

OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

By Stanley Milgram

If this book does make you think long and hard about the world in which you live, about the people you know, and—most particularly and perhaps painfully—about yourself, then I know of no book that will do so. It has had that effect on me. I first read *Obedience to Authority* almost a year ago; it has been in my thoughts many times since then and has caused me endlessly to buttonhole friends and acquaintances, urging them to read it. I am glad to have the opportunity to bring this profoundly important work to the attention of readers of *Libertarian Review*.

The thesis of *Obedience to Authority* is simply stated. "Ordinary people," explains Stanley Milgram (professor of psychology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York), "simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. However, 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."

Does this seem like a description of Nazi Germany? It is a description of a cross-section of over a thousand Americans—men and women, aged 20 to 50, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, from all educational levels and a wide range of occupations and professions—who took part in a series of laboratory experiments first conducted by Milgram at Yale University and then repeated in other parts of the country.

Very briefly, each subject of the experiment was told (falsely) that he was participating in a scientific study of the effects of punishment on learning. A white-coated scientist in a laboratory requested the subject to administer a series of progressively stronger electric shocks to a third person, the "learner" (who was strapped into a wired chair), each time the learner failed correctly to answer one of a list of simple questions. The subject was told that the learner, like himself, was a volunteer. This was not the case; the learner knew the actual nature of the experiment, and in fact received no shocks at all. *An overwhelming majority of the subjects, in the absence of force, in opposition to their moral principles, despite feelings of intense internal conflict and doubt, and despite the pleas, screams and apparent acute suffering of the*

learner, continued to administer the shocks until the scientist-authority told them to stop. The psychological power of the authority-figure was far stronger than the power of their own moral values.

There is no way, in a short review, to communicate the appalling quality of the spectacle the experiments unfold, the spectacle of predominantly decent people motivated, not by feelings of aggression or hostility, but by their inability to resist the commands of an authority, to systematically torture what they believed to be helpless victims.

Milgram gives a number of fascinating and valuable explanations both of the causes and the psychological mechanics which make such behavior possible, explanations drawn in large part from his subsequent interviews with his subjects. The most significant mechanism involved, in my view, and the most common, is the subjects' self-creation of an "agentic state." That is, the subjects ceased, as the experiment progressed, to see themselves as responsible for the actions they were taking; they attributed the initiative and the responsibility to the authority, viewing themselves as only his passive agents. It was the authority who defined the moral meaning of their actions. What caused disobedience in the minority who refused to continue administering the shocks? The conviction that they were autonomous entities, who could not and would not abrogate moral self-responsibility. A "residue of selfhood," states Milgram, allowed the minority to keep their personal values alive.

Milgram's summation of the meaning of his work is chilling. His results, he writes, "raise the possibility that human nature, or—more specifically—the kind of character produced in American democratic society, cannot be counted on to insulate its citizens from brutality and inhumane treatment at the direction of malevolent authority. A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act, and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority."

The first step in averting the catastrophic potential implied by Milgram's findings is to understand it. I urge you to read *Obedience to Authority*. Reviewed by Barbara Branden / Psychology / \$10, hardback / \$3.45, paper

YOUTH--TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

By Panel on Youth, President's Science Advisory Committee

ESCAPE FROM CHILDHOOD

By John Holt

WILL IT GROW IN A CLASSROOM?

Edited by Beatrice & Ronald Gross

Not expecting to discover a revolutionary plan of action coming from a presidential panel, I was surprised to discover that *Youth-Transition to Adulthood* accomplishes the promise of its title. The introduction and historical background materials consume over half the text and are presented with homogeneous clarity, given the number of authors.

Distilled, the key observation of panel members is that our children currently suffer "cultural detachment" due to a prolonged educational experience within an age-peer-group. cursory attention is paid to the effects of excluding young people from any productive activities until their early twenties while simultaneously making them financial burdens for the family unit. In the course of this retrospective look at the emergence of the technological generation, the days of a mixed work-study agricultural economy are nearly lamented.

Many pages later, the obvious conclusion is drawn. Our educational system keeps youth in school longer, but does not meet the social expectation of increasing and enlarging preparation for a life's work. Having brought the reader this far, the panel members then proceed to address the alternatives in 30 pages of hazy suggestions, most of which would lead (true to form) to the creation of other committees for further study.

Calling for an end to the monolithic institutionalized school system, the authors regrettably propose creating work experiences for teenagers in public and national services, stressing the achievement of collective goals.

John Holt's *Escape From Childhood* is a less scholarly piece on the issue of transition, written in the author's familiar anecdotal style. The book begins with Holt's own revised "children's charter," which includes his somewhat startling assertion that every child should be legally free to select and live in a family relationship outside the home of his/her parents. Rather than dealing in abstract phrases such as "cultural detachment," Holt says plainly that "childhood goes on too long and there is too seldom any sensible and gradual way to move out of it."

More philosophical than Holt's previous educational classics, *Escape* is a compelling essay on how we have all been primrose-pathed about the idyllic world of childhood. While promulgating the illusion of an unspoiled, responsibility-free time of life, we are really telling our children that the world is a

treacherous place in which they must depend on adults to keep them out of trouble. Reaching the adult stage of controlling one's own life is synonymous with being chased out of the Garden of Eden. Holt does not come right out and say it, but the political implications of such programming are clear. Small wonder the masses cling to the security of an all-knowing, protective government to fill the void of parental dependency.

Largely libertarian in his beliefs about authority, power, personal freedoms, and rational self-interest, Holt has momentary lapses. He advocates, for instance, the "right" of children to receive from the State whatever minimum income it guarantees adults.

About our concern to provide for children adequate education and a healthy environment, Holt cautions that "no amount of sentimentalizing or preaching will make a society provide for its young people a better quality of life than it provides for its adults. We fool ourselves if we think ways can be found to give children what the rest of us so sorely lack." This passage appears in the chapter insightfully titled "What Children Need, We All Need."

Will it Grow in a Classroom? has its roots in the Free Learning Project, an organization of soul-searching, open-education advocates still fighting up the down staircase. This collection of essays by teachers about teaching was meant to inbreed the best new ideas in classroom relevance. The editors bill it as "shop talk."

Not quite like many a recent teacher-guerilla-warfare manual, *Will it Grow* is an endearing patchwork of personal stories, dialogues, and occasional verse. It is a diverse book, funny, practical, enlightening, and encouraging in its no-starch self examination of the chalk-dust circuit.

Filled with invention and experimentation, some chapters read like situation comedies, some like parables. Sharing the spotlight with educational luminaries like John Holt is a delightful repertory company, including a classroom "madman," a science teacher who assigns hole digging for homework, and an instructor who uses gerbils and goldfish to teach reading. The common voice throughout calls for an end to the insensitivities of processed schooling and reminds us that it takes a flexible curriculum to accommodate the spectrum of individuality found in the average student body. Reviewed by Susan Easton / Education / Youth / \$1.95 / Escape / \$1.75 / Will it Grow / \$2.95

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