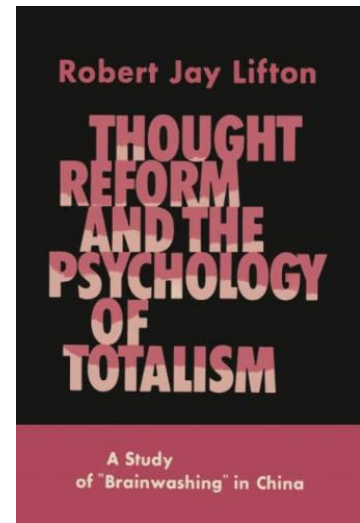


“A Gripping Study of Brainwashing – a Real Classic”

A Review (2-2023) by Dick Burkhardt of
“Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism – A Study of ‘Brainwashing’ in China”
By Robert J. Lifton (1961)



You'll not only see through a window into the heads of many individuals who survived some of the worst psychological torture in human history, you'll learn about their psychological development growing up and how this influenced the ways they coped with this abuse. Lifton spent days interviewing them in Hong Kong soon after they were expelled from mainland China (subsequent to their forced “confessions”), and he was able to follow up with many 4 years later. This included 25 European-types, especially Catholic priests, and 15 Chinese, with whole chapters and extensive quotes for some individuals, major sections of chapters for most.

Lifton is a professional psychologist not only of great insight and depth but also of compassion. For a scientific type, such as myself, but without Lifton's professional training, what I learned was a revelation, with many lessons for today - for both cultish and political ideological extremism. Though a big book, I kept coming back for more. This was even more for the individual stories, than for the famous chapter 22, which lists his eight psychological themes of mind control.

A good introduction to these themes is in his recent book “Losing Reality” yet this overview omits the gripping narratives of the original. A complementary classic is Eric Hoffer's “The True Believer” (1951), which focuses on the leadership of mass movements (see my Amazon review of 8-24-2020) and the psychology of those who carry out the abuses described by Lifton. The lessons for today depend especially on his Chinese subjects, since they were not imprisoned like the Westerners, but participated voluntarily to a certain degree, though sometimes only to avoid becoming a social or economic outcast.

We learn that “individualistic” behavior would arouse the suspicion of authorities, even when it was nominally in accordance with Marxist-Leninist doctrine and by Chinese who professed their loyalty to the Communist regimes. These Chinese were organized into groups where great pressure was put on individuals to criticize both themselves and others and to confess their supposed bourgeois misdeeds or evil attitudes. These were the infamous Maoist “struggle sessions”.

One person, as a university student, “feared that, should he make one false move, they might well label him a ‘reactionary’ – a dangerous accusation for anyone.” (p 261). The “ruling class” characteristics were “pride, conceit, greed, competitiveness, dishonesty, boastfulness, and rudeness”. In addition, “if a ‘backward’ girlfriend was thought to be impeding a student’s progress, he was advised to breakoff the relationship, but if both were ‘progressive’ ...the group would give its approval” (p 262). Failure to make “progress” could lead to a public humiliation at a mass meeting – a carefully staged “show trial”.

One student committed suicide, two were sent to mental hospitals, many had severe psychological or psychosomatic symptoms. Completion of the final course of study required a confession, which included gut-wrenching denunciations of family members for supposed misdeeds (“landlord”, “exploiter”, etc., even for family backgrounds in small businesses or village leadership). Even good deeds by a parent of the petite bourgeoisie were condemned because they “helped to render the position of the ruling class more unassailable” (p 270).

However Lifton notes that sometimes there develops a strange “bond of betrayal between reformers and reformed” (p 293), both having betrayed the loyalties and values of their former lives. This bond which helps explain why this ‘re-education’ succeeds with some though it ultimately fails for the many who are deported, reconnecting to normality from totalism. Overall, even among those who stayed in China, the majority were “adapters”- those who just tried to keep their heads down and make like they are going along, while both “resisters” and “zealous converts” were much fewer in number.

The irony for the reformers is that “they can neither achieve their perfectionist thought reform goals, nor cease trying to: every wave of

thought reform [leaving resentments and confusion in its wake] makes the next wave even more necessary....victims of their own cult of enthusiasm.” (p 413). Nevertheless, “thought reform achieves a degree of psychological control over the individual as strong as any yet devised” (p 414).

The eight psychological techniques of ideological totalism described in Chapter 22 and illustrated by the individual case histories are: (1) Milieu Control, (2) Mystical Manipulation, (3) The Demand for Purity, (4) The Cult of Confession, (5) The ‘Sacred Science’, (6) Loading the Language, (7) Doctrine Over Person, (8) The Dispensing of Existence. Then in Chapter 23 he organizes these into four general approaches to changing people: (1) coercion, (2) exhortation, (3) therapy, (4) realization. For example, coercion “is an essential ingredient of all varieties of thought reform and of all phases” while “exhortation seeks to create converts and disciples” (p 439).

Exhortation is, of course, very common outside of totalist environments, along with therapy and realization, so Lifton addresses how these may be designed to avoid the ravages of totalist thought control. He identifies those “Western intellectual currents which historically have done most to counter totalism” as “humanism, individualism, and scientific inquiry” (p 446). He stresses that totalist thought reform illustrates “the importance of remaining open to knowledge from all sources, even (or especially) the most unlikely” (p 453).

Lifton cites “religious totalism” as a particular challenge, with periods of control, manipulation, and bigotry having occurred in all the world’s major religions. Likewise “political inquisitions occur ... when ideological totalists set up their own theocratic search for heresy”. He cites McCarthyism as a “bizarre blend of political religion and extreme opportunism”, which “became a poor imitation of its declared enemy [Communism] (p 457). Lifton also notes that this “seems to confirm...the principle that totalism breeds totalism” since “among those most actively engaged were former Communists turned Anti-Communist” (p 458).

Today we see totalist mindsets and behavior on both the radical right, as bizarre conspiracy theories, and on the radical left, as manifested by an unhinged cancel culture. Fortunately, this is driving renewed commitments from the middle to the Enlightenment liberal values of humanism, individualism, and science to counter the toxicity of identity politics.