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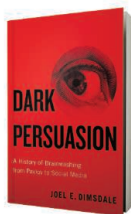
# The matter of mind control

Brainwashing case studies illuminate the history of coercive persuasion

By Sarah Marks

In 1976, Patty Hearst, the granddaughter of American publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, was found guilty of bank robbery, a crime she committed after enduring a sustained period of time as a captive of the domestic terrorist organization known as the Symbionese Liberation Army. The trial, with its glittering cast of expert witnesses, became a test case for psychological theories of brainwashing.

In addition to commenting on Hearst's intelligence and differentiating her behavior from those typically displayed by malingerers, the experts invoked the experiences of US prisoners of war (POWs) in Korea and the concept of "debility, dependency, and dread" to explain how Hearst, in their view, was not acting of her own free will when she committed the robbery. Instead, they argued, she was in thrall to the coercive persuasion of her captors.



**Dark Persuasion**  
Joel E. Dimsdale  
Yale University  
Press, 2021. 304 pp.

The jury was unconvinced and sentenced Hearst to 35 years in prison. However, President Jimmy Carter found the arguments persuasive and commuted her sentence after 22 months, and President Bill Clinton pardoned Hearst in 2001. This trial, and the debates surrounding it, is one of 10 key moments in the history of the idea of brainwashing examined by psychiatrist Joel E. Dimsdale in his new book, *Dark Persuasion*.

A tragedy close to home inspired Dimsdale to dive deeply into this topic. In 1997, as the comet Hale-Bopp approached, his neighbors committed suicide at the instructions of the leaders of the Heaven's Gate cult, who were convinced that death was necessary to free members of their "bodily vehicles" and allow them to ascend to heaven.

The word "brainwashing" was coined in the early years of the Cold War by journalist Edward Hunter to describe reeducation techniques used for indoctrination in Communist China and was subsequently invoked to make sense of the defection of 21 American POWs to China after the Korean War. Elements of brainwashing can be

Heiress Patty Hearst is escorted to court by two federal marshals in 1976.

traced back much further to techniques used in religious conversion and inquisition, but the fear unleashed by the provocative term precipitated the Central Intelligence Agency's infamous MKUltra experiments, which made use of the hallucinogen LSD, sensory deprivation, and electroconvulsive therapy during interrogations to coerce confessions and reached their bleak crescendo with a series of highly abusive experiments carried out on psychiatric patients by McGill University psychiatrist Donald Ewen Cameron between 1957 and 1964.

The book avoids making sweeping claims about the nature of brainwashing, but after a chronological assessment of each case study, Dimsdale presents a comparative table of the key features at play, including techniques such as sleep manipulation, coercion and manipulation, intentional surreptitiousness, and participation in activities not in the subject's best interests. That some combination of these are present in varying degrees in all of the cases cited suggests that Dimsdale sees them as necessary and sufficient criteria for describing brainwashing with some degree of certainty. Some of the 21st-century examples he discusses briefly in the book's last section, including controversies surrounding deep brain stimulation and the rise of social media platforms and conspiracy theories, do not quite fit these criteria, however.

While there is novelty in the synthesis of these case studies, *Dark Persuasion* does not offer much new material, and Dimsdale has not unearthed any substantial unexpected archival finds or generated new oral histories. However, his account of the Hearst trial is carefully researched and supplemented with a wealth of scientific papers from the time. And while the causal link he suggests between Pavlov's experiments with traumatized dogs and the interrogation and torture processes that led to false confessions in Stalin's show trials is based on slender evidence, Dimsdale's observations about the proximity of these events are nevertheless astute.

But historical rigor is not necessarily the point of this highly readable and compelling book. Dimsdale's goal is to prompt reflection on what he sees as the overlooked reality of coercive persuasion at a broader level and the ever-present threat that it poses to individuals and to society at large—a threat, he warns, that is becoming ever-amplified by new technologies and mass media. In this aim, he succeeds admirably. ■

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# Science

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