

Warning Signs One is Dealing with Guru-ism in Political Organization

By Tom Paine

In MLM circles, there may be warning signs that one is being manipulated by, or contributing to, cultish leadership.

The following notes have been prepared to help people identify the warning signs of such developments. This document might help people better understand the problem before the issue progresses to a point causing personal and collective damage.

1) Focus by an individual on breaking apart comrades' personal and familial relations.

If personal relations are impeding political work and development, this can and should be addressed. However, if an individual takes it primarily on themselves to break apart supportive relations in comrades' lives, declaring definitively that such ties are bourgeois, this can have a very destructive effect. The way forward should be comrades working collectively to understand the dialectical nature of relations. In contrast, the former tendency is exacerbated by a [tendency in the U.S. of cutting off family members](#), in many cases over perceived slights. This in turn can be seen as connected to the history in US society of religious appeals that divide the world into good and evil, a view not so helpful in dealing with the contradictory reality of personal relationships inhabited by the masses at large.

2) The "leader" believes he or she has the authority and right to expel and introduce individuals into an organization without proceeding through collective established channels.

This is a violation of organizational principles, i.e. of democratic centralism. Generally the individual will pose that he or she alone has the ability to assess a situation. Faced with such a situation, comrades may ask themselves, "why did this leader think it would not be possible to deal with such decisions openly and through group discussion?"

Two explanations come to mind.

a) The need to cover one's tracks. And b) distrust of comrades.

The two are interrelated.

The practice reinforces the idea that it is the key individual's foresight, rather than the collective work of the organization, that is the main way to bring about political advance. This impairs overall positive political development, reinforcing the cycle.

Another warning sign is that such conduct continues despite criticism and complaint. Such is a sign of consolidation to a bourgeois organizational line. Surrounding the leader with a few yes-men/apologists only underscores the dynamic.

3) Relying on the idea of "crisis" to put forward undemocratic processes.

In Reverend Jim Jones' "Jonestown," there were the "white nights," dress rehearsals for apocalyptic events that would threaten the organization, which in that case tragically was used to usher in mass suicide. In MLM circles, opportunists in leadership will often use *the idea of crisis* to prevent

discussion on a topic. This is related to the practice of unilaterally expelling individuals, justified as done “to protect others in the group.” Such individuals may claim that problems that otherwise would be seen as non-antagonistic are in fact just the tip of large icebergs threatening to destroy political work, icebergs that only they can reliably identify.

In opposition to this claim, one may consider that a ship relies on an active crew working together for its operation, otherwise one is condemned to sail blindly, with said leader telling of icebergs in the tropics, and ignoring the arrival of a hurricane. .

Relatedly, such “leaders” tend to revel in spreading gossip and rumors about individuals and organizations. Instead, the sound approach is to address differences in political line to address issues, including when dealing with rival organizations, according to the principle of “unity-struggle-unity” and “practicing Marxism and not revisionism, uniting and not splitting, and being open and *aboveboard* and *not* intriguing or conspiring.”

Conclusion

The solution to liberalism is not guru-ism. The US movement suffered from the rise of a cult around Avakian as early as the 1970s. In recent years, cults in the wider society have continued to rise, including the NXIVM cult, suggesting this reflects a deeper social force.

Faced with such problems, those inside afflicted political organizations may ask themselves “but what else is better/what is the alternative?” Instead of such a response, it is best to face the problem head on, and if unable to transform the situation, to form new organizations. Cutting off communication between good comrades is politically unforgivable. Comrades should not tolerate such machinations, not merely out of concern for themselves, but out of responsibility for the wider movement.

A draft of this document seen by several other comrades who experienced related problems received a comment that such circles tend to produce the phenomenon of lackey-ism, of members of the group who largely differ to a leading individual on key questions. Why reviewers asked did this write up not initially deal with this aspect of the question?

The reason is that it can be difficult to conclude that passive and deferential behavior by members means that a cultish-like formation is in place. One may conclude that perhaps that’s just the personalities of such people. However, the above warning signs expose the true workings of such a group, more-so than an impressions here or there. The leaders of such groups have intents at odds with the basic functioning of proletariat organization. They seek to promote their own control, and doing so requires they violate basic organizational procedure and basic political sensibility. As such, the above warning signs will be observed, and can help wake-up people to what’s really at play.

In 2017, the film *Downsizing* featured a plot in which a Norwegian guru developed a method for shrinking humans down to the size of several inches, presumably to address the threat of climate change produced by excess individual energy footprints. In reality, the awkward plot and production was an analogy for petite-bourgeois hucksterism and cult formation. In the end, such “shrinking” of willing human subjects merely recreated the contradictions of class society in miniature, though with the exception that the “downsized” leave family and friends behind in the “big world.” In the end, this was not enough for the guru, who decides that he must leave his sheepish bite-size followers into an a sealed underground bunker, safe from the crisis of methane—the danger of which only he can

appreciate—for 200 years. The message should be, “don’t go down that tunnel.” It provides a helpful analogy to the situation described above as well.

As stated in a [1976 document from China](#), summarizing the problem of the inner-party bourgeoisie “in the course of leading the struggle of the proletariat and the laboring people against the bourgeoisie, the guides of the proletarian revolution constantly smash all kinds of strange theories put forward by opportunists and revisionists that provide cover for the bourgeoisie.” Drawn from a similar class essence as the corporate and environmental hustles of our current culture, swindlers in the political sphere share a similar toolkit and story-line. They are easily exposed and cast-aside, and the sooner the better.