

# SUICIDE FOR SOCIALISM?

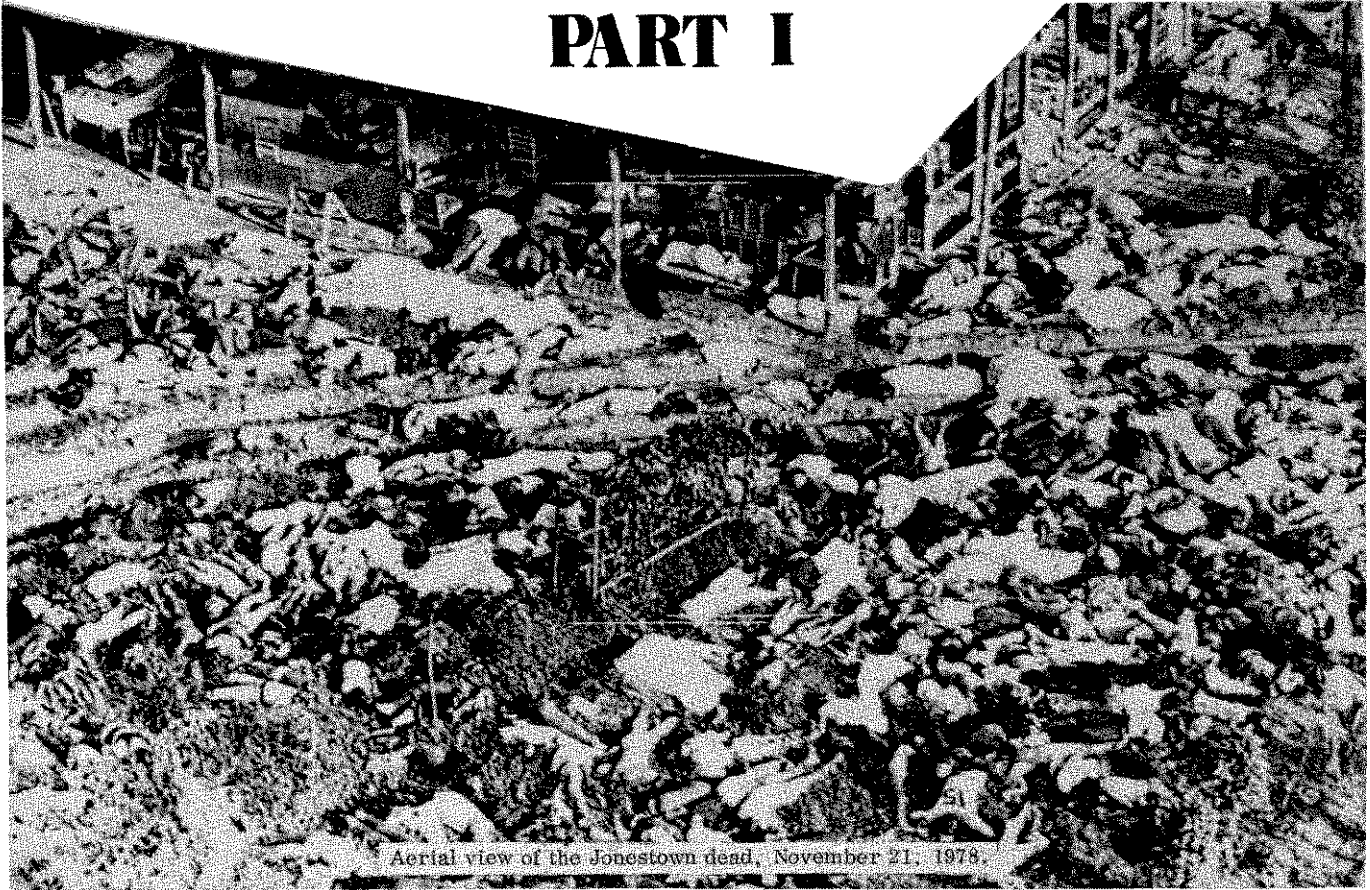


THOSE WHO DO NOT  
REMEMBER THE PAST  
ARE CONDEMNED  
TO REPEAT IT

**SPECIAL  
SUPPLEMENT  
BY MAURICE BRINTON**

# SUICIDE FOR SOCIALISM?

## PART I



Aerial view of the Jonestown dead, November 21, 1978.

### The relevance of Jonestown

'We're gonna die for the revolution. We're gonna die to expose this racist and fascist society. It's good to die in this great revolutionary suicide'. The words uttered by two young men in Jonestown (Guyana) a few minutes before they, together with hundreds of others, poisoned themselves were reported in the Los Angeles Times (November 26, 1978) by Charles Garry of San Francisco, attorney for the Peoples Temple. Garry was no critic of this particular cult. He was the trendy leftist lawyer who, referring to the Guyana commune, had written in the Peoples Forum, journal of the Temple: 'I have seen Paradise'.

For those who think that socialism is about life and reason (and not about giving cyanide to babies... whether in Paradise or elsewhere) the event of last November are deeply disturbing. Let's not quibble about how many died. The latest reports put it at 921 (912 in the Jonestown commune, 5 at Port Kaituma airport, and 4 in the Peoples Temple in Georgetown). Or about the complexities (both in the USA and in Guyana) which led 900 American 'socialists' to this particular part of the South American rain forest. Or about the relations of the Jonestown commune with Soviet Russia (to whose Embassy in Georgetown two survivors sought to hand over a vast amount of money). On all these matters a lot more information will come to light in the months to come.

What is of concern to us as libertarians is how the monstrosity of Jonestown, where people were drugged and beaten, brainwashed and forced to indulge in slave labour, sexually manipulated and annihilated as individuals, ever came to be associated with the name of socialism. Jim Jones' own 19 year old son,

Stephen, said of his father after the mass suicide: 'I now see him as a fascist'. It would be easy to forget it all, as most of the 'left' doubtlessly will, or to sweep it all aside as some trivial or insignificant event: a lot of religious nuts bumping themselves off in some far away jungle. But this isn't good enough. Nor is it enough to comment, as did Socialist Worker (Dec. 2, 1978) that the tragic end of those who followed Jim Jones was 'a reminder of the irrationality and ultimate hopelessness of religious forms of protest'. Or to blame 'the oppressiveness, brutality and mindless profiteering of the society from which they fled'. All this is true. But what it needed is to relate these truths to the specifically 'socialist' content of the Jonestown rhetoric and to the 'socialist' support which the Temple movement mobilised, from Angela Davis to the self-proclaimed 'socialist government of Guyana. (1)

(1) According to the Los Angeles Times (Dec. 14, 1978) 'Burnham described himself five years ago as a socialist but not a marxist. Today he calls himself a marxist who does not yet lead a marxist administration'. According to a veteran member of Georgetown's diplomatic corps 'Jones professed to believe in a socialism based on a multiracial kind of communal life. That's what Mr Burnham is aiming for. That's what may have drawn the Peoples Temple to the 'Cooperative Republic of Guyana'. (Whether Forbes Burnham was a 'marxist' or not, it did not prevent him speaking on an SLL - now WRP - platform in Trafalgar Square in 1958.)

We also need to relate all this to many phenomena and tendencies we see daily in the 'socialist' movement around us. We mean the systematic cult of leadership, the manipulation of information, the abdication of critical judgment, the substitution of rhetoric for argument and of slogans for the serious discussion of complex issues. We mean the belief in 'activity' at any cost - with little questioning as to its content - the mythologising and the voluntarism, the intimidation of dissidents, the almost universal application of double standards, the systematic generation of paranoia and the retreat, on a very wide front indeed, from rationality in general.

The Jim Jones story bears so many similarities to what we see around us that it is worth telling in some detail. Not out of any necrophiliac concern but as an elementary gesture of socialist sanitation. We hope this will help some of those who find themselves bewildered (or trapped) by their experiences in the unreal world of various marxist sects.

## Jim Jones, religion and power

James Warren Jones (JJ) was born in Lynn, Indiana, in 1931. His father, gassed in World War I, was unemployed but an active member of the local Ku-Klux-Klan. His mother worked in a factory, at below average wage rates. When Jim later became involved in the struggle against racism he claimed he was 'biracial', his mother being a Cherokee Indian. Other members of the family dispute this contention. The relevant records are unavailable.

At a very early age JJ became interested in religion. Erstwhile schoolmates have confirmed that this interest centred more around the pomp and ceremonial, the banners and songs, than around questions of doctrine. JJ would 'play church games' with the other kids, games in which he always landed the role of preacher. As an adolescent he went in for social work of various kinds, organising sporting competitions. He apparently never indulged in any sport himself. Bill Morris, one of his classmates, says JJ was never interested in anything of which he was not the center, the organiser. So racist was the Lynn environment that JJ claimed never to have seen a black until he was 12 years old. He realised there was something very wrong and became actively interested in the issue of racism.

In 1949, while working as a medical auxiliary in the Reid Memorial Hospital in Richmond, some 15 miles away, he married Marceline Baldwin, a nurse 4 years older than himself. About this time he was already critical of all the churches he had come up against and was already talking of one day forming a Church of his own. He moved to Indianapolis where he experienced many difficulties in finding a racially-integrated religious environment. He kept ends together by selling monkeys imported from Latin America and Africa, at 29 dollars a piece. Although not ordained he started systematic work in penetrating 'progressive' and 'Christian' circles. His dynamism and charisma made him many friends. By 1956 he was influential enough to found his own Church: the Peoples Temple. It was a converted synagogue in a run-down section of Indianapolis. He adopted several black, white and yellow children as tangible evidence of his deeply felt views.



A turning point in JJ's career was his meeting with Father Divine, the legendary black pastor from Philadelphia. Jones was vastly impressed both by his spell-binding preaching techniques and by the total control he still exerted on his congregation (which consisted mainly of elderly black women). From Divine Jones learned all about 'organising congregations', about how to use an 'Interrogation Committee'. He saw the Committee as the logical extension of his grip on his flock. In Indianapolis Jones started to surround himself with a group of 'totally loyal' men and women, black and white. They would watch and report to Jones on the other parishioners. This was probably the first instance in history of a totally integrated, 'non-racist', 'non-sexist' Secret Police. Thomas Dixon, one of the early members of the Temple, broke with JJ on this issue. 'The Committee' he said, 'was primarily to deal with those who disagreed with Jones. Whoever was summoned by the Committee was grilled for hours on end with questions such as "Why are you against the Reverend?". 'For all his socialist talk' Dickson concluded, 'Jones will end up like Hitler'.

JJ's uphill struggle for racial equality in Indianapolis earned him many enemies. They called him 'nigger-lover', broke his windows, spat on his wife, threw dead cats into his church. Jones, whose physical courage was indisputable, was not deterred. In liberal circles, his image began to harden. He was the protector of blacks and orphans. His influence increased. He is given space in the local paper. In 1960 the mayor of Indianapolis, Charles Boswell, nominated JJ 'President of the Indianapolis Commis-

sion of Human Rights'... at a salary of \$7000 a year. The Peoples Temple began to distribute free soup. Several survivors of the later mass suicide stressed the impact all this was to have on their lives. They were 'looking for a way to make their lives meaningful and found it at the Peoples Temple, with its communal kitchen, work with juveniles and senior citizens, and activism in support of a plethora of causes ranging from aid to jailed journalists to picketing for elderly Philipinos threatened with eviction by a large corporation'. (Los Angeles Times, Dec. 10, 1978.)

Jones then read a satirical article (in Esquire, of all places) about the threat of nuclear war. The magazine listed the 'ten surest places for escaping the holocaust'. Among them were listed Bello Horizonte in Brazil, and Ukiah (north of San Francisco). JJ claimed he had had a similar divine revelation. He visited Brazil (making his first acquaintance with Guyana en route). But he finally opted for California.



Jones, at 22, with the monkeys he sold for his church

## Miracles and the Long March

At this stage of his life JJ discovers he can resurrect the dead, treat cancer and heart disease by the laying of hands, promote the healing of wounds, etc. In 1963 he organises the 'exodus' of his followers to the Promised Land. Like Moses or Mao, JJ too has his Long March... through the southern regions of the Mid-West. His congregation moves in a convoy of small buses. There is much proselytising and faith-healing en route. The 'flock' enlarges. 'Deceived' disciples later described how bits of chicken innards would be used to simulate the tumours he would 'extract' from suggestible women on the way. In 1965 JJ is eventually ordained among the 'Disciples of Christ'.

The 'Chosen People' eventually settle in Redwood Valley, north of San Francisco. The locals are alarmed at the proportion of blacks in Jones' following. The liberals are impressed by his 'sincerity' and by the number of orphanages, convalescent homes and other 'good works' the Temple is involved in. Big money begins to come in. The local conservatives are more sceptical, especially in view of the increasingly socialist verbiage now being used. In 1970, at the height of the Vietnam war, JJ reassures them. He organises an important collection 'to help the families of policemen killed or injured during the exercise of their duties'. He stresses that 'those who are against this war and who are fighting for social justice aren't - by that very fact - enemies of the police'. This is

music to the ears of the local bigwigs, who favour a well organised police force. Donations double within months. Membership increases. Jones is elected President of the Grand Jury of Mendocino County.

The Inner Staff (a kind of Central Committee) was meanwhile being systematically 'consolidated' through the incorporation of individuals whose loyalty to Jones seemed beyond doubt. Ex-cultist Linda Dunn gave a graphic account of events in the Los Angeles Times (Dec. 15, 1978). Between 1966 and 1973 she had been a member of the Inner Staff. She had spied for Jones and kept files on fellow cult members. 'Members had to give up 25% of their wages to the Peoples Temple'. 'Jones surrounded himself with intelligent but gullible white women as his chief assistants. He built them up with praise, telling one she was "Harriet Tubman" reincarnated, while at the same time keeping them isolated and spreading rumours about each of them to break down trust'.

At Temple meetings the same thing took place, although in a much cruder way. People had to 'confess' to patterns of sexual behaviour that were not theirs... and would be publicly upbraided for it. Their self-confidence was being systematically sapped. Children were often beaten, for minor misdemeanours. After the beating they had to say 'Thanks, Father' into a microphone.

Below the Inner Circle there was a Planning Commission comprising about 100 people. Within this group there was a closed off 'secretaries' and 'counselors' directly responsible to Jones. Although 80% of the members of the Temple were black, two thirds of the membership of the upper echelons were white.

## From printshop to 'real politics'

Later in 1970 the cultists left Redwood Valley and moved into San Francisco itself. For \$122,000 the Temple acquired an 'auditorium' (at 1859 Geary Boulevard). The congregation now numbered 7500. The Temple again purchased a disused synagogue (at 1366 South Alvarado St.). JJ bought a printshop and published a periodical called the 'Peoples Forum'. He claimed a circulation of 300,000. Others put it at 60,000. It was no mean achievement. The miracle cures meanwhile continued. Advertising material was distributed in the streets. In September 1972 the San Francisco Examiner eventually took up the issue of the Temple. In a series of articles its 'specialist in religious affairs', Lester Kinsolving, expressed doubts about the '43 resurrections' and 'surprise at the fact that this performer of miracles should have his church constantly guarded by men with revolvers and shotguns'. Jones sent some of his henchmen to picket the Examiner.

But these things blow over. JJ is soon in the big time again. Having burnt his fingers with the Examiner he tries a new tactic. He makes money gifts to a dozen local papers and to a local television station for the defence of a 'free Press'. The recipients included the San Francisco Chronicle and the Los Angeles Times. He travels by air all over the country, with an escort of bodyguards. He creates a company to sell 'Brotherhood' gramophone records. He then enters the vote-trading business. During the



mayoral elections of December 1975 he mobilises 800 Temple members to work full-time for George Moscone. No Trot has ever done as much for the Labour Party. Moscone won easily. During the 1976 Democratic presidential primaries Rosalynn Carter takes the chair at a Temple meeting. JJ's 'socialism' melts. He promises that his flock will vote 'to a man' for the Democratic Party. He packs the meeting with 750 of his supporters, brought up in specially chartered buses. Mrs Carter's bodyguards are impressed by the size of the audience. But they are also alarmed at the fact that they don't seem to be the only ones with weapons. Several 'lambs of the flock' seem to be carrying sawn-off shotguns. In September 1976 Jones organises a great Festival in his own honour. Among the guests are Mervyn Dymally, Governor-General of the state, Congressmen John and Phil Burton and Mayor Moscone. Congressman Willie Brown of the state of California declared that 'San Francisco needs 10 more Jim Joneses'. Tom Hayden, a radical, commented that Jim Jones was 'no ordinary populist. When I came to address a Temple meeting I was searched with metal detectors. Then I understood the crowd was there for Jim, not for Tom'.

One good turn deserved another. After Carter's election Moscone appoints JJ President of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission. Yet despite the increasing influence rumours begin to spread. There is talk of disciples being terrorised and of a great deal of sexual manipulation of his entourage. Jeannie Mills, Mike Cartmell and Deborah Layton Blakey, all ex-devotees, claim that JJ would 'boast for hours of his sexual exploits while forbidding all sexual relations between members of his flock'. JJ had learned from Father Divine the importance of himself becoming the object of sexual desire of the whole congregation. But the Temple meetings are well attended. They provide a platform for stalinist hatchet-woman Angela Davis (see Solidarity London, vol. VII, no. 4) and for Allende's widow. Together with Dennis Banks, leader of the American Indian Movement, they gave rousing talks about 'liberation struggles' being waged both near and far away. The third worldist rhetoric flourished. Religion was now playing a lesser role in the cult's ideology. Two survivors, Clancy and Silver, stated

that for Jones 'the Church was the means, not the end'. Asked if Jones gave primacy to Marxism or Christianity Silver answered 'Jim was a socialist first and an atheist second'. Silver also stated (and, I believe, without cynicism) that the holocaust had made him aware of 'how tenuous life is for most people who don't have an organisation to depend on. The Temple proved it could take care of people from the cradle to the grave'. (Los Angeles Times, Dec. 10, 1978.)

## The Guyana commune

The decision to move to Guyana and create a 'commune' had first been mooted towards the end of 1973. Temple documents reveal that Jones was impressed by the 'socialist' nature of the regime there. Other considerations seemed to have been the need to move from San Francisco where things were hotting up, the favourable exchange rate (sic!) and the fact that the 'local people spoke English'.

The financial and legal arrangements have not yet all come to light. Few of the transactions took place through orthodox channels. Jones was suspicious of official mechanisms and preferred to resort to trusted messengers. Members of his inner circle would fly from San Francisco to Georgetown, carrying sums of up to \$50,000 on them. The annual budget of the Temple had by now reached a figure of \$600,000. Those in the know claimed that much larger amounts were salted away in Switzerland and Panama.

Dan Phillips, who accompanied Jones when he and twelve of his top committee visited Guyana in December 1973, stated 'We each of us had \$5000 on us in notes. We also had a bank draft drawable on Barclays Bank (Canada) for \$600,000. This was deposited with the Bank's branch in Georgetown'.

After initial parleys Jones and his colleagues flew over the jungle in a plane provided by the Guyana government to choose a suitable site for the new 'agricultural colony'. Jones insisted it be remote. The



Peoples Temple congregation singing 'We shall overcome'. On the left: Angela Davis.



From left to right: Jim Jones, Eric Gary (Prime Minister of Grenada) and California's Lt. Governor Mervyn Dymally.

Guyanese stressed it should have development potential.<sup>(2)</sup> A site some six miles from Port Kaituma was finally selected. It spread over 5000 acres (with an option for a further 27,000 acres) and was to be rented to the Temple for ... \$300 a year (sic!). There was a small airstrip at Port Kaituma. The little town could also be reached by a long journey up river. Port Kaituma was 140 miles from Georgetown and about as isolated a spot as could be wished. It was only a few hundred miles northwest along the Atlantic coast from the site of the old French penal colony of Devil's Island, where the French used the jungle and isolation as a deterrent to escape by criminals and political prisoners.

There were immediate problems. Some were due to climate, others to the pilgrims' almost total ignorance of the first principles of tropical agriculture. The first to arrive denuded slopes of trees, allowing heavy rainstorms to wash away important areas of fertile land. In the jungle the local trees proved so hard that planks had to be imported. In November 1974 the Reverend Jones arrived with 50 members of the inner set (by turbo-jet from Mexico) to christen the

(2) Despite these differences of emphasis, agreement proved possible among these 'fellow socialists'. When important visitors later visited the commune (such as California's Lt. Governor Mervyn Dymally), they and Jones were often greeted by Guyana's Prime Minister Forbes Burnham and his Deputy Prime Minister Ptolemy Reid. And it was Viola Burnham (the President's wife) and Ptolemy Reid who transported the Jonestown treasure (amounting to more than \$1 million in currency, gold and jewelry) 'back to government headquarters in Georgetown' as early as November 20. (International Herald Tribune, Dec. 26, 1978.)

place 'Jonestown'. To impress the representatives of the local government Jones arranged for one of his followers, Timothy Stoen, to simulate a severe attack of gastric pain. Stoen complied but later declared: 'I've never had much taste for this kind of game. The Reverend proceeded to "cure" me through a laying of hands'. The visitors seemed sceptical.

In May 1977 there were only 70 'communards' in Jonestown. An idealised recruitment poster was produced, showing Jones kneeling among trees heavy with bananas, grapefruit and oranges. An intensive recruitment drive was started among the politically (and botanically) naive members of the congregation in San Francisco. They were urged to make over all their worldly goods (houses, furniture, cars, etc.) to the Temple, and to take part in the 'great work of building socialism' in Jonestown.

Rosemary Williams was one of those who followed JJ. She gave up her job as a clerk in a San Francisco bank. Her husband Harry, a plumber employed by the San Francisco municipality, was about to go with her, but at the very last minute changed his mind - 'so as not to lose his pension'. The decision not only saved his pension - it almost certainly saved his life.

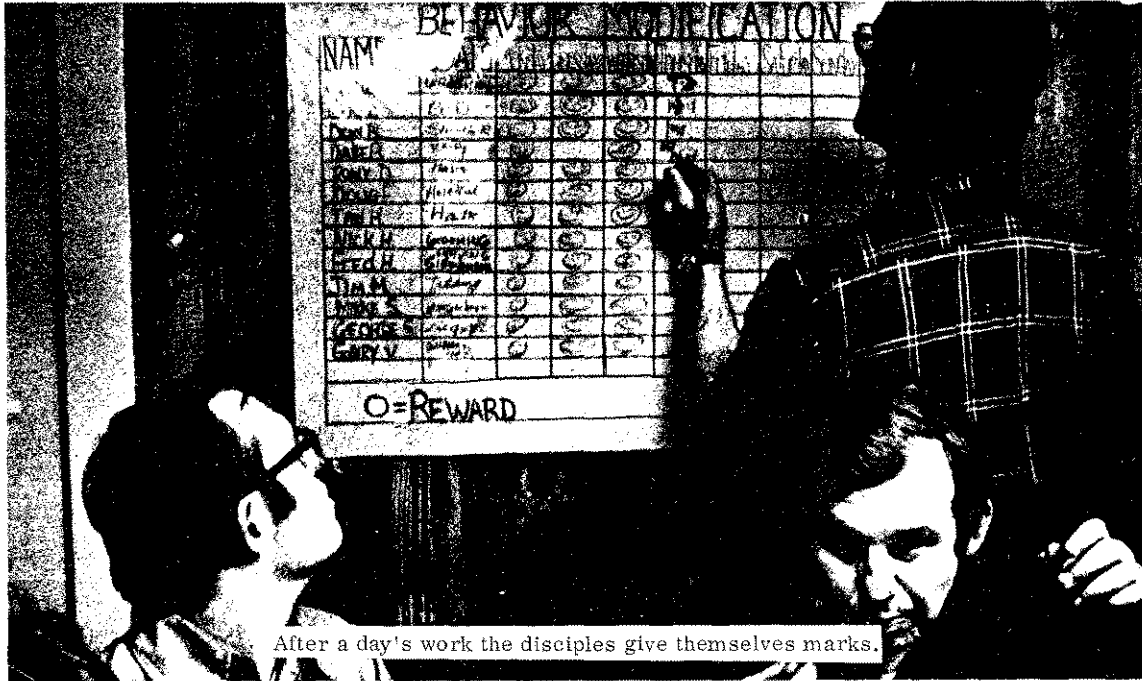
## Self-criticism and 'behaviour modification'

Within a short while of reaching Jonestown Rosemary discovered 'the place was a living hell'. People worked from 12 hours or more a day - after which they had a right to 'self-criticism' sessions. Whoever expressed doubts as to the success of the enterprise - or whoever had failed to fulfil norms - was punished. He (or she) either had the head shaved, or had to wear a yellow hat or a special badge to signal 'dishonour'. 'Culprits' would not be spoken to for several days. Damage or loss had to be 'repaid' by those found guilty. As money had been abolished the 'repayment' took the form of deprivation of food until the 'debt' had been settled. 'Behaviour modification' charts were put up on the walls and everyone's 'progress' was duly monitored. Even after the disaster, some of those who had escaped were still trying to justify the methods used. Jean Brown, one of the survivors, had once worked with Jones as an aide at the San Francisco Housing Authority, when Jones was its Chairman. She had been 'politicised as a graduate student at Berkeley in the late 1960's'. Asked about reports of harsh internal discipline, Ms Brown, a former schoolteacher, said 'the Temple used criticism/self-criticism, a technique advocated by Mao Tse-tung and others to raise questions about the way a group is functioning. People need discipline if an organisation is to function effectively'. (Los Angeles Times, Dec. 10, 1978.)

There certainly was an all-pervading and very rigid discipline. Children who wet their pants were submitted to 'reconditioning' with electric shocks administered through cattle prods. A 16 year old girl was made to clean out a septic tank from 10 pm to 6 am as punishment for having taken some corrugated metal in an attempt to seek some privacy. Meanwhile the diet in the commune was grossly inadequate (mainly rice and beans) despite the Temple's now obvious wealth. People slept in noisy, dirty dormitories.

There was never any hot water, even for washing purposes. The enclosure was 'guarded' by armed men. The loudspeakers were on for hours on end, exhorting the faithful to greater efforts, talking of the 'fascist threat from America', of the numerous enemies of the Temple, keen on destroying 'this socialist experiment' and of the terrible fate that awaited anyone who sought to return to America. 'Every defection', he stressed, 'would only be used by the enemies of the commune'.

On arrival in Georgetown Katzaris was handed a letter by the American Embassy to the effect that Maria no longer wanted to see him. To 'justify' the letter Paula Adams, a Jonestown spokeswoman, had apparently 'revealed' to the American authorities in Georgetown that Maria's father was a child-beater, that he had sexually abused Maria throughout her childhood, etc. Katzaris also learned from ex-members of the Temple that his daughter had signed a predated suicide note.



After a day's work the disciples give themselves marks.

## Complicities in 'socialist' Guyana

Jones meanwhile was consolidating and manipulating his external political contacts. In September 1977 Sharon Amos, Jones' top aid in Georgetown, sought to get former Guyana Cabinet Minister Brindley Benn to drop proposed Guyanese police investigations about what was going on in Jonestown. But Jones went even further. A memo dated March 7, 1978 was found among the dead bodies. This said that 'at the request of the Peoples Temple the Cuban Embassy (in Georgetown) has asked Prime Minister Forbes Burnham to reinstate fired Foreign Minister Frederick R. Wills, who was a cult confidant'. (Los Angeles Times, Dec. 3, 1978.)

There were soon some alarming developments. Maria Katzaris, one of the inner circle and one of Jones' girlfriends, wrote to her father in the USA asking him to come and visit the commune. She enthused about Jonestown and spoke of the threats confronting the place. 'A society based on economic inequality cannot allow an organisation such as ours, which advocates racial and economic equality to exist. They will seek to destroy us', she said. As the father, a psychologist, was preparing to come, he received a number of letters from his daughter, putting off the visit. Worried, he wired Jones, via the San Francisco Temple (with which Jonestown was in constant short wave radio communication) telling him he would be coming all the same.

JJ was also deeply involved throughout this period in legal disputations concerning the return to the USA of a boy called John Victor Stoen. JJ claimed to be the father of the boy, a statement Mr and Mrs Stoen (former cult devotees) rigidly denied. The haggling went on for months. Exasperated, Jones eventually sent an extraordinary message to the Guyanese authorities in Georgetown. 'Unless the government of Guyana takes all necessary steps to put an end to the judicial action undertaken concerning the custody of John Victor Stoen, the whole population of Jonestown will commit mass suicide at 17.30 today'. The Guyanese authorities capitulated, feeling it unwise to test whether Jones was bluffing. In March 1978 Jim Jones also sent a letter to every senator and congressman, complaining of the harassment of the commune by various government agencies. It ended ominously: 'I inform you that it is preferable to die than to be persecuted from one continent to another'.

## 'Socialist' paranoia

JJ's speeches over the loudspeakers were daily becoming longer - and more strident. He would denounce the 'traitors' who were abandoning the Temple. Threats were now openly being made: 'there is only one punishment for treason: death'. 'Enemies of the Temple' were being rooted out everywhere. Equivocations would not be tolerated. 'Whoever is not with us is against us'. Paranoia and delusions intertwined. He (JJ) 'was the reincarnation of Lenin and of Jesus Christ'. He had 'friends and contacts' throughout the world, including 'the leaders of the USSR and Idi Amin'.

Several times he broached the theme of 'a collective suicide to bring socialism into the world'. Meanwhile, armed guards (30 by day and 15 by night) would constantly surround the camp.

Jones was nothing if not logical. Once a week there was a dress rehearsal for the mass suicide. These were on the so-called 'white nights'. 'The situation is hopeless', he would proclaim. 'Our only choice is a collective suicide for the glory of socialism'. The congregation would then line up and each be given a glass full of a red fluid. 'In forty minutes', Jones would entone, 'you will all be dead'. 'Now empty your glasses'. Everybody did. Describing the night she first witnessed this ritual, Deborah Layton - a 19 year old member of Jones' Inner Circle (and one of the eventual survivors) - said: 'we all went through with it without a protest. We were exhausted. We couldn't react to anything'.

People who have been through the harrowing experience of life in some of the 'left' sects at times of 'crisis' will know exactly what she meant. Emotionally and physically exhausted people can vote that black is white without batting an eyelid. Nor is such irrationality necessarily confined to small groups. The manipulated 'confessions in the long term interests of the Revolution' of some of the old Bolsheviks during the Moscow Trials contained several similar ingredients.

Deborah Layton managed to get herself transferred from Jonestown to Georgetown, where she defected. She turned up in San Francisco. Her stories, initially disbelieved, were eventually listened to by Leo Ryan, congressman for San Mateo.

## The climax

We are now approaching the climax. Ryan wrote to Jones saying that some of his (Ryan's) constituents had 'expressed anxiety' about relatives in the colony and that he intended to visit the place. Back came a testy letter from the Temple's attorney Mark Lane, implying that Ryan was engaging in a witchhunt. If this continued, Lane said, the Peoples Temple might have to move to either of two countries that do not have 'friendly relations' with the USA (he meant Russia and Cuba). This would prove 'most embarrassing' for the USA. Ryan decided to go to Guyana all the same, with eight newsmen. After much humming and hawing Lane eventually joined the group.

The rest of the story is fairly well known: the arrival of Ryan's party at the commune, the 'show' put on for them, the messages slipped surreptitiously into the hands of the visitors, Jones' fury when 14 of his congregation asked to return to the USA, the unsuccessful knife attack on Ryan by cult member Don Sly, the journey back to Kaituma with an impostor planted among the 'defectors', the hastily conceived and partly botched up attack on Ryan's party at the airstrip (Ryan and four others were killed, but one of the two aircrafts got away), and Jones' final decision on the 'mass suicide' when news reached him that the attack had failed and that a major crisis now really confronted him.

The deaths themselves were well described by Odell Rhodes, a survivor, in the Los Angeles Times of November 25. 'Generally there was no panic or emotional outburst. People stood in line to swallow

the poison ... a lot of people walked around like they were in a trance'. The camp's doctor and nurses brought out several large plastic vessels containing fruit-punch laced with cyanide. 'They would draw up an amount into syringes. Babies and children went first. A nurse or someone would put (the syringe) into a person's mouth and the people would simply swallow it down'. Rhodes escaped by slipping through a ring of armed guards into the jungle. Asked why the cultists had meekly gone to their deaths, Rhodes said 'some of these people were with Jimmy Jones for 10 or 20 years. They wouldn't know what to do with themselves without him'.

So much for the story itself - which had to be told. Even if sundry leftists or third-worldist do-gooders scream! Even in the context of contemporary 'socialist' political scholarship where, in the words of Revel (The Totalitarian Temptation, Penguin, 1978) 'to suppress evidence seems to be the normal way of showing which side one is on'.





## PART II

### What do sects provide?

Throughout history religious or political faiths have exercised great influence. They have moved armies and motivated people to build both cathedrals and concentration camps. Their success had had very little to do with whether they were 'true' or not. The fact that thousands (or millions) believed in them made of them real historical and social forces.

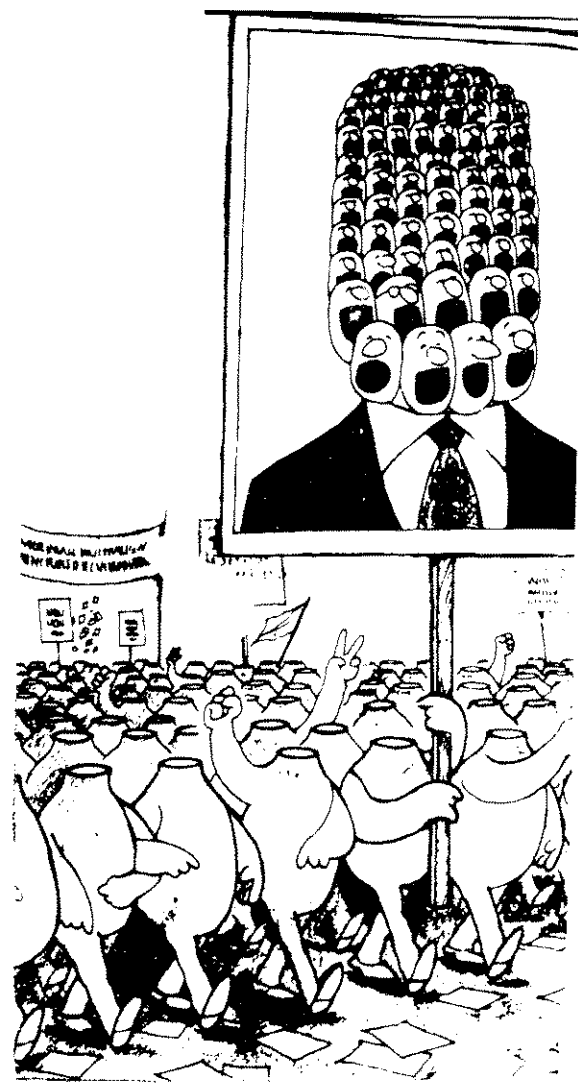
Religious or political faiths (and the Jonestown events show that the boundaries may be hard to define) have several things in common. They can provide, for the emotionally or materially deprived, the lonely, the rejected (or - less often - the culturally alienated or intellectually confused) the security of human contact, the satisfaction of an activity that seems socially useful, and the self-generating warmth of knowing all the answers, i. e. of a closed system of beliefs. These beliefs diminish, in those who hold them, the awareness of 'failure' or of rejection - or the feeling of being useless. They are potent analgesics. And they offer positive objectives, either through instant political solutions in this world, or through solutions in the hereafter (pie in the sky). In a society which either callously disregards (or just bureaucratically forgets) the very existence of thousands of its citizens, claims to make existence meaningful evoke an echo. Sects (i. e. groups based on cults) may come to fill an enormous vacuum in people's lives.

Most people are much happier in a situation where they are needed, wanted and accepted for what they are, not condemned and looked down upon for not being what they are not. We all like to act in a manner that is rational and that fulfils both one's own needs and those of others. The tragedy is that political and religious sects may convert these positive human attributes into their opposites: manipulation and authoritarian dogmatism on the part of the leaders, submission and the abdication of critical faculties on the part of the led.

### Sects in history

Historically, cults and sects have usually flourished at times of social crisis, when old value systems were collapsing and new ones had not yet asserted themselves. They usually start as small groups which break off from the conventional consensus and espouse very different views of the real, the possible and the moral. They have attracted very diverse followings and achieved very variable results. Christianity started as a religion of slaves. In The Pursuit of the Millenium, Norman Cohn shows how, many centuries later, 'the people for whom (the Medieval Millenium) had most appeal were neither peasants, firmly integrated into the life of the village, nor artisans integrated into their guilds. The belief in the Millenium drew its strength from a population living on the margin of society'. The New England Puritans conformed at one time to the norms of a harsh age by imprisoning and torturing their own dissidents. They later became respectable. So did the Mormon followers of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. Marxism arose as a theory that would liberate a proletariat that had 'nothing to lose but its chains', and has ended up imposing chains on the proletariat. The followers of the Peoples Temple (mainly poor blacks and alienated young whites) have made history by inaugurating the 'mass revolutionary suicide'. Cults can clearly mature into mainstream institutions. Or disintegrate into jungle horror stories.

A detailed analysis of cults would require an analysis of their rhetoric and ideology, and of the culture matrices in which they are embedded. The present appeal of cults is related to the major upheaval of our times. This is not primarily economic. Referring to the Jonestown events an American sociologist has written: 'The US consensus of values has broken down. There is, in some respects, an undermined authority in philosophy and theology. There is the demise of metaphysics... there is no "rock in a weary land" that gives people something certain to hold onto. So people reach out and grab at anything: an idea or an organisation. When traditional answers seem inadequate, people are ripe for cults that promise prescriptions for a better life. Most cults offer three benefits: ultimate meaning, a strong sense of community and rewards either in this world or the next. When those prescriptions are linked to the authoritarian style of a charismatic leader you have an extremely powerful antidote to the cultural malaise of what sociologists call anomie (rootlessness, aimlessness). (Los Angeles Times, December 1, 1978.)



Specific ingredients to disaffection from established society had welled up in the 1960's and early 1970's. There had been the expansion of an unpopular war in South East Asia, massive upheavals over civil rights and a profound crisis of values in response to the unusual combination of unprecedented affluence on the one hand, and potential thermonuclear holocaust on the other. Revolutionary socialists - the whole axis of their propaganda vitiated by their erroneous analyses of capitalism and their distorted vision of socialism - had proved quite unable to make any lasting impact.

## Black separatism

Predominantly black organisations such as the Peoples Temple have, moreover, deep roots in the very fabric of American society and of American history. Before the Civil War there had already been 3 separate attempts by US blacks to flee racial persecution. The first was initiated by a black seaman, Paul Cuffee, in 1815; the second by a black physician, Martin Delaney, in 1850; and the third by a black minister, the Rev. Henry Highland Garnet, in 1855. All were designed to lead blacks to a world of peace and freedom by inciting them to make a mass exodus either to Africa or to the West Indies. The appeals proved most attractive to the most exploited and dispossessed. This separatism was often cloaked in religious cloth. But it was the bitter racism and socio-economic oppression experienced by the black masses in the post-Reconstruction South, rather than religious exhortation, that led so many blacks to support the cause of emigration.

This was also true of the largest mass black separation movement of this century, Marcus Garvey's 'Back to Africa' movement of the 1920's. Calling his movement 'Black Zionism', Garvey skillfully used symbols (flags, uniforms and other regalia) and highly emotional rhetoric to fire his followers. In the end thousands of enthusiasts lost money, suffered broken promises and became victims of outright fraud. Father Divine had been inspired by Garvey. And Jim Jones was inspired by Father Divine.

As Earl Ofari points out in an article in the International Herald Tribune (Dec. 9, 1978) 'the willingness of a sizeable segment of blacks to embrace movements that have run the gammut from "Back to Africa" to Peoples Temple stands as a reflection of their utter desperation. The lesson, surely, is not that cults hold a particular fascination for blacks but that the most deprived members of US society - those who see the least hope of making it within the system - are the easiest prey for charlatans preaching that Paradise lies just over some falsely technicolored rainbow'. This is clearly true: oppressed whites have also sought refuge in 'solutions' of this kind. And it is a powerful rebuke to those trendy radicals (usually guilt-laden middle class individuals) who seem to think that oppression is good for you, that it somehow guarantees revolutionary purity.

## The Californian background

The state of California was also part of the cultural matrix of the Peoples Temple. It has established a questionable claim to fame as the cult centre of the world. Richard Mathison (author of 'Faiths, Cults and Sects of America') points out that 'as the tide of seers, prophets, mystics and gurus came to this natural haven for the dis-

enfranchised and the uprooted, they grew to be accepted as no less a part of the landscape than eucalyptus or foot-long hotdogs'.

Over the years California has spawned nearly every variant of cultic fraud. Between the wars it produced the 'Mighty I am' movement. Guy Ballard (an unemployed paper hanger) claimed he had been visited on Mt. Shasta by a vision of the legendary Count of St. Germain, an 18th century mystic. The Count gave Ballard a sip of 'pure electronic essence' and a wafer of 'concentrated energy' (the religious symbolism, in modern garb, is here very clear) and told him to get rich. It worked! By the time the dust settled in the 1940's Ballard claimed 350,000 followers and the Internal Revenue claimed he'd bilked his disciples of some \$4 million.

Joe Bell, a post-depression dandy, founded Mankind United by preaching that a race of little men with metal heads who lived in the centre of the earth would tell cultists what to do through his revelations. Bell ended up claiming a quarter of a million gullible followers who mortgaged homes and sold other belongings before he was grounded in a maze of legal problems.

In more recent times there have been the (not specifically Californian) examples of Ron Hubbard's Church of Scientology, of the Unification Church of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, of Chuck Dederich's Synanon, of the Divine Light Mission, of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness ... to mention only some of the 'religious' cults. Recent estimates claim that more than 2 million Americans - mostly between the ages of 18 and 25 - are affiliated to cults. And this doesn't include those affiliated to various 'political' cults. ('Psyching out the Cults Collective Mania', Los Angeles Times, Nov. 26, 1978.)

## Fulfilment and rationality

The key thing to grasp about cults is that they offer a 'fulfilment' of unmet needs. Biologically speaking such needs (to be loved and protected, understood and valued) are something much older and deeper than the need to think, argue or act autonomously. They play a far deeper role than 'rationality' in the moulding of behaviour. People who haven't grasped this will never understand the tenacity with which the beliefs of certain cults are clung to, the way otherwise intelligent people get caught up in them, their imperviousness to rational disproof, or the organisational loyalties of various sect members. The surrender of individual judgment is one of the hallmarks of a 'well integrated' sect member.

LETTER IN LOS ANGELES TIMES Dec. 5, 1978.

In his column McCarthy says: 'Don't try to explain it'. There is an explanation and there is a way to armor our children against fanatic leaders.

We must rear our children to value autonomy, to question authority, all authority. We must see to it that children trust themselves, not any cult, not any panacea.

We must foster independence as a goal, we must not lead children to believe anyone has all the answers. Father doesn't know best - whether the child's own or Jim Jones.

Florence Maxwell Brogdon,  
Culver City.

Jim Jones was called 'Father' or 'Dad' by his devotees. The poor blacks of the Jonestown commune hadn't just 'given up their self' to their charismatic father. Such were the physical, emotional and social deprivations they had grown up in that they had very little 'self' to surrender. And that 'self', such as it was, seemed to them of little relevance in changing their circumstances or the world they lived in. Some young middle class whites in the commune were prepared to surrender their 'self' in exchange for an emotional feedback they had lacked in earlier life. Others had already surrendered their 'self' to their parents. In joining the Temple they had merely found a new repository for it.

But the twisted and manipulatory demagogues who lead various fascist and leninist cults are also - at least to begin with - pathetic individuals. They too are often the products of distorted backgrounds. They seek to blot out the intolerable parts of their life, first through the manipulation and later through the control of the lives of others. The needs of follower and leader feed insatiably upon one another. The relationship is symbiotic: each needs the other. Both seek instant, effortless, ready made solutions, rather than the achievement of understanding, which is a pre-condition for real action for change. Human beings often feel vaguely guilty about not knowing THE TRUTH. When a gifted, persuasive leader comes along who says he has it - and who presents it in a simple and easy manner (even if it is a delusional system) people will listen. They will accept some things about which they have reservations, because they perceive that the Leader has 'good' answers about other things.

Arthur Janov, author of 'The New Consciousness' and of 'Primal Man', points out that 'the surrender of the self, of judgment, of feeling, has taken place long before the outward appearances of a cult become bizarre'. In an otherwise excellent article on Cults and

the Surrender of Judgment' (International Herald Tribune, Dec. 2, 1978) he fails however to stress the specificity of the Jonestown events. This wasn't a rational decision like the mass suicide at Masada. (3) It was not culturally motivated like Saipan. (4) It didn't even resemble the fate of the Old Believers. (5) What happened during those last grizzly hours in the Guyana commune was something historically new, a typical product of our time: the era of propaganda and of the loudspeaker, of brainwashing and of totalitarian ideologies.

## On Temples: religious or revolutionary

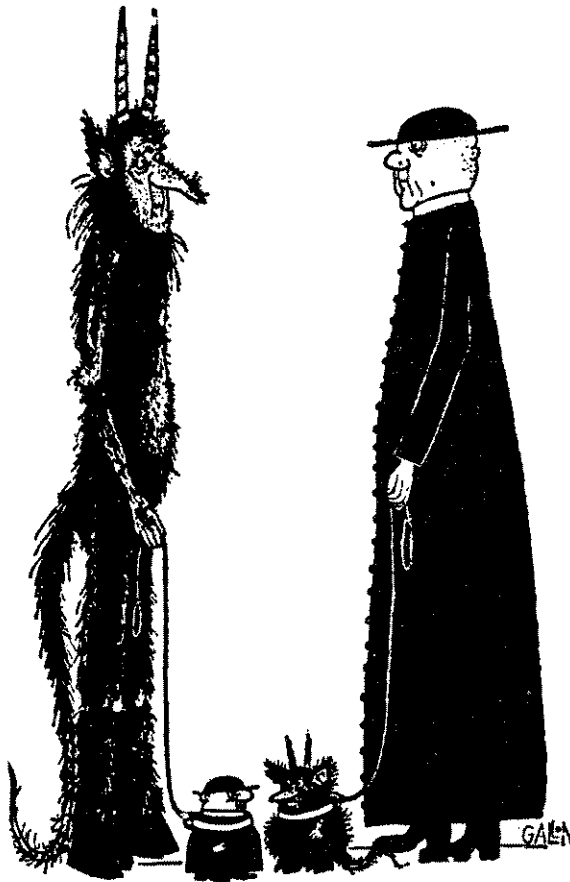
Sects like the Peoples Temple - or certain revolutionary groups - offer more immediate solutions than the more abstract religions, or than the more rational and self-managed forms of political radicalism. They don't only offer a new super-family, a new group of people to hold onto, to support one. The main attraction is that the cult leader is real, visible, tangible. He may promote you - or shout at you, abuse you, even spit at you. His sanctity or political omniscience (and I say 'his' deliberately, for most popes or general secretaries have almost universally been male) provide a spurious antidote to the malaise of rootlessness. 'Join me' the Leader says (for most sects are actively proselytising agencies) 'for I am the one who knows. 'Come to my Church (or become a member of my revolutionary organisation). For I am the one and only interpreter of the word of God (or of the course of history). Find with us a purpose for your useless life. Become one of the Chosen People (or a Cadre of the Revolution)'

We are not saying that all revolutionary groups (or not even that all those we disagree with most strongly)

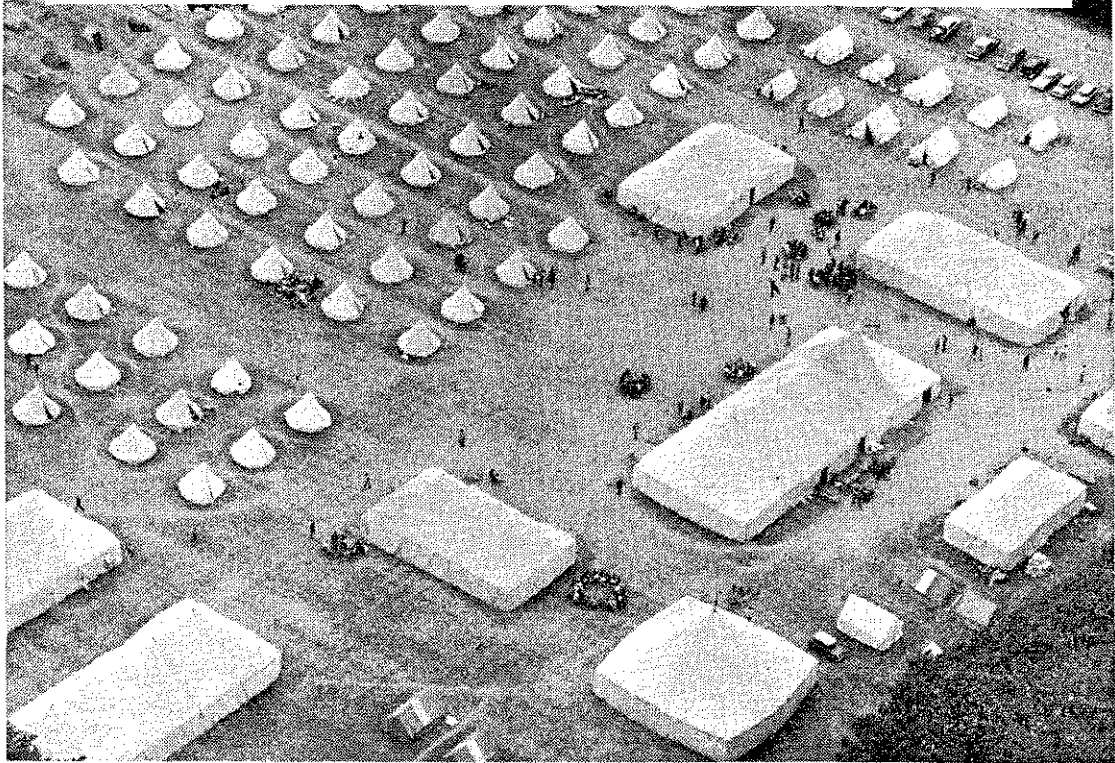
(3) In 73 A.D., after a prolonged siege, 960 Jewish men and women besieged by the Romans for over a year decided, after full discussion, that mass suicide was preferable to surrender. This decision was taken despite the fact that it constituted a transgression of the Jewish religious code. Another Jewish leader (Yoseph ben Matatyahw, later known as Flavius Josephus) had been trapped on another hill, some years earlier. He took the opposite decision... and lived to record the Masada events.

(4) During the US invasion of the South Seas Island of Saipan during World War II, Japanese officers used their Samurai swords to behead dozens, if not hundreds of their compliant troops. Other soldiers obeyed orders to jump off cliffs into the sea. This event was an integral part of a culture where dishonour was deemed worse than death.

(5) During the second half of the 17th century the Old Believers broke from the Russian Orthodox Church and were later threatened by the official Church with reconversion by decree. 'Thousands burned themselves alive. They assembled in log huts, churches and other buildings, mostly in the northern regions of European Russia. They would ignite the buildings and perish. They felt it was far better to die in flames than to burn eternally in Hell by accepting what they perceived as an heretical church'. (see Frazer's 'The Golden Bough').



July 1972: Trotskyists (SLL brand) under canvas at St. Lawrence Bay, Southminster, Essex.



are like the Peoples Temple. But who - in all honesty - can fail to see occasional disturbing similarities? Who does not know of marxist sects which resemble the Temple - in terms of the psychological atmosphere pervading them? (6) Surviving members of the Japanese Red Army Fraction or ex-members of the Socialist Labour League (now WRP) who got out in time need not answer these questions!

'The less justified a man is in claiming excellence for his own self, the more ready he is to claim it for his Nation., his Race or his Holy Cause'.

Eric Hoffer in 'The True Believer'.

P.S. Same, no doubt, applies to women!

In such organisations the Leader may become more and more authoritarian and paranoid. If he has achieved institutional power he may kill, torture or excommunicate (Stalin, Torquemada) increasing numbers of his co-thinkers. Or he may order them 'shot like partridges'. If he is a 'leftist' authoritarian devoid - as yet - of the state power he is seeking, he will merely expel large numbers of his deviant followers. Deviance - above all - cannot be tolerated. Such men would rather live in a world peopled with heretics and renegades, and keep the total allegiance of those who remain. One even wonders whether (unlike most of their supporters) they still believe in what they preach - or whether the maintenance of their power has not become their prime concern. Jim Jones' rantings about defectors and

Why didn't more people leave Jonestown? It was because they would again be left without hope. This was at least as potent a motive for staying as were the stories spread by Jones and his inner clique that there would be no point in seeking help in Georgetown, for the Peoples Temple had its agents there too... who would 'get them'. Even when Ryan and his team visited the commune, only 14 out of over 900 members said they wanted to leave. To many, the figure seems trivial. To Jones it spelt catastrophe.

Many sects live in political isolation. This is a further mechanism for ensuring the control of the leaders. The members are not only 'rescued' from their past, they are 'protected' from their own present. Such sects refrain from anything that would bring their members into too close a proximity with the outside world. Recruitment is encouraged, but closely monitored. Members are urged to give up their hobbies and their previous friends. Such external relationships are constantly scrutinised, questioned, frowned upon, deemed suspect. United action with other groups - of a kind that may involve discussion or argument - is avoided, or only allowed to 'trustworthy' leaders. The simplest course is to move, lock, stock and barrel, to the jungles of Guyana. In such an environment, after surrendering their passports and all their worldly possessions, the members would be totally dependent on the leaders for their news, their day-to-day needs, for the very content of their thoughts.

Open, non-authoritarian organisations encourage individuality and differences of opinion. But criticism