

The Milgram Experiment

by Jeff Riggerbach on September 3, 2010

[Transcribed from the [Libertarian Tradition podcast](#) episode "The Milgram Experiment."]

It was about 1550, according to the standard accounts — about 14 years before the birth of Shakespeare, about 80 years before the birth of John Locke, about 135 years before the birth of Bach — that a young Frenchman named Etienne de La Boetie, a young man of what we, today, would call college age, about 20 years old, posed what Murray Rothbard would later describe as "the central problem of political philosophy: the mystery of civil obedience. Why do people, in all times and places, obey the commands of the government, which always constitutes a small minority of the society?"

La Boetie saw, Rothbard wrote, that

every tyranny must necessarily be grounded upon general popular acceptance. In short, the bulk of the people themselves, for whatever reason, acquiesce in their own subjection. If this were not the case, no tyranny, indeed no governmental rule, could long endure. Hence, a government does not have to be popularly elected to enjoy general public support; for general public support is in the very nature of all governments that endure, including the most oppressive of tyrannies. The tyrant is but one person, and could scarcely command the obedience of another person, much less of an entire country, if most of the subjects did not grant their obedience by their own consent.

This, then, becomes for La Boétie the central problem of political theory: *why in the world do people consent to their own enslavement?*

Rothbard wrote this passage as part of a lengthy and extremely interesting [introduction](#) to a then-new edition of Etienne de La Boetie's youthful essay on political philosophy. This new edition (which presented a modern American translation originally brought out in the 1940s) was published in 1975 under the title [The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude](#). That very same year, 1975, a rival edition of La Boetie's little book was issued by another small scholarly publisher, this one presenting an 18th-century British translation with the 16th-century French text on facing pages. This rival edition was published under the title *The Will to Bondage* and featured a not so lengthy but extremely interesting preface by the libertarian historian and editor James J. Martin.

Martin thought he knew the answer to the question that had so perplexed La Boetie and now perplexed Rothbard: Why *do* people, in all times and places, obey the commands of the government, acquiesce in their own subjection, consent to their own enslavement? Martin's answer was that they're born that way. We should ask ourselves, he wrote, whether "at bottom all political, ethical and philosophic convictions" might not be "due to personal temperament and incapable of being accounted for by reason." This hypothesis, he maintained, "is of critical importance to a detached view of this business of tyranny, its persistence, and its opponents."

For temperament brings up the matter of genetics, not propaganda, education, psychic persuasion or intimidation, and a whole schedule of related phenomena. It remains to be proven whether there has ever been a genuine case of a person temperamentally congenial to tyranny who has ever been "converted" to the opposite tendency, or vice versa, by any device known to the arts of persuasion.

At the time he wrote this, Martin had spent more than 20 years teaching at the high-school and college levels. And his considered opinion was that schools, in particular, persuaded nobody of anything. "They largely succeed," he wrote, "in entrenching sentiments already there in the people they process, though they may develop adversaries by awakening contradictory reactions among those temperamentally hostile to what they are exposed to." This is why "the members of libertarian persuasions remain at just about the same levels year after year relative to the total community, despite the most wondrous attempts via literature, communication and action to swell them." The plain fact is, Martin insisted, that those "who crave the comforts and security of subordination outnumber the 'free souls,' and there is no credible evidence that this relationship is likely to change in any appreciable degree now or at any calculable time in the future."

That was James J. Martin's take on the origins of the politics of obedience, the will to bondage, the will to voluntary servitude. There were other takes, however. As the simultaneous appearance in 1975 of

competing translations of Etienne de La Boetie's essay in political philosophy suggests, the '70s was a time when such ideas were "in the air," a time when many people were drawn to consider and discuss such ideas.

Consider the case of Stanley Milgram, the social psychologist at the City University of New York whose book [*Obedience to Authority*](#) was published in 1974. The book was Milgram's summary of and reflections upon a series of experiments he had begun conducting back in 1961, when he was a newly minted Harvard PhD in the second year of his first teaching assignment, as an assistant professor of psychology at Yale. Milgram advertised for volunteers who would be willing to participate in a psychological experiment in return for a small payment — "four dollars for one hour of your time," according to the ad reproduced in Milgram's 1974 book. When the volunteers reached Milgram's laboratory, they were told they would be participating in a study of how memory and learning were affected by punishment.

They were told that in the experiment each of them would play the part of a "teacher." Each of them was then paired with another volunteer, who was playing the part of a "learner." The rules were simple. The learner was strapped into a chair by a white-coated "experimenter" and connected to electrodes. In an adjoining room, with a window through which the teacher and the experimenter could see and make eye contact with the learner, the teacher read a list of words arranged in pairs aloud into a microphone. The teacher's voice was audible to the learner through speakers on the walls of the adjoining room. In similar fashion, the learner's voice was audible to the teacher and the experimenter through speakers mounted on the walls on their side of the glass.

If the learner repeated the word pairs in correct sequence, the experiment would go on. If the learner made an error, the teacher would administer an electric shock to the learner by remote control, pressing a button on a control console. Each electric shock administered would be stronger than the one before.

At some point in the proceedings, the volunteer "teachers" discovered, the volunteer "learners" began to show discomfort, then increasing evidence of feeling serious pain, when the shocks were administered. It wasn't long before the learners began demanding, then begging, to be released from the experiment. It wasn't long before they began struggling to escape from the chairs into which they had been strapped by the experimenter. It wasn't long before the learners began pleading with the teachers to help them get themselves free.

And, as the severity of the shocks the experimenters ordered the teachers to administer grew greater and greater, the console from which the teachers administered these shocks began to display warnings that the selected voltages were dangerously high. Still, any teachers who protested to the experimenters or even raised questions about whether the experiment should proceed were sternly ordered by the experimenters to continue. They were told by the experimenters that everything was all right.

And, in fact, everything was all right. The learners were not really volunteers, but actors. They were not really receiving any shocks at all. But the teachers did not know this. They believed themselves to be inflicting excruciating and possibly life-threatening pain on the learners. And most of them went right on doing so, despite the struggles and protests of their victims. Only one of Milgram's first 40 volunteers refused to inflict any more shocks beyond what his console told him was 300 volts. But by that time, according to Milgram, the learner's "response can be described only as an agonized scream. Soon thereafter, he makes no sound at all."

Yet all but one of Milgram's first 40 volunteers went right on administering shocks. Two-thirds of them went on administering shocks right up to what their consoles told them was 450 volts, the highest voltage the equipment could produce, even though by that time, the learners were totally unresponsive and apparently either unconscious or dead.

Milgram's experiment really had nothing to do with memory, learning, and punishment, of course. It was rather, as he described it in 1974, a simple experiment ... to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist. Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not.

Yet, at any point in the proceedings, all any of the teachers had to do was refuse to continue. All any of them had to do was stand up and walk out of the laboratory. It is rather like the situation Etienne de La Boetie

describes in his essay on the politics of obedience. Because the ruled always outnumber the ruler, La Boetie wrote, the ruled can free themselves at any time "merely by willing to be free."

It was really that simple, La Boetie wrote. In his words,

Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break in pieces.

Would the experimenter in Stanley Milgram's lab have fallen of his own weight and broken in pieces if the teachers had walked out on him? As [Milgram himself](#) put it,

a reader's initial reaction to the experiment may be to wonder why anyone in his right mind would ... not simply refuse and walk out of the laboratory? But the fact is that no one ever does. Since the subject has come to the laboratory to aid the experimenter, he is quite willing to start off with the procedure. There is nothing very extraordinary in this, particularly since the person who is to receive the shocks seems initially cooperative, if somewhat apprehensive. What is surprising is how far ordinary individuals will go in complying with the experimenter's instructions. Indeed, the results of the experiment are both surprising and dismaying....

Many subjects will obey the experimenter no matter how vehement the pleading of the person being shocked, no matter how painful the shocks seem to be, and no matter how much the victim pleads to be let out. This was seen time and again in our studies and has been observed in several universities where the experiment was repeated. It is the extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority that constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation.

Milgram believed there were two explanations for his results. I call them the psychological explanation and the sociological explanation. The psychological explanation is that under certain circumstances the ordinary individual is both able and willing to "view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes," so that "he therefore no longer considers himself responsible for his actions." The sociological explanation is that under certain circumstances most individuals abandon any attempt at independent thinking and simply conform to what they feel is expected of them — what they have absorbed, mostly unthinkingly, from the culture in which they have grown up and now live.

So what was the solution to this problem of authority, as one might call it? To his credit, Milgram considered libertarianism as a possibility. But he rejected it. "It would seem," he wrote, "that the anarchist argument for universal dismantling of political institutions is a powerful solution to the problem of authority. But the problems of anarchism are equally insoluble." For while the existence of authority sometimes leads to the commission of ruthless and immoral acts, the absence of authority renders one a victim to such acts on the part of others who are better organized. Were the United States to abandon all forms of political authority, the outcome would be entirely clear. We would soon become the victims of our own disorganization, because better organized societies would immediately perceive and act on the opportunities that weakness creates.

Moreover, it would be an oversimplification to present the picture of the noble individual in a continuous struggle against malevolent authority. The obvious truth is that ... for every individual who carries out harsh action because of authority, there is another individual who is restrained from doing so.

The libertarian social psychologist Sharon Presley studied for her PhD under Milgram at the City University of New York in the '70s; she says, politically, Milgram was not a libertarian, but "a liberal Democrat who was in favor of civil liberties."

Nonetheless, by reflecting further on Etienne de La Boetie's key insight about the politics of authority, the will to bondage, and the eager embrace of voluntary servitude, and by devising an ingenious test for their influence on the ordinary individual, Stanley Milgram made an important contribution to the libertarian tradition.

Jeff Riggerbach is a journalist, author, editor, broadcaster, and educator. A member of the Organization of American Historians and a Senior Fellow at the Randolph Bourne Institute, he has written for such newspapers as The New York Times, USA Today, the Los Angeles Times, and the San Francisco Chronicle; such magazines as Reason, Inquiry, and Liberty; and such websites as LewRockwell.com, AntiWar.com, and RationalReview.com. Drawing on vocal skills he honed in classical and all-news radio in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Houston, Riggerbach has also narrated the audiobook versions of numerous libertarian works, many of them [available in Mises Media](#). Send him [mail](#). See Jeff Riggerbach's [article archives](#).

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