

## Dark Persuasion

A history of brainwashing from Pavlov to social media

Joel Dimsdale

July 2014, £16.99, 300pp

ISBN 978-1-107-03003-7

Two stories. First: on 18 November, 1978, 914 members of the Peoples Temple died, as instructed by their self-anointed Messiah, Rev Jim Jones, in what he described as an act of "revolutionary suicide". Some drank the cyanide-laced fruit punch made up by the community's doctor; others were injected with the cocktail by their fellow devotees.

It's all recorded on tape: their screams of joy, despair and pain can be heard above the hymns played on the organ and the maniacal exhortations of Jones. "I am freedom," he had told them earlier. "I am peace. I am justice... I am God." They evidently believed him.

Second: an analysis of 125,000 Twitter news stories showed that false news spread faster and wider than true stories. Why? Because false news, with its novel, sensational claims, was more titillating than the truth. That might not be worrying if people were merely titillated. But they're not. They're convinced. Studies have repeatedly shown that between 50 and 75 per cent of US adults regard fake news headlines as credible.

We are pathetically malleable. *Dark Persuasion* is a brilliant, highly readable account of that malleability. It's essential reading for any would-be dictator or advertising executive, and anyone who wants to confound them. Do you think that you have an inalienable core, inaccessible to torture, allurement, sleep deprivation, drugs or demagoguery? Joel Dimsdale may make you think again. He might leave you despairing, politically queasy or determined to smash your smart phone. He certainly won't leave you unmoved.

Dimsdale leads us conversationally through the history of mind-manipulation, from torture to tweets. Torture is very good at getting people to talk, but very bad at getting them to tell the truth, and even worse at producing real change. The scientific

study of methods that elicit the truth and effect lasting change began, of course, with Pavlov. His premise was dogmatically materialist: you are your brain, and brains can be changed. Conditioned reflexes can override unconditioned reflexes; old memories replaced with whatever an adroit manipulator chooses to insert.

And so the dark tradition began: Stalin's show trials, in which transparently false confessions led to execution; the development of "truth drugs"; attempts by aggressive regimes to produce true disciples and attempts by the opponents of those regimes to frustrate them; "Stockholm Syndrome", where hostages come to adore their captors and fear their rescuers; the suicide (or is it really murder?) of religious devotees; the seismic power of peer pressure and our compulsion to imitate, and their cynical recruitment by social media.

BG Wells wrote that "human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe". There's little comfort in Dimsdale's book, but there's a good deal of prophylactic education.

My main hope – not, it seems, shared by Dimsdale – lies in a systematic contradiction of Pavlov's premise.

Charles Foster

★★★★★

