Why Are We So Fascinated by Cults?

Two new books use divergent styles to look at mind control, brainwashing and the outer limits of influence.

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Jim Jones and other cult leaders are an endless source of lurid fascination to our society. But we still don't fully understand why people are drawn to them.

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THE INSTABILITY OF TRUTH: Brainwashing, Mind Control and Hyper-Persuasion, by Rebecca Lemov

BLAZING EYE SEES ALL: Love Has Won, False Prophets and the Fever Dream of the American New Age, by Leah Sottile

On the television drama "Severance," a sleek dystopian mood piece patently designed for Our Times, employees of a nebulous corporation volunteer to have their home and office selves psychically partitioned. A brain implant allows "outies" to go on with the business of being a person in the world, blissfully ignorant of the classified work their "innies" do in a bland, windowless facility five days a week, and vice versa.

In the actual, unsevered universe we still live in, dissociation is not yet an elective outpatient surgery and mind control retains its status as a societal boogeyman, the stuff of Manchurian candidates and prison camps, death cults and Kool-Aid.

That consciousness can be so pliable and vulnerable, so susceptible to outside forces as to turn itself against logic or values, is a proven bug in the human operating system. The hows and whys of it remain less understood, despite decades of anecdotal evidence and exploration.

Not that a legion of medical professionals, research scientists and salacious limited streaming series haven't tried. The subject has also spurred a robust literary genre, to which two engaging if imperfect entries can now be added: "The Instability of Truth," by the Harvard historian of science Rebecca Lemov, and "Blazing Eye Sees All," by Leah Sottile, a podcaster and freelance journalist for outlets including Rolling Stone and The New York Times Magazine.

Taken together, the books have a bit of a Goldilocks problem: Lemov's is thoughtful, well supported and perhaps unavoidably academic. Sottile's is easily the more accessible effort, full of wild anecdotes about lost continents and blue-skinned gurus; it can also be heedlessly loosey-goosey, light on corroborating facts and critical distance from its troubled subjects.

"The Instability of Truth" is set up not unlike a syllabus, beginning with American P.O.W.s in the Korean War and moving through notable case studies like Patty Hearst, the C.I.A.'s MK-ULTRA program, Facebook-feed algorithms and the rise of so-called crypto cults. A recurrent theme is public shame: The war veterans who converted to Communism were dubbed weak, amoral and unpatriotic; headlines positioned Hearst as a rich girl dabbling in radical chic, playacting revolution for kicks.

That many of the P.O.W.s were beaten and starved and then fed a careful, relentless regimen of propaganda and coercive persuasion, or that Hearst was locked in a closet for 59 days and repeatedly raped, often did not rate mention in the accounts of their offenses. The consensus seemed to be that they had been given autonomy over their own minds and bodies, and failed miserably.

To be fair, Lemov points out, the public and even dedicated specialists initially lacked the vocabulary that might have softened those judgments. Trauma as a causal root was still years away from mainstream currency, and deprogramming efforts proved both medically and legally murky, full of their share of pitfalls and charlatans.

Though she offers vivid snapshots of individual cases and often interjects her own experiences in chatty, personable ways, Lemov's detailed analyses can read as somewhat weedy and dense for a layperson. Sottile, in contrast, wastes little time dangling the sensational Smurf-tinted bait in "Blazing Eye Sees All": a Kansas-born mother of three and former McDonald's manager named Amy Carlson who came to call herself Mother God.

Carlson claimed to be a 27,000-year-old refugee from the apocryphal land of Lemuria, subsequently reincarnated as Jesus, Cleopatra, Joan of Arc and Marilyn Monroe (among others) on her path to set humanity free. She also drank so much

colloidal silver — a popular New Age cure-all — that her skin took on the dusky hue of an unrinsed blueberry.

Mother God's belief system was an often incomprehensible mishmash of self-aggrandizing fantasy, conspiracy and light antisemitism; still, it spoke to an increasingly large audience of seekers and lost souls who were promised that her glorious ascent to a fifth dimension was imminent. (Viewers of the 2023 HBO docuseries "Love Has Won" may know exactly how soon.)

As Sottile recounts it, Carlson's story was part of a long lineage — or more of a matrilineage, from the proto-spiritualist Fox sisters, who in the mid-1800s used snaps and séances to reach the other side, to 20th-century mediums like the former prom queen J.Z. Knight, who channeled the stentorian spirit of an ancient warrior named Ramtha.

Many of these self-styled sages claimed deep connections to "lost" civilizations and espoused elaborate mythologies that touted specialized diets, supplements, "angel numbers" and high-vibration colorways. A lot of them also enthusiastically embraced the material perks that their followers' fervent financial support provided, even as they grew increasingly paranoid and isolated from their flocks.

More than once, Sottile floats the idea that New Age practices gave women voice and agency in a world where that is hard to find. It's a thought worth exploring, though one that also seems to let some uniquely harmful people off the hook: religious chicanery, the great feminist equalizer!

A penchant for elisions and overbroad statements ("No one wants to be a God. Not really," Sottile asserts at one point, after having spent some 250 pages methodically proving otherwise) also tends to mar an otherwise compelling and colorful read. The entertainment value is evident; the aftertaste is queasy and a little sad.

Where both writers find consensus — other than the loony historical footnote of the former first lady Nancy Reagan's outsize fixation on astrology — is the essential humanity of their subjects, many of whom it would be too easy to put at a disparaging distance.

On "Severance," the show's split characters eventually begin to uncover the more sinister aims of their supposedly benevolent employer, a mega-corporation whose arcane codes and credos hint at its own cultish leanings. The cognitive dissonance of that will surely be resolved, give or take a season, by some canny mix of science and screenwriting. But no one outside a TV show wakes up and says, "I'd like to lose my mind today." There are many ways to detach from perceived reality or even basic good sense, whether it's the Manson Family or a peer-to-peer marketing scheme that sells brightly patterned leggings, and not a lot of proven methods to get it back.

The brain is a soft black box whose ideologies regularly tip toward extremes: Look no further than the diverse demographics of those who have come to furiously reject vaccines. (Hence the memorable designation of some of the fringier elements of New Age conspiracy as "pastel QAnon.") Then again, maybe even the most passionate of those true believers will change their minds; it happens all the time.

THE INSTABILITY OF TRUTH: **Brainwashing, Mind Control and Hyper-Persuasion** | By Rebecca Lemov | Norton | 464 pp. | $32.99

BLAZING EYE SEES ALL: **Love Has Won, False Prophets and the Fever Dream of the American New Age** | By Leah Sottile | Grand Central | 296 pp. | $30

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