

HOW TO SPOT WHEN YOU'RE IN A CULT



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How to recognize that you're in a cult seems so obvious and therefore unnecessary to ask that most people never even bother to do so.

Consequently, it should not be a surprise so many people continue to find themselves to be in cults and not realize it till years later, if at all.

So, a couple of misconceptions: we are not talking about New Religious Movements (NREs)—at least not exclusively. To begin with, those are not necessarily cults, and more importantly, cults are not exclusively “religious” movements.

From Heaven's Gate to Scientology to for-profit face-to-face canvassing, you cannot rely on the self-description of an organization to accurately describe what it does, and like with NXIVM, it usually isn't the supernatural or religious aspects that are actually problematic.

A cult may never have explicitly supernatural or spiritual aspects; they may define themselves by their strict adherence to materialism, even. Thus, if those are the red flags you're looking for, you're not going to notice when no one is talking about god, reincarnation, or quantum pseudoscience.

Multilevel-marking schemes tend to be so exploitative of their “independent contractors” that they cannot persist without some amount of cult dynamics holding them together. It is rare that even those actually profiting in the pyramid do so solely in the cynical belief that they are exploiting bigger suckers.



There are more traditionally structured business cults as well. Philadelphia-based antifascist journalist Gwen Snyder has talked about her experiences with what others have called a “liberal sweatshop” but what Snyder described as a business cult: for-profit canvassing corporation Grassroots Campaigns, Inc.

She identified five elements of the sort of job that ends up actually being a cult.

- Enforced poverty**
- Organization-facilitated group living**
- Geographical isolation to facilitate indoctrination/retention**
- Coerced begging**
- Organizational incest**

Her whole piece is worth reading, especially the elements that a naive person might assume are unrelated, like “incestuous” sexual relationships with co-workers serving to further isolate members/employees and make them reliant on their job not just for compensation but for all socializing.

Like with GCI, in many cults, the vast majority of exploited people are not even part of the cult. The union-busting or precarious employment-guarantees do harm many people, sure, but those are not the ones likely to stick around, either. The selection bias of the sort of folk competent enough to be milked in the intermediate and long term are not at all what people assume cults are looking for, and those watching how they do better relative to others won't spot their own exploitation.



Remember: GCI is as mainstream as it gets, fundraising for Democratic candidates and the ACLU while facilitating and experiencing horrendous labor violations.

Cults are a normal part of modern society, not something only at the fringe.

Considering the likely audience of this, it may be tempting to say, “No gods, no masters,” or “obviously capitalism is a cult.”

But this is a feature that appears within the radical, anticapitalist left as well.

The abusiveness of the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL) or Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), of Bob Avakian’s Revolutionary Communist Party USA, or Gazi Kodzo’s Black Hammer organization and its rapid turn toward failed Colorado commune and predation of unhoused people in Atlanta — it is not just “those people” who can fall into this. A Maoist transbian polycule with a central node who controls the sex lives of her partners while leading the “self-crit” sessions — this is only tangentially the faults of capitalism.

No one is immune from this, no one is safe. Because while cults can express themselves in all of these various ways, they are not only taking advantage of the weakest or worst of us; they don’t even always take us in our weakest or worst moments.

Cults also will, like a cordyceps fungus, repurpose your strengths and talent to their own ends. Your incredible intelligence and reasoning abilities will be turned to explaining why you should continue to support this particular cult despite all evidence to the contrary. Your empathy will make you care about others still in the cult that leaving it would mean leaving behind. You will convince yourself that reform is possible and you just need to go through the proper channels that the abusers just happen also to control.



To review: a cult can look like anything and anyone can find themselves in one.

But most cults, by their nature, do not lead with the weirdest shit first. Some go as far as to have front companies recruiting people to one thing, then slowly introduce this other thing when that person is thought suitable and their defenses are down.

Remember: using the example of GCI, most people who worked there were not in a cult. They helped fund a cult and got ripped off by one, but they weren't in one. A "fundraiser manager" who ran an office, reliable "field managers" who ran crews day after day, and top performing canvassers who made good money and went to conferences — these were people in the cult. You had to be useful and reliable enough to be brought into the fold and made to invest deeper.

For most people, there won't be a clear sudden indicator because they will be surrounded by others who treat these power dynamics as normal and good. Peer pressure is not just something middle schoolers fall victim to but something all of us experience.

Even if you leave, all that does is reinforce the survivor bias and culture of those who remain, feeding the narratives of exclusivity, elitism, and persecution to keep members cleaved from the outside.

Back to the question: how do you spot that you're in a cult?

It's crucial that you actually bother to ask. It's crucial that you have the humility to assess your surroundings, your choices, and be willing to walk away from stuff you've invested in when you realize your mistake, sunk costs be damned.



What then are you looking for?

There are various guides you can use, but a pretty robust if still subjective one is Isaac Bonewits' Advanced Bonewits Cult Danger Evaluation Frame (ABCDEF), rating 18 categories to score from one-to-10.

1. **Internal Control:** Amount of internal political and social power exercised by leader(s) over members; lack of clearly defined organizational rights for members.
2. **External Control:** Amount of external political and social influence desired or obtained; emphasis on directing members' external political and social behavior.
3. **Wisdom/Knowledge Claimed by leader(s):** amount of infallibility declared or implied about decisions or doctrinal/scriptural interpretations; number and degree of unverified and/or unverifiable credentials claimed.
4. **Wisdom/Knowledge Credited to leader(s) by members:** amount of trust in decisions or doctrinal/scriptural interpretations made by leader(s); amount of hostility by members towards internal or external critics and/or towards verification efforts.
5. **Dogma:** Rigidity of reality concepts taught; amount of doctrinal inflexibility or "fundamentalism;" hostility towards relativism and situationalism.
6. **Recruiting:** Emphasis put on attracting new members; amount of proselytizing; requirement for all members to bring in new ones.
7. **Front Groups:** Number of subsidiary groups using different names from that of main group, especially when connections are hidden.
8. **Wealth:** Amount of money and/or property desired or obtained by group; emphasis on members' donations; economic lifestyle of leader(s) compared to ordinary members.
9. **Sexual Manipulation of members by leader(s) of non-tantric groups:** amount of control exercised over sexuality of members in terms of sexual orientation, behavior, and/or choice of partners.
10. **Sexual Favoritism:** Advancement or preferential treatment dependent upon sexual activity with the leader(s) of non-tantric groups.
11. **Censorship:** Amount of control over members' access to outside opinions on group, its doctrines or leader(s).
12. **Isolation:** Amount of effort to keep members from communicating with non-members, including family, friends and lovers.
13. **Dropout Control:** Intensity of efforts directed at preventing or returning dropouts.
14. **Violence:** Amount of approval when used by or for the group, its doctrines or leader(s).
15. **Paranoia:** Amount of fear concerning real or imagined enemies; exaggeration of perceived power of opponents; prevalence of conspiracy theories.
16. **Grimness:** Amount of disapproval concerning jokes about the group, its doctrines or its leader(s).
17. **Surrender of Will:** Amount of emphasis on members not having to be responsible for personal decisions; degree of individual disempowerment created by the group, its doctrines or its leader(s).
18. **Hypocrisy:** amount of approval for actions which the group officially considers immoral or unethical, when done by or for the group, its doctrines or leader(s); willingness to violate the group's declared principles for political, psychological, social, economic, military, or other gain.



Again, there are others. ABCDEF works best for new religious movements; Gwen Snyder taking business cults to task highlighted some issues Bonewits did not. Certainly, neither person is, themselves, infallible.

Consider both nothing more than starting points.

So far, we haven't talked much about anarchist groups or dynamics, and you may assume that's because we are not power worshipers, fascists, Marxist-Leninists, so our praxis inoculates us.

That is bunk.

It is true that anarchist critiques of hierarchy apply to cults as well. An anarchist may not always be able to recognize a hierarchy, but we ought to have a good idea of our response when we do.

Anarchists are not immune from becoming cult leaders. Those who do that are not uniquely evil or a different species from us. A cult leader may be wholly sincere and actually believe they are that special, that irreplaceable.

If you are an anarchist, you should always be thinking about and planning for your replacement. You will die one day. You may be disabled before that, or jailed before that, or "canceled"; don't think you are not capable of being an abuser, including in ways that meant almost nothing to you but everything to them.

Anything you're doing should not rely solely on you to not fail. The group you are part of should not require one person, you or anyone else, who is so essential that others are tempted to give them a pass because they are so valuable to the work.

Having said all this, is the vaccination against hierarchical cult abuses a panacea against all abuses? Clearly not.



If Grassroots Campaigns were only exploitative and union-busting, that still would be bad.

Actually, the Southern Baptist Convention is structurally remarkably non-hierarchical and laudable in many ways. Yet, there are invisible, cultural hierarchies in the SBC and its member churches facilitate all kinds of abuse, as the Houston Chronicle's investigations revealed in recent years.

A cult is one kind of hierarchy. It is often starkly hierarchical and dangerous but not the only way for an org or group dynamics to be abusive. We have to work very hard to guard ourselves against these, too; that is anarchism.

We need collective action from non-blood relations willing to work together and help one another. We need to radically re-imagine and embody different ways of living, different possibilities of seeing the world. The taboos of the status quo are not extant always because they serve most of us or benefit any but a few.

And yet, attempts to create alternatives to what we have inherited are not guaranteed to be improvements, and in our desperation at the state of the world or just our own lives, we can pursue groups—usually new groups—that lack the protective guardrails erected by necessity to keep a collective functioning since, without them, the group implodes.

How do you spot you're in a cult? Think about what power is and who has it, and never stop looking or talking to other people about what you see. Interrogate yourself, don't make excuses for your friends, and kill your heroes so you can meet real people worth knowing.

Mirror: <https://queersatanic.com/how-to-spot-when-youre-in-a-cult/>

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