

Cults

by Bill Herbst

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Wikipedia — the Google-hound's Encyclopedia Britannica and poor man's first source of information on any topic — defines a "Cult" as:

A social group that is defined by its unusual religious, spiritual, or philosophical beliefs, or by its common interest in a particular personality, object, or goal. [To those criteria, I'd add cultural, political, and economic beliefs as well.]

(Wikipedia also notes that the word itself is controversial and a subject of contention among scholars, and also that the term is pejorative. Well, duh...

America, like all nations in the world, but even more than some, is a Land of Cults. If you live in America, you could easily be a member of a Cult, and quite possibly a bunch of them.

Just liking something or doing a lot of a specific activity doesn't make you a Cult member. But liking anything so fervently and passionately that it becomes a sacrosanct belief is indeed Cultish, as is engaging in any activity to the point of obsession. Any interest can qualify as the basis for a Cult, assuming a sufficient degree of religiosity among its adherents. Paintball, Classic Cars, shopping at Whole Foods. Damn near anything can potentially become a Cult.

Cults may be organized and even "official" — with formal structures, procedures, membership dues, web sites, and conventions. Or they may be relatively invisible and ad hoc. Belief in American Exceptionalism could qualify as a Cult, but it doesn't have a headquarters or a slate of elected officials. Its Cult status is more of an amorphous cultural meme that crosses all sorts of boundaries. What I'm getting at here is that organizations and institutions are not necessarily Cults, and Cults are not necessarily organizations or institution. Still, in the Venn Diagrams of the social order, all these categories often overlap.

All Cults are delusional (sometimes joyfully, other times angrily), based on some dream-like subset of reality that is amplified to an extreme. Delusions are, of course, universal for human beings. Our attraction to dreams is linked, or so

we're told, to imagination and creativity. OK, so far so good. Fantasies that become obsessive, however, and blur the distinctions and boundaries between illusion and reality, are the seeds that flower into full-blown delusions. We are all deluded about something, in one form or another, and to widely differing degrees.

I'm told that people exist on this planet who are not deluded at all, who embrace reality fully and don't engage in the obsessions and compulsions of fantasy, but I've never met anyone even remotely close to that. Everyone I know (including me) is delusional to some extent. Once we get to know someone, their delusions (whether quaint and charming or toxic and dangerous) become readily apparent. Think of each of your friends. You know how they're crazy. Yes, our hearts open to our friends and beloveds anyway, but we see where they're lost in dreams.

Cults emerge when people who hold similar delusions discover each other to share and reinforce their obsessive fantasies — giving permission to act out, as it were. Among the tenets of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous, which can itself become a Cult for some people) is the practical consideration that maintaining sobriety by refraining from drinking alcohol probably requires a wholesale change in the addict's social groups. To guard against relapse, certain friendships and interpersonal relationships must end, and new, healthier connections fostered.

Not all Cults and their members scare me. Nope. As far as I'm concerned, many Cults are just fine. If you want to be a Body Builder, by all means go for it. Cults such as Trekkies or Espresso Geeks or Old Movie Lovers (who not only watch Turner Classic Movies, but join TCM Backlot and go to conventions or take cruises) seem to me relatively benign. I do not fear for my life when I'm in the presence of such people. Despite their obsessive delusions, I feel safe with them.

On the other hand, some Cults terrify me. These include religious Cults (think Christian Evangelicals or ISIS) and political Cults (both major political parties and many lesser political allegiances qualify, although not every Republican or Democrat is a Cultist). Adherents to the Cult of Capitalism give me the willies.

The Trump Cultists who gathered in Washington D.C. last week and carried out their Master's orders, acting as a lethally angry mob and temporarily taking over (and trashing) the Capitol building are scary to me. UFO or Alien Origin Cultists are OK. QAnon Cultists are not.

If I'm not a member of your particular Cult, then you regard me as *Them*, not *Us*. That's fine, as long as my being *Them* to you means simply that I don't share your belief. No harm, no foul. But if my being *Them* makes me an Enemy, then I worry. Even though my intentions are totally non-threatening, you still regard me

as Wrong and Evil. In some Cults, that means you'd be perfectly happy to kill me and might even believe that it's necessary and justified to do so.

The Trump Cult's riot at the Capitol last week wasn't surprising in the least. Anyone could see it coming from years ago, step by step by step. I daresay that, although I didn't like it, I wasn't even shocked by what happened. I do worry a lot about the utter unreachability (is that a word?) of the Trump Cultists, who seem immune to reason, evidence, and truth itself. But, after all, this is America, where Reality TV rules, deals with the devil go unquestioned, and perhaps 20% of us are bat-shit crazy.

On the one hand, I'm actually sympathetic to the Trump Cultists. Their grievances and disenfranchisement emerged out of real complaints, but their "solutions" are almost always either false or ineffective. No, immigrants aren't coming to take away all their jobs (it's corporations that did that), socialists aren't boogeymen, and freedom doesn't mean doing whatever the hell you want. Jesus H. Christ, how can these people hate the government so much, but be just fine with Amazon, Cabala's, and Bass Pro Shops?

On the other hand (as I wrote above), too many Trump Cultists are simply unreachable, and they tend to have guns, so I see no alternative to my avoiding them like the plague (to use a particularly apt metaphor). I really don't want those people to be "Them," but I don't know how to turn them into "Us."

Strangely enough, though, as much as I dislike the current Republican Party, I worry almost as much about Democrats, specifically that huge swath of "centrist liberals" and even progressives who believe that positive change can be achieved by reforming the system from within. I don't think so. The system is now so gargantuan in scale, with such deep roots, that attempted reforms are inevitably co-opted. Incremental change is a nice idea, but Americans are far too divided (and deluded) to implement that, much less make it work. Since I'm not in favor of violent revolution, however, I'm left with only the sad option of watching collapse unfold.

Look, I understand wanting to remove Trump from power. I'm pleased to see that jerk go down, and I hope the Donald and his whole criminal family get their much-deserved comeuppance. And yes, I regard Republican politicians such as Mitch McConnell, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, Josh Hawley, and Lindsay Graham (to name but a few) as hopelessly despicable assholes. But I'm not in love with Nancy Pelosi or Chuck Schumer, either. The Dems also serve the Empire and are definitely not our saviors. Finally, I get really nervous when so many people suddenly start screaming about our "sacred Constitution" and "Democracy." All that smacks a little too much of villagers with pitchforks looking for the Frankenstein monster.

But maybe I'm wrong. Perhaps my own delusions have blinded me to the Big Picture. Maybe what's happening right now is still the necessary first skirmish in turning us around. Perhaps the incoming Biden administration will end the pandemic, dismantle nuclear weapons, get us off fossil fuels, and significantly redistribute the wealth in America. Yeah, sure. Tell me another fairytale.

I expect very little *substantive* change to come out of the current mass hysteria. Form, maybe; content, probably not. My continuing perception is that we're collectively not even close. Our delusions have become so kaleidoscopic and hold Americans so completely in their grip that collapse will have to proceed much further and cause more suffering before we even start to get our heads screwed on straight.

Welcome to 2021.