

# Cambridge Elements

Elements in New Religious Movements

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## BRAINWASHING

*Reality or Myth?*

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## Brainwashing

### Reality or Myth?

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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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