 1998: 231*). He believed there was no need for physical force to lead cult members to believe that, should they leave the group, they would incur intolerable exit costs. Exiting the movement, they were told, might prejudice their eternal salvation and their possibility of continuing a normal life. Zablocki also criticized Singer, insisting that brainwashing did not explain why some joined a cult, only why they did not leave. He also argued that brainwashing worked only in a limited number of cases (*Zablocki 1998: 229*).

Critics have objected that exit costs are maximized in a large number of legitimate social institutions, including the family and mainline religions (*Bromley 1998: 250–71*). Indeed, using Zablocki’s model it is not easy to distinguish between religion and cults, and it has met with limited success even within the anticult milieu. On the other hand, because of his moderate approach Zablocki became one of the participants who represented the cultic studies side in a dialogue with mainline new religious movements scholars. The dialogue aimed, if not at resolving differences, at least at avoiding the name-calling and lawsuits typical of the cult wars years. In the twenty-first century,
thanks to the efforts of Eileen Barker, Michael Langone, and others, this dialogue has increasingly involved both proponents of brainwashing theories and their critics.

Anticultists in South Korea and Japan have remained outside of these dialogues. They stuck to a crude brainwashing theory and to deprogramming, which in these countries was mostly practiced by conservative Protestant ministers. They combined a countercult theological criticism of heresies with anticult brainwashing theories, an approach that had been advocated earlier in Europe by German Lutheran pastor Friedrich-Wilhelm Haack (1935–91), who coined the word soulwashing (seelenwäsche) (Haack 1979: 116). In Japan, deprogramming was not ended by the law courts (Fautré 2012) until the seminal decision of the Tokyo High Court in the case of Unification Church member Goto Toru in 2014, who was detained against his will for more than twelve years, and then confirmed by the Supreme Court in 2015 (Fautré 2015).

In South Korea, deprogramming continues to this day, particularly against the Christian new religious movement, Shincheonji. This is despite massive street demonstrations in 2018 after a female member of that group, Gu Ji-In (1992–2018), was strangled to death by her father while she tried to escape deprogrammers (Fautré 2020). South Korean deprogrammers even produced propaganda videos proposing a unique mix of Singer-style brainwashing theories and Christian criticism of “unbiblical heresies” (Di Marzio 2020).

In Japan (Fautré 2021) and South Korea (Introvigne 2020), brainwashing arguments continue to be used to award damages to some former members of groups labeled as cults. Local courts, however, adopted the model of the Molko decision. They only ruled in favor of the ex-members when they found either that they had been recruited without having initially being told which groups they were asked to join or were induced to donate money under false pretenses. In cases where they believed deceit was not proved, the courts concluded there had been no brainwashing and refused to award damages (Introvigne 2020).

Russia and China are special cases. In post-Soviet Russia, anticult activities were initially promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), based on theological criticism against unwelcome competitors in a religious market that was just opening after decades of state-enforced atheism. The ROC’s criticism of the heretics, however, was largely perceived as old-fashioned and unpersuasive. It failed to effectively contain the growth of new religions coming from both Asia and the United States.

In 1992, Alexander Dvorkin, a Russian who had become an American citizen, returned to Moscow from the United States, where he had spent fifteen years, converted to Orthodox Christianity and obtained college degrees in
Theology and Medieval Studies. In the United States, Dvorkin had been exposed to the anticult theories of brainwashing. Upon his return to Russia, he sought employment with the ROC which quickly came to see in him a man of providence, sent to modernize the dusty anticultism of the church and make it palatable to the secular authorities through the theory of brainwashing (Shterin and Richardson 2000). Just one year after he had arrived in Russia, he became the head of the newly established countercult branch of the ROC, the Saint Irenaeus of Lyon Information and Consultation Center, and a professor of Cultic Studies at the ROC University of Saint Tikhon (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012).

While firmly grounded in Russian Orthodox theology, Dvorkin’s narrative about the danger of the cults aimed to persuade the officially secular (but deeply indebted to the ROC for electoral and political support) Russian politicians that anticult action should be taken. After 9/11, and several terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalists on Russian soil, the Russian Parliament passed increasingly severe laws on “religious extremism.” Dvorkin managed to persuade the authorities that brainwashing, typically used by the cults, was one of the features of extremism, although not the only one.

In 2009, Dvorkin was appointed head of the government’s Council of Religious Experts with a crucial role in designating which groups should be regarded as extremist – inter alia because they used brainwashing – and banned. Although he occasionally embarrassed both the government and the ROC for his violent language and attacks against mainline Hinduism and Islam, which had caused international political problems for Russia, he managed to have Jehovah’s Witnesses banned in Russia in 2017 and continued to target other new religious movements such as Scientology (USCIRF 2020: 3–5).

While the main financial support for European anticultism had traditionally come from the French government (Duval 2012), Russia started to court anticult organizations in various countries and promoted Dvorkin as an international expert on brainwashing and cults. In 2009, Dvorkin was elected vice president of the European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS), a position he maintained until 2021. None of the more secular European anticult leaders – some of them self-styled atheists – object to having a ROC employee in this position. In 2020, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan commission of the US federal government, identified both Dvorkin and FECRIS among the main threats to the global cause of religious liberty, denouncing them for their promotion of “pseudo-scientific concepts like ‘brainwashing’ and ‘mind control’” (USCIRF 2020: 3).
Dvorkin and other supporters of Singer-style brainwashing theories, including American deprogrammer Rick Ross, also visited China. There, in 1999, a new nationwide campaign had been launched to eradicate cults after the start of the conflict between the authorities and Falun Gong, the qigong new religion that had grown rapidly in the 1990s (Edelman and Richardson 2005). Eventually, China organized the largest and most-funded anticult association in the world. In its repression of religious movements it labeled as xie jiao, it started using the Western rhetoric of brainwashing.

While attending a conference with Chinese anticultists and law enforcement officers working full-time against the cults (KKNews 2017), I was surprised to learn that none of them was aware of the fact that the word brainwashing had originally been coined within the context of Western anti-Chinese and anti-Communist propaganda. On the other hand, as noted by the Chinese scholar Wu Junqing, contemporary Chinese anticultists did not need Western sources to use the rhetoric of brainwashing against the cults. They simply secularized the traditional Chinese theme of xie jiao, which lured victims through black magic (Wu 2017: 155–58). “We need not suppose that today’s functionaries read … imperial anecdotes” about black magic and xie jiao, Wu argued. “Popular novels and films” depicting the sinister techniques used by cults in Imperial China would be enough for the purpose (Wu 2017: 157).

Believing in cultic brainwashing, both Russians and the Chinese also accept the use of deprogramming. In these countries deprogramming is practiced in state-sponsored facilities and jails, rather than as a private activity, and cultists are sentenced to spend time there by court decisions or administrative orders (Richardson 2011). In Russia, deprogramming facilities are managed by the ROC and the Dvorkin group (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012: 279–80). In China, deprogramming is practiced in coercive educational facilities, such as the so-called transformation through education camps, in dedicated homes, and in jails (Cai 2021).

When in 2021 the BBC broadcast a report on the Xinjiang camps, giving voice to several women who had been reeducated for their alleged Islamic radical leanings, it told a tale very much reminiscent of the Maoist thought reform studied by Lifton. The women reported that, besides long hours of propaganda lessons, they were submitted to sleep and food deprivation and to a system of punishment and rewards based on their progress on the deradicalization path. They were also forced to take pills and injections that were introduced to them as vaccinations but left the women numb and confused, as if they were actually mind-altering drugs (Hill, Campanale, and Gunter 2021).
5 Conclusion: Old Wine in New Bottles

In the second half of the 1990s, James T. Richardson, who played an important role in criticizing brainwashing theories as applied to new religious movements, joined forces with legal scholar Gerald P. Ginsburg and others to systematically survey all American court cases where the word brainwashing appeared. Richardson and his colleagues continued the surveys into the twenty-first century, and published a summary of their research in 2015 (Reichert, Richardson, and Thomas 2015). They found that after Fishman, the use of brainwashing arguments in legal cases involving new religious movements had greatly decreased, although there were attempts to reintroduce them from time to time. Nevertheless, this did not mean that brainwashing had disappeared from American courts.

Richardson and his coauthors found that the words brainwashing, mind control, and cult had emerged between the Fishman decision of 1990 and 2014 in more than 900 American court cases, most of them not involving new religious movements. Brainwashing by a variety of sources (including teachers, pastors, therapists, and even the US government) was used, although rarely with success, as a defense in criminal cases, just as had happened in Fishman and in the earlier Patty Hearst case.

Much more successful was the idea, used in custody litigation, that one divorced parent had brainwashed children into hating their other parent. This was called parental alienation syndrome (PAS), a theory put forward by American child psychiatrist Richard A. Gardner (1931–2003), who explicitly based it on brainwashing (Gardner 1992). Answering his critics in an article published posthumously, he wrote that, “It is true that I do focus on the brainwashing parent, but I do not agree that such focus is ‘overly simplistic.’ The fact is that when there is PAS, the primary etiological factor is the brainwashing parent. And when there is no brainwashing parent, there is no PAS” (Gardner 2004: 614).

Gardner’s theory was not unanimously accepted. In a remake of the 1987 DIMPAC case involving Singer’s brainwashing theory, a Presidential Task Force of the APA concluded in 1996 that “there are no data to support the phenomenon called parental alienation syndrome” (American Psychological Association 1996, 40). Criticism came both from psychologists and legal scholars, including San Diego State University’s Janet R. Johnston (Kelly and Johnston 2001; Johnston and Kelly 2004), and from critics of brainwashing theories such as Richardson (Richardson et al. 1995; Reichert, Richardson, and Thomas 2015: 13; Thomas and Richardson 2015). However, PAS continues to be used as an argument in divorce and custody cases, not only in the United States.
States; and the heated discussion about Gardner’s theories keeps alive an international controversy on brainwashing.

Coercive control – defined as intimidation, surveillance, and isolation within a context of domestic abuse or stalking – also remains controversial. California and Hawaii, England and Wales, and Tasmania and Queensland in Australia, followed by others, have passed legislation outlawing this behavior. Although the laws refer to a specific abusive conduct, the shadow of brainwashing hangs over the statutes, making them difficult to enforce. Sometimes, critics argue, it is the perpetrators who accuse the victims of manipulation through coercive control (Solis 2021).

Furthermore, brainwashing was proposed after 9/11 as a folk explanation of how terrorists, some from wealthy families, had joined al-Qa’ida and later the Islamic State. Anticultists offered themselves as experts on Islamic radicalism, claiming that al-Qa’ida and other radical Muslim organizations were basically cults, which they said was also true of other non-Muslim terrorist groups. However, their lack of information on the Islamic context and on the specialized academic field of terrorism studies quickly became apparent, and they have largely been ignored by the academic community and government agencies dealing with counterterrorism (Dawson 2009).

Brainwashing theories were, however, more successful, as noted in the Introduction to this Element, as explanations of the Trump phenomenon and of how it was possible that millions of American citizens (and not a few non-Americans) supported QAnon and other movements and networks promoting wild conspiracy theories. Old hands in the anticult movement, such as former deprogrammer Steve Hassan, simply applied Singer’s brainwashing theory to Trumpism and QAnon. The title of Hassan’s book, The Cult of Trump: A Leading Cult Expert Explains How the President Uses Mind Control (Hassan 2019), already says it all. Those psychologists and psychiatrists who had maintained a concern that governments and intelligence agencies are both willing and able to heavily manipulate their citizens also revamped the idea of brainwashing, as epitomized by Dark Persuasion: A History of Brainwashing from Pavlov to Social Media, a book published in 2021 by Joel E. Dimsdale, a professor emeritus at University of California, San Diego (Dimsdale 2021). Dimsdale’s concerns about how social media may now be used to disseminate dark propaganda and political manipulation are shared by many. However, when dealing with new religious movements, Dimsdale largely relied on the old anticult vulgate.

The bizarre claims of QAnon and the assault on Capitol Hill of January 6, 2021 lent credibility to the theory that the extreme pro-Trump fringe included victims of brainwashing, and even Hassan was taken seriously by mainline
media (see, e.g., Milbank 2021). As had happened with Communist thought reform in the 1960s, and later with accusations of brainwashing directed at new religious movements, Lifton offered a more elegant version of claims that Trumpism was a cult of sorts (Lifton 2019). The fact that he had used this terminology gave credibility to the idea that the extreme right was brainwashing its followers.

Paradoxically, QAnon and similar movements were themselves persuaded that brainwashing was being used on the American political scene – by the Democratic Party, the “deep state,” and what one author, who wrote an opus in no less than forty-three small volumes on the issue, called the “Marxist-Zionist-Jesuit-Masonic-Black Nobility-Illuminati-Luciferian death cult” (Hagopian 2020–21).

There was, however, a difference between how the anti-Trump and the pro-Trump camps referred to brainwashing. Critics of Trump and those who denounced QAnon as a cult basically revived the anticult model of brainwashing, based on mind control achieved through psychological manipulation. In QAnon, on the other hand, one would more often find, together with references to the MK-ULTRA project – which had allegedly been secretly continued by rogue deep state operatives after its official demise in 1963 – the idea that brainwashing was achieved through magic. Sometimes, it was the modern magic of mysterious mind-controlling rays directed on unsuspecting American homes from satellites, chips implanted by unscrupulous medical doctors, or drugs hidden in anti-COVID-19 vaccines by conspirators led by Bill Gates or George Soros. In other cases, QAnon postings claimed that deep state brainwashing worked by mobilizing black magic in a very traditional sense, through spells, rituals of witchcraft, human sacrifice of children, or invocations to Satan and his minions. Trump’s camp always included believers in magic (Asprem 2020) and denouncing Hillary Clinton and other Democratic leaders as involved in Satanism was a key part of the QAnon narrative.

In a sense, the brainwashing discourse has come full circle. The idea that those who embrace deviant beliefs had been bewitched by black magic had been secularized twice, first as hypnosis and then as brainwashing. Now, black magic with its traditional paraphernalia of sinister enchantments and Devil worship came back to be adopted by some QAnon followers as the only possible explanation why otherwise sane, patriotic, and even some Republican Americans had been persuaded, first, that Trump was up to no good, and then that he had really lost the 2020 election, rather than being cheated out of his victory by the deep state’s ability to simultaneously brainwash millions of citizens.
Indeed, black magic had not disappeared when its secular version, brainwashing, became prominent. Some of the groups labeled as cults preached more or less unorthodox versions of Christianity, Hinduism, or Buddhism, but others offered esoteric and occult experiences. It was easier to accuse esoteric cults of brainwashing their victims through black magic, and once again popular culture helped persuade those who remained doubtful. In 1908, the English novelist William Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) published *The Magician*, the story of an occult master called Oliver Haddo who uses black magic to mentally enslave and then kill a naïve British girl. Maugham based Haddo on Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), known to his followers as the founder of the new religion of Thelema and to his critics as the most sinister of the esoteric cult leaders. Maugham had personally met Crowley in Paris. As evil as Haddo was in the novel, his black magic worked, Maughan claimed, and produced real brainwashing effects (*Maugham* 1908).

As Italian scholar Franco Pezzini (2020) has demonstrated, *The Magician* inspired dozens of lesser novels for decades, not to mention movies and comics. Crowley himself, after answering Maugham with a critical review in *Vanity Fair* that he signed “Oliver Haddo” (*Haddo* 1908), very much enjoyed the publicity, and even adopted some of Haddo’s features as described in the novel. Haddo was also based on Svengali and, through the respected Maugham, themes introduced in the previous decade by du Maurier, who had become unmentionable in polite company because of his antisemitism, continued to circulate into the twenty-first century.

Brainwashing did not totally replace black magic and hypnotism as an explanation for why weird ideas and unusual movements are held and joined by normal people. Rather, black magic, hypnotism, and brainwashing have continued to coexist in various combinations. I have highlighted the role of novels such as *The Magician* and *The Manchurian Candidate* because they, and their film adaptations, reached a much larger audience than scholarly studies or works of political and religious controversy. As Richardson and his colleagues noted, long-running folk beliefs transmitted through popular culture may influence politicians and courts of law. In the case of brainwashing, “the popular acceptance of the concept, coupled with its obvious utility as an ‘account’ of otherwise controversial behaviors, resulted in such evidence being introduced and accepted in specialty courts, including family and juvenile courts” (*Reichert, Richardson, and Thomas* 2015: 19).

More than seventy years after Hunter coined the word “brainwashing”, we are still encountering the contradiction between the majority of academic
scholars, who have largely rejected it as pseudoscience, and a popular culture where the brainwashing explanation of deviant behavior and belief remains so powerful that it refuses to go away. It comes back every time new and seemingly unexplainable forms of deviance create a market for easy explanations.
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New Religious Movements

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