

Reproducing Coercion

An exploration on the reproduction
of ideology in cults and capitalism

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Abstract

This thesis is about coercion. When individuals are exposed to coordinated processes of manipulation, they are unwittingly stripped of agency and their lives impacted beyond measure.

The idea for this work stems out of the experiences of the author who spent his formative years growing up in a religious high-pressure group (commonly referred to as cults). After leaving the group, he had to adapt to modern society, and came to the realization that he had a unique perspective. He had not been raised with the same normativity others had been systematically exposed to.

Journeying into the intangible and often legitimate yet immoral tools of control, manipulation and precaritization used by high-pressure groups, the work offers insight into common characteristics that help identify and analyse coercive groups, regardless of their ideology or area of operation.

The thesis then delves into an exploration of capitalism (in its various forms and historical structures within western context), and the common characteristics class - based societies exhibit with coercive groups. More notably, the focus is on the reproduction of ideology and the functions of Ideological State Apparatuses in replicating class exploitation and aiding in its internalization.

The topics in this work, explored with an experimental approach, incorporating the author's personal experiences and recollections, while referencing films he's produced on the subject matter.

The work consists of three parts: The first part seeks to identify the characteristics of high-demand groups; it also delves into an overview of Althusser's theories on the reproduction of ideology. The second part explores the parallels between various forms of capitalist ideology and

high-demand groups, while focussing more on absolute thought, language and precaritization. The third part journeys into labour, hierarchy, and compartmentalization of the workplace, exploring how systems are reproduced and how they endure through repetition.

By comparing cult coercion methods to the reproduction of capitalism, the thesis seeks to offer a unique perspective on how ideology is reproduced, irrespective of the doctrine.

Introduction

Why this topic?

I spent my formative years in what could be described as being a high-demand group¹. This work is thus, built upon my experiences growing up in a cult, and the research I have been occupied with since. Growing up, our “elders”² often acted as substitutes for parents, the ideology and doctrine acted as substitutes for education and thought, and group dynamics were a substitute for community and meaning.

I began questioning my beliefs and dedication to the group and its ideology in my early 20s, after being exposed to different modes of thought and critical thinking processes during my university studies. It was years later, thanks to the reach of exchange groups on the Internet, that I would begin reading the experiences of other spiritual abuse survivors. I noticed their stories shared an uncanny resemblance to mine. While the cultural setting they were in, as well as the belief systems and ideological frameworks they ascribed to, might have been vastly different, their experiences and emotional journeys seemed similar, and most facets appeared to be interchangeable.

I soon recognized the similarities were beyond coincidence, with differences based on the level of coercion practiced by the group at large. That’s why, while the experiences of doomsday cults or highly authoritarian groups catering to the whims of a single leader were foreign yet understandable to me, I realized I mostly identified with the experiences of more mainstream groups claiming religion status, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses,

¹ Note: the terms high-demand, high-pressure, coercive, totalistic and authoritarian will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis; they are all terms used by researchers to describe groups that utilize similar coercive techniques as manipulative acts of influence and persuasion

² As will be explained in this work, high-pressure groups assign new meanings to words. In this case, the term “elders” is used to describe the upper-echelon of hierarchy within the group, and has no relation to age.

Scientologists and Mormons.

We might've used different terminologies, but the words stood for similar meanings. What I was trained to see as being a "slap of mercy"³ was what Jehovah's Witnesses would classify as being "tender mercy."⁴ What I experienced as being "banished" from the group for failure to adhere to authority, was for them being "disfellowshipped" (Jehovah's Witnesses) or "shunned" (Mormons) or "disconnected" (Scientologists). While I was brought up with the full weight and burden of being one of the "golden generation" that would usher in the new world system and ensure faith went global, they had been labelled as having the responsibility of "Joshua's Generation" (IBLP – institute in basic life principles), and were on a crusade to take over the congress and supreme court of the U.S. ⁵

My research on thought reform, coercive methods and the experiences of ex-cultists initially lead me to Steve Hassan and his BITE model⁶, which is a list of behaviour, information, thought and emotional control mechanisms and techniques used by high-demand groups. This model sees that the more of the listed techniques the groups utilize, the more coercive and manipulative they can be deemed to be. Subsequent research introduced me to the works of Rick Alan Ross, clinical psychologist Margaret Thaler Singer, psychologist Robert Lifton (who researched

3 A reference to when God "punishes" a follower who might be steering off the path, to ensure they get back in towing the line.

4 The words are used to explain how God punishes members of the group for going astray.

5 I cover memories related to the burden of being assigned responsibility for the future in the short piece titled "Joshua's Generation," submitted as part of the artistic component of this Master's Thesis.

6 Based on American Psychologist Leon Festinger's theory of behavioral control, Dr. Steve Hassan developed the BITE model. The model outlines Behavior, Information, Thought and Emotion control mechanisms used by high-demand groups.

political violence and used the term thought reform to explain the process of coercion), sociologist Janja Lalich (who focused on ideology, power relations and social control) as well as Amanda Moore (author of *Cultish* – a book focusing on the language used by high-demand groups). For the most part, their research and analyses highlighted the same mechanisms.

I came to realize that the terms “high-demand groups,” “high-pressure groups” or “authoritarian groups” were descriptive terms used to highlight certain traits and qualities that existed in a wider variety of groups, not just religious sects, or religion offshoots. Multilevel marketing schemes such as Amway and LuLaRoe, New-age movements such as the 3HO and Bikram Yoga, religious sects, and cults (such as televangelist and fundamentalist Baptist movements and the Islamic Hizmet movement⁷ I had been brought up in), trauma therapy and self-help gurus such as Teal Swan, and even political cults such as Q-Anon could be said to be utilizing similar tactics and methods.

⁷ The Hizmet movement, also referred to by opponents as the Gülenists, is a Turkey - based Islamic high-demand group that focusses on exerting influence in the fields of education, commerce and politics.

Cults and capitalist relations of production: what do they have in common?

Walter Benjamin describes capitalism as being the most extreme cult ever, and asserts that capitalism "...essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion."⁸ He identifies three characteristics that are recognizable and unique to capitalism. Firstly, he asserts that everything has meaning only in relation to capitalism because as it is not based on a belief system or ideology. Secondly, he claims that capitalism is permanent and constant because there are no holidays, weekends or special days off, instead there is merely an extreme status of constant worship of the capitalist Gods. Thirdly, and most importantly (and perhaps more relevant in the context of this paper) he asserts that capitalism "...is presumably the first case of a blaming, rather than a repenting cult."⁹ I would disagree with him here, given that cults or high-demand groups also utilize internalized guilt as a major coercive tool (which I will get into later in this work). My assertion is that capitalism and high-pressure groups both use guilt as a major coercive mechanism, however it is important to stress that he describes guilt in capitalism to be constant. He also adds that capitalism allows no place or space for repentance, making it a tool not for reforming individuals, but rather for obliterating them.¹⁰ From a personal point of view, I see this obliteration in the form of a precaritization, of creating alienation and insecurity, and replicating relations of exploitation. The social context of capitalism alluded to in his

8 Benjamin, W. (2005). Capitalism as religion. In E. Mendieta (Ed.), *The Frankfurt School on Religion* (p. 259). New York, NY and London: Routledge.

9 Ibid., p.259

10 Ibid., p.260

words are that capitalism has no rest day, a concept I find highly similar to the sociality and expectation among high-pressure groups. Such structures allow no space or time for reflection and resting, for reasons I will delve into later.

Realizing that there are similarities between the characteristics of capitalism as described by Walter Benjamin and the practices of high-demand groups, I couldn't help but wonder if the parallels weren't merely limited to basic ideology and practice? Does capitalism (at least in the sense that we understand it in relation to our modern lives)¹¹ exhibit deeper traits of absolutism in its replication and application, much like high-pressure groups?

Themes such as the commodification and exploitation of labour (by way of free labor being the moving force of the activities of many cults), placing the responsibility of systemic failures on the shoulders of individuals (by instilling guilt mechanisms and promoting self-sufficiency as a moral ideal¹²), absolute claims (with both capitalism and high-demand groups claiming to be "the one" solution to everything), repetitive processes and practices as a means of reconstructing and solidifying reality and perception (and the connection between capitalist modes of repetitive assembly line production and high-demand group labour structures) began emerging and became increasingly impossible to ignore. This led me to draw parallels and explore the structural and ideological commonalities.

¹¹ I delve deeper into an explanation of how I define capitalism and related terms in relation to this topic, in the chapter titled "disclaimer before moving forward." Please refer to it for a more detailed exposition.

¹² Butler, J. (2015). *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard University Press.

Upon the recommendation of my thesis supervisor Prof. Ruth Sonderegger, I began looking into Althusser's theories on the reproduction of capitalism and how propaganda apparatuses serve to replicate the relations of production. I noticed similarities between the coercive methods used by high-demand groups and the methods of replication by ideological state apparatuses that work alongside repressive state apparatuses. Althusser asserts that the social division of labour is the reality behind the technical division of labour, and that the hierarchy of access to knowledge is not purely technical, but utilized conscientiously for the "...purpose of maintaining workers in the condition of the exploited."¹³ I noticed parallels between this assertion and how knowledge was stratified in the high-demand group I was in, as well as (based on my research) other high-pressure groups.

It should come as no surprise at this point, that I will be exploring the coercive techniques used by authoritarian groups, and the similarities they possess with capitalist social relations, with a more exerted effort (and attention) given towards the semblances of such methodologies with Althusser's Independent State Apparatuses, particularly in regard to how they replicate and enforce capitalist relations of production. The operative word here is "exploring," given the theme isn't a common one,¹⁴ and I will be swimming in proverbial new waters. This would also explain the extent to which I provide citations and quotes throughout this experiment to ground my arguments

¹³ Althusser, L. (2014). *On the reproduction of capitalism: Ideology and ideological state apparatuses* (G. M. Goshgarian, Trans., Chapter 2: What is a Mode of Production). Verso. [Apple Books version].

¹⁴ There is ample work on religion and capitalism, however cults and capitalism, and the commonalities they have in regard to replicating and enforcing their systems isn't a common topic of academic exploration as far as I know.

in research and provide further reading on the themes I'm alluding to.

What am I trying to accomplish?

My purpose is two-fold. Firstly, I would like to raise awareness on how these techniques are practiced. I hope my work can empower spiritual abuse survivors to speak out, share their stories, and come to the realization that they are not alone, nor were they gullible – they were faced with an organized effort of coercion they were oblivious to. Contrary to popular belief, it is important that they realize they are actually strong and resilient individuals who believed in inspiring change in the world and had the courage to fully immerse themselves in what they felt was a solution. What's more, they then had the courage and sense of reason to get out and start all over, despite all difficulties and challenges involved.

Secondly, I view myself as an outlier. I have spent a considerable amount of time and energy in endeavouring to somehow situate myself, my existence and identity somewhere along the fault lines of capitalism, nationalism, and religion, and this has allowed me to develop a unique, and critical perspective. This places me in a unique position when looking at this topic from various vantage points. As a child of the 80s, I lived through a shift towards hardcore capitalism and witnessed the development of society along those lines. I don't know if my father's generation was proud for working in a job (at the time). I do know they were proud of their social relations and characters. They were proud of the accomplishments of their children, and of the relations they had with relatives. But they rarely spoke about work, as it was merely a task to be performed in return for earning a living. Their generation saw work as a means towards a specific end, which was to live life and raise a family.

The thought patterns of my generation shifted, and we began viewing work as an end in itself: life's purpose became working. I, on the other hand, personally lived in between the cracks and treaded carefully when my dedication was required on anything in life (most likely due to my experience in a high-pressure group). I had not been raised with the same modes of thought and normativity others had been systematically exposed to, and I felt the demands placed on me to be out of place. As such, I developed a healthy scepticism, which places my in a unique position for this endeavor.

Underscoring (what I feel is) the importance of this work, is that we are in a unique period in modern history. Historically speaking, once societies begin experiencing change and uncertainty, they lose confidence in the institutions of the old, and this creates a gap of trust and purpose, which offers fertile ground for self-appointed leaders offering simple solutions to what are otherwise, extremely difficult, complex, and challenging questions or problems. As people begin doubting and mistrusting institutions and structures, they "...become more approachable and vulnerable to the manipulations and exploitations..."¹⁵ of high-demand groups. Simple solutions and absolutes can be attractive in an unstable world, especially one that is facing newly emerging challenges.

The unexpected emergence of alternative lifestyle groups, self-help systems, multi-level marketing schemes focusing on "mindset" as a means to success, yoga and trauma therapy groups led by charismatic leaders with inspiring emergence stories, fitness and health systems that promote anti-scientific practices, and "alternative" approaches to knowledge (and belief) in the last half century provides evidence that older structures are facing a crisis of trust and believability. This trend might continue to increase as we face economic instability, ecological threats,

15 Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1995). *Cults in our midst: The hidden menace in our everyday lives* (p. 36). Jossey-Bass/Wiley.

international disputes, and regional wars that threaten us with food scarcity, desertification, and climate refugees.

Also worth mentioning is that I will be incorporating personal autobiographical recollections in relation to the subject, as I attempt to wet my feet in what seems to be, quite a challenging ordeal. I have come to the realization that reflecting on experiences are my way of expressing myself and reviewing my personal history within the larger framework of systemic coercion.

I will also be referencing short films in relation to the subject matter from time to time: these are works I created and submitted as part of my thesis. Each one of them explores a different coercion method and how it impacts individuals, their relations, and their perception of the world. It would make sense for the reader to view the films after reading this paper, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding.

I realize what I have laid out here, is quite a tall order. I promise to tackle it with the curiosity and care of a baby chimpanzee let loose in a china shop. If I break or shatter a few ornaments, you'll have to excuse me and chalk it up to the fragile nature of this topic.

Autobiographical recollection: The burden of spreading the truth.

I wasn't aware of what the semester break meant for most students.

I was to find out much later that it was mostly used to take some time off, relax, recharge, and clear your mind for the upcoming semester.

My reality was an all together different affair. Breaks meant reading camps. They meant spiritual retreats. They meant having the time to dedicate a full day to learning, improving spirituality and knowledge. They also meant making the most of our tightly regulated time – we would maximize the limited slot allotted for playing basketball or football or watching films. We knew the movies were edited before our screenings: scenes involving Rocky and Adrian were nicked, as was any scene with a hint of romanticism or sexuality. The same scrutiny wouldn't be allotted towards violence however and we freely viewed Rambo blow up gas stations or Bruce Lee beat up his opponents with no remorse.

We were proud and happily obliged to the duties and responsibilities allotted to us: we felt we were chosen by God, we were special. We had a comradery of sorts in this regard. We saw each other as brothers and were ready to sacrifice anything for each other and the cause, which is also what was expected of us. In a sense, we were a family, glued together by a belief in a better future – one we would formulate, build up and make possible when we became adults and had the power (and influence) to change the world. We might've been teenagers, but we were constantly reminded of our duty to ensure spreading the truth far and wide, to all corners of the world, and sacrificing our very existence if need be. We had friends

that were sent on missions throughout Asia and Africa, far and wide. The first time I heard of Manilla was when a friend was assigned to “study” there. There was a whole frontier awaiting us in the future, and the optimism among us was contagious. We were the future.

Note: The theme of being burdened with the propagation of a universal truth that could potentially save the world, is covered in “Joshua’s Generation” – one of the short films I submitted as part of the artistic component of this thesis. In it, the main character uncovers a time capsule she had buried following a summer retreat during her youth. She reminisces on how she felt empowered with the truth and the task of proselytizing the universal message to a wider world, and the sense of community and comradery she enjoyed with her fellow camp participants.



Part I.
On theory:
the framework

High-pressure groups: what are they exactly?

Before we embark on this difficult undertaking of mine, it would make sense to set the framework first: what exactly is a high-demand group? How can they be identified and what is the criteria upon which to define them?

This is a process and theme that can be quite complicated for many, given that high-demand groups utilize already existing beliefs and ideologies, and carve out space for themselves within pre-existing frameworks. As such, one might be inclined to think Jehovah's Witnesses are merely another Christian denomination, or that members of the Hizmet movement (which I spent my formative years in) are merely regular Muslims passionate about promoting inter-faith dialogue. Being able to distinguish for instance, a local church from a coercive group, or a group therapy session from a coercive meeting meant to indoctrinate a person or lure them into financial manipulation, might not be easy to accomplish. In fact, that they exist within these cracks is what allows them to operate and exert influence so freely.¹⁶

Scientology was able to obtain a tax-exempt status as

¹⁶ This also brings up, as a sidenote, the real damage cults can do, and the threat they impose on our systems. Cults and their impact go beyond the psychological manipulation done on individuals, or philosophical debates on their ideologies. Some cults can be more insidious and deceptive than meets the eye. The American based IBLP as well as the Turkish Gülenist movement and even Scientologists and Moonies, might also have political motivations. They very well could grow to a level and size where they begin having an impact on democratic policies, and even on democracy itself.

a charitable organization and church¹⁷ while charging members for books, CDs, and auditing services towards the bridge to total freedom. They presented these items as a necessary step towards attaining "...the ultimate in spiritual enlightenment."¹⁸ The Hizmet movement operated (and still does, albeit more discreet and less in number and sheer influence following the coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, for which it is blamed)¹⁹ schools, media organizations and banks dispersed throughout Europe, North America, Africa and Asia. Reverend Sun Myung Moon owned the Washington Times²⁰ and Clube Esportivo Nova Esperança, a Brazilian football club²¹ as part of his financial empire while his followers donated their incomes to the church. Many of these groups are "...disguised as legitimate enterprises — as restaurants, self-help groups, business training workshops, prosperity clubs, psychotherapy

17 Church of Scientology. (n.d.). Church of Scientology's landmark victory over IRS. Scientology.org. Retrieved October 27, 2023, from <https://www.scientologyreligion.org/landmark-decisions/church-of-scientology-irs-tax-exemption.html>

18 Business Insider. (2016, December). Scientology costs: Leah Remini recap episode 3. Retrieved October 27, 2023, from <https://www.businessinsider.com/scientology-costs-leah-remini-recap-episode-3-2016-12#scientology-has-a-detailed-and-costly-course-list-called-the-bridge-to-total-freedom-3>

19 BBC News. (2016, July 20). Turkey coup: What is the Gulen movement and what does it want? BBC News. Retrieved October 27, 2023, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36855846>

20 The Washington Post. (2012, September 2). Sun Myung Moon dies at 92; Washington Times owner led the Unification Church. Retrieved October 27, 2023, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/sun-myung-moon-dies-at-92-washington-times-owner-led-the-unification-church/2012/09/02/001b747a-f531-11e1-aab7-f199a16396cf_story.html

21 The Guardian. (2006, April 14). Over the Moon: How football wins recruits for sect leader in Brazil. The Guardian. Retrieved October 27, 2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/apr/14/brazil.mainsection>

clinics, martial arts centres, diet plans, campus activities, and political organizations.”²²

Deception and lacking transparency are at the core of cult relations. I recall being instructed to reveal as little as possible about ourselves until we were sure the person (possible recruit) was open to the message. The aspect of having double ethics and lacking transparency, and belief in an overriding philosophy of the ends justifying the means, results in the establishment of an “... own brand of morality, outside normal social bounds.”²³

Identifying high-demand groups

A list of characteristics emerges when defining authoritarian groups, how they function, and how the relations within such groups are formed and maintained. Limited research so far seems to coalesce on some key features: a charismatic leader, organized and coordinated persuasion processes, hierarchical structures and relationships within the group, the tendency to offer simple solutions to complex problems, black and white thinking processes, thought and character reform (or transformation) through social and ideological pressure, physical and ideological isolation from society at large, lack of transparency, patterns of exploitation and manipulation (among others). Margaret Singer & Janja Lalich²⁴ organize groups with cult-like characteristics into two categories: the first being ideology, religion or spirituality-based groups that expose recruits and members

²² Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1995). p.14

²³ Ibid., p.19

²⁴ Dr. Margaret Thaler Singer was a clinical psychologist who focused on undue influence in social and religious context. Dr. Janja Lalich is Professor Emerita of Sociology at California State University. In their book titled “Cults in our Midst” they conducted interviews with over three thousand former cult members and spiritual abuse survivors.

to organized persuasion and manipulation techniques resulting in deception and exploitation; the second consisting of commercially sold awareness and self-improvement programs that utilize the same persuasion skills for economic or monetary exploitation.²⁵ In other words, they make a distinction between faith-based and economy-based groups yet highlight the fact that both appropriate the same techniques. We will be encountering this approach and perception quite often, given that the methods analysed will bear distinct similarities, yet some frameworks or end goals might carry differences, whether they be economic, political, spiritual, or religious in nature. Singer accentuates three dominant factors in cult systems: that the group leader has some inspiring origin story, that there is a hierarchical or power-based relationship between the followers and the leader, and that there is a coordinated use of a persuasion program that implements thought reform, or what is more commonly referred to as brainwashing. Singer asserts that thus, regardless of how difficult it might be to label a movement as a cult, and regardless of whether the definition should include structures outside religion, utilizing these three factors would suffice in helping assess the cultic nature of a structure.

Adding to these, it might be useful to note that cult leaders are self-appointed, persuasive individuals with claims to a special mission in life and access to special knowledge. I have portrayed this trait in one of my thesis films titled *The story of Liz*, in which the self-appointed therapist claims to be special from birth and possess unique abilities. In the short film, we listen to her as she reveals that she's chosen for the role through some divine/spiritual ordainment, and that she's been appropriated with the ingenuity to heal traumas, which psychologists and experts can't.

Such statements are generally part of the leaders "origin story," which includes a discovery of meaning following

25 Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1995). p. 14

traumatic experiences, culminating in a mission to save mankind through some sort of divine guidance reminiscent of common myths and legends, super-hero emergence stories or the startling and highly imperfect backstories of heroes in Hollywood films. Planting themselves (and their claims) within already existing religious or spiritual structures, they claim to possess a vision gifted to them alone, which allows them to interpret former ways of knowledge in a new and "correct" way. In a sense, the journey they've been on and the wisdom accumulated as a result, enables them to offer "... the only viable system for change that will solve life's problems or the world's ills."²⁶ As such, this new theology is often claimed to be beneficial for the whole of humanity.

Another characteristic highlighted by Singer is the use of double ethics, which entails secrecy towards new recruits and full disclosure within the group. Members refrain from disclosing everything related to new recruits or possible candidates, and there is generally a hierarchy of knowledge revealed based on the perceived level of the recruit or fresh member - as opposed to how there's a requirement of full disclosure within the group, and more particularly of practicing strict transparency towards the leader and the hierarchy within.

The coordinated program of persuasion practiced by high-demand groups are what Singer and Lalich, following in the footsteps of Lifton, label as thought reform. This includes absolute control of members' behaviours and thinking processes. Control mechanisms include a severe commitment (of time and economic resources), dictating what members drink, eat, wear, how they behave and how they view the world. Sudden changes in the lifestyle and belief system of the recruit is often made possible through a major disruption in the life of the follower, creating a severance with (mostly) family, friends, and other acquaintances, and resulting in isolation and co-dependence on

the group and leader for sociality and sometimes even economic stability. Singer and Lalich also highlight the fact that not all cults are alike, and that they "... exist on a continuum of degrees of influence, from more to less extreme."²⁷ As such, they are clear on the point that "... the term cult is merely descriptive, not pejorative. It refers to the origins, social structure, and power structure of a group."²⁸

Amanda Montel²⁹ focuses on language techniques and methods in her work, postulating that cult leaders understand that language is the most important persuasion technique. According to Montel, Language creates repetition, which instils a set of codes in the follower, and helps the internalization of doctrines. Use of specific language structures creates a set of conceptual frameworks that dull critical thinking. Cults can co-opt and appropriate scientific jargon and terminology as a tool for validation, implying scientific consensus behind their claims. Finally, she posits that language can be used to provide members a feeling of being in the know-how, of having access to secret knowledge, and thus, being special or unique, or even chosen.³⁰ According to Montel, cults craftily redefine existing words, creating powerful euphemisms, secret codes, chants, mantras and even force language in their process of using language as a tool for influence.³¹

Robert Lifton, author of *Thought Reform and the Psychology*

²⁷ Ibid., p.19

²⁸ Ibid., p.21

²⁹ Amanda Montell is the author of "Cult-ish: The language of fanaticism", a book that focusses on the common language tools of cults and cult-like systems. In it, she outlines the linguistic tools used by coercive groups towards creating a unique language and ensuring the internalization and replication of the ideology.

³⁰ Montell, A. (2021). *Cult-ish: The language of fanaticism* [Apple Books edition]. Harper Wave.

³¹ Ibid.

of *Totalism* (a text that's served as a blueprint for outlining the coercion techniques used by authoritarian groups for many) delves into three criteria that can be used to define such groups: possessing a charismatic leader, using coercion (thought reform), and the economic, sexual and other types of exploitation of members by the leader or leading personages.³²

Lifton details milieu control as perhaps the most significant method or tool that enables the process of thought reform. He defines it as the " ... control of all communication within a given environment,"³³ and is similar to what Steve Hassan would later on categorize into: Thought, Information and Behaviour control. The Management of inner thoughts (as well as of critical thinking and self-reflection) through sociality and constant control, is a significant part of this mechanism. Some cults even promote members keeping tabs on each other and disclosing confidential information to higher ups. Lifton lists physical isolation and the utilization of emotionally intense, physically, and mentally draining retreats as part of milieu control methods.³⁴ In similar vein, I recall having to attend retreats each break (summer and winter), and how intensely our time was regulated during the two to three weeks of milieu control, which encompassed physical and social isolation. I've alluded to this trait in *The story of Joshua's Generation*, the short film previously mentioned above. The main character takes out a paper with the daily schedule on it, and we can see that each hour was planned with an activity or event during the summer camp she mentions.

The same film also touches upon another characteristic

³² Lifton, R. J. (1981). Cult formation. *The Harvard Mental Health Letter*, 7(8).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ As outlined in my first autobiographical recollection, retreats are highly controlled environments, used to shape individuals and their thoughts through repetition and peer pressure.

Lifton mentions: a demand for purity. This often entails a radical separation of good and evil or what Lifton describes as “either/or thinking processes” within the environment and within oneself. Either/or thinking is complimented with an everlasting and unattainable process of purification, given that no one can attain purity in its full form as dictated by the ideology. The demand for constant purification results in the creation of internalized guilt mechanisms that act as control mechanisms for the individual. Three other key elements of high-demand group coercive methodologies according to Lifton are sacred science, loading of the language and the principle of the doctrine over the person.³⁵ Claims of *scientific confirmation* often provides ideological assertions with plausibility and the leader with influence – regardless of the level of truth involved. In other words, the mentioning of scientific confirmation will more often than not, garner credibility for the leader and their claims. *Loaded language* refers to utilizing constructs and linguistic patterns that in the form of simple images or slogans that embody truth. This method can often reduce complex and complicated issues and themes into slogans that are digestible to the follower. The cult member is also conditioned to side on behalf of the ideology when experiencing a sense of conflict between their personal experiences and the doctrine. Lifton explains this by positing that the “... internalized message of the totalistic environment is that one must negate that personal experience on behalf of the truth of the dogma.”³⁶

Finally, one of the most cold-blooded and uncompassionate of totalitarian traits is what Lifton labels as the “dispensing of existence.”³⁷ We come across the use of this methodology quite often in politics as well, especially when the propaganda apparatuses begin highlighting the evil traits of the oppressed in an effort to dehumanize whole groups or

35 Lifton, R. J. (1981). Cult formation.
The Harvard Mental Health Letter, 7(8).

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

segments of society. This creates a cognitive dissonance among the public and their perception of what's happening and prevents them from questioning of brutal acts of violence or oppression executed upon the groups being dehumanized.

Within high-demand groups, this process labels those who do not believe in the doctrine, as well as individuals who question its legitimacy as being tainted or evil. The most extreme form of this thought process is denying that "others" even have the right to exist. One example of this is the salmonella poisoning orchestrated by the Rajneesh movement in 1984. Led by Indian mystic Bhagwan Shree Rajesh, the group is known to have orchestrated the first bioterrorism attack on American soil, causing the poisoning of over 750 people. They spread salmonella in the salad bars of 10 restaurants in Oregon to achieve this outcome. The attack was the result of a preliminary exercise for a future poisoning of the water supply of Wasco County, meant to incapacitate voters who were identified as possibly casting votes against Rajneesh's slate of candidates in an upcoming local election.³⁸

Richard Ofshe³⁹ highlights four key factors in what he coins as being "coercive persuasion" techniques.⁴⁰ These include destabilizing an individual's sense of self through intense interpersonal and psychological attacks (resulting in ensuring compliance with the rules and the system), the use of a group to enforce coercion and compliance and promoting conformity through pressure and the

38 Ross, R. A. (2014). *Cults Inside Out* (Chapter 1: Growing Cult Awareness). CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. [Apple Books version].

39 Ofshe is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. He's known for his work on interrogation techniques, coercive social control and influence leading to pseudo-memory creation.

40 Ofshe, R. (1992). Coercive Persuasion and Attitude Change. In *Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Vol. 1, pp. 212-224). Macmillan

manipulation of the social environment. These coercive techniques lead to a breakdown of independent or critical thought, which creates interdependency on the group and the leadership, especially on critical issues such as comprehending the world, making value judgements, determining the context of reality, and perceiving the world and their own place in it.

Rick Alan Ross⁴¹ defines cults as a movement or group that is excessively devoted to a person, idea, or thing. As such, he posits that they are unethically manipulative and use persuasion to control followers to ensure the goals of the leaders are advanced. This is generally to the detriment of the members, their families, and the community at large. Ross, in his work *Cults Inside Out* embarks on an extensive and impressive case study of various groups and their histories.

Sociologist Janja Lalich, together with psychologist Michael Langone also highlight similar characteristics in their checklist of "social-structural, social-psychological, and interpersonal behavioural patterns commonly found in cultic environments,"⁴² which include excessive commitment to the leader, discouragement of critical thought, mind-altering practices in the form of routines, mantras, chanting and meditation, dictation of how to think and act (which include behaviours, outfits, familial relations and even sexual activities), claims of special status for members, a polarized (us vs. them) view of the world, lack of accountability for leaders, induction of feelings of shame and guilt as a control mechanism, proselytizing as a major activity, devotion of individual time and money to the cause, among others.

⁴¹ Rick Alan Ross, author of *Cults Inside Out*, is a cult expert, deprogrammer and founder of the Cult Education Institute.

⁴² Lalich, J., & Langone, M. (2015). Characteristics associated with cultic groups (Rev. ed.). *ICSA Today*, 6(3).

Similar to the researchers and experts listed above, Steve Hassan⁴³ also categorizes destructive and manipulative groups as having an authoritarian leadership, being deceptive, and practicing mind control (akin to what is labelled as thought reform by Lifton and Singer). Much like Singer, he lists four different types of high demand groups, mainly operating in the fields of religion/spirituality, politics, therapy and awareness, and commercial activities.⁴⁴

His BITE model is a list that categorizes the characteristics and behavioural patterns listed by Singer and Lifton into four main subject headings, which serve to compartmentalize the coercive techniques utilized by authoritarian groups. According to Hassan, the BITE acronym stands for Behavior, Information, Thought and Emotion control. Hassan exerts that the overall effect of these four headings and the items on the list under each category is what promotes dependency and obedience. They're implemented coercively and unbeknownst to the recruit or follower. Behaviour control includes regulating the physical reality through repression, manipulation, (sleep, sex, physical existence) restriction and financial exploitation. It includes indoctrination through group, behaviour modification, discouragement of individualism, rigid rules and regulations, obedience, and dependency, among others. Information control encompasses withholding information and use of systematic distortion or lies, minimizing access to non-cult sources of information, compartmentalization of insider vs. outsider doctrines, encouraging spying

43 Dr. Steve Hassan is a former Moonie cult member, deprogrammer and expert, known for the BITE model, which combines previously researched and established coercive techniques in a discernible form. Critics of his, claim his work lacks academic foundations, however I personally find the model useful as a detailed outline of how high-demand groups function and use coercive techniques.

44 Hassan, S. (2013). *Freedom of Mind: Helping Loved Ones Leave Controlling People, Cults, and Beliefs* (p. 21). Freedom of Mind Press.

on other members, and encouraging consumption of cult-generated materials. Thought control includes black and white thought processes, loaded language in the form of buzz words, permission of pure thoughts only, promotion of the us vs. them dichotomy, thought stopping techniques (or what Montel refers to as thought terminating cliches), control of thoughts through rituals and activities, rejection of critical thinking, and the rejection of alternative modes of thought.

Finally, emotional control entails manipulation that narrows the range of feelings and makes the follower view some emotions as being evil. Instillment of excessive guilt and fear, phobia indoctrination (through belief in hell, fear of enemies, fear of losing salvation etc.), shunning those who leave and threatening to harm in severe cases, are also a part of the emotional control mechanisms.

Defining totalitarian groups

Based on the research and analyses of the above - mentioned experts, we can safely reach the conclusion that behavioural patterns and relationships within the group are surely more revealing than other traits. Consequently, a more diversified approach towards high-demand systems could be useful, and this understanding is one of the main pillars of this paper and my artistic work on the matter. We need to recognize that high-pressure groups can be formed around a host of varying content and conceptual frameworks, including " ...politics, religion, commerce, self-improvement techniques, health fads, the stuff of science fiction, psychology, outer-space phenomena, meditation, martial arts, environmental lifestyles, and so on."⁴⁵ As such, the defining factors of a cult go beyond the subject matter or even where they stand within mainstream thought and ideologies, and incorporate a host of reasons that utilize

⁴⁵ Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1995). p.22

methods of coercion, relationships, isolation and are based on leadership qualities and relations.

Furthermore, identity often becomes immersed in group dynamics in high-demand groups, and group dynamics are often dictated through language and ideology specific to that belief group. This construct ensures that the individual, over time, merges into unity with the community and the leader. Such systems seek to “clone” individuals, making them all, what ex-jehovah’s witnesses would call “borg” (in reference to the species in the Star Trek series that operate with a hive mind called “the collective.”) The communal mindset or hive mentality in which all members think, act and envisage alike is one of the main characteristics of high-pressure groups. Repetition of doctrine and group dynamics result in members sacrificing their identity for unity and authority. We can also assert therefore, based on literature in the field related to the study of such groups, that there are central traits that can be identified and used to differentiate manipulative, coercive high-pressure groups from other forms of communities and movements.

Autobiographical recollection: you’re never in a cult.

*I was never in a cult. I was merely a follower of the truth.
The one and only truth.*

*We knew we held the keys to universal absolution.
It was only a matter of time before the truth would spread
throughout the world, bringing peace and prosperity
to the globe. It was foretold by prophets and even in the
Holy book, that we would usher in a new era of prosperity
before the end of times.*

*I would take offence at anyone daring to question the
validity and legitimacy of our beliefs, and consequently,*

the person we held in the highest esteem. He was the sole authority on life and beyond, selected by God himself, to represent and guide the change that was about to take place - it was our task to listen to him, to sing his praise and to spread the word, which fluctuated between praise of the group, exaltations of him, and claims of holding the keys to the only universal truth.

I knew cults existed of course and scoffed at them. I could not believe people were gullible enough to fall for their manipulative ways. I saw them as odd religious offshoots of false religions, such as Mormonism or the Jehovah's Witnesses. Then there were religious sects and cults – various movements within Islam- that held similar views as us. We knew they were also on the false path. They needed to hear the message and learn that they were being misled.

Truth was on our side, and we were endowed with the most sensible, most obvious, most acceptable system of belief. I would cry at night, begging God to bestow faith into the hearts and minds of people I cared about, for imagining them burning in hell fire for rejecting the truth while I sat in heaven for eternity, was too heavy a load for me to handle.

I was never in a cult. I was a follower of the truth. I merely wished everyone else would follow the same truth so the world could be saved.

On the Reproduction of Capitalism

Althusser, in his work on Ideological State Apparatuses, delves into the relations of production and the exploitative nature of these relations. He asserts that the state and its apparatuses serve to ensure widespread public acceptance of the interests of personages who are not the agents

of production (the bourgeoisie or ruling class) and actively work to normalize the structure of exploitation through propaganda. My understanding is that Althusser's analysis touches upon many of the similar themes that capitalism and authoritarian groups hold in common on the coercion and the thought reform of subjects. More importantly however, it provides a conceptual framework that can help us visualize and correlate the similarities of both systems, particularly regarding the reproduction of ideology.

I believe therefore, that it would make sense to briefly summarize some key elements of Althusser's theory, before moving forward with this paper.

The exploitative nature of the relations of production

Althusser posits that capitalist relations of production are by their very nature, relations that are based on capitalist modes of exploitation. The surplus value created by the labourer isn't reflected in the wage given to the labourer, and as such, the labourer is short-changed or exploited. To understand the true essence of this argument, we first need to have an overview of how relations of production function in capitalist societies according to Althusser (which are later utilized as a theoretical basis in the writings of Chamayou, which I also cite in this paper). We would also need to delve into how technical hierarchy reproduces the reality of class-based society (how the social division of labour is reflected in the technical division of labour), and how propaganda apparatuses function and ensure the acceptance of this exploitative model as the norm.

Everything in a capitalist social setting, formation and structure (which also includes the relations, the state repression accompanying it, as well as the class relations) according to Althusser, "is rooted in the material base of capitalist relations of production, which are relations

of capitalist exploitation".⁴⁶ The system of production itself is thus " ... subordinated to exploitation and thus to the production of capital on an extended scale."⁴⁷

By grounding the root structure of our social reality and analysing the system it's based on, Althusser claims that de facto, anything built on top of this system will only serve to replicate the structure and purpose of said system. If one were to draw a comparison with the relations in high-pressure groups, we could stipulate that any system built on coercion, manipulation or thought reform, will thus duplicate, and replicate this structure in all forms. This of course, leads to high-demand groups replicating forms of coercion and methods of blocking or shaping cognitive thinking to become the norm when analysing the outside world. The relations within the system, as well as the hierarchy, would thus be seen as representative of the same system and structured by the agents controlling the structure. According to Althusser, the relations of production in a class-based society are between the agents of production and the bourgeoisie, or what Althusser describes as being the "personages who are not agents of production." These personages find the authority and right to intervene in the production process and exercise control over the object of production, the instruments of production and the agents of production. As such, the means of power are not held by the forces producing labour, but by the capitalists and bourgeoisie class exploiting the efforts of labour.

Personages holding the means of production and distribution (through appropriation of surplus labour) have control over the beginning and the end of the process. Therefore "Capitalist relations of production are relations

46 Althusser, L. (2014). *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (G. M. Goshgarian, Trans., Chapter 2: What is a mode of production). Verso.
[Apple Books version].

47 Ibid.

of capitalist exploitation.”⁴⁸ In other words, the system is built upon a replication of these relations. The productive forces of the object of production, and the instruments of production are controlled by the same class, and they are at an advantage, for they can advance science and technology for their benefit to improve conditions that allow faster production. This in turn creates more of a divide between the forces of labour and their relation to the products they create.

The exploitative aspect, and control of the means of production as well as the instruments of production, and in part the agents (in the form of exploitation), is similar to the relations in high-demand groups – a topic explored in this paper.

Of value to the paper is how Althusser asserts that the social division of labour is what determines the technical division of labour; He asserts that class-based society is replicated in the social division of labour masquerading as “technical division.”⁴⁹

It is the social class reality that determines the technical division, even though most capitalists argue for a technocracy and claim the division of labour is based on merit or capacity and capability. Althusser rejects these claims, arguing that class-based hierarchy is directly related to the establishment of hierarchy in the workplace. Perhaps some mobility might be handed to the committed and outliers, but overall, people in places of power and influence (hence with access to knowledge) are either directly from the ruling capitalist class or are acting on their behalf and in their interests. This is what Chamayou refers to as a “problem of agency,”⁵⁰ wherein the shareholders

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Chamayou, G. (2021). *The Ungovernable Society: A Genealogy of Authoritarian Liberalism* (Chapter 7: Disciplining the Managers). Polity Press. [Apple Books version].

do not take on supervising tasks and need to ensure the managers protect their interests, which is profit above and beyond all else, or what they would label as share value. Chamayou asserts that neoliberal systems created ways in which the interests of the shareholders and the managers were aligned through incentives,⁵¹ which would explain the discrepancy between CEO wages and benefits as compared to those of the workers.

The “incentive” system to align interests might also explain why CEO wages have skyrocketed by 1460% since 1978⁵² while worker wages have remained stagnant despite the increase in productivity.⁵³

According to Althusser, upward mobility isn’t possible (in an encompassing, transparent sense) in class-based societies. He puts forth that the primary effect of exploitation has other impacts (other than the creation of surplus value), which manifests itself in the division of labour. The technical argument for the hierarchy established in the production process is that it optimizes the work. The organization and technical management of labour is an illusion, utilized for the purpose of maintaining workers in the condition of the exploited. The similarities in how this is managed and successfully implemented through a hierarchy of knowledge, the replication of structures in the workplace and socially, as well as the role the apparatuses play in ensuring this becomes acceptable, has similarities with the techniques utilized by high-pressure groups – also detailed later on in this paper.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Bivens, J., & Kandra, J. (2022, October 4). CEO pay has skyrocketed 1,460% since 1978. *Economic Policy Institute*. Retrieved from <https://www.epi.org/publication/ceo-pay-in-2021/>

⁵³ Lee, J. (2022, July 19). Why American wages haven't grown despite increases in productivity. *CNBC*. <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/07/19/heres-how-labor-dynamism-affects-wage-growth-in-america.html>

The division of labour and the structure is carried out because of the dominant relations of production, resulting in the technical division also being a social one. In other words, in a capitalist class based society, the working class mostly get the manual labour jobs, certain technical and low level management jobs might be held for working class laborers, however the most important posts are held by the capitalists and their direct representatives.

The consequence of this is that a certain group of people hold the monopoly on the content and certain forms of knowledge according to Althusser. " ... "and thus, on a form of 'know-how,' while others (common labourers, unskilled and skilled workers) are 'penned' in other contents and forms of know-how." ⁵⁴ This creates an advantage for the ruling class while it acts as a practical prohibition of access to knowledge for others, establishing this as an acceptable fact. By virtue of authority, which is the same virtue of authority exercised by cult leaders, the ruling elite establish a monopoly over the relations of production according to Althusser. Authority is thus, always on the same side. "It is always the same people who wield it and the same who are subjected to it, for all intents and purposes their whole lives long." ⁵⁵

Base, Superstructure and State Apparatuses Althusser (in line with Marxist theory) separates the structure into two segments, the base and the superstructure. The economic base comprises of the productive forces and the relations of production, and the superstructure is the political and legal level as well as the ideological. The political level consists of the law and the state, while the ideological level is the religious, moral, legal, political aspects that ensure a continuation of the capitalist modes of production. A coalition of these structures merge into the state, which

⁵⁴ Althusser, L. (2014), Chapter 2: What is a mode of production

⁵⁵ Ibid.

allows the state to function as an apparatus that enables the dominant classes, propagates their ideology, and allows them to subject the working class to "... the process of extorting surplus-value."⁵⁶

Ideological state apparatuses function as "... a system of defined institutions, organizations, and the corresponding practices. Realized in the institutions, organizations, and practices of this system is all or part (generally speaking, a typical combination of certain elements) of the State Ideology."⁵⁷

There is an 'anchoring' in material functions specific to each ISA; these functions are not reducible to that ideology but serve it as a form of 'support' through their actions. These comprise of, according to Althusser, the scholastic apparatus, the familial, religious, political, associative, news and information, publishing and distribution and the cultural apparatuses. They serve, in short, to support ideology and its functions. In this sense, these Institutions do not produce the ideologies, but rather, elements of the ideology exist in them. So, to understand institutions, what they are and their ideological practices, we need to understand the ideological formations deriving from state ideology and how these are realized within the practices of the institutions.

They ensure the reproduction of the relations of production behind the shield of the repressive state apparatuses. The dominant state ideology is what ensures the harmony between the repressive and ideological state apparatuses.

I will assert that just as capitalism (according to Althusser) requires these apparatuses to ensure acceptance and support the goals of capitalists and bourgeoisie, cults and high-demand groups also have structures similar to ISAs within their own right, functioning as soft power

⁵⁶ Althusser, L. (2014), Chapter 6: The State

⁵⁷ Ibid

and coercion, until repressive force becomes necessary if unsuccessful.

Disclaimer before moving on-wards.

This is a difficult and complicated topic to tackle. I realize that the terms and concepts I'm utilizing are quite intricate, and dependent on historical, and social context. The capitalism of the industrial era is not the same type of capitalism as in today's service-based gig economy. Likewise, neo-liberalism has also gone through a shift in the last two to three decades, as has the meaning and practice of democracy and transparency, and all accompanying traits, qualities, and relations.

Yet, I can detect a moral, ethical, and philosophical commonality that transcends historical, social, and economic contexts. The historical materialism of each period might go through a transformation, nevertheless there is a common thread that continues to influence (or hamper) the processes and concepts in circulation. The weight of this common thread is perhaps what I'm referring to when I use the terms capitalism, neo-liberalism as well as authoritarianism (and it's sibling, fascism) – and more specifically western capitalism, which has been influenced and shaped by a colonial and imperial past.

As such, the settler-colonial attitudes and approaches of displacement, confiscation, and exploitation with little regard for nature and humans, continues to exhibit itself in the industrialist approach to labour and class relations, and the acts of the state (via the apparatuses, as defined by Althusser). The settlers that confiscated and exploited lands and resources and subsequently created a narrative to justify their acts are (and were), in terms of morality and ethics, not that distant from the capitalist exploiting labour

and advocating for the maintenance of class relations in the industrial era, or the precarious and guilt based neo-liberal system of today. The common historical materialism existent as a common thread is the exploitation of labour, the accumulation of wealth off the shoulders of others, and confiscation of natural resources - all undertaken while utilizing government apparatuses to legitimize the plunder taking place. The industrialist who "maximized" productivity on the production belt is no different in his view of sociality and his perception of human relations than the corporations exploiting labour in the global south, or refusing to offer basic healthcare to their employees at home. For them, humans are "resources," as are "natural" resources.

As such, I might liberally throw words around, but this is not for a lack of better understanding or dismissal of detail and subtlety, but rather, an attempt to define them as being more or less analogous within the context of this paper, both morally and in terms of the precedence they've set when it comes to class-based relations and exploitation; the base that establishes our relations and the superstructure that ensures its continuity are essentially an extension of the same colonial modes of structures that existed prior.

Of importance in relation to this work is the reproduction of capitalism: how systems of ideology propagate and produce subjects who intrinsically accept the exploitative process or relations of production, without the need for violence. A major common thread between capitalism and high-demand groups asserts itself therefore, in how the ideology and class relations (whether it be the class holding the means of production and access to knowledge in capitalist societies or the hierarchy with access to the funds and means to reproduce the system in high-pressure groups) establishes itself and enforces its validity.

From here on, I will be exploring these common traits, while delving into the details of the coercive (or reproductive)

methods in both systems, as well as the social relations that

perpetuate the continuity and dominance of these systems. One final point is that my integration into modern society, particularly after experiencing the social reality of a high-demand group, gave me a unique perspective. I had not been raised with the same modes of thought and normativity others had been systematically exposed to. At the time, I was unable to define the triggers or feelings that emerged in me when exposed to social norms or expectations. One could say I had an intrinsic feeling on the correlation between capitalism (or what I would later learn could be defined as relations of production and its reproduction through apparatuses) and the experiences I had accumulated in a coercive group, yet I was unable to characterize or determine the correlations. Emotional triggers would unearth recollections and feelings I could not define or ascertain.

Once I began delving deeper into critical thought on capitalism as a system and how it was being reproduced, I began noting similarities, which thrust my research into a different direction. Defining the correlation between the two is therefore still an exploratory work in progress and should be read as an expedition into parallelisms from an inquisitive standpoint, and not a definite analysis or categorical list.

Unerring Absolutism



The belief structures of high-demand groups can be a special kind of super-power, in that they provide a unique comfort that stems from having the ability to classify, decode, categorize, and understand each experience, event, happening, person, topic, or theme, regardless of size or scope, within a provided framework. Quite naturally, this process takes place in the mind of the follower without second thought or much effort. Through personal experience, I can assert that there is a level of content that comes with having access to a set of tools that help make immediate sense of the world around you, without having to exert much thought or energy and time towards research or conceptualization.



Part II.

**An exploration
of parallelisms**

Whether it be scientific issues, world politics or personal problems, there always is a perspective or vantage point from where everything is evaluated and a structure or framework within which everything is situated. In a sense, this is the result of a black and white thought process, one that emphasizes an over-simplification of complicated issues, and provides turnkey solutions to complex problems. Authoritarian structures promote “...an all-or-nothing point of view”⁵⁸ and offer “...instant, simplistic, and focused solutions to life’s problems.”⁵⁹ In other words, they’re universal and unerring.

This strict and unnuanced thought process creates room for little to no ambiguity.⁶⁰ As a result, members of such groups “...often express a relentlessly judgmental attitude.”⁶¹ This hypercritical mindset allows a decoding of the world within the framework provided, but is at the same time, extremely unforgiving and subjective.

Ross labels this as the development of a “jeweller’s eye,” a selective vision that’s constrained and “...searches out and finds the tiniest flaws and imperfections in anything or anyone outside the group.”⁶² The dualism apparent in plain sight however, is that the same jeweller’s eye becomes extremely forgiving and blind when it involves members of the same group. I can recall overlooking the ethical misgivings or infractions of group members because we were sure they meant well and harboured no ill intentions. In fact, it was drilled into us to look the other way if a fellow follower was caught sinning or displaying a lapse in judgement. The process would entail revealing the infraction committed to the hierarchy first, then forgiving the person and never mentioning it again. The same imprudence was never afforded the “others,” their infractions were always viewed with disdain and

58 Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1995) p.20

59 Ibid., p.26

60 Ross, R. A. (2014). Chapter 3: Family cults

61Ibid., Chapter 7: Assessing the situation

62 Ibid., Chapter 7: Assessing the situation

an accompanying certainty that they were intrinsically iniquitous. They were assumed to be corrupt to the core, and it was only natural that they'd behave in such a despicable manner – their actions reflected their lack of belief and the hideous morality they subscribed to. This thought process is quite zealous in its core, in that it leaves no room for any nuance whatsoever and rushes to judgement without second thought.

Parallels could be drawn between the absolutism and universal claims of high-pressure ideologies and systems, and the methods used by Ideological superstructures in class-based systems to propagate the legitimacy of the relations of production, while upholding the interests of personages controlling the means of production.

Perhaps it wouldn't be a stretch to posit that just as Ideological State Apparatuses and their propaganda devices serve to support state ideology,⁶³ high-demand group apparatuses (in the form of published materials, schooling, study sessions, communal performance of actions and activities confirming and propagating the belief system of the group) serve to support the ideology and principles of the group. Most groups have their own educational materials, books and pamphlets, and offer courses, seminars, retreats and sessions that package the dominant ideology. This process can be compared to the scholastic apparatus that " ...pumps them (children) full, with old methods and new, of certain kinds of 'know-how' (French, arithmetic, natural history, science, literature) packaged in the dominant ideology, or, simply, of the dominant ideology in the pure state (ethics, civics, philosophy)."⁶⁴ Through these materials, members of high-demand groups are constantly exposed to the belief system, resulting in the internalization of the teachings, and devotion to their leader. They accept the validity and

63 Althusser, L. (2014), Chapter 6: The State.

64 Ibid., Chapter 9: The Reproduction of the Relations of Production

universality of the ideology without question. This process ensures the member normalizes the beliefs and relations within the group. Conviction that the truth cannot be questioned is a result of a reduction of cognitive flexibility and adaptability, given that converts and followers are "taught to feel rather than think,"⁶⁵ while critical thinking is discouraged.

What happens when claims of absolute universality come up short or are proven wrong? Likewise, what happens when the unquestionable ideology exhibits signs of aberration? In the mind of an authoritarian group member, the obvious answer is that the system and the leader can never be wrong.

While this mindset seems to be an absolutist one, the thought that their belief system is fundamentalist⁶⁶ in nature, might be hard to swallow or comprehend for the group member. They are required to fully invest in the ideology, and sincerely believe that it offers an unerring and universal solution to tremendously difficult and complex issues. This conviction bears a resemblance to the internalization of class relations by the labour class, as detailed by Althusser. According to him, the reproduction of ideology hardly requires force or repression, rather it ensures its existence by an internalization of the norms.⁶⁷

Yet, the thought reform process followers must go through, is more than likely to create a state of cognitive dissonance, requiring apparatuses that replicate the ideology and pro-

65 Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1995) p.279

66 Thought reform, according to Lifton, creates the cognitive dissonance necessary to view the world from such a vantage point. As such, he defines high demand groups as sharing a common ancestry with fundamentalism and in essence, even being an "important expression of fundamentalism." Quote from Jay Lifton in forward of *Cults in our midst*.

67 Althusser, L. (2014), Introduction by Jacques Bidet.

vide constant exposure to propaganda. According to Ross, the psychological theory on cognitive dissonance can be utilized as a basis "...for understanding how cult-involved individuals can continue to cling to beliefs, even when facts contradict them."⁶⁸ The theory explains "...that cult members can resolve such conflicts by essentially spinning or accepting rationalizations."⁶⁹ In other words, there is a thought process that emerges, one that helps reconcile the dissonance of contradictory behaviours and acts.

The follower is conditioned to be convinced that the system is impeccable and infallible, and the aberration can only be explained through personal error. The follower assigns guilt and responsibility to the person making the claim, or if it is themselves that has discovered the error, they personally assume responsibility for the failings.

One of the short films I created for this thesis is titled *The story of John Tobin*. The film displays the ideological methods and language tools used mostly by multi-level marketing schemes. The character in the film emphasizes the point that the system works without error, and those criticizing it simply lack the capacity to fully engage with the system and devote their potentials without question. This is a thought pattern that can be found in most, if not all totalitarian groups. The fact is, if one error were to be attributed to the system, the whole concept would come crumbling down. What's more, given how the doctrine has been internalized by the follower, this would also result in an attack on their identity, making it necessary to assign shortcomings to individuals. The failings of the system are thrust on the shoulders of the follower, and they are to blame for having done something wrong, or having been with the wrong people, or having sinned or strayed off the path. Since questioning the perfection of the belief structure would result in a collapse of the whole system; it is

68 Ross, R. A. (2014). Chapter 5: Cult Brainwashing

69 Ibid.

often preferable to have a system that “works,” regardless of the exploitative nature of it.

Absolutism rejects (in essence and through practice) a freedom of mind. An absolute authority, requiring absolute trust, with access to absolute knowledge, provides absolute solutions to complex problems, with a set or series of absolute moral codes, acceptable behavioural patterns, and belief systems. Such an absolute set of values by its very nature requires devotion, investment, and belief. After all, high-demand groups are an “all or nothing” enterprise, both in word as well as in practice. When an ideology claims to be perfect, the system and set of relations created as a result would naturally reflect the same logic.

Dianetics is the bible of Scientology. Written by science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, the book claims to present a new psychological analysis method that helps in (or rather ensures) achieving happiness. Hubbard describes Scientology as “...the means to attain true spiritual freedom and immortality.”⁷⁰ The premise is based on erasing the contents of the “reactive mind” via auditing, a method (developed by Hubbard) that consists of a series of questions and answers that assist a person recall and deal with past painful experiences.⁷¹ According to the Scientology webpage on auditing, the practice “...deletes life’s painful experiences and addresses and improves one’s ability to confront and handle the factors in his life.”⁷²

Putting aside the validity of this claim in the face of a

⁷⁰ Von Dehsen, C. D., & Harris, S. L. (1999). *Philosophers and religious leaders* (p. 95). Greenwood Press

⁷¹ Church of Scientology. (n.d.). Official Church of Scientology video: Auditing in Scientology, spiritual counseling. Retrieved November 28, 2023, from <https://www.scientology.org/faq/scientology-and-dianetics-auditing/what-is-auditing.html>

⁷² Ibid.

whole branch of science dedicated to understanding and dealing with the human mind and how it effects behaviour (namely, psychology), as well as another one dealing with the diagnosis and treatment of mental illnesses (psychiatry), what is noteworthy and striking is that the method is presented and put forth as an absolute and clandestine solution discoverable only by a unique and chosen mind, mainly Hubbard himself. According to Scientology, his efforts resulted in the creation of a method that is "...containing the knowledge of *universal truth* unlocking the riddle of creation itself."⁷³ ⁷⁴

Hubbard co-opted and redefined dozens of technical terms "...to create the impression that Scientology's belief system was rooted in real science."⁷⁵ As Amanda Montel explains in her book on cult language, the term "Valence" for instance, normally refers to the value of something across several disciplines, whereas is it redefined to connote being possessed by an evil spirit in Scientology.⁷⁶ Likewise, the term "clear" has numerous meanings in English, yet it refers to completing the course that helps the follower attain spiritual freedom in Scientology speak.

The use of scientific jargon comes with a caveat, however. An essential attribute of totalistic regimes is to discredit any alternative modes of knowledge that might place it under scrutiny and as such, it is only natural that they often dismiss the validity of science and experts. Ofshe

⁷³ Hubbard, L. R. (2007). *Dianetics: The original thesis* (p. 193). Bridge Publications Inc.

⁷⁴ At the end of *Dianetics* by L. Ron Hubbard, the textbook of Scientology, there's a list of lectures and books that an aspiring Scientologist can read or listen to. One of the recommended works is a series of lectures titled "The Factors: Admiration and the Renaissance of Beingness." The title is followed by an explanation of the content of these lectures or talks, with this sentence summarizing its content.

⁷⁵ Montell, A. (2021). *An explora*, Chapter IV.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*.

describes this as being “the sacred science.”⁷⁷ It is an “agreement that the group ideology is faultless,”⁷⁸ or in essence, perfect. Sacred Science could on the one hand, offer comfort and security, yet such absolutism can achieve such a hold over the thought processes of an individual that “...if one begins to feel himself attracted to ideas which either contradict or ignore it, he may become guilty and afraid.”⁷⁹

Sacred science is when the “wisdom” of the leader is given credibility and “...anyone who disagrees or has alternative ideas is not only immoral and irreverent but also unscientific.”⁸⁰ As such, sacred science is one of the absolutist methods utilized by such groups. Many leaders claim to have science on their side, and utilize it indiscriminately as a tool.

Teal Swan, a new-age trauma therapist accused coercing or implanting suicidal thoughts in her programming,⁸¹ utilizes sacred science as well. She combines Eastern metaphysical jargon with well-known psychology and sociology terms and concepts to diagnose mental disorders and treat them in her own way. “She blurs mystical talk of “synchronicity,” “frequency,” and “the Akashic records” with the formal language of the DSM: borderline, PTSD, clinical depression.”⁸² Teal Swan, in her online videos, does a great job of convincing potential followers that she’s tapped into a special kind of knowledge - one that is (of course) scientific enough to use the terminology, but supported by a higher power and has spiritual aspects that she has been entrusted with.

⁷⁷ Ross, R. A. (2014). Chapter 5

⁷⁸ Ross, R. A. (2014). Chapter 5

⁷⁹ Lifton, R. J. (1989). *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism: A study of “brain-washing” in China* (p. 443). The University of North Carolina Press.

⁸⁰ Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1996). p.69

⁸¹ Montell, A. (2021). Part 6, Chapter i.

⁸² Montell, A. (2021). Part 6, Chapter iv.

She presents her knowledge of the esoteric and psychological as an amalgamation of part science, part spiritual or religious lingo. In the introduction video on her website for instance, she claims that the only access to “empowerment” is through “reality” and that she helps people see reality so they can “...find their truth and to live authentically, so they can be who they really are and live the life they really want to live.”⁸³ She promises genuine healing, authenticity, peace, and clarity in the same video, and adds that people who don’t understand her or fear her message, convolute and misrepresent her message. Mention of “the others” who don’t understand her philosophy and method is an appeal to sacred science.

In other videos on the internet and on her YouTube channel, she does claim an origin story filled with trauma, including satanic ritual abuse, which has been disputed by her childhood friend.⁸⁴ She claims to have overcome such trauma thanks to the unique gifts bestowed upon her, which she now asserts she uses to help others. Swan’s YouTube channel is filled with videos promising methods and techniques on overcoming addiction, depression, and many other psychological issues, even though she is not a trained psychologist and has no mental health accreditation.⁸⁵ She has a language of her own (referred to as “Tealisms”), and her customized vocabulary is a rich set of isms fluctuating between spiritual terminology and scientific jargon. According to Montel, “...her brand of occultic psychobabble creates the impression that she is

83 Teal Swan. (n.d.). [Introduction video on landing page]. Retrieved February 22, 2024, from <https://tealswan.com/>

84 Diana Hansen Ribera grew up with Teal swan and disputes her outrageous claims on growing up in an abusive satanic ritual cult, in her interview with Youtube Channel Mormon Stories: https://youtu.be/pYo4M9tNEqO?si=_TGOYakzJ_fHIO_2

85 Montell, A. (2021). Part 2, Chapter iv.

tapped into a power higher than science.”⁸⁶

One of the short films I created as part of this master’s thesis is a fictional representation of the origin story presented by gurus such as Swan. *The story of Liz* depicts a trauma therapist who claims to have unique abilities and offers, through use of a similar language and a delivery reminiscent of Swan, the promise to provide healing for people suffering with mental health. In *The story of Julia*, also submitted as part of my master’s thesis, we look at how ideas can be planted in vulnerable individuals in need of professional help by such therapists and gurus. Nurturing false memories and false accusations of ritual abuse by family members through thoroughly debunked memory recovery techniques, is also one of the misconducts attributed to Swan.

Teal Swan’s ability to sound scientific and spiritual at the same time is nothing out of the ordinary for such self-proclaimed gurus and leaders. L. Ron Hubbard, like many others, also promoted an image of being both a philosopher and discoverer, and according to Scientology’s official website, was a person “...whose early life fortuitously prepared him, in the manner of Jesus Christ, for his declared mission to save the world.”⁸⁷ The self-improvement program he developed, which would later renounce and dismiss psychology as a fraud, borrowed from the science of psychology and morphed it into a new concept that offered much more than mere mental health treatment. It offered salvation, personal and spiritual perfection. It should come as no surprise then, that Teal Swan also questions the validity and effectiveness of conventional psychology and psychiatry.

Scientology labels psychiatry as practicing abuse in the name of mental health, and dismisses the validity of modern medicine, psychiatry, and psychology. The official

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ross, R. A. (2014). Chapter 14.

website openly states that psychiatry is an invalid field, and that its cures have no scientific basis when diagnosing mental disorders.⁸⁸ In contrast, the psychobabble of their leader and failed science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard is presented as incorporating the latest in science with spirituality, tapping into unknown forms of knowledge. Scientology is yet another example of how the dismissal of science and scientific knowledge is utilized while simultaneously co-opting the language of science itself.

Likewise, Gülen, the leader of what outsiders refer to as the Gülenists and Hizmet movement, utilizes similar rhetorical devices that make use of scientific facts when it suits the message and provides credibility for his arguments. He does not cower from dismissing science as being materialistic or too positivist when it challenges the belief system, however. At the core of his ideology is the ushering in of a new era of global faith by winning a battle against atheism and materialism, through the sacrificial efforts of his followers (the existence of which, he claims, were foretold by the Prophet Mohammed and the Quran). They're confident of being equipped for the task, thanks to the knowledge and method provided by him and his predecessor or influencer, Said Nursi. If you listen to him or his followers (who replicate the same talking points), you can come across use of the big bang theory as evidence of the existence of God alongside dismissal of the principles of scientific theory in the very same breath. In his teachings, Gülen rejects scientific facts contradicting his ideological framework, such as the concept of evolution for instance, relegating it to an agenda item propagated by academics and the scientific world to keep "...conference agendas

88 Scientology. (n.d.). Why is Scientology opposed to psychiatric abuses? Scientology FAQ. <https://www.scientology.org/faq/scientology-in-society/why-is-scientology-opposed-to-psychiatric-abuses.html>

busy.”⁸⁹ With his limited scientific knowledge (as a primary school dropout and religious seminary education graduate), he delves into an argument over the discovery of human bones in one of his writings, using a scientific (archaeological) discovery to refute the theory of evolution, labelling its acceptance as “...a sort of blind faith, a prejudice, a superstition that the materialists cling to Darwinism of the crudest kind.”⁹⁰ Standing against all these ominous threats that aim to make communists, socialists and materialists out of naïve people gullible enough to fall for their propaganda is Gülen and his golden generation of disciples who marvel at the beauty of the world as created by Allah. Unlike Darwin who ignored the divinity clearly visible in creation and order, his followers see a confirmation of the “divine architect.”⁹¹

Autobiographical recollection: absolute belief

Most semester breaks (unless special permission had been obtained) meant spending 15 days in a group, somewhere in the mountains or nature, away from worldly distractions and “sins”. We would call this a retreat. Our days consisted of studying selected texts (which meant reading to each other and confirming the truth of the content), repeating the studied texts to memorize them as weapons

89 Gülen, F. (n.d.). What is the reason for the persistence of Darwinism in the general culture of the masses, though many of Darwin's hypotheses have been challenged and even disproved? Questions and Answers. <https://fgulen.com/en/fethullah-gulen-works/questions-and-answers-en/what-is-the-reason-for-the-persistence-of-darwinism-in-the-general-culture-of-the-masses-though-many-of-darwins-hypotheses-have-been-challenged-and-even-disproved>

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

56 *of discourse to be used when proselytizing, and engaging in worship.*

Islam requires five praying sessions a day. We would fulfil this requirement and add another midnight and before sunrise prayer – which necessitated an interruption of our sleep to wash our faces and arms/feet with cold water prior to prayer. Praying half-asleep was frowned upon.

The ability to live between states of sleep and non-sleep, and shut off the desire to rest or to do anything physical or comforting for that matter, was attained through the repetitive process of waking up and then sleeping, waking up, and sleeping once more, over and over again, each night.

Most days would consist of fasting from sunrise to sunset as a sign of virtue and devotion. An added benefit to fasting, we were told, was that it would diminish our sexual drive and allow us to focus on servitude to the truth and devotion to the path.

The truth was absolute.

Our lives were scheduled in absolutes.

Our belief was absolute.

Our judgements and moral criteria were absolute.

There was no room for anything else.

We, at the ripe old age of 16, were privy to the truths of the universe, the unerring ways the Lord had planned for us, and witness to the universal divinity and righteousness bestowed upon our movement – the movement that would accomplish bringing the world to the one and absolute truth.

Language and repetition

Words and signs obtain meaning through repetition – iteration according to Derrida. When certain words are

uttered, they transform into belief, which in turn converts the words into facts. As such, one can argue (if one were to oversimplify) that, repetition can create belief.⁹² Judith Butler questions why this “relative obscure theory of speech acts”⁹³ is of significance and answers her own question by stating that performativity is a name or word that assigns the power language has and how it can “...set into motion a series of effects.”⁹⁴ The example given by Butler is God’s first performative “let there be light.” Language is a powerful tool that creates an act or action or sets actions into motion.

As such, language isn’t merely a construct or tool utilized to describe things or clarify notions, it can also be effective in shaping our psyche and understanding. As performative acts, language carries weight beyond the information transferred. In fact, the role language plays in high-pressure groups are significant in this regard - it acts as a tool that shapes members and their thought processes, that establishes truths and creates the parameters of the ideology. How authoritarian leaders and groups manage to manipulate or sway a group of people is often a topic of intense interest, however there is no real “brainwashing” taking place. As Singer posits, there are no “...secret drugs or potions.”⁹⁵ The manipulation merely occurs through use of words and their repetition, “...put together in packaged forms.”⁹⁶

Influence is created and cemented through the power of repetition: none of these tools would be as impactful if they weren’t repeated over and over again, through group exchanges, through sermons that are listened to, viewed or read, through books replicating them or magazines and materials reproducing them.

92 A question that needs exploration (and is tackled in the chapter on repetition of thoughts and rituals) is, can the repetition of acts, social interactions, rituals and behaviours have a similar impact in establishing belief?

93 Butler, J. (2015). p.28

94 Ibid.

95 Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1995). p.56

96 Ibid

Each repetition normalizes the assigned meaning or purpose of the language tool, and acts as a major thought reform process; the act of repetition constructs and constrains the reality of the follower⁹⁷ and recreates an identification with the imposed reality.

To repeat the already expressed in line with the spirit of this topic, the lexicon developed by high demand groups receives affirmation through constant reiteration, which solidifies their new (assigned) meanings in the mind of the follower. The new meanings create a self-sustaining mini-verse, which is composed of a system of values and truths that "...then compel their followers to heed its rules."⁹⁸

As a tool, Lifton refers to the phenomenon of "Loaded Language,"⁹⁹ in which "The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases."¹⁰⁰ The terms in circulation serve to encapsulate an all-encompassing perspective that ensures the world is viewed in black and white and is "relentlessly judging"¹⁰¹ and dismissive. The terminology (and its repetition) cancels critical thinking and establishes reactions based on the values that are internalized by the follower. In other words, it becomes the language of nonthought.

According to Singer, this process causes cognitive inefficiencies in cult members.¹⁰² Lack of reflection creates an inability to practice individual thought. In fact, I can recall the levels of stress I felt when asked to draw a conclusion or consider different arguments without a meter of judgement

97 Montell, A. (2021). Part 1.

98 Montell, A. (2021). Part 1, Chapter 3.

99 Lifton, R. J. (n.d.). *Losing reality: On cults, cultism, and the mindset of political and religious zealotry* [Apple Books edition]. The New Press. (Part 1, chapter 3).

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

102 Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1995). p.311

handed to me in advance. I had been trained to passively listen and accept everything I heard without criticality, which Singer refers to as “uncritical passivity.”¹⁰³ The follower is thus forced to view life via the triggers and perceptions already ingrained and implanted in them, and quite naturally lacks the critical thinking skills necessary to develop one’s own conclusions. Of course, each individual reacts differently to being exposed to the language of nonthought, but even if it doesn’t fully penetrate the thought patterns of some, it definitely does create a sense of uneasiness when treading off the prescribed path.

The language used in such groups become a series of words that are only understandable by the followers and members. For instance, the 3HO movement utilized concepts such as “pisccean consciousness” or the “negative mind,”¹⁰⁴ terms we might be familiar with but cannot really comprehend the context of, unless we are “in the in.” Members of the Gülen movement would use the term “musbet,” which in Turkish would normally mean “agreeable”. The connotation within the context of the group however, is that the person labelled as being “musbet” is someone open to the message, or has a set of beliefs that correspond to the doctrines of the movement. The word implies, to the person assigned to convert the candidate, that he should feel free to divulge secondary and tertiary tier information about the belief system and structure,

103 Ibid., p.312

104 Montell, A. (2021). Part 1, Chapter 1.

and represents an understanding of hierarchy and access to knowledge.¹⁰⁵

As mentioned previously, the co-opting of language through assigning new meanings to already existing words is also a powerful language tool. Jones for instance, redefined the concept of “accidents” to mean “things that never happen unless we deserve them,”¹⁰⁶ while scientologists refer to people critical of their belief or theology (a term they would most likely deny) as being “suppressive persons.” Amway labels people critical of their pyramid scheme as being “dream stealers.” All these terms on their own, have meanings that are discernible to users of the language, yet within the group they are assigned new meanings to “...spark fear, grief, dread, jubilation, reverence...”¹⁰⁷

The cult of Yogi Bajan (3HO) for instance, used the term “old soul,” to mean multiple unsuccessful reincarnations, thus carrying a negative connotation. Loaded language can also be utilized in euphemisms in authoritarian ideologies. I recall the term “slap of affection” being used often to signify a punishment inflicted on individuals who have “fallen off the path” – another euphemism meant to describe believers who aren’t keeping up with the requirements and are conforming to the “worldly ways” of the “others”.

105 The term also reveals another important aspect of coercion: hierarchy. High-demand groups structure access to knowledge and information, and reveal “secrets” only to those deemed capable of handling them. It might take months or years until the candidate for instance, is told the name of the group leader. The message might be wrapped up and presented in socially acceptable and mainstream concepts until the candidate is “ready” to know more. Throughout this process of course, the manipulative aspect is that the candidate lacks agency, and the process lacks transparency. I delve more into this topic in the chapter on hierarchy.

106 Montell, A. (2021). Part 2, Chapter 3.

107 Ibid., Part 2, Chapter 3

In her book *Cultish*, Amanda Montel interviews a former member of the 3HO organization. Tasha explains how obedience promised to yield great rewards.¹⁰⁸ Simply learning the right words and repeating them meant you could instantly make your desires or goals become a reality. "There was a mantra to attract your soul mate, one to acquire lots of money, one to look better than ever, one to give birth to a more evolved, higher-vibration generation of children," Tasha divulges. Disobey? You'd come back in the next life on a lower vibration."¹⁰⁹

Another language tool is the thought-terminating cliché, which is described by Lifton as comprising of "...brief, highly selective, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed."¹¹⁰ They compress complex problems into phrases that dismiss any concerns or criticisms. At the core, thought-terminating clichés are meant to suppress individual expression, squash the exploration of alternative thoughts or ideas, and terminate a search for balanced or nuanced views.¹¹¹ In a sense, they're catchphrases that discourage treading outside the boundaries of totalist thought.

The collecting of tithing is an important practice in such groups, which is a tax of sorts, paid each year to the organization to help fund their activities and investments. Yearly pledges and contributions not only ensure the member personally invests into the ideology and community, but also provides a constant source of revenue for the group. In the case of the Gülenists for instance, yearly pledges are used to fund youth education, the operating costs of companies owned by the group (which included media companies, publishing houses, bookstores, and banks), or purchase educational institutions or buildings in other countries. The discretion of the money

108 Ibid., Part 1

109 Ibid.

110 Lifton, R. J. (1989). p. 429

111 Ibid.

donated is generally left to the leader or the leading hierarchy, and the authoritarian culture leaves no room for questioning how it is used. Most high-demand groups (if not all) lack transparency, making it impossible to trace where the money goes. The demand for yearly pledges is reminiscent of national tax collection agencies collecting yearly taxes from citizens. Both are virtually impossible to fully avoid.

As a thought-terminating cliché, when a follower claims they're financially struggling and will not be able to make a pledge, they're often told to "trust the Lord," or that the money doesn't really belong to them to begin with. One of the short films I created as part of this master's thesis is aptly named *The Tithing* - the film is a fictional representation of such thought terminating clichés. It also exposes the psychological toll of having to pay a certain percentage of your income to the group. The normal "worldly" reaction towards such a demand would be asking valid questions such as: "can I afford giving so much?" or "perhaps the money would be better put to use otherwise," yet all such thoughts that might arise are instantly cancelled through the use of such semantic stop signs.¹¹²

Given that absolute systems also claim infallibility, such techniques, when used successfully and repetitively, help place the responsibility of errors or questionable results on the shoulders of the individual. The process of nonthought created as a result, dismisses personal struggles as insignificant to the larger (and more important) picture, and reassigns responsibility to the person doing the struggling. In the Heaven's Gate cult for instance, when the leaders were questioned on whether their theories made sense, their argument was that if "...the truth about the evolutionary level above human was not clear to you, it wasn't their fault."¹¹³ The immediate and uncritical response initiated by such linguistic tools also impacts perception of outside sources.

112 "Semantic Stop Sign" is a term used by Amanda Montel in her book "cultish".

113 Montell, A. (2021). Part 2, Chapter 3.

When articles or critical news stories on the group appear in the media for instance, followers are programmed to view this as a sign of them being misled, or of the media intentionally attempting to discredit or attack them. The same goes for researchers, scientists, authors, or anyone else raising questions about the activities or legitimacy of the group (the concept of sacred science concept has already been mentioned above). Yet, what makes it impactful is the constant use of this technique, repeatedly, until the follower internalizes it and comfortably uses it as an instantaneous response, without second thought.

This exerts itself best when media runs reports condemning the activities of such groups or opinion pieces that criticize them. Most high-pressure groups do not enjoy the negative coverage, given that it contradicts their well-constructed narratives. Their response is to generally claim that the media falsifies information, has an agenda against the believers, is doing the devil's bidding or is in an active conspiracy to silence the truth. Followers are not allowed to read what was written, they hear the propaganda and arguments via the hierarchy or leader, and immediately dismiss the stories or arguments against the group, without second consideration. When child sexual abuse cover-up allegations (and subsequent court trials) appeared in the media about the Jehovah's Witnesses for instance, many followers turned a blind eye, and refused to believe the allegations. They immediately received their verbal cues from the Church and began claiming there was a conspiracy against the group. David Splane, a member of the Witnesses' Governing Body stated (regarding such allegations): "The journalist has a closed mind. The journalist isn't interested in the truth. And so we usually just leave things as they are and let the story die."¹¹⁴ When stated once or twice, this statement might raise an eyebrow or two, however

114 Reveal. (2015, December 14). How Jehovah's Witness leaders are responding to child abuse scrutiny. Reveal. <https://revealnews.org/blog/how-jehovahs-witness-leaders-are-responding-to-child-abuse-scrutiny/>

when the rhetoric becomes part of a constantly repeated trope about the media (and government institutions) being unjust towards the community, followers instinctually do as expected and ignore the news until it fades from the limelight or dismiss allegations as the work of the devil. Donald Trump uses the “fake news” narrative in a similar fashion as well, when dealing with unfavourable criticism or opinions coming from the media.

Given that critical thinking faculties have been subdued, most followers refrain from forming an opinion on such developments until they receive an updated perspective from the upper echelons or their leaders. Once the concept is framed and the new development is placed within a designated thought process, followers and members know how to respond, and begin repeating (for the most part) similar arguments, perspectives, and linguistic constructs within the group as well as to the “others.” As such, it wouldn’t be a stretch to assert that for the most part, the “nonthought” created through these constructs and their repetitions make it highly unlikely that members of such groups exercise criticality or reach conclusions on their own – out of fear for erring on the wrong side or having to retract the independent thought upon an alternative perspective being established and imposed from above.

A final note to make on language repetition and cult indoctrination is what Ofshe labels as being “The dispensing of existence.” This is a concept that classifies individuals not sharing the same ideology as not being worthy of respect, and as such, lacking morality. The follower, having totally merged with the movement in terms of identity and existence, harbours a mistrust for any critical thought or criticism, especially when it comes from “unrespectable” sources. The repetition of the same patterns constructs the reality of the member, creating what Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman call “information disease”.¹¹⁵ Thought processes

115 Zablocki, B., & Robbins, T. (2002). Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field. *Utopian Studies*, 13(2), 249-251.

are restructured in a way in which thoughts, emotions, memories, and even conscious choices are shaped and dominated by the ideology. This process is what results in outsiders, or those not familiar with the group dynamics, seeing or viewing members as being odd, as having different reactions, as “all being the same.” It is also what creates a group dynamic and makes followers feel like they are a part of a community that truly understands them.

Language as a restrictive tool

Given that words and terms are co-opted and redefined by high-pressure groups, would it be apt to consider what’s not being referred to?

When language is constricted, what is not being said becomes as important as what is being implied. How does lack of words or definitions impact our thinking processes? What does restrictive language cover up or hide, which thoughts does it prevent from being expressed?

The use of a totalist language is “repetitiously centered on all-encompassing jargon, prematurely abstract, highly categorical [and] relentlessly judging.”¹¹⁶ The language and use of the same jargon, in a sense, limits thought and creates what Lifton labels as, a “language of the nonthought.”¹¹⁷ Language and how it is utilized, framed (what it allows to express and doesn’t give room for expression of) and constricted, has an impact on what one can think, or even whether one can practice criticality.

The language created and expressions utilized among members of such groups can be limited, resulting in a

¹¹⁶ Ross, R. A. (2014). Chapter 5

¹¹⁷ Lifton, R. J. (1989). *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China*. University of North Carolina Press. (p. 444).

linguistically deprived existence.¹¹⁸ The thinking and feeling processes are dominated by the same pattern of words and descriptions, the same perspectives and thoughts, resulting in a confined orthodoxy "...in which an individual shouts the ideological jargon all the louder in order to demonstrate his conformity, hide his own dilemma and his despair, and protect himself from the fear and guilt he would feel should he attempt to use words and phrases other than the correct ones."¹¹⁹

Within such systems, followers are placed under close observation and control, with varying layers and levels, depending on the structure. One can observe that the authentic identity of the individual, along with their cognitive thinking capacity, becomes replaced with a group identity that is highly regulated; this high-pressure social environment results in the control (externally as well as internally) of behaviours, thoughts, and emotions.¹²⁰ The distortion, manipulation and control of communication processes (as well as the isolation of members from sources of outside information) results in cognitive disorders, or what Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman define as afflictions that are "...physical impairments of thought and feeling, protracted alterations of awareness and personality that can be diagnosed, in the strictest sense, as varieties of 'information disease.'¹²¹ In their work, they identify a sustained altered state of awareness, which they label as being a form of "snapping", which occurs through a change in personality. This change however isn't a state of awareness, but rather, a state of narrowed awareness. It is dictated as much as by what is being expressed as it is by what is not given credence. The narrowing of awareness is the

118 Ibid., p.430

119 Ibid., p.430

120 Hassan, S. (2013). p21

121 Conway, F., & Siegelman, J. (2005). *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change* (2nd ed.) Stillpoint Press. (Chapter 13: Varieties of Information Disease). [Apple Books edition].

first step in reorganizing personality and creating, what they refer to as a "...lasting impairment or destruction of the mind."¹²² The implication here is that the scope of thought and criticality becomes so narrow, that members of high-demand groups lack the ability to even include certain concepts in their thought processes. Conway and Siegelman label this as being a delusion, however we've seen how other researchers define it as thought reform or coercive practices. Regardless of the definition, it is obvious that we are referring to a change, or shift in thinking, cognitive processing, and perception towards models that are limited and limiting as much as they are transformative and coercive. The confounds these models are based on what is available for consumption and internalization, as well as what is not being said, referred to or avoided.

The final stage in this "disease" according to Conway and Siegelman is the stage of "...not thinking or shutting off the mind."¹²³ At this point, the cult follower lacks any personality or thought originating out of themselves or their own cognitive abilities; their personality is now buried somewhere deep in their psyche, and they mirror only what is provided by the group or ideology. Conway and Siegelman refer to this as the "...complete dissolution of personality."¹²⁴ The language as well as the ideology in this case becomes constrictive, with the capacity "...for thinking and feeling ..." being "...immensely narrowed."¹²⁵ When there is no description of a certain feeling, or if it is blocked and no longer accessible through the constructs, that feeling or emotion becomes inaccessible and in a sense, even non-existent. The process corrupts and suppresses the cognitive capacity of members and their inclination to exercise independent thought. This thought reform process is aided through strict control of a person's time, social and physical environment, a segregation and isolation from

122 Ibid., Chapter 13: Varieties of Information Disease.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid.

125 Lifton, R. J. (1989)., p.430.

social circles and support systems prior to joining, and a system of rewards and punishments that “inhibit behaviour that reflects the persons former social identity.”¹²⁶

On precaritization and guilt

Under various guises, whether it be neo-liberalism or conservatism, fascism or democracy, capital has managed to historically integrate itself into the system at large and ensure that capitalist relations of production and hence capitalist modes of exploitation are internalized, accepted, and replicated in the workplace, at home, in family life, in academia, and in every aspect of life. Gramsci described this process through the concept of cultural hegemony (denoting the dominance of one class over the others), Althusser characterized it through his theory on state apparatuses. Both assert the supposition that the ruling classes, the bourgeoisie, and the personages controlling the labour process maintain hegemony (and ensure their interests are adhered to) in capitalist societies.

I am of the opinion that Ideological State Apparatuses (most notably media and academia), also promote a language of nonthought through the constant, incessant and repetitive propagation of the same words, concepts and perspectives. Citizens exposed to the perspectives and ideas reiterated and replicated through ISAs, end up with a capitalist or class-related “jeweller’s eye” perception of their own. While other systems and ideologies, and even dissent against institutions by fellow citizens is met with resistance and ridicule, the failings of the system are often attributed to complex processes, or individuals abusing their authorities.

The internalization of guilt plays a key role in this process - it ensures citizens refrain from faulting the system for its

failures, and instead, focus on their own responsibility in not being able to overcome obstacles. Capitalism (wrapped in the same package with bulk concepts such as democracy, free will, freedom etc.) asserts itself as being the only system that's good and positive in all aspects. Constant repetition of this "mantra" ensures that the relations of exploitation are internalized by citizens, and become part of an identity for the individual.

Judith Butler touches upon the concept of individual responsibility pertaining to modern society and more notably, within capitalism. She asserts that within the construct put forth, one is responsible for one's own wellbeing, and the failure to attain material comfort by an individual is seen as being immoral. "Neoliberal rationality demands self-sufficiency as a moral ideal at the same time that neoliberal forms of power work to destroy that very possibility at an economic level."¹²⁷ As capitalism continues to tighten its noose around workers' wages and the exploitation of their labour to increase profit margins, the shame surrounding poverty increases. Attempts to scrutinize the systemic shortcomings is met with fury, even by individuals at the receiving end of the exploitative relations of production and struggling to attain self-sufficiency.

The system ensures the blame is not placed on its inability to provide security, class mobility and affluence (as it promises and propagates), but rather the individual and their lack of work ethic or commitment. Afterall, capitalism does

(in theory) reward hard work.¹²⁸

Butler asserts that populations are increasingly being subject to what she labels as “precaritization”, a sense of hopelessness and despondency, which is reproduced and maintained by governmental and economic institutions. She asserts that “this process acclimatizes populations over time to insecurity and hopelessness.”¹²⁹ A heightened sense of expendability or disposability according to Butler, is distributed throughout society as a result. Certainly, the nature of capitalist relations of production contributes to this, as does the alienation of the worker from their own labour, however it is my assertion that this feeling is exacerbated on purpose via state apparatuses that replicate these emotions through their dealings with citizens. This is a topic that could warrant a whole paper on its own, given that we are witnessing (especially since the Corona epidemic) the proverbial noose tightened around working class and middle-class citizens in colonial, extractionist societies, particularly with employment and labour rights being slowly dismantled, the cost of living increasing and a sense of hopelessness permeating through society.

Starbucks just recently illegally ceased the operations of one of their shops because employees opted to unionize

128 The rhetoric used by ISAs on this topic is eerily similar to the coercive language models of high-demand groups, who also place the blame on the individual for systemic failures. As referenced previously in this work, the main character in *The story of John Tobin* (one of the short films accompanying this written thesis) emphasizes the point that the system works without error, and those criticizing it simply lack the capacity to fully engage with the system and devote their potentials without question. The chapter on absolutism delves into this topic in detail.

129 Ibid.

in the US,¹³⁰ massive corporations making record profits each year such as Walmart and McDonald's pay poverty wages while their employees are left having to file for aid programs to survive and afford living,¹³¹ the cost of living in Europe has risen at a much higher rate than wages according to Eurostat, with some items increasing as much as 50 percent while wages stagnate,¹³² and global suicide rates have risen by 20,000 over the past 30 years, especially in upper and middle-income regions.¹³³ Whether or not there is a correlation between all of these, is something worth investigating, I am merely pointing out the fact that hopelessness and alienation continues to become a common trend in hyper-capitalist societies.

As productivity demands placed on workers continue to increase, their wages don't in correlation to the workload and working hours. This has resulted in what newspapers and magazines have labelled as being "quiet quitting." Workers remain within the system given that they have no other choice than to work, yet do not go above and beyond the requirements of their jobs, for they see no purpose and receive no incentive to do so. According to

130 Bloomberg. (2023, July 6). Starbucks Illegally Shut Down Unionized Store, Judge Rules. Bloomberg News. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-07-06/starbucks-illegally-shut-down-unionized-store-judge-rules>

131 Fox Business. (2020, November 8). Walmart, McDonald's Among Largest Employers of SNAP, Medicaid Recipients. *Fox Business*. <https://www.foxbusiness.com/markets/walmart-mcdonalds-largest-employers-snap-medicaid-recipients>

132 Eidelson, Josh. (2023, July 6). EU cost of living continues to rise much faster than wages. *EU Observer*. <https://euobserver.com/health-and-society/157649>

133 BMJ editorial. (2021, August 16). Suicide Deaths Have Risen by 20,000 Over Past 30 Years Around the World. *BMJ Newsroom*. <https://www.bmj.com/company/newsroom/suicide-deaths-have-risen-by-20000-over-past-30-years-around-the-world/>

Forbes Magazine: "A recent Gallup poll found that 50% of the US workforce is quiet quitting, corporate America's latest movement where workers have said "enough" to overworking and decided to set boundaries for their wellbeing."¹³⁴ The quiet quitters have realized that they are alienated from their own work as soon as they enter the process, by handing over the use-value of their labour power to the capitalist. The product produced is alien to them (and their employment lacks meaning), while the capitalist appropriates the results of their work. According to Marx, the worker produces objective wealth, which in turn "...becomes an alien power that now dominates the worker." Consequently, "the worker produces the instrument of his or her own domination"¹³⁵

Both ex-Jehovah's witnesses and ex-Mormons have a suitable acronym to describe the dichotomy of quiet quitting. They call it being a PIMO (Physically in, mentally out). It's a term used to describe remaining within the group due to the consequences and stigma attached to the act of leaving, yet not really believing in the ideology nor abiding by it. Being "physically out" often results in losing family, relations, even employment and financial security. The manipulative nature of rewards as well as punishments in authoritarian systems is only possible if the member is isolated and totally dependent on the system and community.

Quite naturally, non-compliance results in "...shunning, banning, and punishment which includes loss of esteem from others, loss of privileges, loss of status, and inner anxiety and guilt."¹³⁶ The shunning of defectors can often result in loss of contact with family members, as they are

134 Stahl, A. (2022, November 2). What's Really Happening With Quiet Quitting? Forbes Magazine. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashleystahl/2022/11/02/whats-really-happening-with-quiet-quitting/?sh=4732462d2ab1>

135 Harvey, D. (2010). *A Companion to Marx's Capital*. Verson Press. (p. 267)

136 Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1996). p.64.

encouraged to refrain from speaking with those falling “off the path,” as a form of punishment. This is what Hassan would categorize as being one of the emotional control mechanisms utilized by high demand groups.¹³⁷ Jw.org, the official website of the Jehovah’s witnesses, claims shunning is necessary because the bible states: “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.”¹³⁸ The repercussions of this practice is that a regular member who has only relied on fellow cult members as a support group and lived a life of isolation from “others,” who has dedicated a lifetime towards the group and its success (often not receiving an education or training to develop knowledge or skills that are employable in the real world due to commitments or rules), is suddenly left with no one to turn to, not even their family. This alone would explain why many choose to fake still believing, as opposed to openly and blatantly stating they no longer follow the faith.

I would assert that there is a major difference in the impact of quitting or opting out between capitalism and coercive structures: it still is somewhat possible to escape the grips and manipulative tactics of high-demand groups. Yet, modern capitalism prevails on a global scale, with the capitalist class holding control over the state and all its apparatuses. It is apparent and distinctly discernible everywhere as a celebration of “...sans rêve et sans merci” (without a dream and without mercy).¹³⁹ Capitalism no longer only maintains control over the nation-state, but has become multi-national, exerting its influence over continents across the globe. It has opted to shape societies (globally) to conform and accommodate its incessant desire to run a profit and maximize exploitation and has managed to integrate itself into all forms of governance, at the local and international level. As such, escaping its

¹³⁷ Hassan, S. (2013)., p.37.

¹³⁸ JW.org. (n.d.). Shunning: Frequently Asked Questions. Jehovah’s Witnesses Official Website. <https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/shunning/>

¹³⁹ Benjamin, W. (2005). P.259

reigns might be even more difficult than escaping the grip of authoritarian structures.

We are dependent on how the system functions, and in a period in which globalism is keyword for corporate rule, and in which the institutions we equate with civil service actually serve to replicate the capitalist relations of production, living outside the system would require immense dedication and knowhow. In most cases, one would need a bank account, or a credit card, or some means of employment; one would have to grow their own crops to avoid supporting the chain of exploitation beginning at the level of agricultural production; one would need to avert consumption of fossil fuels etc. all of which are parts of the apparatuses replicating the relations. The list can go on to reveal the improbability of a total severance from the system.

The staggering, and even paralyzing domination of capitalist relations of production, and the fact that it has now become the sole power (unchecked and without contest) makes it inflexible. The system has hubris enough to claim to have the answer to all the problems of the world, yet by its very nature, capitalism requires belief in its authority and ability. It has no special dogma or theology according to Walter Benjamin, it is its own confirmation. Benjamin goes as far as to claim that capitalism is the most extreme religious cult ever.¹⁴⁰ He details the worries caused by capitalism as being "...hopelessness in poverty."¹⁴¹ He adds that it is culpable of creating "...worries originating in the fear of hopelessness that is community based..."¹⁴²

The sense of hopelessness and guilt results in society seeking refuge in escapism as a means to overcome the "...constant thrum of capitalism, the incessant expectations

140 Benjamin, W. (2005). P.259

141 Ibid., p.261

142 Ibid.

of productivity and our labour.”¹⁴³

The manufacturing of insecurity

During the worker revolts of the late 60s, a General Motors executive claimed that absenteeism in the workplace was due to economic abundance, the safety net of social security and the benefits jobs offered, not because of the dullness of factory jobs.¹⁴⁴ Upon recognizing that the tolerance for frustration among workers was an issue and workers were not content with their jobs, Ford sought to curb the “spoiled” child-like resistance of their employees. Ford executive Malcolm Denise put forth the concept that there are differing levels of tolerating frustration and that the threshold of tolerance needed to be increased among workers. He based his theory on research conducted by American psychologists in the 1930s, asserting that the less frustration individuals encountered early on in life, the more they were likely to exhibit “insufficient frustration tolerance”¹⁴⁵ later on. They put forth that “...the cardinal task of education properly understood was not so much to enable a young person to blossom as the ‘building up of frustration tolerance’ through discipline,”¹⁴⁶ and suggested restructuring the education system to ensure children built up tolerance. Over the years, the personages controlling the means of production purposefully transformed the workplace to becoming precarious and employment becoming insecure. The Nixon administration for instance, “...engineered a short recession in order to cool the economy,”¹⁴⁷ which served to undermine organized labour,

143 Garcia, B. (2023, June 14). The Paradox of Escapism. *FEM Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://femmamagazine.com/the-paradox-of-escapism/>

144 Chamayou, G. (2021). Part 1, Chapter 3: social insecurity

145 Ibid.

146 Ibid.

147 Ibid.

and successive years would see a conscientious effort to curtail labour security and employment opportunities. The theory of power relations to emerge from the crisis of the early 70s "placed the blame on a socio-economic situation that was too favourable to the workers and their struggle."¹⁴⁸

According to Chamayou, this historical context when combined with propaganda that promoted the concept of work as being the sole purpose of life (most notably via articles and stories praising working extra hours and being a dedicated company man), resulted in the generations born after 1973 and growing up in an era of perpetual crisis to internalize "...the idea that each generation would generally be worse off than the previous one. They learned, again, to be afraid."¹⁴⁹

Chomsky refers to the manufacturing of consent when specifying the management of public opinion, I would like to label this particular mode of learned precaritization as the *manufacturing of insecurity*. Both cults and capitalist relations manufacture insecurity as a means of control and instilling learned helplessness. In the case of capitalism, this takes place through a mass re-education in "frustration tolerance" and an acceptance of the status quo of class relations, as well as an internalization of the exploitative nature of these relations – all made possible through the efforts of ISAs. As Althusser states, the ideology has no spiritual form, and can take on the shape it needs to take on, as long as it ensures a continuation of exploitative relations.

Sennett details the modern shift in capitalism and its relation to labour by outlining how the new regime of today is now more flexible, and no longer requires the dedication of the old. Short-term or contractual labour seems to have replaced

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

the "stable past"¹⁵⁰ with people going through 3-4 different skill sets and 11 jobs in the span of one career. The dedicated company man of the past is now replaced by a worker that is somewhat dysfunctional and constantly in a precarious condition. The gig worker of today is incessantly worried, having to perform all duties and roles related to running a business while facing an unsure future. The worker feels guilty for not being able to succeed, for not working hard enough, for not delivering beyond expectations with every task, yet fully embraces and commits to accepting the validity of this fragile ecosystem of jobs and corporations. They live in a professional world where there's a commitment to dysfunctionality, abuse, and exploitation, much like the cult follower and their dedication to the system or structure that also exploits them. The worker of today is constantly on the move, hopping from one job to another, and the workload is so much that they barely have time for family or social connections.¹⁵¹ This new form of flexible capitalism claims giving workers the freedom to shape their lives and discard dependence on the system, yet it has become an " ...illegible regime of power"¹⁵² that no longer values individuals and contribution, and lacks rules and any sort of mutual commitment, which causes the corrosion of character according to Sennett.

Thus, the dysfunctional relations imposed by new capitalism interweaves threat and insecurity as part of the everyday. Despite the shift from the old hierarchies of control and knowledge, the new system presents itself as being accessible, transparent, and flat in hierarchy, yet it still manufactures insecurity and fear in the worker by undermining commitment.

150 Sennett, R. (1998). *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. W. W. Norton & Company. [Apple Books version]. (Chapter 1: Drift)

151 Ibid.

152 Sennett, R. (1998). Preface

From insecurity to escapism and denial



Keeping with this line of reasoning and taking a brief detour, it should come as no surprise that many modern-day high-pressure groups provide solutions to the worries and anguish caused by the emotionally repressive climate created by capitalism and their modern-day representative, The Corporation. The isolation, sense of hopelessness and despondency caused by the constant trumpeting of individualism over society and community has created a void that just can't be filled by alienating capitalist modes of relations. Instead, a host of alternative (and some absolutist) communities, belief systems and structures rise up to the challenge.

Ranging from hardcore religious fundamentalism to trauma and healing cults, from self-help gurus to MLMs that promise economic and social freedom from the shackles of corporate culture, and even fitness groups such as CrossFit and yoga, many options make themselves available to serve and recreate the sociality eradicated by capitalism - and occupy the space once governed by the church and religious doctrine. According to Montell, the 21st century has produced a climate of mistrust, one in which long-standing institutions are no longer placed on the pedestals they were once elevated to. Established institutions have lost their legitimacy in the public eye, particularly as society questions their ability to respond to the problems caused by the impact of relations of production. This state of ostensible inability could be caused by an overconfidence of the hegemony (resulting in their intentions becoming obvious or more transparent and observable), or widespread public reaction towards the liberal employment of repressive apparatuses - particularly as ideological apparatuses lose their impact. Regardless, the failure of long-standing institutions to provide solutions is, "...the perfect societal recipe for making new and unconventional groups... who promise to provide answers that the conventional

ones couldn't supply..."¹⁵³

The sense of precaritization created through class-based capitalist existence is compounded and even exacerbated by the promotion of a demand for self-reliance, which in turn creates more of a sense of isolation, loneliness and disconnect from society.¹⁵⁴

The inability of an individual to take on the personal responsibility of "pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps" creates a sense of moral failure in the modern worker. This is what can be referred to as late-stage capitalism perhaps, as we are confronted with something beyond the relations of production: the system no longer offers liveable or viable wages, nor a sense of security. The contract between the labourer and the capitalist has expanded into systemic instability as the labourer toils for longer hours for a pay that is unable to keep up with the rate of inflation, within a system that seeks to exploit every resource outside the workplace as well. While the system "...redefines responsibility as the demand to become an entrepreneur of oneself under conditions that make that dubious vocation impossible,"¹⁵⁵ the individual is stuck in a modern capitalist purgatory, being one paycheck away from homelessness and poverty. The so-called possibility of upward class mobility looms on the horizon and is constantly promoted via the propaganda apparatuses as being possible and attainable, yet it is elusive to reach. This sense of ambiguity however requires belief, worship, and vocal admiration to exist. It also discourages expression of the problems and issues it causes, because doing so will harm the religious nature of capitalist belief. Keeping an image of success and happiness is the ultimate purpose in ensuring unproblematic continuity.

153 Montell, A. (2021). Chapter 1

154 Butler, J. (2015). p.15

155 Butler, J. (2015).p.16

Yet despite the repression, we can still observe an internalization of the system of exploitation, an acceptance of its absolute validity, even advocacy for its viability from the very people and individuals the system exploits. One can't help but wonder if this dedication is Stockholm Syndrome, or caused by snapping and the subsequent destruction of personality, and whether or not this state is permanent. In other words, are citizens in modern hyper-capitalist societies as cognitively impaired as cult members? Have the ISAs managed to fulfil the duties they've been assigned over the years as citizens deny the state they're in and remain unaware of the "relations of capitalist exploitation"?¹⁵⁶

Part III.

**Repetitive labour,
hierarchy and
the reproduction
of class relations**

More on repetition

I've already delved into the use of repetition regarding absolutist language; however, there is more to be said on the topic. Repetition in relation to thought, rituals and the body, its use in the production process, and in cementing class hierarchy is also of significance.

The human mind is persuadable and malleable, particularly when in a state of distress or when experiencing moments of transition.¹⁵⁷ It isn't coincidental that most high-pressure groups manage to recruit and reform candidates during such phases in people's lives. Edgar Schein from MIT pioneered research on coercive persuasion, or what Singer and Lalich refer to as thought reform, and categorized the process into three stages: unfreezing, changing, then refreezing. Unfreezing as an initial stage is when past attitudes, behaviours, self-notions and perceptions of the world are destabilized through "...lectures, personal counselling, rewards, punishments, and other exchanges in the group."¹⁵⁸ This stage produces an identity crisis via messages that reiterate over and over again, that your previous life and habits (as well as beliefs) were wrong, immoral or misguided. It also opens you up to new suggestions and offers cues on the "right way" to think and behave. The second phase offers you a new path to follow. The new inductee begins imitating other group members and their conduct, takes on their view of the world, and feels pressure to live the pure and unadulterated lifestyle depicted and promoted by the group. The recruit is unaware of the process, given that "when you engage in cooperative activity with peers in an environment that you do not realize is artificially constructed, you do not perceive your interactions to be coerced."¹⁵⁹

157 Ross, R. A. (2014). Chapter 5:
cult brainwashing

158 Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1995). P.70

159 Ibid., p.71

It is at this point and onwards that repetition becomes a useful tool or methodology. The act is used to introduce, indoctrinate, and reinforce the ideology, sets of acceptable behaviours, normative relations, and the hierarchy within the group.

In the upcoming chapters, I will detail the act of recitation: mantras, slogans, or prayers that are repeated in a group setting create physical reactions in the body. Suggestive and visual storytelling and sermons by group leaders create a trans-like state, or a semi-hypnosis of sorts, both which open the follower up to suggestive behavioural patterns and beliefs that mould future endeavours and perceptions. There are also behavioural patterns and structures that are repeated, alone or in a group setting, that help with thought reform. Daily tasks, acts, rituals, and exchanges work as a coercive mechanism. The repetition of certain actions and reactions reinforces the ideology, the quotidian behavioural patterns, social relations, and perception. More importantly however, imitation of leaders, their piety and spiritual perfection (or perception thereof) restructures thought patterns and behaviours. They instil the preferred mode of behaviour as well as a cloning of the group mind-set in the follower.

Then there's the repetition of the hierarchy and social relations, which create a disconnect from the larger picture or purpose, as well as from the world at large. I examine this topic deeper in the chapter on hierarchy and its reproduction.

Finally, repetitive tasks are generally demanded from or assigned to the follower, which serves to accomplish two distinct purposes: to replicate the social relations and hierarchy within the group, and to sever the connection of the follower with the "bigger picture," thus reducing them to the role of blind executor.

Repetitive labour was championed at the dawn of industrialization with the model factory according to

Richard Sennett¹⁶⁰ and despite the objections, the concept of Fordism and industrial capitalism championed the time metric. The routinization of time, according to Chamayou, ensured the worker lacked a vision of a different future outside the system and its offerings.¹⁶¹ This disconnect ties into Althusser's assertion that technical hierarchy is a replication of class relations in capitalist societies, with access to knowledge and knowhow being limited to the upper echelon (a structure replicated in high-pressure groups as well.)

Repetition and the body – mantras, trance inducing rituals

Linguistic rituals, such as chants and prayers, can have physiological impact and leave the follower open to suggestion or coercion, unbeknownst to them. Many high-pressure group leaders, knowingly or intrinsically, use speech patterns, visual aids, and repetitive and monotonous sentence structures to transform listeners into a state of trans, leaving them susceptible to persuasion. I attempt to replicate these trans-inducing speech patterns on two of the short films I submitted as part of my master's thesis: *The story of John Tobin* and *The story of Liz*. Both fictional gurus deliver their thoughts using visual aids and repetitive, monotonous structures.

I've already mentioned the language of non-thought, however there is also the instruction of non-thinking in cult groups, which is applied through "...the form of repetitive prayer, chanting or speaking-in-tongues, self-hypnosis or

160 At the time, more specifically in the middle of the 18th century according to Sennett, it seemed that repetitiveness could be positive and fruitful as well as destructive.

161 Sennett, R. (1998). Chapter two: routine

diverse methods of meditation..."¹⁶² Conway and Siegelman acknowledge that when practiced in moderation, techniques such as these might be beneficial, however coercive groups generally utilize these techniques in a prolonged fashion, using it as a tool that wears down the follower until the brain adapts into a stage of non-thought. The lengthy sessions disrupt or severe critical thought, whereby "...the brain's information-processing capacities may be disrupted or enter a state of complete suspension...disorientation, detachment...hallucinations, delusions and, in extreme instances, total withdrawal."¹⁶³

It is important to note that this doesn't necessarily mean members or followers of high-pressure groups are in a state of constant daze, walking around like zombies, repeating the same mantras or chants, and responding similarly to each experience like a well-coded machine. Each person is different, and each person's response might be unique. Yet, many groups that do utilize thought reform techniques, also use activities or methods that induce trances, whether this be through sermons and lectures, or through group sessions. I can certainly attest to being woken up at 4a.m. to attend mass prayer sessions, half asleep, as we repeated or chanted the same prayers in unison as a group. I can vividly recall the feeling of elation and "oneness" or unity I experienced with the rest of the group. I can also recollect listening to sermons with fellow believers for hours on end, and not remembering much of the content afterwards; I do remember leaving the sermon with a sense of satisfaction and happiness, however.

Singer and Lalich explain how natural indirect trance induction was initially created or utilized by psychologists to bypass individuals who resisted change.¹⁶⁴ Milton Erickson, a renowned medical hypnotist devised a unique method, in

162 Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman (2005).
Chapter 12: The Snapping Moment and Catastrophe Theory

163 Ibid

164 Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1995). P. 148

which he used ordinary words and a conversational style, merged with a certain pace in delivery to "suggest" individuals perform certain actions, without direct instructions. Prior to his method, individuals were informed by professionals of the method and put through formal trance induction techniques. Erickson created a process in which he paced and led the person "...and they found themselves speaking to him or listening to him, unaware that trances of various depths were being produced."¹⁶⁵ Singer postulates that authoritarian group leaders utilize similar pacing and leading techniques to induce a trans-like state in the listeners.¹⁶⁶ The impact of this technique is that the listeners might not exactly be able to follow the message, and the text or speech might not even be logical or make sense if one were to think about it, yet the critical faculties are worn out by this point and the mind is left to accept the suggestions being made, without resistance or criticality.

A good example of this method can be found in one of the speeches of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, which he gave during an initiation ceremony when renaming his disciples (giving them new names) along with a necklace with his image in it. Reading it might be able to provide an insight into how words and utilization of imagery can cause states of light trance or "spacing out":

"First, the picture is not mine. The picture only appears to be mine. No picture of me is really possible. The moment one knows oneself, one knows something that cannot be depicted, described, framed. I exist as an emptiness that can not be pictured, that cannot be photographed. That is why I could put the picture there. ... The more you know the picture—the more you concentrate on it, the more you come in tune with it—the more you will feel what I am saying. The more you concentrate on it, the more there will not be a picture there."¹⁶⁷

165 Ibid., p.147

166 Ibid., p.147

167 Ibid., p.150

One could, in essence, begin criticizing his statements by questioning the very premise he bases his abstraction on: why or how does one “know” that something can’t be depicted? Why is a picture of a person really not possible in the material sense, when it is? How does an image of a person merely appear to be an image of them, when it is an image of them? How can one “feel” what someone is saying by looking at their picture or image? The list can go on and on, but it would make no difference, nor serve a purpose. The purpose of his delivery and pacing (which is quite rhythmic and lyrical) is not to convince, nor is it to state. Notice the use of short sentences, the lack of a continuity of rationality and logic, and the use of contradicting statements embroiled within visual imagery that basically cajoles the listener into passively accepting the premise without thought. He guides the listener and lets the sensory language influence their state of being and direction. This method is called using “guided Imagery.”¹⁶⁸ When induced in a state of deep relaxation, a leader can “... guide an individual or group to experience various feelings, an imagined environment, or sensations”¹⁶⁹

I personally can recall a picturesque image being described by our elder, accompanied by tears and a yearning for the ideal world. It was the visual of a thousand horses disappearing into the sunset, to portray or represent a romantic visualization of sacrificing time, effort, and one’s existence towards spreading the truth. We were guided to identify with those horsemen, in a sense. It would be brought up and idealized during a lengthy lecture or sermon, the contents of which I still cannot recall. This is because the contents and delivery rhythm probably induced us into a state of trans, for it had no pause. It prevented us from reflecting on the words being spoken, and questioning the propositions put forth.

168 Ross, R. A. (2014). Chapter 5:
cult brainwashing

169 Ibid.

On final note, as impactful as the delivery of guided imagery is the use of repetitive rituals. This includes ceremonies conducted together in large groups, with heads or bodies swaying to the text being read without interruption or chanting in unison post-prayer as a group. "...Almost any repeated motion helps to alter a person's general state of awareness"¹⁷⁰ Especially when combined with chanting or voice and breath related motions, repetitive movements can create a sense of dizziness. Spinning or spin dancing, or whirling, swaying, and rocking, when combined with breathing techniques, creates a state of trance that once more, dulls the critical thinking faculties and also creates a sense of high. "...the effects of these motions are relabelled by group leaders as ecstasy or new levels of awareness"¹⁷¹

Autobiographical recollection: repeat until you no longer have to repeat.

Each word, each sentence, each parable, each reference, each act would be repeated. To the point that it wouldn't matter who was leading the reading or prayer session that day or the next, here, or elsewhere; wherever, whenever, it would all be the same.

The examples and breaks would be the same, the lessons learned would be exactly... the same. We all had a unity of consciousness...Made possible through endless repetition.

We all made the same jokes to the same references, quoted the same texts to the same issues. We had the same thoughts and responses to the same experiences. We were one in thought and in act.

Wake up in the still of the night. Use your right foot to get out of bed. Wash up, rush to prayer.

Greet the angels on both shoulders. They're watching at

¹⁷⁰ Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1995). P.128

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

*all times. Allah is closer to you than your jugular vein.
Do not question. Do not walk the path of disobedience.*

Disobedience results in ruin.

*Do as is required without question. For that's what Allah
demands of you.*

That is what your community demands of you.

Listen. Repeat. Obey. Serve.

Use your right hand to eat.

Take your first step with your right foot.

There is a wisdom beyond comprehension in these acts.

*When the day ends, wash up and perform one last prayer
before lights out. And repeat.*

Wake up.

Wash up.

Use your right foot to get out of bed. ...

Compartmentalization of labour and access to power and knowledge

According to Sennett, "threat and insecurity is interwoven into modern capitalism."¹⁷² I like to refer to this as the "carrot – stick conundrum." Every day, laborers and citizens living in hyper-capitalist societies are left having to choose one over the other. On the one hand, there is the gleaming carrot as an opportunity (propagated through the apparatuses at a relentless pace) of class mobility, and on the other, there is the fact that most workers are barely getting by, forced to work under unfavourable circumstances. According to a survey conducted in 2019, 59% of Americans are just one paycheck away from homelessness.¹⁷³ In countries with social safety nets, the

¹⁷² Sennett, R. (1998). Chapter: Driftv

¹⁷³ Mastantuono, M. (2022, December 19). Why it's hard to house the homeless. *Bentley University*. Retrieved from <https://www.bentley.edu/news/why-its-hard-house-homeless>

situation isn't as dire, however that doesn't negate the fact that individuals still feel the pressure of insecurity imposed on them as a tool of coercion, nor does it discount the reality that social programs are slowly and methodically being dismantled. The new regime promotes flexibility (through contract work, the gig economy and short-lived employment opportunities) as being beneficial, yet the relations of exploitation resume as usual, despite this new model seeming to be at odds with the "stable employment" concept of the old.

During the era of early capitalism and subsequently industrialization, the repetitive, orderly and task-oriented production process became the norm, yet as far back as the mid-18th century, "...it seemed that repetitive labour could lead in two quite different directions, one positive and fruitful, the other destructive."¹⁷⁴ The factory concept provided a spatial replacement for other workplaces; the system of production in which there was an order where everyone knew what to do and when, as well as how, became the norm. The division of labour helped ensure each worker performed tasks that functioned within a structure that was inter-connected, much like a beehive. This process helped increase the production output to a level beyond what a single worker could individually produce in their workshop or atelier. Sennett notes that Adam Smith, in *Wealth of Nations*, iterates a recognition of how mind-numbingly boring work could at a certain point become "...self-destructive, because human beings lose control over their own efforts; lack of control over work time means people go dead mentally"¹⁷⁵ The repetitiveness of the workplace dulls the mental tenacity of workers (or can do so), given that according to Smith, "routine deadens the spirit."¹⁷⁶ In the chapter above, I've already explored how

¹⁷⁴ Sennett, R. (1998). Chapter2: Routine

¹⁷⁵ Sennett, R. (1998). *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (Chapter 2: Routine). W. W. Norton & Company. [Apple Books version]

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

repetitive routines, behaviours, words and mantras can cancel critical thought and act as a main tool of thought reform. It would be interesting to explore how this can apply to the reproduction of capitalism and the relations of production.

The concept of Fordism and the production belt is what we can perhaps label as being the pinnacle of specialized division of labour. By restructuring the production process and assigning miniscule yet repetitive tasks at each station, Ford was able to accomplish a more rapid production, at a lower cost. According to records for instance, "At its designed speed, the assembly line at Lordstown turns out 100 Vegas an hour, giving each worker 36 seconds to complete work on each car and get ready for the next car."¹⁷⁷ From the vantage point of the capitalist, this model reduced dependency on skilled labour and moved towards what Marx would describe as "work deskilling." What was once complicated, becomes (through the reorganization of the process into components) simpler, and requires less knowhow from the worker, which also reduces "...the value of labour-power."¹⁷⁸ It is important to note that the reduction of labour-power value was no coincidence, the process was and still is a result of class strategies, "...worked out through the state apparatus."¹⁷⁹

The deskilling of workers and the compartmentalization of tasks provided the possibility of achieving higher profits within a shorter time. The Highland Park factory of Ford, particularly during 1910-1914, could be considered to have been a laboratory towards fine-tuning technologically divided labour. It was here that Ford preferred and began employing specialist workers, who undertook "...miniature

¹⁷⁷ Braverman, H. (25th Anniversary Edition). Introduction.

¹⁷⁸ Harvey, D. (2010). Chapter 6: relative surplus value.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

operations requiring little thought or judgment"¹⁸⁰ over skilled craftsmen. They also introduced a "time-motion studies" program in which the time to install certain parts were measured within a fraction of a second, and new quotas were placed – requiring workers to keep within the determined production times with each task. Separating the work from thought and an understanding of the larger picture was a vantage point that was also asserted by psychologist Frederick Taylor. He believed that there was no reason for the worker to understand the complexity of the process or the grand scheme¹⁸¹ and that workers would be distracted if they were to occupy themselves with the design of the whole - this would cause them to lose all efficiency.

While technical division and compartmentalization increased productivity and minimized the role of the labourer, what impact did this process have on the worker and their place in the production hierarchy?

It seems as if what determined the hierarchy in the compartmentalization of production was also the compartmentalization of access to knowledge and power. It was the personages Althusser mentions and their managers that knew what the bigger picture was, and ensured a reproduction of the relations that served them well. Access to information, and the level of access is what determined the place obtained and retained within this hierarchy.

The similarities on access to sources of knowledge between class-based societies and high-demand groups seem to be many, given that followers aren't always privy to information; instead they're required to repetitively take on the menial tasks assigned to them (and not ask about the purpose or end result) and fulfil their role with obedience and contentment.

180 Sennett, R. (1998). Chapter 2: Routine

181 Ibid.

In my film titled *Joshua's generation* which I created for this thesis, I highlight the strict management of time in high-pressure groups. The main character digs up a time capsule containing documents from her youth, which also include a highly structured camp schedule. In fact, this scene is also autobiographical in nature, and I realized through my research that strict control of tasks and time was a feature of all high-demand groups. The film is in a way, a reflection of my own personal experience, given that I felt like I was always assigned a laundry list of duties and tasks while in the group. I could neither always satisfy the elders with my performance, nor fully comprehend the reasoning behind certain requests. The knowledge that what I did would play a role in changing the world, was incentive enough.

Frederick Taylor was in for a surprise during the tests he conducted. He was of the stern belief that the workers would simply accept and implement the tasks assigned, yet the work and duties assigned were often sabotaged by the workers themselves. It seems as if the process of optimization led to a decrease in morale and productivity. Meanwhile, other "Experiments like those at General Electric's Hawthorn plant showed that nearly any attention paid to workers as sentient human beings improved their productiveness."¹⁸² The results of such experiments didn't fit Ford's narrative of optimization and productivity, and he adamantly pushed on to optimize production, even at the cost of alienating the worker from the fruits of their labour.

Yet there is a "catch-22" with the eternal desire of capitalism to constantly "improve" production processes, and that is the fallacy of metric analysis. As Harney and Moten state in *All Incomplete*, the metric that analyses the production line efficiency is unrealistically measured against previous metrics. This creates an imbalance and "leaves behind not an improved organization but a metric to ensure the

organization will never be satisfied".¹⁸³ Thus, it would not be a stretch or an exaggeration to claim that the repetitive nature of the assembly line, and the need to constantly improve the flow of production, creates an abusive, coercive environment. What's more, given that capitalism's nature is to constantly "increase" profit by any means necessary, this process creates constantly moving goal posts that aren't always realistic or materially possible to attain, unless the workers regularly overexert themselves.

The struggle of automation and repetitive labour was met with discontent by automobile workers. The dropout rate was at such staggering rates that "Chrysler reported that during 1969, almost half its workers did not complete their first ninety days on the job."¹⁸⁴ The demands for change during the 70s in the US automobile industry resulted in lack of discipline by the workers who protested the metric requirements, leading to an " ...epic battle between management and labour"¹⁸⁵ Restoring discipline was tantamount, and GM opted for the hard-line and sped up the work rate, automated unskilled tasks, downgraded the remainder, made cuts in wages and strengthened surveillance and control.¹⁸⁶

According to Chamayou, when GM officials were complaining about lack of appreciation by workers, Maslow developed a hierarchy of needs that outlined how the more they had, the more meaning they were searching for. The solution that was devised wasn't to offer the workers more, it was to show them the stick. They assumed workers were simply too comfortable and lacked what they labelled as "frustration tolerance." It shouldn't come as a surprise then that according to Weber, no special proof was necessary

183 Harney, S., & Moten, F. (2021). *All Incomplete. Minor Compositions.* (p. 52)

184 Braverman, H. (25th Anniversary Edition). Introduction.

185 Chamayou, G. (2021). chapter 1: indiscipline on the shop floor.

186 Ibid

to " ...show that military discipline is the ideal model for the modern capitalism factory."¹⁸⁷

The consequences of compartmentalization and work deskilling is a disconnect in the relations between the hierarchy and the laborers, similar to the disconnect between the cult leader and their followers. The follower is in a sense, as expendable as the factory worker. They're merely a cog in a system that replicates its own relations and identity, and once they step out of the system or fail to fulfil tasks, they are shunned, cast aside, and discarded.

High-demand groups are experts in creating a common culture that extends beyond monetary compensation and demands sacrifice to reach the set-out goals. In the process, they successfully substitute one exchange commodity (money) with a fictional one in the form of a purpose or an altruistic universal goal: saving the world, finding inner peace, flexibility, attaining eternal bliss...

The follower views the responsibility and burden as necessary work towards the goal. In this sense, one could argue that Ford would be amazed at the discipline and selfless dedication exhibited by the followers of authoritarian groups. According to Max Weber, the capitalist system needs a kind of devotion to the calling of making money. It requires blind faith in that 'incomprehensible,' 'mysterious' idea that a human being "should be able to make it the sole purpose of his lifework to sink into the grave weighed down with a great material load of money and goods."¹⁸⁸

187 Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society* (Vol. 2, G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press. (p. 1156). As cited in Sennett, R. (1998). *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*.

188 Chamayou, G. (2021). Part 1, Chapter 1: Indiscipline on the shop floor.

In this sense, the very thought of having self-sacrificing, unquestioning workers would've been a dream come true for the capitalist. Historically speaking, obedience was necessary in the workshops of Medieval masters because " ...the customs of the age required the apprentices and journeymen to give to the man whom they had contracted to serve."¹⁸⁹ With the emergence of modern industry and mass-production in factories and production facilities, the worker was expected to be dedicated to the employer. The purpose of the relations was to " ...secure or exact from his "employees" a level of obedience and/or co-operation which would enable him to exercise control."¹⁹⁰ Harry Braverman asserts that the new social relations is what framed the production process creating this shift. The new beneficiaries of obedience were, as Althusser defines them, " ...personages who are not agents of production, although they intervene in production."¹⁹¹ On the production floor, the purpose of the middle manager became not to understand the worker or provide them with opportunities to flourish, but to " ..establish a 'psychological profile of the workforce' aimed at evaluating the 'loyalty of the employee' and to detect, even on the basis of weak signals, the individuals most likely to join a union."¹⁹² Their role within the hierarchy was dependent on serving the base and their needs, and (just like the follower assigned a role in a coercive group) comply with the expectations cast upon them.

Scientology is infamous for having Sea Org members sign million-year contracts that require a lifetime of servitude,

¹⁸⁹ Braverman, H. (25th Anniversary Edition).

Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century. Monthly Review Press. [Apple Books version]. (part 1, chapter 2)

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Althusser, L. (2014). Chapter 2: What is a mode of production?

¹⁹² Chamayou, G. (2021). *The Ungovernable Society: A Genealogy of Authoritarian Liberalism* (A. Brown, Trans.). Polity Press. [Apple Books version]. (chapter 4)

which include hours of labour each day, often without adequate sleep and naturally, without compensation. I can personally recall toiling away over 14 hours a day for mundane tasks at a young age; demanding sleep or time off was frowned upon. Jehovah's Witnesses are often sent for a year (in unfavourable conditions and without compensation) to distant lands on ministerial duties.

Coercive group members have tasks they need to execute, mantras they need to repeat, beliefs they need to reiterate, social norms they need to execute over and over again, for the maintenance and propagation of the ideology, and they execute these tasks without question. Being a "good example of obedience"¹⁹³ is key to the management and continuity of the system. In fact, this point is often reiterated through tales of obedience, resulting in the creation of a mythological and elusive wisdom that is beyond comprehension, yet needs to be adhered to and trusted at all times. Wrapping the exploitation of resources, minds, and acts within the framework of obedience-which in this case is the corporate culture of the group-contributes to the efficiency of the proverbial production line process within the high-demand group.

Hierarchy in capitalist relations and high-demand groups

Restricting access to knowledge prevents the working class from reaching beyond the confounds and boundaries of their class. In class-based systems, knowledge is monopolized and "common laborers, unskilled and skilled workers are "penned" in other contents and forms of know-how."¹⁹⁴ The official monopoly on certain forms of knowledge and a practical obstruction towards accessing

¹⁹³ A statement used among Jehovah's witnesses to signal virtue in obedience

¹⁹⁴ Althusser, L. (2014). Chapter 2: what is a mode of production?

it, ensures that the social division is adhered to in life and the workplace, becoming an accepted fact of life.

Through the virtue of authority, monopoly and prohibition are exercised over the relations of production. No organization exists without managing the division of labour, which in turn exists through hierarchical relations of authority. A place or position in the hierarchical structure becomes a claim to being selected. The capitalist class claims being unique (or even chosen) because they have access to world-changing ideas and possess a work ethic that puts the whole world to shame (simply ask any capitalist why they deserve their wealth and power), the coercive group leader claims the same because they have access to divine or special knowledge that is hidden, secret, or unattainable by the "normal" person. Yet " ...authority is always on the same side: it is always the same people who wield it and the same who are subjected to it, for all intents and purposes their whole lives long."¹⁹⁵

Preservation of this hierarchy requires the efforts of the superstructure, which consists of a political and legal level according to Althusser (represented by the state and the law) as well as an ideological level. The ideological state apparatuses thus-exactly like the constant repetition of teachings, sermons, books and thoughts of the high-demand group and the function these activities serve-are persistently and regularly operative to ensure a continuation of the interests of the personages controlling the labour process, and the means of production. Althusser posits that Ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), which include an extensive list encompassing the scholastic, familial, religious, political, information and news, publishing and cultural apparatuses, and the institutions or organizations corresponding to the apparatus (the parliament and political parties for the political ISA, entertainment, and sports for the cultural ISA etc.) form a system of replication and preservation of the status quo.

They are not anchored in purely ideological practices, but in non-ideological realities that serve and support the over-arching ideology. The family unit for instance serves to help produce labour power but also functions as a unit of consumption. In this regard, the father or mother figure, who work in a setting that replicates the modes of production and does not allow upward mobility or trans-class movement, will accept this reality as being the norm because the institutions seek to reproduce these modes of production relations and normalize them through un-ideological practices that replicate the ideological underpinnings. "The ideology realized in an ISA ensures its systemic unity on the basis of an 'anchoring' in material functions specific to each ISA; these functions are not reducible to that ideology but serve it as a 'support'."¹⁹⁶

Althusser lists the school system as the most dominant ideological apparatus, elevated to the most dominant position "essential for reproducing capitalist relations of production,"¹⁹⁷ to replace the church and religious institutions previously fulfilling a similar role. He adds that the political apparatus is but a theatre, and the bourgeoisie has been quite adept at adapting and sharing power in the political changes taking place since the French revolution. The political apparatus subjects individuals to state ideology through indirect or direct democratic ideologies. Likewise, the news and information apparatus conspire to stuff "every 'citizen' with his daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism, and so on, by means of the press, radio, and television."¹⁹⁸

When it comes to high-pressure groups, there is a certain sense of hierarchy that's replicated in the process of imitation and repetition, as well as the structure of relations. Many members who rise within the hierarchy or selected to preferred positions are " ...taught to perpetuate the

196 Althusser, L. (2014). Chapter 6, the state

197 Althusser, L. (2014). Chapter 6, the state

198 Ibid

manipulative system.”¹⁹⁹ As such, they take on a role that enforces obedience and dependency while reinforcing the stature of the leader. In this sense, the promoted middle-managers of high-pressure groups are much like the middle-manager of a factory plant, who exists and works to perpetuate and continue capitalist class-relations, sometimes (or often) unknowingly. Power and dominance are exercised and reproduced through these behavioural patterns and the institutions that support them within the group.

The group psychology of imitation can be so prevalent that members might find themselves all wearing the same pants, same colour shirts, donning similar hair styles, eyeglasses and even shoe models. It could be that one of the members operates a clothing store that supplies the outfits, or better yet, that the organization itself has a brand. The member would thus complete the circle by buying books from the anointed bookstore (which coincidentally carries only material published by the group or the leader), watching channels of propagation operated by the movement, and purchase outfits and attire only sold at certain shops. In this sense, the leader would not need to practice heavy-handed coercion, the setting and modes of behaviour are so powerful and omnipresent that a majority fall into line and automatically emulate the patterns being implied.

Singer and Lalich coin the implied behaviour as “social proof.”²⁰⁰ People throughout the group behave in particular ways, which on its own leads the new recruit to the assumption that such behaviour is good, it is acceptable, it is pure, and it is the way a true believer needs to behave. Members seek behavioural perfection and mostly fail to attain the level of perfection they seek to emulate. In return, they become highly critical of the “lazy” behavioural patterns of the others (the rest of society) and cast extreme

199 Ibid., P. 274

200 Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1995). P.162

judgement on them. Meanwhile, members that over-achieve, over-perform, sacrifice sleep or fast and dedicate their existence to “the cause” are praised and held in high esteem.

The ideology and hierarchy naturally impacts and dominates the labour process and relations in such groups; labour being defined as working on behalf of the group, replicating their ideology, investing time and effort towards the group and their activities. When proselytizing or working within the group, it is the duty of a good follower to accept the tasks and the roles given, and to ensure the perfect execution of responsibilities assigned. I recall having fellows my age (at the time we were merely 18 years of age) being “assigned” posts in far-off lands to countries in Asia or Africa to “study.” “Assignment” was a word co-opted in this sense, it signified the honour of being assigned a unique post and the expectations accompanying the assignment, which included establishing a cultural centre, rubbing shoulders with local politicians, providing free tutoring for local students, and striving day and night to spread the truth in the country one was assigned to.

Being assigned these roles was a badge of honour within the group. Fact was however, that there was no transparency in the assignment process. One would be handed down a post as if the organization was a governmental structure with official seats to be filled, and just like the image of the horsemen galloping off into the sunset, they would be expected to accept the role with gratitude, and immediately get to work.

Perhaps this could help us at least partially better comprehend why upward mobility is rarely possible in capitalist structures. The hierarchy in the workplace, according to Althusser, reinforces class and class-struggle, with a monopoly on certain jobs and positions reserved for certain classes or individuals. In this sense, the technical division of labour is purely a social division, the result of an exercise

of dominance.²⁰¹

What it is that prevents people from rising up or rallying against the subjugation forced upon them? In the case of the high-demand groups, we can see that there are a host of reasons that create these relations and dynamics of acceptance, but ultimately, it boils down to the coercion techniques working together in a systemic fashion. A combination of all the elements reproducing the power structure, ensures its replication through various apparatuses. I believe (and echo the opinion of Althusser) the same reasons are valid in capitalist systems as well. Particularly regarding the replication of exploitative relations and the internalization of the norms²⁰² in the form of the subjugation of one class over the other. In other words, one could claim that subjugation rears its head as an ideology that is replicated and constantly interpellated as a thought in the form of a public (or publicized and repetitively vocalized) voice.²⁰³

Autobiographical recollection: group identity and hierarchy

We listened.

We would sit in a circle and listen.

He was chosen, as only one “wonder” would be chosen by God, every century, to set things straight and adapt religion to the challenges and demands of the time.

He wrote on belief. On science. On how religion could be scientifically proven.

He also wrote on trust and dedication.

Obedience would be rewarded with heaven.

“Ask for permission even if it is to go to the washroom.”

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., Introduction by Jacques Bidet

²⁰³ Althusser, L. (2014)., Introduction by Jacques Bidet

Ask for permission and listen and obey.

Ask for permission to eat.

Ask for permission to marry and ask if you've found the correct mate. If not, ask whom you should marry and seek advice.

Ask for a suitable name to be assigned to your child.

Ask for permission to go out, or come back in.

We were told to follow the wisdom of our elders.

We knew they had access to knowledge that was beyond our understanding.

They were wise, and we needed their wisdom. We needed to obey, and not ask questions – they had their reasons, and we were required to listen.

Conclusion

I realized just recently, that the control mechanism of the group I was in was built on data, much like the metric applied by Ford when attempting to optimize production: I would be questioned on the number of pages I had read from the book I had been assigned, how many iterations of optional prayer I had executed alongside the mandatory ones, or what "good deed" I had performed, as well as what my "sins" were and how to absolve myself from them. The demand for purity and commitment brought alongside it, a sense of guilt. Achieving the demands of what modern work culture would label as KPIs (key performance indicators) was almost impossible, yet it placed my existence within a hierarchy determined by performance and dedication.

As the years went by, my access to knowledge expanded (I found myself being excited at hearing more on the latest political or social developments, or what the leader thought about certain events second hand), but I was well aware of the fact that not all information could be disclosed to everyone. Access to secret knowledge gave me a sense of superiority and accomplishment.

My exit began with a question. That simple question started as a snowball and began rolling down an ominous and apocalyptic hill: it gathered more snow, grew in size and became a boulder, smashing into my glass house of belief. I then had to adapt to society at large and noticed I didn't fit there as well. I began noticing that there were hierarchies in modern society too, and certain practices felt manipulative – yet I couldn't define this feeling at the time.

I came into the master's program at the Fine Arts Academy of Vienna with a clear notion and conviction: I was sure beyond a doubt, of the manipulative nature of cults and how they operated. I was a filmmaker and storyteller, and I would tell the stories of manipulation through my work. Over time, I came to realize that even though I am still of the opinion that high-demand groups are insidious and malevolent, I needed to analyse systematic similarities and common characteristics, and more importantly, incorporate

my own perspective in the work. I needed to find a sense of honesty and lend the topic my own voice.

I was also slowly discovering that my “gut feeling” was worthy of exploration when it came to capitalism. Exploring the commonalities between the two has been no easy task, and at times, even at times proving to be extremely challenging. Mostly because not much work has been done on this topic, and I needed to explore, connect, and synthesize. I hope this work has managed to lay out the characteristics of such groups and successfully explore the parallels between them and the reproduction of capitalist relations of exploitation.

Ultimately, the work seeks to empower through knowledge. I do not cast blame on any single organization, yet I attempt to highlight that coercive structures have the capacity to impact lives and exploit individuals. By doing so, I seek to empower spiritual abuse survivors and provide them with a unique perspective. I can only hope that it serves as a foundation for more research on the matter, given that coercive groups exist within capitalist structures and as such, can only replicate what they're a part of.

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