

# SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIAL POLICY

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## ESSAYS IN HONOR OF JAMES S. COLEMAN

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AND  
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### RATIONAL MODELS OF CHARISMATIC INFLUENCE

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Matters of public policy often come to a head under nonroutine circumstances. This can happen when a widely desired social change is seen as impossible unless a crisis galvanizes key players to action. At such times, emotional contagion and personal loyalty to charismatic leaders appear to supersede linear rational planning. For example the long, tortuous debate over the role to be played by the Communist Party and the KGB in the restructured Soviet Union was, in the end, settled by who could and could not mobilize the loyalties of deployable agents under circumstances in which direct control had become impractical and in which the normal distribution of rules, rights, and responsibilities had been suspended. The historical importance of such charismatically punctuating events would appear to place severe limitations on the power of rational models of collective action to predict and account for the decisions that bring about actual public policy changes.

However, it is not clear that charismatic interludes in public policy making require the suspension of all of the assumptions underlying rational modeling of individual and collective decisionmaking. The actions of crowds, mobs, juntas, and sectarian revivals do not always seem, with hindsight, to have been chaotic, even if they cannot be shown to have followed by linear extrapolation from earlier routine collective deliberations. The work of James Coleman (1990) in extending the theory of social choice into areas not normally thought of as amenable to it has blazed a trail that we may follow in dealing with this problem. Coleman (1990: 311) has argued that:

If actor A has transferred rights of control of certain actions to another actor, B, then B has available social capital in the form of those rights of control. If a number of actors have transferred similar rights of control to B, then B has available an extensive body of social capital, which can be concentrated on certain activities. Of course, this puts

extensive power in B's hands. What is not quite so straightforward is that the very concentration of these rights in a single actor increases the total social capital by overcoming (in principle, if not always entirely in fact) the free-rider problem experienced by individuals with similar interests but without a common authority. It appears, in fact, to be precisely the desire to bring into being the social capital needed to solve common problems that leads persons under certain circumstances to vest authority in a charismatic leader.

The question then is what steps we must take to develop such a theory to the point that it can help us predict, or at least explain, such social discontinuities. As Coleman earlier points out (1990: 75ff), what is puzzling about charismatic influence is why a rational actor would ever submit to it. Weber (1947: 106) asserts that actions based on charismatic influence "are very closely related to phenomena which are understandable either only in biological terms or are subject to interpretation in terms of subjective motives only in fragments and with an almost imperceptible transition to the biological." This point of view has been uncritically adopted by contemporary sociological theory. My question is whether we can do any better in claiming a sociological stake in these phenomena.

The purpose of this essay is to explore some possible directions in modeling charismatic influence as a rational process. I want to be able to explain what makes an actor deployable in collective situations that lack effective control mechanisms and why a rational individual might be prepared to vest authority in a charismatic leader rather than to free ride on the self-investments of others. Such investment is found not only at the complex levels of public policy making. A social system as simple as that of the Lone Ranger and Tonto contains many of the essential ingredients. What is required at any level of complexity is a choice model that accounts for consistency of subordination in the absence of direct social control.

It is clear that the hedonic rational actor will never become a deployable agent. Yet we know that some fully functional, rational individuals do become deployable agents. Therefore, we need to postulate the existence of a choice structure internal to the individual under which the outcome of choosing to be a deployable agent will be preferred. Many such choice structures can be imagined, but we will follow the lead of Coleman (1990: 949) in thinking of such structures as internal constitutions under which precommitments can be made to future courses of action in opposition to simple hedonic interest. The problem then becomes understanding the process by which charismatic influence acts upon such internal constitutions.

I have chosen to investigate this problem by looking at totalist religious communities (cults). The phenomena of interest are found there in purer form than within the circles of politics and statesmanship, and such communities are richly endowed with charismatic relationships. Furthermore, their members often demonstrate an extreme form of auto-machia (James: 1961), the lifelong struggle

against the impulses of the natural self. This Calvinist tradition of auto-machia and its near cousins within the East Asian religious traditions provide a useful image of the most uncompromising precommitment of belief in every area of life. The religious true-believer, engaged in a struggle against all his immediate impulses, is the polar opposite to hedonic man. Both of these ideal types are useful for understanding the mechanisms of rational action.

For these reasons, totalistic religious communities are useful sites in which to investigate charismatic compliance in its most extreme form. However, the same processes observed in such communities may be seen, although often in more diluted and less apparent forms, in political movements (Almond, 1954) and in political conflicts in which ideologies play a role.

Two interrelated questions are addressed in this chapter: (1) What collective mechanisms are required for the reliable production of deployable agents? (2) Under what circumstances will rational individuals submit to these mechanisms? In the first section of this chapter, I describe the theoretical assumptions about collectivities and about individual actors that form the basis for my attempts to model charismatic influence. In the second section, three models of charismatic influence that have been advanced to account for the events that occur as people move into and out of totalistic religious communities are examined in terms of these assumptions.

### THE PROBLEM OF CHARISMATIC INFLUENCE

In this section I will attempt to set out the theoretical assumptions underlying our investigation of charismatic influence. We will look first at the macro level problem of developing a reliable supply of deployable agents as social capital for the collectivity. Then we will turn to an examination of the micro level problem of the rationality of charismatic compliance.

#### Macro Level: Deployable Agents as Social Capital

The problem as seen from the macro level is how to create agents of sufficient deployability to accomplish the goals in a collective agenda. The key here is that the agents must remain loyal when the chips are down. Membership turnover is inevitable, so the system must provide both for sanctioning and terminating wavering agents and for continually creating new ones. At the same time, the agents' enthusiasm for remaining deployable must be reinforced periodically.

This is not a trivial task. If the charismatic leader can never rest on his laurels in legitimating his authority, neither can the leader's agents be trusted to remain loyal through crisis  $n+1$  just because they have been trustworthy through crises 1 through  $n$ . When the Lone Ranger says, "It looks like we're completely

surrounded by Indians." Tonto replies, "What do you mean we, kemo sabbe?" One of the reasons that this old joke strikes us as funny is that it surprises us into recalling that an individual's control over his own actions is inalienable. Compliance can, at least in theory, be revoked at any moment, however long the history of fidelity.

There is a potentially destabilizing positive feedback loop built into charismatic systems. The charismatic leader or his organization must be capable of accomplishing extraordinary deeds. Otherwise, there is no basis for the heavy claims that charismatic influence makes on its agents. But one of the things that makes such accomplishments possible is a trustworthy corps of deployable agents. This corps allows the leader to accomplish deeds that appear even more miraculous, which, in turn, justify even greater claims on the followers, and so on. Once such a system is on a roll, it is possible that the system will remain in a fragile dynamic equilibrium, perpetuating itself through time. What is not so easy to explain is how such a system gets started and how it survives the inevitable setbacks that sooner or later must come its way. And, in fact, such systems are usually very unstable, but not always. One of the best and most detailed field reports of how a system like this can survive for many years before it eventually spins out of control is to be found in Carter's 1990 study of the followers of the Bhagwan Rajneesh.

A deployable agent is an agent who will continue to act as an agent of another in opposition to his own simple hedonic interests and in the absence of any controls. For some aspects of public policy, deployability is essential. But whom can the leader really trust? It is a lot easier to make a person into an agent than into a deployable agent. As Hechter (1987: 66) has pointed out:

The less visible the behavior, the less subject it is to subsequent modification: everyone knows that it is easier to toilet train children than to teach them not to lie. Finally, direct reinforcement is only suitable for those people who are already dependent on groups; independent souls have no incentive to submit themselves repeatedly to such discipline.

Direct reinforcement can evidently modify behavior, but how lasting are its effects? If individuals only responded to direct reinforcement, then every time they became subject to changing reinforcement schedules, their behavior would shift much as weather varies in a light breeze. But human behavior is much more stable than this image would suggest.

Why not create deployable agents by means other than charismatic influence? This is not impossible. Leaders, whether charismatic or not, need trustworthy lieutenants, some of whom must be deployable. In the absence of charismatic subjects, other candidates have been enlisted, including but not limited to the following: medicrines, ogres, and guest people. Of these, the first two have some obvious disadvantages. The leader wants in a deployable actor not only trustworthiness but also competence and some capacity to serve as a conduit of the leader's charisma. Although it has become the practice in the United States

for presidents to safeguard their tenure by appointing mediocre second-in-command, this can be done only because the vice president does not have important responsibilities other than succeeding the president. A mediocre General Schwarzkopf in the Persian Gulf War would have been more problematic. Ogres, on the other hand, may be quite competent, and their continuing loyalty may be assured by the hatred with which they are regarded by all except the charismatic leader. An ogre as lieutenant, however, is better at assuring that a movement against the leader doesn't get started than in aiding him once it has gotten started. Guest peoples (such as Jews in Christian nations) may be the most effective deployable agents other than charismatic true-believers. They cannot aspire to leadership themselves and, therefore, they can be reasonably competent and still be trusted with deployed authority. Their disadvantage, however, is that they can serve one charismatic leader just as well as another. It is difficult to imagine circumstances in which a charismatic leader can structure for himself a monopoly on the resources of toleration and privilege that can be offered to a guest people in exchange for their loyalty.

The nurturing of a steady supply of deployable agents is necessary and difficult, and requires continual monitoring. Of the numerous mechanisms used for this by charismatic leaders and their surrounding collectivities, I will mention just two here that seem to me particularly vital to the effort: ideological totalitarianism and charismatic ritual.

Ideological totalitarianism provides an efficient breeding ground for deployable agents. Its critical feature is the absence of external frames of reference with which to critically evaluate the outcomes of charismatic compliance (Zablocki, 1980a; Ofstie and Singer, 1986). Totalitarianism is not just a dysfunctional byproduct of rigid minds. It can be a rationally optimal way to structure beliefs to make charismatic compliance, once achieved, something close to an absorbing personal status. Distinguishing features of ideological totalitarianism are (1) an absence of even the smallest areas of personal privacy exempt from ideological evaluation; and (2) an absence of peccadillos, such that every sin becomes a cardinal sin. These features, while at first sight bizarre, serve a clear function in reducing defections among deployable agents.

Charismatic rituals serve as dress rehearsals for crises of charismatic legitimacy. They create the habit of deployability. The charismatic revelations reported by Victor Turner (1969) as a manifestation of the "power of the weak" serve such a function. The elimination of status differentials during what Turner calls liminal states can be seen here to serve a not entirely obvious function. I would argue that what is most important about the liminal state is its ending. By establishing pathways for the return of charismatic authority during times when agents have little motivation to defect, a habit of not defecting is formed that can be useful when the collectivity's survival is actually threatened.

### Micro Level: The Rationality of Charismatic Compliance

We turn now to the perspective of the agent. Let us assume that the collectivity wishes the agent to become deployable and the agent shares that desire. The agent's internal constitution is the postulated vehicle for training the agent in deployability. At minimum, an internal constitution allows an actor to precommit to a future preference ordering by locking in current preferences. But weakness of will (Charleton, 1989) makes such simple precommitment problematic. How does either the collectivity or the agent know that despite all sincere current intentions, the spy pilot will not surrender to the enemy rather than commit suicide as specified in his instructions? Clearly, effective charismatic influence involves something more than simply evoking a pledge of commitment at time zero.

*Incentives for Compliance.* Is there an innate human need to escape the boundaries of the self? According to Lindholm (1990), there is such a need, and it is necessary to explain the phenomenon of charismatic influence. Coleman (1990) on the other hand, suggests that charisma can be explained as rational response to disjunctive preferences in the presence of a need for collective decisionmaking and does not require the assumption of such a transcendent need. These two threads are not mutually exclusive. The first directs our attention to intrinsic incentives for charismatic compliance, the latter, to extrinsic incentives. The question is whether either can serve as a sufficient incentive in the absence of the other. Coleman's discussion of what he calls affine identification (1990: 164) partially reconciles these two perspectives on charismatic influence but does not answer the question of whether both intrinsic and extrinsic incentives are always needed. In this chapter, I shall treat this problem as unsolved.

*Mechanisms of Compliance.* Let us turn now to a discussion of how the follower may become a deployable agent, given a desire to do so. It seems reasonable to start with the assumption that something gets rearranged inside the individual when he becomes a deployable agent. I would argue that what gets rearranged are beliefs. If we assume that a person acts in accordance with his internal constitution, we need to look at the way beliefs function in shaping these constitutions.

Let us assume that the mechanism for precommitment is the development of certain kinds of beliefs. Beliefs can be divided into two categories serving different functions: (1) testable beliefs that serve an obvious social reality function; and (2) distal beliefs (Abelson, 1986: 229) that cannot be tested and seem to serve no obvious function. Nevertheless, distal beliefs are held by pretty much everyone, so there must be some obscure function that they serve. Let us limit our concern to those beliefs that can be classified as distal (not ordinarily subject to empirical verification). From this point on, I will use the term *convictions* to refer to strongly held distal beliefs.

There exists some biological evidence for the universality of convictions. Gazzaniga (1985) sees convictions as neurologically inevitable byproducts of the division of labor within the brain. The left brain interpreter working with various right brain behavior modules imposes consistency on them through mechanism of belief formation. He further argues for the neurological inevitability of the cognitive dissonance internal control mechanism (Festinger, 1957). He cites evidence from temporal lobe epilepsy (Geschwind, 1977) that a brain injury can cause a deepening of religious conviction: "the brain lesion frees the patients from their personal histories and prepares them for any set of beliefs" (Gazzaniga, 1985: 167) by preventing even the low level testing of the consequences of our convictions that is ordinarily a right brain function. The individual can be rapidly convinced of a changing flow of beliefs that are accepted uncritically.

In the normal person, there is some evidence that convictions, once developed, are perceived as valued possessions. There are, in other words, costs (possibly substantial) to the actor in giving them up. People tend to defend their convictions even against highly reasonable attacks. Coleman (1957) has shown how direct attacks on beliefs polarize communities. Greenwald (1968) has shown that there is a low correlation between recollection of the rational arguments used in persuasion and the degree to which one is persuaded.<sup>1</sup>

Abelson (1986: 230) offers linguistic evidence that convictions are treated as possessions more than as ways of testing reality:

For the *obtaining* aspect, there are expressions such as "to acquire a belief," "to inherit the view," and so on, as though beliefs were things that figured in some sort of social or physical transfer process. For the *keeping* aspect, one commonly encounters the wording that someone "holds onto a belief." Reference is made to *valuing* by such expressions as "to cherish a belief" and "I'm reappraising my position." The *losing* aspect is rich in metaphorical phrasings, including "to lose your belief in . . ." "to abandon your belief," "to surrender your principles . . ."

Abelson (1988) presents evidence that convictions are developed along three dimensions: (1) emotional commitment (behavioral intention loads on this factor), (2) ego preoccupation, and (3) cognitive elaboration. Many people have partial convictions, loading high on just one or two of these dimensions (Abelson, 1988: 273, 274). But in the charismatic agent there is fusion: all three loadings are typically very high.

Based on the above considerations, we can postulate that a simple internal constitution consists of the following: a fluid substrate of hedonic preferences; a mantle of more rigid preferences locked in via convictions; will power as the inner agent that supports convictions when they oppose hedonic interests. However, a more complex (and probably more realistic) model of the internal constitution makes room also for ego defenses—stress-induced reactions to anything that threatens convictions and will power. Ego defenses, like

convictions, are virtually universal but functionally useless to individuals who are willing to constantly modify their convictions, rationally, in the light of new evidence.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to say much more about the function of ego defenses in the rational person other than that they constitute a second line of defense for dealing with the stress between inner constitution and proximate desire. However, I want to make the point that a fuller understanding of ego defenses, their role in the inner constitution of the individual, and their function in bolstering precommitment will be essential for improving our understanding of how charismatic influence operates.

The most promising direction for this is provided by Swanson (1988), who shows the correlation of types of ego defense with social position. Swanson sees ego defenses as mechanisms of self-justification. In the terms we have been using, they are ways of reconciling conflicts between precommitted forms of action and primary preferred action (at the given moment). Swanson presents research findings to suggest that both social status and complexity of social organization are statistically associated with specific types of ego defenses.

As a point of reference, Swanson's eleven basic ego defenses are listed here without further elaboration: (1) *Personal Interdependence* stage: indecisiveness, regression; (2) *Social Interdependence* stage: repression, simple reaction formation, denial; (3) *Charismatic organization* stage: displacement; (4) *Firm* (or task oriented collectivity) stage: projection, rationalization, isolation; (5) *Constitutional order* stage: intellectualization, complex reaction formation.

Swanson (1988: 159) argues the inevitability of ego defenses as well as their rationality:

I also proposed that individuals will always find it necessary to use some defenses because they will never find themselves completely at one in any social relationship. They will always have reason to want to get more from the relationship than it offers or to contribute less to it. They will always have desires that can be met through other and competitive relationships. Defenses will therefore be an inevitable and ubiquitous part of people's participation in social life. . . . These arguments . . . suggest that defenses are aspects of the individual's activity as a social participant—as a self or person—and that they therefore are a form of self process. . . . [T]he arguments imply that defenses must meet at least some of the ordinary criteria of evidence and logic if they are to be successful as justifications that seem satisfactory and "true" to the defender as well as to other people.

In summary, we have postulated that charismatic influence works by amending the internal constitutions of the followers in such a way as to make them deployable agents. But, in what way it amends the constitutions is still unclear. Three models have emerged from the study of totalist religious communities. We next examine these models in an attempt to see whether we are proceeding in a direction compatible with empirical observation.

## MODELS OF CHARISMATIC INFLUENCE

In this section, I attempt to link the theoretical ideas developed so far to empirical generalizations gained from the observation of totalist religious communities. First I shall describe a pattern of behaviors that has been repeatedly observed. This pattern is considered somewhat out of the ordinary and requiring explanation. There is, however, approximate consensus at the level of the descriptions of behavioral events.

Next, a set of competing models are advanced to explain this pattern of behaviors. These models involve the attribution of beliefs, attitudes, and motives as well as judgments concerning meanings of group phenomena and the veracity of individual reports, none of which are directly observable. Unlike the observations of behavior, there is no consensus with respect to the applicability of one or another of these models.

Let us start by asking what behavioral facts need to be explained? These behavioral facts comprise a sequence of events often spread over a number of years. This visible and relatively unambiguous sequence consists of four steps: (1) *affiliation*, (2) *lifestyle modification*, (3) *disaffiliation*, and (4) *disenchantment*. People are observed to affiliate with certain groups. Affiliation is soon followed by a sharp and sudden rejection of prior roles and relationships and a substitution of new roles and relationships prescribed by the group. This rejection is manifested by a dramatic lifestyle modification that many people outside the cult label as deviant. Persons may stay affiliated with such groups for varying lengths of time ranging from an entire lifetime to less than 24 hours. After a while (for some but not all) disaffiliation from the group occurs. Disaffiliation can be: (1) *voluntary*, (2) *forced by the group* (expulsion), or (3) *forced by outside agents* (abduction). Among those that disaffiliate, a certain percentage eventually begin to complain that actions taken while associated with the group have come to be perceived as ego-dystonic (i.e., highly alien to the person's own current values as well as to the values held prior to affiliation as they are now recollected).<sup>2</sup> Without making any value judgments as to the veracity of these complaints, let us refer to this step in the behavioral process as disenchantment. It should be noted that such disenchantment in some cases comes prior to rather than after disaffiliation.

A fair degree of consensus (Lofland, 1966; Richardson, 1978; Zablocki, 1980b; Bromley, 1981; Barker, 1984; Galanter, 1989) exists at this level of behavioral description. Let us assume, therefore, that this constitutes a fair description of the behavioral phenomena that need to be explained. Let us next turn to three types of models that have been advanced to explain this above sequence of behaviors.

### Seekerhip and Apostasy: Charismatic Influence as Persuasion Constrained by Fixed Internal Constitutions

First, let us consider a model that tries to account for the above behavioral observations with a model of charismatic influence that looks at the amendment of the internal constitution as the superimposition of a new set of convictions on top of an old one that remains more or less intact. This model does not require the assumption that old convictions are changed, but only that they are suspended in favor of a new set adopted uncritically. At the other end of the temporal process, this set of convictions can later be discarded with little effect upon the original internal constitution that had remained dormant beneath it.

Although I have called this the seekerhip/apostasy model, I do not mean to imply that conversion to the cult perspective is always superficial or that eventual apostasy is predicted inevitably by this model. Although the cultic internal constitution is conceived of here as an overlay, it may be the most significant and valued part of the person's life and it will turn out, in some instances, to be permanent. The critical difference is that the cult overlay rests upon the foundation of a fully functional intact preconversion self. The implications of this are important for deployability. In this model, a level of independence always awaits, at least in potential. Deployability, therefore, always remains conditional upon continuing cult affiliation. Deployability and cult affiliation may be so intrinsically linked that defection from one is inconceivable for the actor without defection from the other. But this model predicts that great emphasis will be placed on maintaining rewarding and absorbing social networks and other payoffs for continuing membership in the collectivity.

At certain points in the life course, most notably during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, some individuals need to experiment with radically new sets of attitudes and behavioral roles. Often the need is to commit to these allegiances intensely and absolutely. These experiments are almost always short-lived and have few consequences for later life. There may also be behavioral role playing (even of the most fanatical and externally convincing sort) without any inner conviction. The seekerhip/apostasy model predicts that many young people will affiliate with cults based on no great commitment, and that they will be able to stay loosely bonded and disaffiliate when it suits them, with relative ease.

These individuals are known as seekers. Seekers have measurable characteristics that distinguish them from the larger population. They find cults and join them as part of their search for something that the dominant culture does not offer. Some stay, and others move on to further episodes in their seekerhip careers. Still others outgrow seekerhip.

The Lofland and Stark (1965) model of conversion is probably the most influential of this genre. It describes a process that develops over time in

specific stages. It emphasizes the decisions and activities of the individual convert rather than any possible manipulative activities of the cult. Lofland and Stark divide the process into three predisposing steps followed by four situational steps. The predisposing steps are the following: (1) feelings of tension or deprivation of some duration; (2) development of a problem-solving strategy within a religious perspective; (3) definition of oneself as a seeker after religious truth. The situational steps are the following: (1) a sudden opportunity to abandon an old way of life and embrace an entirely new one; (2) development of intense emotional bonds between the individual and the other cult members; (3) atrophy of relationships with nonmembers; and (4) intense communal involvement in a totalistic social structure.

How does the seekerhip/apostasy model account for disenchantment? When individuals leave an organization to which they have been totally committed, there is sometimes a psychological need to completely disavow, perhaps even take vengeance upon, this organization. The kind of apostasy that we must be concerned with here falls into two distinct categories: (1) Apostasy at the behest of family emmeshment: Total disavowal of the offending group may be a requirement for full reacceptance into the family of origin. Under such circumstances, a mutual agreement on a fiction that the former cult member was coerced, exploited, or brainwashed might be the path of least resistance for all concerned, and (2) Apostasy in the service of personal revenge and/or greed: Feigned distress is always a possibility in civil suits. It is undeniable that, if large monetary rewards are to be gained by suing cults, individuals may be motivated to manufacture grievances against these cults.

### Brainwashing: Charismatic Influence as Persuasion That Reprograms Internal Constitutions

The brainwashing model looks upon the amendment of the internal constitution as a fundamental restructuring rather than as an overlay. It need not be deceptive or involuntary. A rational individual intent on maximizing the social capital available to his cause may say to the charismatic leader (although probably not in these words), "Here I am. Come brainwash me." For the individual in a state of auto-machia, who can echo the plaint of St. Paul (Romans 7:15) that, "The good I would do, I do not; the evil that I would not, that I do," such a tactic may come to be seen as the only available rational choice.

Brainwashing<sup>3</sup> explains the lifestyle modifications of a cult participant as the behavioral result of an intensely focused and highly structured process of manipulative influence. The influencing agent is a cohesive normative group (often although not always communal in organization) acting at the behest of a charismatic leader. The target of influence is always an isolated individual, frequently an adolescent or young adult.

Some people may be more susceptible to brainwashing than others (and a

given person may be more susceptible at certain times of life than others). However, the brainwashing model does not focus primarily on initial characteristics of the subject. The assumption is that many different kinds of people can, with enough effort, be brainwashed. Attention is therefore focused on the charismatic leader and the manipulative group.

Although the individual often participates enthusiastically in the process, what makes brainwashing work is a strenuous and costly environmental management program used by the group to bring the individual through three hypothesized stages of resocialization: (1) the stripping process, (2) identification with the aggressor (Kuleshnyk, 1984), and (3) symbolic death-rebirth.<sup>5</sup> The following is a list of the subprocesses<sup>6</sup> involved in each of these stages: (1) the stripping process (assault upon identity, establishment of guilt, self-betrayal, the breaking point); (2) identification with the aggressor (leniency and opportunity, compulsion to confess, channelling of guilt, reeducation, progress, and harmony); (3) death and rebirth of the self: (final confession, symbolic rebirth).

Lifton (1989) has argued that throughout these stages resocialization is energized primarily by the constant fluctuation between assault and leniency and the unending process of confession, reeducation, and refinement of confession. In addition to these, it is likely that there is a third driving force behind the brainwashing process that was not identified by Lifton or Schein. This may be called progressive desensitization by ritualized rehearsal. Perhaps this may be thought of as a more recent refinement of the brainwashing process. Its advantages were demonstrated by Charles Manson (Bugliosi and Gentry, 1974) and Jim Jones (Weighman, 1983) to overcome the inhibitions of cult members against committing murder and suicide. Although the exact order of stages and substages may vary from group to group, we should always expect to see these features, or their functional equivalents, in any brainwashing system.

Let us turn our attention briefly from the individual who is being brainwashed to the group that is doing the brainwashing. The brainwashing model posits a complex and costly manipulative system that can take subjects through the three stages culminating in symbolic death and rebirth of the self. The manipulative system (Lifton, 1989) in its fullest manifestation exhibits all eight of the following characteristics:

1. Close to absolute control over all legitimate channels of communication both within the group and between the group and outsiders.
2. Attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral manipulation of the subject, no matter how extreme or devious, legitimized by the overriding value and importance of the group's goals.
3. A demand for absolute purity in the individual's motivation such that

even the slightest intimation of ambivalence or rebellion is considered a serious and critical problem.

4. Personal confessions continually demanded. Each confession is then judged to be inadequate in some way and new and more complete confessions are required.

5. Ideology presented as a closed system, perfect and consistent in every way.

6. The spoken and written language loaded with thought-terminating clichés and memorized formulas, which function to make sustained analytic thought and/or rational debate impossible on certain core topics.

7. Efforts made to eliminate personal human idiosyncrasies that do not fit doctrinally prescribed role expectations.

8. Dividing people into insiders and outsiders with only insiders having worth as people and the right to exist.

It is not necessary to have every one of these eight mechanisms in place to have brainwashing. In fact, these structural characteristics define not a process, but a totalistic social structure. The presence of a totalistic social structure is a necessary but not sufficient condition for brainwashing to occur. However, the closer a group comes to a system of social control characterized by these eight structural elements, the more likely, according to this model, that the brainwashing process will be found.

To summarize, brainwashing is conceived as a process of fundamental restructuring of an individual's internal constitution leading to adaptation of a new lifestyle supported by a new and internally consistent view of the world. This modification is brought about by a manipulative process featuring the alternation of psychological assault and leniency over a prolonged period; periodic cycles of confession, rejection of confession, and reconcession; and ritualized rehearsals of taboo activities meant to desensitize the subject to their actual importance. These modifications are brought about within the context of a totalistic social system. The process takes the subject through three sequential stages: (1) the stripping process, in which old preference and value structures are removed; (2) identification, in which the subject attempts to become as much like the other cult members as possible; and (3) symbolic death and rebirth, in which the subject internalizes the new structure of preferences and values.

The brainwashing model does not claim that subjects are robbed of their free will. Free will is a philosophical concept that has no place in scientific theory building. Neither the presence nor the absence of free will can ever be proved

or disproved. The brainwashing model does imply that resocialization remaps the preferences of the subject so that the subject voluntarily chooses to do what the cult wants him to do. It does not argue that choice is eliminated, but rather that the preference structure on which choice is based is manipulated. The brainwashed individual remains capable of rational choice and action, but under a transformed substrate of convictions that yield preferences remapped to conform to the collective ideology. The brainwashing model is consistent with the assumption that cult members make choices that are rational in the context of their newly transformed preferences.<sup>7</sup>

#### Snapping: Charismatic Influence as Persuasion That Destroys the Old and Substitutes a New Inner Constitution

The snapping model looks upon the amendment of the internal constitution as a revolutionary process. In this most extreme of the three models we are examining, the old self is obliterated and permanently replaced with a new one. In this model, the religious metaphor of death and rebirth is taken almost literally. Although an individual can still withdraw from the cult, there is no going back to anything resembling preconversion identity. The labels "zombie theory" or "robot theory" that have often been applied to the brainwashing model are more appropriately used in connection with the snapping model.

This is the weakest of the types of models proposed both because it has not been the target of a program of careful research and because it requires the assumption of widespread pathology. I'm including it because it has been offered to explain the cult phenomenon and because it has often been confused with the brainwashing model, although it is quite different in terms of both the resocialization mechanisms that it hypothesizes and its predicted results. At this point, the supporting evidence, for the snapping model is weak.

According to Conway and Siegelman (1978), the originators of the snapping model, the human mind is limited in its ability to process information. A combination of information overload and stress puts the subject's mind into an inflexibly malleable state. In such a state, the mind snaps and can then be imprinted with the designs of cult leaders. A new set of convictions and defenses is placed directly over the hedonic foundation of the mind since prior socialized convictions have been obliterated. Minds in this condition are vulnerable to any influences, and almost anyone, according to this model, is potentially vulnerable to this type of rapid imprinting. Individuals, even those with no prior interest in cults, so treated, become totally deployable agents of the cult leaders. This condition will often be permanent unless there is a forcible intercession (e.g., deprogramming). Even deprogramming, according to the snapping model, is more aptly pictured as rehabilitative reprogramming. Since no preconversion internal constitution survives the snapping process, the objective of deprogramming must be to construct a new set of convictions and

defenses for the "patient," hopefully a more adaptive and less exploitive set.

The major distinguishing prediction of the snapping model is that there will be widespread mental illness (especially dissociative disorders) among former deployable agents of cults. The evidence on this point has been mixed. Eleniad (1979) finds persuasive evidence of permanent impairment of cognitive functioning within a clinical sample of former religious cult members. On the other hand, Ungerleider and Wellisch (1979), working with a much larger and more representative sample—a cross-section of all cult participants and former participants—has found no evidence of any significant impairment. Recently, researchers such as Zeitlin (1985) have attempted to link snapping with concepts derived from the study of hypnosis.

#### Comparison of the Models

These three models of charismatic influence in cults are not entirely mutually exclusive. In fact, there are circumstances under which each of them may have some validity. One can imagine a cult for which the seekerhip/apostasy model approximates the experience of the majority of the members, the brainwashing model approximates the experience of the subgroup of deployable agents and candidates for deployable agency, and the snapping model approximates the experience of the members of a psychologically impaired subpopulation.

The seekerhip/apostasy model is the most parsimonious. It is also most consistent with the way cults themselves explain their socialization practices and membership turnover. However, it does not account well for many of the costly mechanisms of resocialization (both for cult and recruit) that are typically found in religious cults.

The brainwashing model is the model that is most consistent with retrospective accounts of ex-members of cults to the extent that they can be believed. It has the advantage of accounting for the remarkable parallels between the resocialization systems found in cults and those found in coercive indoctrination centers. But the brainwashing model is also the most controversial and misinterpreted. It may need a new vocabulary, because even the term *brainwashing* is so highly cathected for many people that disinterested research and scholarly dialogue becomes problematic.

The snapping model is the most radical. Research in this area has been the least rigorous. However, the snapping model makes one big hard-to-swallow assumption: that inner structures of convictions and ego defenses can be erased by an external program and replaced by a new external program. The need for this somewhat implausible assumption makes this model the least parsimonious of the three. But, to the extent that evidence accumulates in the future causing us to become increasingly convinced of the plausibility of this assumption, the

snapping model would immediately become the most parsimonious of the three. Ariceli (1975) has suggested, based on his clinical work with cult members and ex-members, that schizophrenics form a unique subpopulation of cult recruits and that this subpopulation may best be explained by the snapping model, whether or not it is plausible for the larger population.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that charismatic influence does not lie wholly outside the realm of rational choice theory. The maintenance of even a very costly structure for charismatic influence can be rational for a leader and/or a collectivity because of the vast increase in social capital that it engenders. However, charismatic compliance is never in the interest of a competent individual conceived as a simple hedonic actor. Therefore, charismatic influence can be viewed as rational for the agent of a charismatic leader only to the extent that we are willing to postulate a self driven in large part by internal convictions.

Models of individual choice embodying these more complex internal structures are compatible with charismatic compliance. Such complex structures, called by Coleman (1990) internal constitutions, must at minimum provide for the possibility of precommitment to future actions based on current preferences.

In this chapter, we have assumed the existence of one such structure, based upon the universality of convictions and the development of ego defenses to protect the interests of these convictions when they are opposed to simple hedonic preferences.

We have seen that this postulated structure is compatible with several models of charismatic influence. Further research is necessary to determine how charismatic influence acts upon the inner constitutions of members, whether by overlay, or by modification, or by erasure and replacement, or by a combination of these mechanisms.

## NOTES

1. Academics, however, may be exceptions to the general rule, by training treating convictions more like pieces in a puzzle than as valued possessions.
2. For example, a mother who had, at the prompting of a cult's leadership, beaten her three-month-old child almost to death to rid her of the devil's influence said the following: "I can't understand how I could have done it. It's just not like me. It's completely foreign to my nature. And it's not how I was raised either. . . . But, when I was there, it was different."
3. Throughout this essay, I use the term *brainwashing* to describe a process that has gone by many names in the scientific and popular literature. This process has been called thought reform (Lifton, 1989), menticide (Meertoo, 1956), coercive persuasion (Schein,

1961), mind rape (Meertoo, 1956), and debility, dependency, and dread (Farber, Harlow, and West, 1957). Singer (1987) has preferred to use the longer phrase: systematic manipulation of psychological and social influence. All of these terms are roughly synonymous. I have chosen to use *brainwashing* because it has the widest public recognition. It may also be the most misunderstood of all these terms, but I see that as an advantage, since using the term impels us to face these misunderstandings head-on instead of avoiding them with linguistic work-arounds.

4. Even when a closely bonded married couple joins a cult as a family, the brainwashing process, at some point, separates the two people, psychologically if not always physically.

5. The terms used here are my own (Zablocki, 1980a) modifications of Lifton's (1989), but terminology is not standardized in this field and other terms have been used. For example, Schein (1961: 111-139) prefers the terms *wrangling, change, and reframing* to refer to the same phenomena.

6. For a fuller discussion of each of these stages, see the lengthy accounts in Lifton (1989) and Zablocki (1980a).

7. A misconception about brainwashing results from a confusion between the efficiency of brainwashing and the efficacy of brainwashing. Barker (1984), and others have argued that, since very few cult prospects become long-term cult members, the socialization process is not irresistible and therefore is not brainwashing. But nothing in the brainwashing model predicts that it will work on everybody. In fact, the efficiency of brainwashing, operationalizable as the expected yield of deployable agents per 100 cult recruits, is a discoverable parameter of any particular brainwashing system and may often be quite low. For the system to perpetuate itself, the yield need only produce enough value for the system to compensate it for the resources required to maintain the brainwashing process.

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