
Why Johnny Can't Disobey

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Few people are too concerned about whether Johnny can disobey. There is no furor or frantic calls to the PTA, as when it is discovered that he can't read or does poorly on his S.A.T. scores. Even to consider the question is at first laughable. Parents and teachers, after all, are systematically working at developing the virtue of obedience. To my knowledge, no one as yet has opened a remedial disobedience school for overly compliant children, and probably no one ever will. And that in itself is a major problem.

Patricia Hearst recently said that the mindless state of obedience which enveloped her at the hands of the Symbionese Liberation Army could happen to anyone. Jumping to a tentative conclusion from a tip-of-the-iceberg perspective, it looks as though it already has happened to many, and that it has required nothing so dramatic as a kidnapping to bring it about.

Given our experience with various malevolent authority figures such as Adolph Hitler, Charles Manson, Lieutenant Calley, and Jim Jones, it is unfortunately no longer surprising that there are leaders who are capable of wholesale cruelty to the point of directing mass killings. What remains shocking, however, is that they are so often successful in recruiting followers. There seems to be no shortage of individuals who will offer their hearts and minds on a silver platter to feed the egos of the power-hungry. This becomes even more disturbing when one ponders the truism that society's neurotics are often its cultural caricatures, displaying exaggerated manifestations of its collective neuroses. There are enough examples of obedience to horrendous commands for us to ask if and how a particular culture sows the seeds of dangerous conformity.

Political platitudes and lip service to the contrary, obedience is highly encouraged in matters petty as well as profound. Linda Eton, an Iowa firefighter, was suspended from her job and catapulted to national fame for the radical act of breast-feeding at work. A dehumanized, compartmentalized society finds little room for spontaneity, and a blatantly natural act like breast-feeding is viewed as a preposterous interruption of the status quo.

Pettiness abounds in our social relationships, ensuring compliance through peer pressure and disapproval, and enforced by economic sanctions at the workplace. A friend of mine, a construction worker, reported to his job one rainy day carrying an umbrella. The foreman was outraged by this break from the norm, and demanded that the guy never carry an umbrella to

the construction site, even if the umbrella was black, since it "caused his whole crew to look like a bunch of faggots."

Another friend, though less scandalizingly visible in his job as a security guard during the wee hours for a multinational corporation, was caught redhanded playing a harmonica. Mercifully, he was given another chance, only to be later fired for not wearing regulation shoes.

Ostensibly, such firings and threats are deemed necessary to prevent inefficiency and rampant chaos at the workplace. But if employers were merely concerned about productivity and efficiency, it certainly is disputable that "yes-people" are more productive and beneficial than "no-people." Harmonicas may even increase efficiency by keeping security guards sane, alert and awake by staving off sensory deprivation. A dripping wet construction worker could conceivably be less productive than a dry one. And the Adidas being worn by the errant security guard could certainly have contributed to his fleetness and agility as opposed to the cumbersome regulation shoes. The *real* issues here have nothing to do with productivity. What is really involved is an irrational fear of the mildly unusual, a pervasive attitude held by authorities that their subordinates are about to run amok and need constant control.

These little assaults on our freedom prepare us for the big ones. Having long suspected that a huge iceberg of mindless obedience existed beneath our cultural surface, I was not particularly surprised when I heard that nine hundred people followed their leader to mass suicide. For some time we have lived with the realization that people are capable of killing six million of their fellow citizens on command. Jonestown took us one step further. People will kill themselves on command.

In matters ridiculous and sublime, this culture and the world at large clearly exhibit symptoms of pathological obedience. Each time one of the more sensational incidents occurs—Jonestown, the Mai Lai massacre, Nazi Germany, the Manson murders—we attribute its occurrence to factors unique to it, trying to deny any similarities to anything close to us, tossing it about like a philosophical hot potato. We prefer to view such events as anomalies, isolated in time and space, associated with faraway jungles, exotic cults, drugged hippies, and outside agitators. However, as the frequency of such happenings increases, there is the realization that it is relatively easy to seduce some people into brainwashed states of obedience.

Too much energy and time have been spent on trying to understand the alleged compelling traits and mystical powers of charismatic leaders, and not enough in an attempt to understand their fellow travelers—the obedient ones. We need to look deeper into those who *elected* Hitler, and all those followers of Jim Jones who went to Guyana *voluntarily*. We must ask how many of us are also inclined toward hyperobedience. Are we significantly different, capable of resisting malevolent authority, or have we simply had the good fortune never to have met a Jim Jones of our own?

Social psychologist Stanley Milgram, in his book *Obedience to Authority*, is convinced that:

In growing up, the normal individual has learned to check the expression of aggressive impulses. But the culture has failed, almost entirely, in inculcating internal controls on actions that have their origin in authority. For this reason, the latter constitutes a far greater danger to human survival.

Vince Bugliosi, prosecutor of Charles Manson and author of *Helter Skelter*, commented on the Jonestown suicides:

Education of the public is the only answer. If young people could be taught what can happen to them—that they may be zombies a year after talking to that smiling person who stops them on a city street—they may be prepared.

Presumably, most young cult converts have spent most of their days in our educational system, yet are vulnerable to the beguiling smile or evil eye of a Charles Manson. If there is any lesson to be learned from the obedience-related holocausts, it must be that we can never underestimate the power of education and the socialization process.

Contrary to our belief that the survival instinct is predominant over all other drives, the Jonestown suicides offer testimony to the power of cultural indoctrination. Significantly, the greatest life force at the People's Temple came from the children. Acting on their survival instincts, they went kicking and screaming to their deaths in an "immature" display of disobedience. The adults, civilized and educated people that they were, lined up with "stiff upper lips" and took their medicine like the followers they were trained to be—a training that didn't begin at Jonestown.

When something so horrible as Jonestown happens, people draw metaphors about the nearness of the jungle and the beast that lurks within us. It seems that a more appropriate metaphor would be our proximity to an Orwellian civilization with its antiseptic removal of our human rough edges and "animal" instincts. On close scrutiny, the beast within us looks suspiciously like a sheep.

Despite our rich literature of freedom, a pervasive value instilled in our society is obedience to authority. Unquestioning obedience is perceived to be in the best interests of the schools, churches, families, and political institutions. Nationalism, patriotism, and religious ardor are its psychological vehicles.

Disobedience is the original sin, as all of the religions have stated in one way or another. Given the obedience training in organized religions that claim to possess mystical powers and extrarational knowledge and extoll the glories of self-sacrifice, what is so bizarre about the teachings of Jim Jones? If we arm our children with the rationality and independent thought necessary to resist the cultist, can we be sure that our own creeds and proclamations will meet the criteria of reason? The spotlight of reason which exposes the charlatan may next shine on some glaring inconsistencies in the "legitimate" religions. Religions, which are often nothing more than cults that grew, set the stage for the credulity and gullibility required for membership in cults.

A witch hunt is now brewing to exorcise the exotic cults, but what is the dividing line between a cult and a legitimate religion? Is there a qualitative difference between the actions of some venerated Biblical saints and martyrs and the martyrs of Jonestown? If the Bible contained a Parable of Guyana, the churches would regularly extoll it as a courageous act of self-sacrifice. Evidently saints and martyrs are only palatable when separated by the chasm of a few centuries. To enforce their beliefs, the major religions use nothing so crass as automatic weapons, of course, but instead fall back on automatic sentences to eternal damnation.

Certainly there must be an optimal level of obedience and cooperation in a reasonable society, but obedience, as any other virtue that is carried to an extreme, may become a vice. It is obvious that Nazi Germany and Jonestown went too far on the obedience continuum. In more mundane times and places the appropriate level of obedience is more difficult to discover.

We must ask if our society is part of the problem, part of the solution, or wholly irrelevant to the incidents of over-obedience exhibited at Jonestown and Mai Lai. Reviewing social psychologists' attempts to take our psychic temperatures through empirical measurements of our conformity and obedience behavior in experimental situations, our vital signs do not look good.

In 1951 Solomon Asch conducted an experiment on conformity, which is similar to obedience behavior in that it subverts one's will to that of peers or an authority. This study, as reported in the textbook *Social Psychology* by Freedman, Sears, and Carlsmith, involved college students who were asked to estimate lines of equal and differing lengths. Some of the lines

were obviously equal, but if subjects heard the others before them unanimously give the wrong answer, they would also answer incorrectly. Asch had reasoned that people would be rational enough to choose the evidence of their own eyes over the disagreeing "perceptions" of others. He found that he was wrong.

When subjects were asked to estimate the length of a line after confederates of the experimenter had given obviously wrong answers, the subjects gave wrong answers about 35 percent of the time. Authors Freedman, Sears, and Carlsmith stress:

It is important to keep the unambiguousness of the situations in mind if we are to understand this phenomenon. There is a tendency to think that the conforming subjects are uncertain of the correct choice and therefore are swayed by the majority. This is not always the case. In many instances subjects are quite certain of the correct choice and, in the absence of group pressure, would choose correctly 100 percent of the time. When they conform, they are conforming despite the fact that they know the correct answer.

If 35 percent of those students conformed to group opinion in unambiguous matters and in direct contradiction of the evidence of their own eyes, how much more must we fear blind following in *ambiguous* circumstances or in circumstances where there exists a legitimate authority?

In the early sixties, Yale social psychologist Stanley Milgram devised an experiment to put acts of obedience and disobedience under close scrutiny. Milgram attempted to understand why thousands of "civilized" people had engaged in an extreme and immoral act—that of the wholesale extermination of Jews—in the name of obedience. He devised a learning task in which subjects of the experiment were instructed to act as teachers. They were told to "shock" learners for their mistakes. The learners were actually confederates of the experimenter and were feigning their reactions. When a mistake was made, the experimenter would instruct the teacher to administer an ever-increasing voltage from a shock machine which read "Extreme Danger," "Severe Shock," and "XXX." Although the machine was unconnected, the subject-teachers believed that they were actually giving shocks. They were themselves given a real sample shock before the experiment began.

Milgram asked his Yale colleagues to make a guess as to what proportion of subjects would proceed to shock all the way to the presumed lethal end of the shock-board. Their estimates hovered around 1 or 2 percent. No one was prepared for what happened. All were amazed that twenty-six out of forty subjects obeyed the experimenter's instruction to press levers that supposedly administered severely dangerous levels of shock. After this, Milgram regularly obtained results showing that 62 to 65 percent of people would shock to the end of the board. He tried several variations on the experiment, one of which was to set it up outside of Yale University so that the prestige of the University would not be an overriding factor in causing subjects to obey. He found that people were just as likely to administer severe shock, whether the experiments occurred within the hallowed halls of Yale or in a three-room walk-up storefront in which the experimenters spoke of themselves as "scientific researchers."

In another variation of the experiment, Milgram found that aggression—latent or otherwise—was not a significant factor in causing the teacher-subjects to shock the learners. When the experimenter left the room, thus permitting the subjects to choose the level of shock themselves, almost none administered more than the lowest voltage. Milgram concluded that obedience, not aggression, was the problem. He states:

I must conclude that (Hannah) Arendt's conception of the *banality of evil* comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine. The ordinary person who shocked

the victim did so out of a sense of obligation—a conception of his duties as a subject—and not from any peculiarly aggressive tendencies.

This is, perhaps, the most fundamental lesson of our study: ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority. A variety of inhibitions against disobeying authority come into play and successfully keep the person in his place.

A lack of compassion was not a particularly salient personality factor in the acts of obedience performed by the followers of Hitler, Jim Jones, and the subjects in the Milgram experiments. Nazi soldiers were capable of decent human behavior toward their friends and family. Some, too, see an irony in that Hitler himself was a vegetarian. The People's Temple members seemed more compassionate and humanitarian than many, and yet they forced their own children to partake of a drink laced with cyanide. Those shocking the victims in the Milgram experiments exhibited signs of compassion both toward the experimenter and to the persons that they thought were receiving the shocks. In fact Milgram finds that:

It is a curious thing that a measure of compassion on the part of the subject, an unwillingness to "hurt" the experimenter's feelings, are part of those binding forces inhibiting disobedience . . . only obedience can preserve the experimenter's status and dignity.

Milgram's subjects showed signs of severe physiological tension and internal conflict when instructed to shock. Presumably, these signs of psychic pain and tortured indecision were a manifestation of an underlying attitude of compassion for the victim, but it was not sufficient to impel them to openly break with, and therefore embarrass, the experimenter, even though this experimenter had no real authority over them. One of Milgram's subjects expressed this dilemma succinctly:

I'll go through with anything they tell me to do. . . . They know more than I do. . . . I know when I was in the service (if I was told) "You go over the hill and we're going to attack," we attacked. So I think it's all based on the way a man was brought up . . . in his background. Well, I faithfully believed the man [whom he thought he had shocked] was dead until we opened the door. When I saw him, I said: "Great, this is great!" But it didn't bother me even to find that he was dead. I did a job.

The experiments continued with thousands of people—students and nonstudents, here and abroad—often demonstrating obedience behavior in 60 to 65 percent of the subjects. When the experiments were done in Munich, obedience often reached 85 percent. Incidentally, Milgram found no sex differences in obedience behavior. Though his sample of women shockers was small, their level of obedience was identical to that of men. But they did exhibit more symptoms of internal conflict. Milgram concluded that "there is probably nothing the victim can say that will uniformly generate disobedience," since it is not the victim who is controlling the shocker's behavior. Even when one of the experimental variations included a victim who cried out that he had a heart condition, this did not lead to significantly greater disobedience. In such situations, the experimenter-authority figure dominates the subject's social field, while the pleading cries of the victim are for the most part ignored.

Milgram found that the authority's power had to be somehow undermined before there was widespread disobedience, as when the experimenter was not physically present, when his

orders came over the telephone, or when his orders were challenged by another authority. Most importantly, subjects became disobedient in large numbers only when others rebelled, dissented, or argued with the experimenter. When a subject witnessed another subject defying or arguing with the experimenter, thirty-six out of forty also rebelled, demonstrating that peer rebellion was the most effective experimental variation in undercutting authority.

This social orientation in which the authority dominates one's psyche is attributed by Milgram to a state of mind which he terms "the agentic state." A person makes a critical shift from a relatively autonomous state into this agentic state when she or he enters a situation in which "he defines himself in a manner that renders him open to regulation by a person of higher status."

An extreme agentic state is a likely explanation of the scenario at Jonestown, where even the cries of their own children were not sufficient to dissuade parents from serving cyanide. Despite some ambiguity as to how many Jonestown residents were murdered and how many committed suicide, there remains the fact that these victims had participated in previous suicide rehearsals. Jim Jones, assured of their loyalty and of their critical shift into an agentic state, then had the power to orchestrate the real thing. The supreme irony, the likes of which could only be imagined as appearing in the *Trafalmore Tribune* with a byline by Kurt Vonnegut, was the picture of the Guyana death scene. Bodies were strewn about beneath the throne of Jones and a banner which proclaimed that those who failed to learn from the lessons of history were doomed to repeat them.

How many of us have made the critical shift into an agentic state regarding international relations, assuming that our leaders know best, even though they have repeatedly demonstrated that they do not? Stanley Milgram predicts that "for the man who sits in front of the button that will release Armageddon, depressing it will have about the same emotional force as calling for an elevator . . . evolution has not had a chance to build inhibitors against such remote forms of aggression."

We should recognize that our human nature renders us somewhat vulnerable. For one thing, our own mortality and that of our loved ones is an unavoidable fact underlying our lives. In the face of it, we are powerless; and in our insecurity, many reach out for sure answers. Few choose to believe, along with Clarence Darrow, that not only are we not the captains of our fate, but that we are not even "deckhands on a rudderless dinghy." Or, as someone else has stated: "There are no answers. Be brave and face up to it." Most of us won't face up to it. We want our answers, solutions to our plight, and we want them now. Too often truth and rational thought are the first casualties of this desperate reach for security. We embrace answers from charlatans, false prophets, charismatic leaders, and assorted demagogues. Given these realities of our nature, how can we avoid these authority traps to which we are so prone? By what criteria do we teach our children to distinguish between the charlatan and the prophet?

It seems that the best armor is the rational mind. We must insist that all authorities account for themselves, and we need to be as wary of false prophets as we are of false advertising. Leaders, political and spiritual, must be subjected to intense scrutiny, and we must insist that their thought processes and proclamations measure up to reasonable standards of rational thought. Above all, we must become skilled in activating our inner resources toward rebellion and disobedience, when this seems reasonable.

The power of socialization can conceivably be harnessed so as to develop individuals who are rational and skeptical, capable of independent thought, and who can disobey or disagree at the critical moment. Our society, however, continues systematically to instill exactly the opposite. The educational system pays considerable lip service to the development of self-reliance, and places huge emphasis on lofty concepts of individual differences. Little notice is taken of the legions of overly obedient children in the schools; yet, for every overly obedient child,

there are probably twenty who are obeying too much. There is little motivation to encourage the wheels to develop as noisy, creative, independent thinkers who may become bold enough to disagree. Conceivably, we could administer modified Milgram obedience tests in the schools which detect hyper-obedience, just as we test for intelligence, visual function, vocational attributes and tuberculosis. When a child is found to be too obedient, the schools should mobilize against this psychological crippler with the zeal by which they would react to an epidemic of smallpox. In alcoholism and other mental disturbances, the first major step toward a reversal of the pathology is recognition of the severity of the problem. Obedience should be added to the list of emotional disturbances requiring therapy. Disobedience schools should be at least as common as military schools and reform schools.

The chains on us are not legal or political, but the invisible chains of the genetic state. We have all gotten the message that it is dangerous and requires exceptional courage to be different.

If we are to gain control of our lives and minds, we must first acknowledge the degree to which we are not now in control. We must become reasonable and skeptical. Reason is no panacea, but, at the moment, it is all that we have. Yet many in our society seem to have the same attitude about rationality and reason that they do about the poverty program—that is, we've tried and it doesn't work.

Along with worrying about the S.A.T. scores and whether or not Johnny can read, we must begin to seriously question whether Johnny is capable of disobedience. The churches and cults, while retaining their constitutional right to free expression, must be more regularly criticized. The legitimate religions have been treated as sacred cows. Too often, criticism of them is met with accusations of religious bigotry, or the implications that one is taking candy from a baby or a crutch from a cripple. The concept of religious tolerance has been stretched to its outer limits, implying freedom from criticism and the nonpayment of taxes. Neither patriotism nor religion should be justification for the suspension of reason.

And, on a personal level, we must stop equating sanity with conformity, eccentricity with craziness, and normalcy with number. We must get in touch with our own liberating ludicrousness and practice being harmlessly deviant. We must, in fact, cease to use props or other people to affirm our normalcy. With sufficient practice, perhaps, when the need arises, we may have the strength to force a moment to its crisis.