

Gaslit Nation Transcript

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The Cult Age: Interview with Cult Expert Dr. Janja Lalich

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[intro theme music]

Sarah Kendzior:

I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the bestsellers, *The View From Flyover Country* and *Hiding in Plain Sight*, and of the upcoming book, *They Knew*, available for pre-order now.

Andrea Chalupa:

I am Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones* about Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine, a film the Kremlin doesn't want you to see, so be sure to see it.

Sarah Kendzior:

And this is Gaslit Nation, a podcast covering corruption in the United States and rising autocracy around the world.

Andrea Chalupa:

Welcome to our special spring series, "Gaslit Nation Presents... Rising Up From the Ashes: Cassandras and Other Experts on Rebuilding Democracy". [bugle sound effect] Our bonus episodes, available to Patreon subscribers at the Truth-Teller level and higher, feature our esteemed guests taking the Gaslit Nation Self Care Q&A. So for fun ideas, sign up to hear that.

Sarah Kendzior::

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Andrea Chalupa:

You'll get special access to watch a live taping of Gaslit Nation over the summer. More details to come.

Sarah Kendzior:

This interview was recorded on January 7th, 2022.

[begin interview]

Andrea Chalupa:

Today we are joined by Dr. Janja Lalich, a researcher, author and educator specializing in cults and extremist groups with a particular focus on charismatic relationships, political and other social movements, ideology and social control, and issues of gender and sexuality. Dr. Lalich is Professor Emerita of Sociology at California State University-Chico where in 2007 she was awarded the Professional

Achievement Honor. She is also the founder and director of the Center for Research on Influence and Control. She received a BA with honors from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has a Master's in Human Development and a PhD in Human and Organizational Systems from Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, California. Her books include; *Take Back Your Life: Recovering From Cults and Abusive Relationships*, *Captive Hearts*, *Captive Minds*, and *Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults* based on her research on the Heaven's Gate cult (the group that committed collective suicide in 1997) and her own decades-plus years of experience in a political cult, the San Francisco-based Democratic Workers Party. Most importantly, her work puts forth her Bounded Choice Theory, which offers a new approach for understanding the dynamics of self-sealed groups and the True Believer phenomenon. Welcome to the show, Dr. Lalach. You are certainly in demand these days we imagine, unfortunately.

Dr. Janja Lalach:

Yes. Thank you. Thanks for having me on your show. And yes, I'm busier than ever. [laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs] ["So Many Cults, So Little Time"](#) was actually the name of a Gaslit Nation episode because what Sarah and I have been witnessing, like so many others, is a cult-like mentality with this deepening polarization in America, which is made worse by an expanding consolidation of far-right propaganda networks and gerrymandering and dark money groups running a muck and so forth. And that polarization leads to cults, a cult-like mentality. We imagine that what we're witnessing is cult-like, right? That's how we describe it. Would you say that's correct and is in the field of what you've researched?

Dr. Janja Lalach:

Yes, absolutely. The kind of close mindedness and Us versus Them thinking is one of the hallmarks of a cult or a cult mentality and we're certainly seeing a lot of that today, along with the violence that was fostered by... Is it okay if I mention his name?

Sarah Kendzior:

Oh, please do.

Dr. Janja Lalach:

[laughs] I think during the Trump years, a lot of hate and violence got drummed up that was lying under the surface in our country, and so now we've got this combination of this Us versus Them mentality and this sort of license to act out. So we see people going into stores and causing a riot if they are asked to put a mask on and things like that, and it's just really become a nationwide phenomenon.

Andrea Chalupa:

It's normalized violence of all kinds, like you mentioned, the stores, all the viral videos of people throwing tantrums in stores over masks—having to wear masks—and we've also seen people becoming increasingly violent on flights in America today. This normalization of violence begins with hate speech, disinformation, propaganda, which says it's okay to lash out, it's okay to dehumanize others. We saw it with our own eyes how one of the earliest instances was Trump mocking a reporter who had a disability and Trump mocked him, mocked how he spoke and his physical appearance. And everyone, you know, a lot of normal so-called people who have any common sense might look at that and go, "Wow, that's shocking. His campaign should be done," but instead it just unleashed, as you said, this validation, this permission to dehumanize others.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

And it's somewhat different from the cults that I've been studying over 35 years because what we've been used to is, you know, what I now call the run of the mill cults or the brick and mortar cults where there was a headquarters, you knew who the leader was, you knew where the various centers were, things like that. Well, there were also always groups that were more secretive and underground, but the kind of acting out towards society that we're seeing today is not typical of cults in the past. I mean, some cults, yes, did act out, like Aum Shinrikyo, the group that put the sarin gas in the Tokyo subway. But in most cases, cults are far more insular, so this acting out and these violent attacks and the hate speech and the, as you say, the permission to act in these completely obnoxious ways is really a new phenomenon in terms of cultic thinking.

Andrea Chalupa:

It's sort of like what you saw in the past, as you mentioned, the brick and mortar cults, is almost like the blockbuster video of cults and now we've entered this age of streaming where it's just easily accessible, you can do it anywhere, and it's just the convenience of it essentially, and a decentralization in a lot of ways.

Dr. Janja Lalich::

Yes and certainly the year that we were sheltered in during the first year of the pandemic gave people all that time to peck around on the internet. And as we've learned, they were shunted around by these algorithms. I mean, I have no clue what an algorithm is but apparently people who understand that were able to suss out how people were pushed into these what we now call rabbit holes of extremism. In these internet communities, people felt the same kind of closeness and sense of purpose and camaraderie as people do when they join a physical cult. So again, we have this online phenomenon which has taken over and is creating these new ways for cultic groups to form and for people to take control and take advantage of other people.

Sarah Kendzior:

You're comparing the brick and mortar type cults—the more traditional, I guess, if you could say that, cults of the past—to the new cults that have emerged in the era of digital media. Do you think that there was a particular year or a particular event or turning point that accelerated this, or was it more of a gradual phenomenon as more and more people got internet or smartphones or what have you?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Well, I think it evolved over time just as everyone—just about everyone—is using the internet for one thing or another. The first really kind of internet-based cult activity that we saw was the Heaven's Gate cult. You know, the one that committed suicide, or mass murder, however you want to look at it.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, they believed a comet was—

Sarah Kendzior:

The Hale Bopp comet, right?

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, and the charismatic leader said, "If you kill yourselves with me, we'll get a ride on the comet."

Dr. Janja Lalich::

Right, although they didn't think they were killing themselves. As they said, "What we're doing isn't death. Death is staying here. What we're doing is life." So it's another example of how cults turn around the language and create their own sort of worldviews. They had a pretty big presence on the internet in the mid '90s because some of their people who had jobs were computer programmers. Since then, of course, it's just mushroomed. So there are quite a few traditional cults, if we want to call them that, who in some ways only have an online presence. For example, the group called Twin Flames Universe. Almost everything they do is online. They rarely do any kind of physical gathering. So that's become very common for the regular old cults, as I call them. And then of course, as I was saying earlier, I think the real turning point was the pandemic. That's when people really got caught up in these awful groups. Certainly QAnon was around before that, but then it really mushroomed with the pandemic.

Andrea Chalupa:

Wow. I am so now fascinated by the Twin Flames Universe that you've mentioned, because I've come across this on social media and I've actually read about it and thought, Oh, that's interesting. I'd never heard of Twin Flames and I went down the rabbit hole one sleepless night on Twin Flames and I didn't realize it was a cult until you just told me that.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Oh, Twin Flames is absolutely horrendous and harmful. I mean, because they target young women and say, you know, "We'll find your twin flame, you know, your life soul partner" and because it's mostly women in the group, what they've done in recent years now is have people go through sex change so that one of them will become a man and take on masculine characteristics. So they begin with lots of hormones, that they have some company who's willing to feed them hormones without proper psychological evaluations. And you see these couples where, you know, there's obviously a female and then you see someone who has a beard and lots of hair growth, is dressed very kind of "male" and macho. And these are people who never in their life dreamed of having a sex change. It's really so exploitative and so harmful.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right so it's not like they naturally, like, they're not naturally trans. It's entirely different from a natural-born trans person.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Exactly, which I have no problem with.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right. Of course.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

This is coerced. It's absolutely coerced and these young women go along with it. They're completely trapped psychologically in this group and the leaders are considered sort of godlike persons. They

recently had a public gathering in, I believe it was in Sedona, and when they came out, everybody just cheered and treated them like gods. It's a couple. I believe they're headquartered in Michigan somewhere. But no, it's a very harmful group.

Andrea Chalupa:

What struck me about it is that they were selling toxic romance, saying that if the person you're in love with does all these abusive things to you, it's okay, they'll come back because you're meant to be together. That's why I was in the rabbit hole with them. I'm like, what is this? And I saw all these comments saying, "Oh, this person that I'm madly in love with keeps ignoring me and wants nothing to do with me, but I believe in the Twin Flame and that he'll come back eventually." I was like, Whoa. So I just thought it was just like a random Instagram group I stumbled on and I did not realize how deep the web goes and how organized it is. That's really creepy.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Yeah. And of course they charge money for the courses that they do and, you know, whatever. So there's also a financial aspect to it.

Andrea Chalupa:

Okay. So I'm emphasizing this because, me, you know, somebody that talks a lot about this information and the times we're in: I casually stumbled upon a very active and dangerous cult and just had no idea. It's just ubiquitous now. You could be on Instagram... I go on Instagram and look at photos of pretty dresses and fantasy vacation spots I'll never go to. That's like my self-care. And then next thing you know, probably because those are kind of "girly", if you wanna put a gender on it. And probably I got pumped some Twin Flame nonsense and I started reading these weird comments. I'm like, Oh, Twin Flames is a thing, okay, but I didn't realize-

Sarah Kendzior::

Thank goodness we have our guest on, Andrea, so that you did not join the Twin Flames cult accidentally.

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs] This turned out to be an intervention.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

[laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

I was thinking this whole time Sarah might be my Twin Flame. [laughs]

Sarah Kendzior::

Uhh, sorry. Sorry, man.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

You're a perfect example of how easy it is and how quickly it happened.

Andrea Chalupa:

Exactly right. Exactly! It was just casual. It was just casual scrolling one night, looking for some entertainment and I just got roped into something that I had no understanding of. So that's disturbing. And so obviously you've been in demand, we've seen interviews with you with *Wired* magazine because social media plays such a big role in this, all the social media platforms. So you think they're safe, you think they're escapist, but next thing you know, you could be radicalized or you could be sold something that is a gateway to more dangerous initiation. You talk a little bit about that?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Right, or you could be sold. You know, it is human trafficking awareness month and that's a whole other area that very similar tactics and techniques are used to seduce and coerce men and women into that world of sex trafficking, or labor trafficking. Right now, it's rampant. I mean, as you say, I'm busier than ever. I get emails and messages from all over the world. Last night I did an interview, a live interview, on a London radio program which is one of the most widely heard. It was a call in program. And already this morning I've gotten a handful of emails from people who listen to that program who say, "I've had this cult experience" or "I grew up in this incredibly narcissistic family" and, you know, "What can you do to help me?" If I had a magic bullet, I'd be a millionaire.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right. So one of the questions we get a lot from our listeners is we hear a lot from our listeners about how they have people in their family that are convinced of the Big Lie or convinced that Trump is the savior and they don't know how to get through to them, or they're convinced that the vaccine and masks are evil. In my family, I have somebody that we've lost to the Big Lie. We're estranged from this person now. And then we have somebody that we are forced to be estranged from because he's convinced that that he is the equivalent of an early freedom fighter against the Nazis and that the Nazis of today are Dr. Fauci and others trying to force people to get the vaccine and wear a mask and all these mandates.

Andrea Chalupa:

He refuses to get a vaccine or wear a mask around us. So we can't see him. We haven't seen him. Lives are being... Families are being divided over this. Families are being separated over this. And our listeners reach out to us all the time saying, "What do I do with this situation? How do I get through to them? How do I get my family back?" And we don't know what to tell them, but the one advice that I've heard that I've researched—and tell me what you often recommend to people—is try not to isolate them, because if you isolate them, they go further. Have some safe, stable contact with them so that you don't lose them entirely. Just give them some sort of a window, some sort of out.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Yes. That's absolutely my philosophy. I mean, I talk about using critical compassion, that even though sometimes people believe things that to us are completely horrendous, like, you know, someone in your family becomes a white supremacist or something, which is, I guess, far more hateful than an anti-vaxxer or a QAnon-er so it's hard to say, "Be nice to that person", but it is important. You don't have to like what they're believing in and you primarily don't want to talk with them about what they're believing in. What you want to do is try to maintain contact in some kind of way. Never cut them off. If they cut you off, okay, they did that. But don't you ever cut them off. And I think it's important, as what you were referring to, what I call a safe haven.

Andrea Chalupa:

Let them know that you're a safe haven if they ever decide to change their mind, that your home is someplace where they can come and not be ridiculed and not be humiliated and you're not gonna say, "See, I told you so. That was a stupid thing to join." But they're gonna be able to come and just lay on the couch and chill out. And if they don't want to talk, they don't have to talk. Now, that's going to be their choice and their motion and the only way you can perhaps encourage them to take that step is when and if you do have contact with them, rather than argue about beliefs and who's right and who's wrong, it's best to remind them of good times when you were a family or you were friends or whatever the relationship was. Remind them about times you went fishing together, or last Christmas Eve when uncle Joe played Santa Claus and it was so funny or, you know, those kinds of things that will kind of pull at their emotional heart strings, because you want to offer an alternative to what they believe is now their new family and you want to remind them that you were an okay family. You know, all families have problems and whatnot, but you also love them and you care for them, and look at all these times in the past when we did this, that and the other. That's about the best advice I can give anybody.

Andrea Chalupa:

Wow. Okay, so if you've lost somebody down the rabbit hole—whatever it may be—you want to keep the vibe around them accessible, nonjudgmental, and as enjoyable as possible. Just sort of, you know, you can come here and decompress. You want to basically provide a safe space.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Right, and if you're able to get together with the person, do something fun. Do the things you used to do together. And if your relationship with the person is completely damaged and there's no way they'll even communicate with you, well then maybe there's someone else. Maybe there's a cousin that that person was always close to, or a high school friend or whoever, you know, or an aunt they always admired, and have that person be the contact person and keep yourself out of it for a while because maybe your presence or your efforts only make them go in deeper, as you were saying earlier. So you need to be strategic about it.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right, as frustrating and as hurtful as it may be, it's not the time to fact check the person. I think that's a big part of the frustration is it's disinformation, it's brainwashing. It's just that they're totally divorced from even the laws of physics and it can be jaw dropping, some of the things they believe that come out of their mouths, and you're like, How can you say that and think that?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Right.

Andrea Chalupa:

So if we are living in a disinformation age and fact checking is so important and fighting for the truth and just standing your truth is so important, do you have any obligation or should you not try to lead someone to the truth? Should you just hold space for them and simply be?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Exactly.

Andrea Chalupa:

Okay.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Absolutely. Any way that you try to discuss or argue with them is more than likely not gonna work and it's just gonna have them dig in their heels. When I was in my cult, if someone had come to me and said, "Oh, you know, let me tell you about Stalin" or "Let me tell you about what the Communist Party has done in China and the mass starvations and this, that, and the other," I had answers for all of that. There was no way anybody was going to argue me out of that. Although if someone had come to me and said, "Are you happy?" I would've had to think about that, because I wasn't happy. Happy was not a word in our vocabulary. You weren't supposed to be happy. So that might start a different conversation that might have gotten me to think about, Well, wait a minute, what exactly is the point of this? Is it to destroy me? So, as I say, you need to be very strategic in general and avoid ideological discussions

Andrea Chalupa:

In terms of happiness, like the questions, "Are you happy?" and "Was the point of this to destroy me?", it does seem like the cult we've seen, certainly the cult of Trump, is a self destructive cult. He incited his followers to break the law and provide all this evidence for law enforcement of themselves breaking the law, and now hundreds are being arrested and prosecuted and there are certainly going to be many more to come. These people have faced expensive lawyer bills for what they did on our Capitol on January 6th. Trump basically said to them at his January 6th rally and in all the weeks leading up to it, Self-sacrifice yourself for me. So there is this dynamic of, no, you're not supposed to be happy. You're supposed to destroy yourself for the quote leader. Could you talk about that human sacrifice and the dynamic behind it and why people fall into it?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

I understand it as the consequence of what I call a charismatic relationship with an authoritarian leader. People misunderstand the concept of charisma and they believe that it's something inherent in an individual, that you're born with it or something. But charisma is actually a social relationship. Once you have determined that someone is charismatic and you grant them that title, then they have power over you, because obviously if you think someone is charismatic, you think they're special in some way. So that becomes a relationship with an imbalance of power, right? So that starts right from the get go. And then the more you believe that and the more authoritarian the person is so that they are convincing you that they have all the answers and that you shouldn't challenge and you shouldn't question, you should just be 100% devoted to this person and follow everything they say, your whole mindset starts to change about the world. Your worldview shifts. And within that, your sense of morality shifts so that you now take on morality—or the immorality—of the leader. And that's why we see people doing things that are shocking to us, doing things that they never would've done in any other circumstance. So it's a combination of all of that, which is what I call the indoctrination program, or a resocialization of you as the committed person, that lead people to just do these incomprehensible things to those of us on the outside,

Andrea Chalupa:

Right. It's a feeling that their lives are given meaning.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Yes, absolutely. They're given meaning, they have purpose, they think they're on the side of right. And you get to a point—and this is where my Bounded Choice Theory comes in—you get to a point as a devoted member or a devoted follower where you cannot imagine life outside of that group or that situation. There is no way that you can see any other way to live or be than being loyal to that person and following whatever is happening. And so then you're trapped in this kind of psychological trap, which I call Bounded Choice where, yes, you have choices to make about certain things but they're not consequential. The most consequential is, Should I stay or should I leave? And you're going to opt for the group because it's too scary and too dangerous and too unimaginable to leave.

Sarah Kendzior:

When it comes to Trump, can you comment on at least what I see as the different cults that follow him? I mean, obviously he has a cult following, but I feel like I'm seeing a different phenomenon. Some of it is the typical sort of personality cult that you see emerging around an aspiring autocratic leader. I also have seen people who think that he's the Messiah and they're basically transferring religious beliefs onto him. Or alternatively, they think he's the antichrist but they think that's a good thing because it's heralding in an end times. And then QAnon is sort of its own entity unto itself, combining aspects of the other two. What do you see within Trump's followers, and if they are to leave their cult worship or belonging, how would that come about?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Well, I mean, that's why what we're seeing with Trump is something we've never seen before, because we're seeing this cult-like behavior on a national scale. And as you just described, we see it manifest itself in a variety of different ways, so it's not like there's just one solid block of people who are charging ahead with one belief system. We've got the whole mishmash of everything. He was very... If you want to even call him a cult leader (which I don't necessarily, because I think he wasn't smart enough) but if you want to call him a cult leader—and he did do things that helped his followership grow, the kinds of techniques of high arousal, the chanting, the shouting, the wearing the MAGA hat, all of that—but you'll have people see him as some kind of hook to hang onto in whatever belief system they've chosen.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

And he does have these different personas, depending on the group, like you said. For some it's religious, for some it's, you know, just thinking he's like the best politician or businessman or whatever. And getting people out of that is just like anything else. Certainly we saw after the January 6th attempt last year, we did see a lot of people left QAnon and some of the groups because it was such a disaster. But then a lot of them at the same time got recruited by other groups who were waiting in the wings. So a lot of them were then recruited by the Proud Boys or this militia group or that because they sort of had lost their worldview, so they were vulnerable at that point. That's why it's so shifting and it's so hard to get a handle on. But I don't know, I mean, leaving those groups, and there's so many different manifestations, I mean, some of it is going to have to happen through law enforcement taking action where there is criminal behavior, criminal activity. And then some of it is just hoping people wake up one day and see that what they're believing in is complete nonsense. Again,, I don't really have answers for that.

Sarah Kendzior::

Well, one thing one wondering about is, you know, I've followed QAnon for a long time and within the morass of propaganda and bullshit that the QAnon acolytes would spew out, there were grains of truth. For example, QAnon was following the Epstein-Maxwell case before Epstein allegedly died in prison and before it sort of rose to prominence. And so the problem with the rest of the media not really covering that and especially of law enforcement not cracking down on them is that when they finally did, when it was all brought to the fore, the QAnon on folks were like, "Aha! You see? We were right all along. They buried it all along. They did all these things..." and then they would use that as a way to say, "Well, therefore, all the other things we're saying are true. JFK, Jr. has risen from the dead. Trump is the Messiah. The storm is coming, etc., etc.". And it made me wonder, you know, if our government were to be very, very honest about institutional corruption and were to actually hold criminal elites accountable for crimes that have been going on for decades, would that work to kind of deprogram acolytes in these political cult movements, or is it something beyond that, like an emotional attachment that doesn't respond to action or logic?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Well, it's probably a little of both. I mean, that's a big ask to think that our government is going to cop to institutional corruption.

Sarah Kendzior:

Ha! Oh, we know. [laughs]

Dr. Janja Lalich::

[laughs] You know, I think we can't discount the emotional attachment that people have to these involvements. A lot of these groups, or the people who sort of take leadership, they're very good at damage control. So yeah, they can say, you know, even the example of Save the Children. They were talking about pedophilia. Well, who's not against pedophilia, right? So that's the cleverness of what they do. And then, you know, the sort of glomming onto a legitimate organization and trying to align themselves with that and recruiting people who were decent, honest people genuinely interested in fighting pedophilia, they get caught up in this other shifty organization or movement. So it's difficult because law enforcement can only do stuff if there are crimes, right? That's why we have a hard time even getting them interested in some of the more outrageous cult behavior that happens because they're like, "Oh, I don't know. You've got to really show me evidence of crimes."

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Who do you get to do that? Former members are afraid. They don't want to go to court. We know all that. It's like domestic violence. We know what that's like. So law enforcement can only do so much. And trying to rationalize with them clearly hasn't worked because they're not thinking rationally. They have that closed mindset that we talked about. You don't even have one leader you can grab onto and discredit because one day you have this guy who pops up, some talk show host who then dies of COVID, and then the next day someone else pops up and that's who they follow. You know, I was saying to a friend the other day, Trump could die tomorrow and it wouldn't make a difference. It's way too widespread at this point.

Sarah Kendzior:

Do you think there's any comparable politician that could attract the kind of following that Trump did? And if so, who?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Mmm, no. [laughs]

Sarah Kendzior

Yeah, I don't really either. I was just curious.

Andrea Chalupa:

I think the point is that it's decentralized and a lot of the stars of today, they weren't on our radar back in 2016. Like the QAnon mascot out of Georgia, Marjorie...

Sarah Kendzior

Oh, Marjorie Taylor Greene.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. Marge Taylor Greene, Lauren Boebert, they weren't on our radar. My point is that Trump's movement is really good at radicalizing people and producing new stars. It's that belonging. It's like, "You're one of us, we've got our secret language, our coded language," which white supremacy, the KKK, which were typically underground movements because they had to be, because there's nobody above in the mainstream embraced by the mainstream as Trump was giving them permission to come out. So there used to be coded language, like the 14 Words, all this Hitler Nazi symbolism that the American movement adopted and that's how they would talk to each other. And like the okay sign with their hand.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Right, and Pepe the Frog. Remember Pepe?

Andrea Chalupa:

Oh, yes. Now it's Let's Go Brandon and it's saluting flags that were at the January 6th violent coup attempt. It's a clubhouse. It's a massive, massive clubhouse and it's this big belonging of a movement and through that, that's how you get all this new talent to rise because it's so massively decentralized. I think that's the challenge we have before us. Trump's in bad health. We know his eating habits, right? The guy loves his McDonald's. He's not going to be around forever. And then unfortunately, he's leaving behind what looks like a cult, walks like a cult, sounds like a cult and that cult is going to breed all these other Trumpkins. And so I think what we need to do is if you want to be rid of this public menace and this public health crisis—because it is a public health crisis. They're extending the pandemic.

Andrea Chalupa:

They keep the pandemic going because they refuse to get vaccinated and wear masks. And they're a danger to us. They're a literal danger to us. So there has to be legislation that steps in and nips what empowers them. They're always gonna be among us in some shape or form, but you have to pull the plug on their mainstream voice and their mainstream normalization and their mainstream access. And so I think some ways to do that—and tell us if you agree—is, *obviously*, regulate social media so it can't just casually rope people into the rabbit hole. Regulate media, like bringing back the Fairness Doctrine which

was destroyed under, I believe it was Reagan, and apply it now to cable news and apply it, of course, to radio where both sides of any controversial issue have to be addressed. Combat consolidation of media there's no more monopolies in media of any kind. That's extraordinarily dangerous. And also strengthen public schools, strengthen fact-based institutions, scientific institutions and so forth. So wouldn't you agree that, since we're stuck with Trump in some way, shape or form, that we need to have laws step in? Laws need to be enacted in order to protect us from what gives rise to Trump and his movement.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Yeah, I agree with you. I think the prominence of that is, I mean, look what's happening right now in the government with the Congress and the Senate and these fake Democrats. You're absolutely right about social media, about education. I mean, I've been saying all along, part of this is the effect of the dumbing down of America that we've witnessed over the last 30-40 years. The education system is not at all what it used to be. I went to a really crappy high school and I came out with a really good education. It was a working class high school and I did fine. I got myself to college. I graduated with honors. As a professor, when I was teaching, before I retired, I'd have these students who would come out of nice middle class families who lived in nice middle class suburbs and sometimes went to private schools and they couldn't write a sentence. It was just shocking to me. So certainly I believe a focus on the educational system would be really important. And I think also people need to be stronger in taking action at the state level and at the local level. I read yesterday that Mayo Clinic—I'm pretty sure it was Mayo Clinic—just let go 700 workers because they refused to follow the vaccine mandate. Good! That's what needs to be done. I mean, these folks need to see the consequences because we're certainly all feeling it. So I think actions like that are important.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, without question. There have to be consequences. We're recording this in January. We just had Merrick Garland give an address saying that they're working on the investigations, they're gonna go after everybody no matter how powerful they may be. How important do you think it is that we see high profile arrests, indictments of some of the...of Trump himself certainly and his inner circle, like Bannon, who ran a war room in the Willard Hotel for the days leading up to the [coup attempt] and promised on his podcast that "all hell's gonna break loose on January 6th. It's go time." How important do you think it is for the Department of Justice to prosecute Trump and his inner circle for January 6th?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Oh, I think it's really important. I think it's so important and in part because of people like us and, you know, my 90 year old aunt who was just talking to me about this the other day and just your average decent citizen wants to see these consequences for what happened on January 6th. People were absolutely appalled by that. I think that it's important because so many people on the Democratic side are feeling like nothing ever happens, nothing ever changes. Why hasn't this happened yet? It's already been a year. And then people lose their sense of activism. We need people to stay active in whatever way they can, to keep fighting this and fighting for our democracy, as they say. So I think if the Justice Department really did finally go ahead and arrest some people and prosecute some people, that would make a huge difference in the sentiment across the nation.

Sarah Kendzior:

Do you have any opinions on why hasn't anything significant happened after a year? Why haven't the DOJ or others in Congress acted with urgency?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

I think the Democrats are too nice. [laughs] You know, they're always trying to make peace and go across the aisle and do all that. Even though I'm one who said don't ever cut people off, I think when you're in government and you've got people like Marjorie Taylor Greene and some of those other—pardon my French—assholes, I think the Democrats need to take a stronger stance. They need to be strong and they need to exemplify that kind of strength so that the people in the country who don't want this going on can really feel like it's worth fighting for because they've got leadership at the top that's fighting for it.

Sarah Kendzior::

Yeah, absolutely. On that note, from what I can tell you're wise enough to not spend all your days lurking around Twitter, but unfortunately Andrea and I are not so wise and what we've seen a lot over the last four years is cult of personality forming around members of the DOJ or the FBI, most notably with Robert Mueller. There were candles with him on it. There were images of him as this strongman figure. And then the same applied to Pelosi. Now it's Merrick Garland. There is a cult—we're not sure how authentic it is because there seems to be a lot of automated aspects to it—around Merrick Garland and any criticism of him is met with just extreme condemnation, like “How dare you not trust him?!” And the rhetoric around it is so similar to QAnon. It's all, “Trust the plan. It's coming. Just wait.” It's this demand for loyalty. Have you seen this yourself? And even if you haven't, what would possess people to behave this way?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Well, I haven't seen that and I do spend a certain amount of time on Twitter. I guess I'm following the wrong people.

Sarah Kendzior:

You're following the right people, I think.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

[laughs] Yeah, that sounds horrendous. I mean, it's really using the right-wing playbook and using those, sort of cult techniques of shutting down criticism and any kind of challenge. So yeah, I have no clue who's doing that. I don't know if you do. Maybe they think because the other side does it that way and it works, they should do it that way. But that's a bad strategy.

Sarah Kendzior:

It's a strange strategy because ostensibly it's coming from either Democrats or often from former members of the FBI or DOJ who say they want Trump and his coterie of criminals to be held accountable. But then when ordinary Americans demand for that to happen in a more fast moving timeline—because of course, we have the midterm elections coming and we have the statute of limitations ending on a lot of Trump's earlier crimes—they are bombarded by a mob. Maybe I'll send you some links. It's very strange. You know, there's this old book-

Andrea Chalupa:

I think we're gonna have you on speed dial. We need a cult expert on speed dial on Gaslit Nation.

Sarah Kendzior:

There's a book from the 1970s that got banned when it first came out called *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* Victor Marchetti. Do you know this book?

Dr. Janja Lalic:

Yeah, well, I knew it back in the day.

Sarah Kendzior:

What do you think of it? I mean, just for our audience, this is a former CIA official who called for more transparency and an end to what he thought of as a cultish secretiveness in the government that was detrimental. And this was happening while the Watergate hearings were going on, after the Pike Committee and the Church Committee had emerged, the Pentagon Papers and so forth, this sort of time of accountability. Do you have any thoughts on that, on "cults of intelligence" in the government?

Dr. Janja Lalic:

Certainly there has been historically a lot of secretive activity within the intelligence communities. I guess the one that affected me most was COINTELPro which was infiltrating the Left.

Sarah Kendzior:

Mmmhmm (affirmative)

Andrea Chalupa:

Right and that was targeting especially Black communities.

Dr. Janja Lalic:

Yeah. Black communities, the Black liberation movement. Absolutely. But I think it's a sticky wicket—I haven't been able to say that in a while-

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs] It's from your London interview last night.

Dr. Janja Lalic:

There was a time when I was doing a lot of discussions and presentations with various intelligence communities in the Five Eyes, which is, you know, the five countries who work together. When I actually got to meet these people who do this work, I really gained a lot of respect for them. So I think just as within probably any organization, there's going to be corruption. There's going to be secrets. There's going to be hidden things. I don't think that's what we most need to worry about right now. Maybe I'm being naive, I'll admit that, but I don't think that's our worry right now.

Sarah Kendzior:

No, we've got plenty to deal with. It's just a strange manifestation because you obviously need agencies of accountability. You need agencies that do research on hostile threats to America. I think where it got very complex and kind of unprecedented was the nature of Trump's administration, which was basically a crime syndicate masquerading as a government, and then you don't see those agencies stepping up to stop it. And they're very, very secretive about whatever it is they're doing to ostensibly stop it, which I

think is why these cults around FBI officials or people like Mueller formed, because people want so badly to believe that there's this savior in the wait, that it's all just getting taken care of secretly and we'll eventually be relieved of this anxiety for our nation's future. That unfortunately doesn't seem to be in the cards, at least not in the immediate moment. And if it is, I think they should tell us. [laughs] But, anyway, Andrea, I know you had more questions.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, I feel like we're just so excited to talk to her that we're like, Could you tell us the meaning of the universe please? But obviously we've seen from studying history that you have certain forces of personality, like Ulysses S. Grant is someone that I keep going back to. He just had the right character, the right personality, to be a forceful general. I think arguably Lincoln, for instance, couldn't have had his cabinet, his team of rivals, without having somebody that was just immensely forceful and ruthless and doing a lot of so-called dirty work by just crushing the enemy wonderfully. So I think when you're dealing with times of crises, you need bold leadership. You need people that need to ruthlessly hunt down the enemy and crush the enemy. And we don't have that right now.

Andrea Chalupa:

We have a Congress full of many representatives who are speaking forcefully, but unfortunately they're hampered by party politics, the system itself with rules skewed against them and so forth. But I think if a bold leader does emerge that is fearless and strong—strength and courage are contagious—and says, “We're not gonna tolerate this anymore. We're gonna get these laws done, these protections in place, these regulations, no matter what it takes, we're not gonna go home until it's done.” We just have not had that. We haven't had any coordinated, centralized leadership that's able to meet this moment right now, but I do think and I always have faith in a lot of the men and women—including in law enforcement, including in intelligence—who are working tirelessly in the dark and are paying a great sacrifice and a great risk for that.

Andrea Chalupa:

I do think that just like the enemy is increasingly decentralized—because Trump's movement is going to survive once Trump is gone—I think the resistance is also decentralized. Prior to this conversation, I had a great conversation with two experts at the States Project which is a grassroots movement working to ensure state power and state offices are increasingly Democratic so that good laws can be passed and they're telling me about all these grassroots victories. It's the grassroots. So I think we do have a lot of hope in turning this around and meeting the moment. It's just a decentralized enemy, currently, is being met by a decentralized resistance because we're not getting the leadership we sorely need at the top. It's been bottom-up power so far. I do want to ask you... People are increasingly demoralized for a lot of reasons. It's not just the threat of fascism in America (which is really real) but also the climate crisis, of course.

Andrea Chalupa:

Also the algorithms. There was a leaked report out of Facebook and Instagram deliberately makes young girls feel terrible about themselves and what a mental health crisis that's contributing to. And they don't care. They want the engagement, they want the profit. So it's a time of many crises hitting us at once. So during these times of great instability and uncertainty, it seems that we might be entering—or are already in—an age where people are more vulnerable to cults. Is that the case? Do you expect to see

more and more cult-like groups spring up? And hardcore cults? Are we in danger of an age of increasing cults?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Yes, absolutely. When societies are in crisis, that's when cults do very well. We saw that when the Soviet Union crashed and then all the various cults ran over or to Eastern Europe to recruit because here were people whose whole world was just turned upside down in all these countries. So there's so much evidence of that happening and we see it in practically every little niche and venue. I mean, we've got the wellness industry, the sports industry, the scents, those oils that everybody gets, and then it's in the business world. It's everywhere. These little grouplets grow and these leaders pop up, and people are feeling vulnerable—they don't know what the hell's happening in the world—and so they think, “Oh, here's somebody who sounds honest, who sounds like they have an answer.”and boom, there you go. So yeah, I think we're going to see a lot more of this.

Andrea Chalupa:

What advice do you have for people in terms of where to start, to take the first step to look for help?

Dr. Janja Lalich:

It depends on what stage somebody's at. If it's somebody who was in a cult and has left the group and needs some support and help, it's really important to have some kind of social network that can support you. I work with two therapists who had experience in those awful boarding schools, so we all have cult experience in our background and we've been doing courses on Zoom. Also we do individual consultations. Our website is tbylr.com. Take back your life recovery dot com, but just the letter. tbylr.com. So that's one place people can go. There are some support groups around the country and online and there are certainly books that are helpful to people. I know finding therapists, if that's what someone's looking for, is very difficult because a lot of therapists don't understand the effects of cult membership or cult involvement and so it's important to find a therapist who understands what's called Complex PTSD, not just PTSD. There are resources out there but people need to kind of dig around a bit. And there are certainly a lot of groups on the internet where people discuss their experiences. You just need to be careful that you're not falling into something again, where someone's going to take advantage of you. People are very vulnerable when they get out of cults.

Andrea Chalupa:

Well, thank you so much for your expertise. We're tremendously grateful for your time today and for enlightening us. I know our audience has been wanting this conversation for a while, so we appreciate it.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

Oh, great.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yes, thank you.

Dr. Janja Lalich:

This was great. You guys are very smart.

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs] Thank you!

Sarah Kendzior:

[laughs] We appreciate it, thanks!

[outro theme music]

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth Teller level or higher.

Sarah Kendzior:

We want to encourage you to donate to your local food bank, which is experiencing a spike in demand. We also encourage you to donate to Oil Change International, an advocacy group supported with the generous donation from the Greta Thunberg Foundation that exposes the true costs of fossil fuels and facilitates the ongoing transition to clean energy.

Andrea Chalupa:

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