

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