

ANALYSIS OF THE PEOPLES TEMPLE

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Practice theory, regardless of how well conceived, does not have the capability to “prove” the “cause” of social phenomena, least of all the deaths of more than 900 people in the Guyana jungle. But theory for practice does offer unique analytical insight into social action. My use of it here is to get a better understanding of the members of the Peoples Temple. From an organizer’s viewpoint, there are too many questions about them, about their behavior and action, which have not been answered systematically.

Why did they join the Peoples Temple and sign over their property and possessions? It is difficult to understand why Temple members agreed to end relationships with family and friends and why, later, they felt so vulnerable to outside groups. What was the relationship between accepting the organizer and leader, Rev. Jim Jones, as a deity, and the members allowing themselves to be psychologically and physically battered? Members worked under conditions of near-slavery, and yet, few left and reported the Temple’s activities to authorities. Perhaps the most troubling questions are about the final events in Guyana. Why did people agree to suicide rehearsals? Why did some commit suicide? And why did some murder others, including their own children?

There have been answers to these questions, but they have not been keyed to community organizing practice. The least valuable have been limited by a constricted view, seeing Jones *or* the Temple members as the cause of the extraordinary events that marked the organization’s life and death. Some writers ascribe superhuman, if perverse, powers to Jones; others perceive in the Temple membership some pathetic emotional or intellectual flaw. There is of course at least a particle of truth in both ideas. But both are basically fragmented and insufficient explanations. Much more valuable, although still lacking theoretical coherence for decisively informing organizing, are the insightful anecdotal accounts and persuasive historical views of the Temple.

The Peoples Temple experience, if it is to be demonstrably informative for everyday organizing, must be explained by the same systematic theory that guides day-to-day practice. It is in practice theory, geared to change-agentry and designed to illuminate recurring problems and tasks, that retrospective analysis can be achieved for organizers’ purposes. This is true because analysis must reveal not only what happened and why, but how: it is a search for the techniques, the practical arts—of social action and change.

For background we will selectively review the Peoples Temple story, focusing on strategic themes in Jones’ practices and the more enigmatic actions of the members, first in Northern California and later in Guyana.* The analysis that follows employs the social action dialectic and a number of learning, exchange, and reality construction principles.

Background

Jones was a gifted orator, with a well-modulated voice and a reassuring smile, unusually adept at gaining trust. There is unbroken agreement among observers that his practiced style of “active listening” and soft baritone voice—affecting sympathy and caring—were instrumental in recruiting new members. He actively sought out and applied his rhetorical skills to people with histories of oppression and deprivation. Black people with low incomes, former prostitutes and drug addicts, etc., made up the majority of the

membership. Once their induction was finalized, often by transferring property to the Temple or making irreparable breaks with family and friends, Jones' sympathy was replaced by harsh, exploitative treatment.

Jones structured the Temple to play on emotional themes in the backgrounds of the people he had targeted for membership. Temple services resembled Southern and Midwestern gospel-singing churches in which many of the members grew up. From the early 1960s he exaggerated the bitterness and hatred that confronted the mostly black membership in their past and present lives. Masterful vision-making of a Promised Land of equality and material security followed the exaggerated agitation.

Jones was an artful contradiction. At one moment he was fully engaged in the rhetoric of mutual caring, racial equality, and nonviolent socialism, and the next he was flaunting power and feeding his own personal appetite for money and sex. Within the Temple he imposed a double standard, a self-entitlement to extensive privileges and possessions, including food, clothing, living quarters, and sexual liberties. As early as 1964 he began to openly declare himself a deity.

The organizational structure of the Temple was hierarchical, with four levels: Jones was at the top; beneath him there was an inner circle known as "angels," numbering between 12 and 20, that handled money, media, and strong-arm tactics; below them was the planning commission, entrusted with daily management and enforcement of lesser rules; and at the bottom—literally and figuratively—was the general membership. Jones actively recruited whites, particularly women, for his chief lieutenants. Several in his trusted inner circle were the shills and tricksters in "faith-healing" sessions that, using three-day-old rancid chicken parts as "expelled tumorous masses," were staged to present Jones as a divinity.

Jones hooked people into the organization by isolating them, irrevocably, from former lives and ideas. As a condition of acceptance, he demanded that property and possessions be turned over to the Temple, thereby eliminating the temptation and means for disaffiliation. For those who lived in the Temple's communes, there was a requirement to turn over pay from regular, outside employment, receiving in return a two-dollar weekly allowance. To ensure isolation of members, they were not permitted unaccompanied movement, except to and from work, and they were warned repeatedly not to speak with outsiders. Presumably, it was in part to further this isolation that the Temple held separate "religious" services for the members and the as-yet uncommitted.

Jones was able to successfully define out-groups (the press, CIA, FBI, etc.) as bent on the immediate and total destruction of the Temple. He managed to undermine family unity and loyalty that might threaten his position or the organization, arbitrarily ordering sexual relationships and marriages ended and arranging new ones. And he was able to impose outrageous punishments that enforced his autocratic rule. Members were routinely whipped and beaten with paddles for smoking or lack of attention during "sermons."

Northern California

By the late 1960s Jones had refined substantial political clout in the Mendocino county community of Ukiah, the first Northern California home of the Temple. Turning out 300 to 400 votes in elections with vote totals of only 2500, the Temple was the single most important political force in the area. Very little changed when the organization relocated to San Francisco. For political rallies Jones could deliver 2500 people on six hours notice. Many were also available to do get-out-the-vote precinct work on Election Day. In the

December 1975 run-off election, Jones mustered more than 2000 voters and 150 precinct workers—with the mayoralty decided by only 4000 votes.

The survival of the Temple in the early 1970s, when the first critical stories began to be told by ex-members, was aided by important local political figures. The Temple had a well-deserved reputation for delivering crowds, a valuable bargaining chip in urban politics. The extent to which Jones successfully dealt with and compromised politicians is indicated by the fact that the District Attorney began an investigation of the Temple in July of 1977, with five investigators, but did not disclose the incriminating results until after the deaths at Jonestown in November of 1978. The report included allegations of murder, arson, kidnapping, extortion, child abduction, battery, illegal possession and use of drugs, and diversion of welfare funds. Jones was also successful in delaying press exposure of the Temple's more malevolent doings until resettlement in Guyana was accomplished. The mayor was enlisted to ask *New West* magazine to hold back their attack on the organization. And Jones contributed several thousand dollars, ostensibly for scholarships, to a dozen newspapers, a TV station, and a magazine, receiving kid-glove treatment from one and all.

Guyana

Life at the Guyana settlement was, from the beginning, and remained, a marginal and punishing experience, with few redeeming qualities. Heavy rains, wood too hard to cut, and uncontrollable rat infestation were the ordinary problems of daily pioneer living. Overcrowded dormitories and lack of simple amenities, such as hot water and toilet paper, compounded these hardships. The majority of settlers worked 11 hours a day, six days a week, and seven hours on Sundays. Their diet was almost entirely rice and beans, in various combinations, three times a day. The more extreme forms of punishment continued: "Sins" (minor infractions) resulted in public beatings. Devastating punishment became ordinary. For petty rule violations, adults were placed in a wooden box, 3 x 3 x 6 feet, for a week at a time. Children were subjected to psychologically brutalizing treatment, many being lowered into a dark well at night and pulled under the water by adults hidden there. It was terrifying for the youngsters, whose screams could be heard throughout the settlement.

The Temple's class structure persisted at Jonestown. The "community elite," in addition to receiving special food and living accommodations, as Jones did, controlled and regulated the lives of the remainder, down to the smallest details. The regimen included loudspeaker broadcasting of Jones' words on an average of six hours daily, endless nightly "re-education" meetings, and directed performances of the full encampment to placate outside visitors.

After the spring of 1978, Jonestown became a virtual concentration camp. As settlers arrived, their money and passports were confiscated. Jones told the colonists that he had an informer in the U.S. Embassy at Georgetown who would tell him immediately of anyone who tried to leave the country. He also told them on several occasions that he had authority from the government of Guyana to shoot anyone who tried to leave.

Once each week the whole community gathered and acted out a scenario of mass death. The community surrounded in the fantasy drama by mercenaries who, in victory, would torture them. Thus their only alternative was "mass suicide for the glory of socialism." As each person drank a small amount of red liquid that simulated poison, Jones announced that all would be dead within 45 minutes. When the time had passed, he told them they had met the loyalty test but that before long the real thing would take place.

Several members later stated that, because of their physical and emotional exhaustion, the suicide practice sessions were not traumatic.

Just before the mass death, at Jones' call, everyone in the settlement went to the pavilion, with the reluctant rounded up under threat of deadly force by armed guards. Guards encircled the members as they convened, each guard holding a gun or bow and arrow. The first deaths, according to reliable news reports, occurred when guards grabbed babies from "recalcitrant" mothers and held the children up to let "nurses" spray their throats with poison. When the assembled did not move quickly enough at Jones' exhortations to hurry, the guards physically forced people to drink the poison. The words of a guard to one woman: "you dumb bitch, you better do it or we're going to shoot your ass off." By eyewitness accounts, however, many took the poison without being subjected to personalized threats.

Analysis

The social action dialectic provides an exposition of the Peoples Temple tragedy, as the outcome of continuing and complex interaction between contingencies and ideologies. At the outset we see in the protagonists the larger workings of these two forces.

In the members there was a collective history of deprivation and distributive injustice, which are the learning and exchange contingencies for counter-controlling behavior and for opposition institutions and ideologies. This fits the history of low-income black people in the U.S., a record of oppression and injury leading to escapist searches for the Promised Land. The Garvey "Back to Africa" movement and Father Divine's "Peace Movement" are the best-remembered examples.

Jones embodied rhetorical skills for vision-making, and a facile personality that he used effectively to accumulate resources for exchange and to manage contingencies of behavior. These are the prerequisites for orchestrating construction of ideologies. Jones consolidated an unusual command of incentives for drawing others into construction and acceptance of his unique and sinister brand of ideology.

The primed, prospective Temple member was initially presented a highly contrived picture of the organization. With special Sunday services designed to show outsiders the positive ideologies of the Temple—racial equality, mutual caring, etc.—and Jones' power of "divine healing," exceptional socializing forces were at work. All were calculated to play on past respondent learning, the emotional experiences of former life to which individuals resonate. The promise of life within the Temple must have appeared for many, at that point, as far more rewarding than anything in their own past, present, or future. And first meetings with Jones to consider membership were doubtlessly reinforcing, communicating an impression of his intense concern.

It was but a short step for Jones to extract a commitment in exchange for the ideological incentive of a future Promised Land, a socialist haven of equality and love, made believable by the plausibility structure of the existing organization and its ideologies. Like the market player who doubles up on *losing* investments, as time went on each member probably found it reinforcing to increase commitment to the faulty course of action, despite new and punishing revelations—sustained throughout by the reward of not admitting a mistake of ever-larger magnitude and by the Temple's ideologies.

Probably the most powerful aspect of the Peoples Temple ideology was its definition of Jones as a deity. While the Temple ideology was multifaceted, its centerpiece—from and to which all else flowed—was Jones as god, the messiah. It was the keystone of

the entire overarching ideology and its sanctioning powers. It licensed Jones to freely create additional ideologies that, in turn, rationalized his whims for dispensing and arranging rewards and punishments, for himself, his aides, and the members.

Jones' strategy of isolation, almost as if directed by reality construction theory, no doubt enhanced his efforts to alternate recruits to the new ideological world and its sanctions, and to nihilate former worlds grounded in family and friends. Withholding resources and eliminating opportunities for contact with discrepant realities assured isolation.

Jones' adroit management of exchanges with politicians and the media forestalled exposure of the Temple's more malevolent activities—mobilizing votes, precinct workers, and other resources in trade for legitimization. The facts confirm that he was successful, that numerous complaints were made to public authorities but, despite their scope and seriousness, were slighted. Apart from the obvious political incentives for would-be or incumbent officeholders, it is reasonable to assume that Jones' articulation of Temple ideologies rationalized these exchanges for all participants.

By the time of resettlement in Guyana, individual investments by members in the faulty course of action had reached extreme proportions. They were "motivated" mainly by painfully coercive contingencies administered by Jones and his lieutenants, and by ideological realities that turned social life upside-down, defining pain as pleasure, family and friends as enemies, and death as life. The acts of reality construction went on unrelentingly at Jonestown, day and night, over loudspeakers and in meetings, with all resources under Jones' control. An average or even exceptional person, under the total circumstances, might hardly find rebellion or escape a reasonable alternative.

Yet the contingencies and ideological realities in the Jonestown culture were not monolithic. The presence of a community elite and "class" distinctions provided the institutional base, the plausibility structure, for two separate but overlapping worlds, one common to the membership at large, the other more closely held by Jones and his inner circle. While accounts of the Temple only hint at the details of that second realm of rewards and meanings, contained therein is the basis for explaining some of the more inexplicable behavior on the day of the mass death. Those members specially entrusted as armed guards and "nurses" shared not only their own exclusive ideology but also a range of practical incentives for deserting or completing their tasks.

We cannot retrospectively know why some Jonestown settlers took their own lives and the lives of others, including their own children. Given what is known, however, and considering the dialectic of social action, murder and suicide may very well be terms that lost their common meanings in the topsy-turvy culture of the Peoples Temple. It would not be the first time that a mix of perverted, self-serving ideology, and powerful, punishing contingencies of learning and exchange, made mass death "acceptable." Nor is there anything unique in how that combination was manifested in the present protagonists, that is, a history of deprivation and injustice in the victims and the fusion of brilliant rhetoric and resourceful personality in the perpetrator.

Conclusions

The development and demise of the Peoples Temple, while indisputably affected by broad political and economic forces, can be understood in many respects by psychological and sociological concepts, encompassing social phenomena from individual behavior to organizational action, the micro to mezzo range. Entwined in the social action

dialectic, theories of learning, exchange, and construction of reality offer explanations of how individuals and collectivities are influenced in practice by power and ideology. In the upcoming Practice Technology, the dialectic is used not only to analyze but also to make predictions, an implicit part of technology.

There is a final, very different lesson in the Peoples Temple story. It is a kind of national moral, admittedly not essential for this analysis, yet too moving to ignore. It is to be found in the revealed volatility of long-lived alienation. While no society, regardless of how just or healthy, can fully guarantee the absence of individual aberration, always thwarting the appearance of a Jim Jones, it is also true that none can afford indefinitely the social pathologies that reduce the resistance of citizens to such aberrant individuals. The issue is not Jones and the prevention of his type, but the vulnerability of so many others to his pathology. The present disquieting sum of that vulnerability, measured in the depth of alienation of the country's low- and moderate-income citizens, is spotlighted in the epilogue of the Peoples Temple—the burial detail. In the midst of historic material wealth, it was difficult not to be dumbfounded by the incomprehensible fact of several hundred containers of human remains, of U.S. citizens, stacked in a Federal warehouse—no one willing or able to claim them for interment.

* My main sources were Marshall Kilduff and Ron Javers, *The Suicide Cult* (New York: Bantam Books, 1978); David Moberg, “‘Revolutionary Suicide,’ 1978,” *In These Times*, 3(5):11-14 (December 13-19, 1978); “Confession Letters to ‘Dad’ Jones Tell of Guilt and Fear,” *In These Times*, 3(6):19-20 (December 20-26, 1978); Phil Tracy, “Jim Jones, The Making of a Madman,” *New West*, 3(26):45-48 (December 18, 1978).