

# Tablet

## The Story of O.

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One evening in the later months of 1982, a young bakery manager, machinist, and political organizer named Alexandra Stein parked her car on a seedy side street in Minneapolis then quietly walked up the block to a rundown duplex building. Although she had been living on this street for over a year, she had never visited this particular house before, nor even known of its existence. Upon arrival, she slipped into the living room and found five chairs arranged in a circle, four of them occupied by people she knew and one of them reserved for her.

This was no ordinary social visit: Stein had been summoned here for an “ideological hearing” (similar to what in other extremist political groups has been called a “struggle session”) conducted by fellow members of a political cult called simply “the O.” Previously known as the “C.O.,” for “Cooperative Organization,” it had first taken shape in the mid-1970s as a militant Marxist reading group that attempted to infiltrate and commandeer the Midwestern food co-op movement, before going deep underground. By the time Alexandra joined in 1980, the O. was fanatically secretive. While the cult’s members rarely met, and communicated with code names, all of their activities, from work to travel to sex, were directed by an unnamed hidden ringleader by means of typed, unsigned memos delivered through an internal mail system. The ideological hearing that Alexandra joined on this autumn evening was unusual in that more than three O. members gathered together in a single room.

As outlandish as it may sound at first, the O. is significant today as a historical touchstone for the emergence of a conformist and totalizing mindset among the white-collar middle class. Secretive and extremist groups, which flourished in the 1970s and ’80s, adapted a set of classic social-control techniques to the manipulation of idealistic activists entering the managerial workforce. Blending social-justice and pseudo-therapeutic language, the management strategies they pioneered carried over into the service industries, academia, and the growing nonprofit-industrial complex. For example, Christian Parenti has shown that one of the most common exercises found in diversity and social-justice seminars, the degrading and objectifying “privilege walk,” originated in 1980s workshops run by members of the Re-Evaluation Counseling Communities, a Seattle-based cult patterned on Scientology and using a thinly veiled knockoff of L. Ron Hubbard’s “Dianetics.”

What is more, in the current century, the social surveillance and control fostered by political and self-help cults has come to pervade the wider public discourse. In the current pressure-cooker environment, speech taboos multiply, and once-ordinary terms and habits become the bases for accusations of an expanding array of heresies, from “ableism” to “misogynoir.” Social media,

meanwhile, serve as platforms for constant cycles of denunciation, confession, and social banishment. As a result, over the past decade, polemicists have increasingly complained of a “woke” or “leftist” zealotry seizing the levers of power, loosely referring to its adherents as members of a “cult.” These critics have a valid point, but amid their hyperbolic rhetoric, they have failed to follow through on the comparison, and so have ignored the basic instrumental function of woke language—namely, that it enables a largely invisible elite of owners and employers to extract labor and compliance from the managerial class.

Contemporary critics of the “woke ideology” often seek to trace its origins to the influence of long-dead social theorists, from Hegel to Foucault. In response, the defenders of social-justice ideals counter that to be “woke” once meant merely to be vigilant and alert to injustice, as in blues singer Lead Belly’s admonition to “stay woke.” Both arguments, however, are preoccupied with the intellectual genealogy of terms and concepts, while ignoring the concrete practices of social control that link historical cults to modern-day labor management. Wokeness today is not at root a set of ideas or doctrines, but a style of social interaction that serves to enforce conformity and compliance.

It should hardly need to be said that cults have leaders, who tend to use common strategies for recruiting and manipulating members, such as isolation and alternating rounds of flattery and humiliation. They separate their followers from outsiders and often exploit them for money, sex, or power. The O. in 1980s Minneapolis stands out as an instance of a group whose leader remained anonymous and controlled his followers through elaborate bureaucratic procedures; it was, one might say, a cult of impersonality, and thus a preview of woke labor management. Its methods are unusually well-documented due to the disclosures of Alexandra Stein, a former member who escaped the group in 1991 and later published *Inside Out: A Memoir of Entering and Breaking Out of a Minneapolis Political Cult*.

Stein’s recollections reveal how the O. played upon both the altruistic ideals and the inflated self-importance of young, mostly white activists. Raised in a Jewish family in South Africa and London, Stein migrated to California in the 1970s in order to engage in working-class community organizing, and she moved to Minnesota in 1980 to join the O. in hopes of helping to foment a workers revolution. The group shuffled aspiring radicals among various industries and businesses, several of them owned by cult members, supposedly in order to “develop” their practical skills and their ideological purity as members of the revolutionary vanguard. Their work was “preparation for cadre life,” and according to cult functionaries, “production was the key to development.” Using this pretext, the O. leader and his deputies demanded long hours of labor as well as money, which members were told to “centralize” or contribute to the cult. Stein recalls her O. comrade Jerri waking early after only four hours of sleep to type endless internal reports for the O., going into an office job in the day, eating hasty suppers in the kitchen standing up, and then changing clothes to rush to a second job in the evening. At one point, Stein’s boyfriend (paired with her by the O.) was directed to visit his grandmother in West Virginia and ask for a loan of \$5,000, which he immediately “centralized.” The cult evidently knew no limits in exploiting its followers’ idealism and feelings of guilt in order to maximize productivity: In August, 1982, after Alexandra learned that her close friend’s mother, the renowned anti-apartheid journalist Ruth First, had been killed by a government letter bomb, Stein’s main

handler, an officious taskmaster named Debbie, urged the grief-stricken Stein to keep working, saying, “you must continue the struggle for her, for your friend, mustn’t you?”

What is more, the events leading to Alexandra Stein’s ideological hearing later in that same year illustrate how easily certain strategies of control can transfer from cults to the workplace. Most new members of the O., after a probationary period working in manual jobs to prove their commitment, were then moved into white-collar careers; Alexandra and most of her cohorts were directed to become computer programmers. After initial training, Stein’s contacts assigned her to work at the People’s Nutritional Bakery, a whole-grain bread producer that members of the O. had taken over years earlier. Alexandra would manage their transition to computerized scheduling, which would track the manual workers’ every action. She was disturbed to see the low pay and harsh conditions under which the workers toiled, but the O. discouraged personal interactions with them, since this would supposedly cloud the cult members’ “objectivity.”

While Stein was still recovering from the news of Ruth First’s assassination, the lawyers on the bakery’s board of directors (all of them O. members) decided to massively expand operations with the aim of cornering the whole-grain market in the Twin Cities. As part of the transformation, the bakery would legally reorganize as a co-op. While this might have seemed to be to the workers’ benefit, in fact it shifted risks and burdens, such as the responsibility of paying the 7% payroll tax, from the business owners to the workers themselves, just as the bakery was about to enter a volatile period; Stein understood the reshuffle to be “a con.” Nonetheless, she helped to stage-manage the announcement of the change and to squelch opposition:

Everything was planned out to the minutest detail. The workers were assessed as to their possible responses; strategies and tactics were in place to isolate the dissidents and to support those who would stay. It was expected that some would react and they would be encouraged to leave as soon as possible, or they would simply be fired.

At the compulsory employee meeting, two lawyers from the board gave a presentation full of buzzwords like “opportunity”; Stein recalls that “the bakery workers looked as cynical and suspicious as I felt as we heard the starry-eyed, deeply sincere presentations of Cindy and Debbie.” The scene from that basement meeting ought to sound eerily familiar to white-collar managers in the business and nonprofit world of today, who are so often called upon to sugarcoat the bitter pill of organizational restructuring with trite catchphrases gleaned from management seminars. However, the story of the People’s Nutritional Bakery (which soon after crashed and burned) also raises the question why Alexandra played along, even as she saw through the hollow promises of the reorganization.

The answer to this question, in short, is that Stein had already been subject to two years of the same sort of management and conditioning to which she then helped to subject the manual workers. This conditioning is what made the O. such an effective model of social control: Independent moral judgment is difficult to assert within a closed social group, and specific practices in the O. made it practically impossible.

Members, upon joining, were subjected to a pseudo-psychological “assessment” that identified their ingrained ideological flaws (or in group lingo, their “Primary Internal Contradiction” or

“PIC”) and prescribed various regimens to “struggle with their bourgeois side.” The members were required to perform constant self-analysis and to confess their failings in weekly or even daily “summaries” of their activities. The practice appealed to their narcissism and self-importance at the same time that it transformed these feelings into shame and self-doubt. In the case of Stein, the group leaders labeled her as a “male chauvinist” because of her father’s supposed influence. They also astutely identified her pattern of flitting from one project to the next without long-term commitment, and they played upon this perceived inadequacy to pressure her to remain in the O. The pervasive criticism of members’ flaws and weaknesses alternated with approval: Soon after her “assessment,” the memo instructing Stein to study computer programming commended her “commitment and willingness to struggle to transform your Bourgeois World Outlook and your PIC.”

On those occasions when dissent did arise within the O., the group’s leaders and members enforced conformity by deflecting criticism back onto the critic. Alexandra had learned this pattern very early on. When, in her first months in the O., she had worked at a cult-owned bookstore, she observed the poor management and lack of initiative on the part of store managers. She had her concerns placed on a meeting agenda, but when the topic came up, the chair merely turned the scrutiny onto Alexandra herself, announcing coldly, using Stein’s code name, “it is seen that it is more important to discuss Claire’s practice rather than allowing ourselves to become distracted by her criticisms of the program. She does not have the basis or the history of practice here to be able to contribute significantly until she has examined her own practice.” In time, Stein learned that, in her words,

Criticism of the O. was always diverted. This was true with an awesome consistency. The only criticisms that were allowed (in fact, encouraged) were those against other individual members. ... Soon I learned the important lesson that the more I criticized the O., the more I was criticized myself. I took this lesson to heart, not in a conscious way, but deeply nonetheless.

Two years later, as Alexandra was drawn into the bakery reorganization, she knew to expect the same response. When she complained to her closest associates, Jerri and her boyfriend, Ted, that she couldn’t see how their activities at the bakery could possibly constitute a political act, she was told vaguely to “summarize” more and “examine her practice.” Finally, in her frustration, Stein wrote a memo back to the anonymous leader, complaining of the poor treatment of the bakery workers and suggesting that she take a temporary break from the O. This brought the conflict to a head, leading to the “ideological hearing” at the secret cult-owned house up the street. The other members demeaned and humiliated her, accusing her of selfishness and of being too naive to grasp the “essence” of their mission. Debbie challenged her, “can you say you’ve really internalized your assessment?” The two women eventually came to an impasse, with Stein insisting on moving out on her own temporarily.

This clandestine meeting in the fall of 1982 illustrates the wide range of strategies that the O. could use to manipulate its members. From appeals to altruism and guilt they might escalate to shame, humiliation, and ultimately fear: The group could always threaten ostracism (or possibly worse). Even as Alexandra resolved upon distancing herself from the O., she still knew that she would ultimately return: A break with the organization would leave her socially and economically isolated, alienated from her romantic partner, her home, her job, and her only

friends and associates in the state. What is more, the O. gave her a sense of purpose in the world without which she feared she would be forever adrift: “God knows I didn’t want to be cut out into the galaxies, a lost star wandering in the universe, unattached and hopeless.” After moving to her own flat, Alexandra felt not liberated but “stranded; helpless and alone ... wanting still, in a desperate way, to dedicate my life, to feel myself useful and not useless; to feel myself significant.”

At this point, while some readers may feel sympathy for Stein’s situation, they may also wonder what any of this has to do with “wokeness.” After all, most subscribers to contemporary social-justice ideals do not belong to any closed, exclusive group like Stein’s, and, additionally, the O. was putatively Marxist and made little appeal to identity politics. Nevertheless, there are several important points of commonality linking the woke landscape of today with cults of the late Cold War period. These include the obsession with one’s own internal psychology, to the point of elevating it to the central theater of struggle; the striving for an unattainable perfection of the self, fueling endless rounds of confession and self-criticism; and the rapid proliferation of jargon, code words, and obscure acronyms, which both separate the initiates from outsiders and keep the adherents perpetually off balance and confused.

All of these patterns and practices are encapsulated in the book that is probably the epitome of the woke lit genre: Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility*. DiAngelo describes herself as a “consultant and trainer on issues of racial and social justice,” and the book is the outcome of her experience presiding over the most central and defining ritual of woke management: the diversity training. Typically, this ritual, enforced upon white-collar workers by upper management, empowers consultants to expound upon theories of society that necessarily imply that most of the workers are guilty of or complicit in racial oppression. For instance, although DiAngelo herself never clearly defines racism, she states unequivocally that all white people are “socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we either are not aware of or can never admit to ourselves,” and further, that no possible personal background or actions “exempt you from the forces of racism, because no aspect of society is outside these forces.” Here is the same strange blend of politics and pop psychology that cults like the O. use to induce anxiety and shame.

The accusatory style of this rhetoric often evokes negative responses, such as skepticism, counterarguments, or in some cases, expressions of anger or defensiveness. The book begins with a vignette in which DiAngelo has been hired by employers to lead a room full of workers in a “dialogue about race.” This supposed “dialogue” begins, as in a political cult meeting, with pronouncements from definition: “I have just presented a definition of racism that includes the acknowledgment that whites hold social and institutional power over people of color.” In DiAngelo’s estimation, the room “is filled with tension and charged with hostility”—one man objects, striking his fist on the table. However, rather than consider that these negative reactions indicate a flaw in her approach, DiAngelo turns all criticisms back onto the workers themselves. This is because her job, at base, is not to change anyone’s mind, but rather to make workers feel embarrassed and insecure, thus exerting pressure to work harder and keep their heads down. Her own paychecks come from the executive suite.

When objections do arise in her workshops, DiAngelo, like the functionaries in the O., draws from her grab bag of heresies and mental flaws in order to psychologize dissent. In fact, the book

itself forms one massive exercise in pathologizing disagreement: The term “white fragility” itself is a way to cast any objection to the employer-backed program as a sign of moral failure. DiAngelo repeats this strategy throughout the book, as when she condemns “individualism” as a prop of white supremacy. Thus when one worker argues that some white people, such as Italian Americans, have experienced discrimination, she dismisses his complaint as “an all-too-common example of individualism.” This comment is chillingly reminiscent of conversations in the O., such as when Stein complained to Debbie that all criticisms of the O. were always turned back upon the critic, to which Debbie gave the sneering rejoinder, “there is your idealism coming out.”

At the heart of both political cult rituals and the diversity training racket is the conviction that all participants suffer from incurable ideological failings, with which they must contend in a literally endless cycle of confession and penance.

Moreover, Alexandra’s book contains hints that suggest that the O. may have played a direct role in the instrumentalization of cult social-control techniques for a wider market. When, in 1990, Alexandra confronted Debbie over the apparent uselessness of the group’s activities, Debbie insisted that the O.’s “internal transformation process” was the group’s “special contribution” to the world and implied that they intended to market it as a product to other organizations.

Of course, contemporary woke language is awash in New Left identity politics, which is very scarce in the language of the O., which instead is a heady blend of Maoism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and self-help lingo. Already in Stein’s book, however, there are hints that late-Cold-War radicalism could morph into the identitarian obsessions of our present age. For instance, the conflict between Alexandra and Debbie came to a head in 1990, with Stein demanding democratization and transparency in the O. Debbie, foreseeably, told Stein to redouble her efforts at internal transformation, and in addition, she tried out an unusual tactic by invoking what Stein called “the white guilt trip.” Debbie referred to various times in the past when white activists had sold out their African American allies, and told Stein, “that is what you are leading up to: you will betray the only force in the white left that has consistently been using the Tools to dismantle bourgeois ideology.” Stein notes that this was out of character for the O., but the background of this conversation was the fall of the Eastern bloc and the discrediting of Soviet communism, which prompted many wavering Marxists to turn toward a more identity-based philosophy.

Indeed, the pairing of social-control techniques with identitarian rather than Marxist rhetoric was a key innovation—one that allowed these techniques to be marketed to employers throughout the white-collar economy. Diversity trainings had originated back in the 1960s, following the Civil Rights Act, merely as a mode of showing compliance with anti-discrimination laws and protecting employers from liability. It was not until the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, that workplace trainings took on a more moralistic tone. The great success of *White Fragility* reflects the degree to which the middle-class public, by the 2010s, had already been primed to accept employers as judges of moral and political rectitude. The aim of such moral education is not to combat racism—experiments have shown that lecturing people about “white privilege” does not increase their compassion for minorities, but only discourages compassion toward poor white people. Rather, the object is to inspire shame, distrust, and ultimately fear—of social ostracism

and unemployment. (This stands in contrast with the two institutions—unions and the military—that effectively break down racial prejudice by demanding solidarity among their members.)

Alexandra's fight with Debbie hastened her exit from the group. In the early 1990s, she became aware of the social-science literature on cults and came to see the O. as one of them. She attended support groups of cult escapees, and found many similarities between her group and right-wing fundamentalist sects and self-improvement cults like EST and the Forum. Eventually, she learned of the existence of other leftist extremist cults, such as the Democratic Workers' Party, most of them based in California, and all of them using the strategies of isolation, mystification, and ritualized humiliation that made the O. run.

Finally, former members of the O. pointed her toward the origins of the group itself and the identity of its shadowy leader. He was a generally mysterious man named Theophilus "Theo" Smith, born in Mississippi, who claimed to have been active in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the '60s. After a brief involvement in the union movement in Detroit, he appeared, in 1973, for reasons unknown (perhaps, as former O. members guessed, as part of a COINTELPRO op), at a communal organic farm in Wisconsin. Here, he assembled his reading group and manipulated them with flattery and humiliation, then used them, under the title "Co-op Organization," to infiltrate and seize control of the multiplying food co-ops around the Twin Cities.

Their campaign was violent, involving physical attacks and threats. In the recent documentary *Co-Op Wars*, witnesses recall members of the C.O. invading a committee meeting at the People's Warehouse in Minneapolis, brandishing lead pipes, with one of them declaring, "it's time for some Third World leadership!" The director of one co-op store who resisted their measures had his car firebombed. Eventually, the C.O. lost the struggle, and had to retreat to a few small storefronts. After 1976, they turned inward, as Theo undertook an "intensification campaign" and exerted ever tighter social and mental control over his followers; those who left were threatened and occasionally beaten with baseball bats. In the 1980s, though, Smith abandoned physical violence, as social manipulation was adequate to his ends. Ultimately, the sorcerer's greatest trick was to disappear. With no more than a few trusted deputies allowed to meet him or even to know his true name, Theo vanished into a bureaucratic mist.

Stein and two of her friends learned of the group's violent past and reappraised its authoritarian style, eventually resolving to leave. However, they shied away from recognizing outright the most painful reality: that the real purpose of the group to which they had given a decade of their lives, with all of its half-baked business ventures, was its leader's enrichment. In their joint letter of resignation, they stated that the O. "had become merely the organizational expression" of its leader, but in the letter and in her memoir, Stein fails to note how literally this was the case: The group's eventual moniker, "the O.," perfectly recreated the secretive ringleader's own name, "Theo." He had been hiding in plain sight all along.

In the same way, the leaders of the woke cult have also been hiding in plain sight. They are the owners of large businesses and organizations, who in turn fund bureaucrats and consultants to manage workers. Robin DiAngelo and her fellow pundits may be the high priests or the mystagogues of wokeness, but they are not the gods. Like Debbie in the O., they are apparatchiks

serving their bosses' interests. To ignore this fact is like imagining that because Theo was hidden, he did not exist; it is to view the woke system in truncated form, like the pyramid in the reverse of the Great Seal, with a gap beneath the hovering apex.

While it may seem odd when corporations or other powerful institutions use woke language in their efforts to suppress worker resistance, such as when REI begins its anti-union propaganda podcast with a Native land acknowledgement, this is not a perversion but a fulfillment of the rhetoric's basic function. Phrases like "woke corporatism" are thus redundant. Woke language aims at balkanizing workers and silencing demands from below, and in the current decade, we have seen it carry over into public and political debate through the channels of nonprofits and propaganda "think tanks"—such as when the president of the Peterson Institute, Adam Posen, declares at a Cato Institute event that the desire to revive manufacturing is merely an expression of "the fetish for keeping white males with low education in the powerful positions they are in."

In woke rhetoric, elites have found a useful tool of social control, effective in workplaces and, increasingly, in political debate. Like those sucked into the O., we would be fools to take woke rhetoric seriously, rather than seeing through it as part of a strategy of control and manipulation. It is up to those of us in the white-collar middle class to reject this ruse, to open our eyes to its true purpose, and to open our minds and arms to potential friends and allies, embracing all those who work and struggle for survival in an unequal world.