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Anarchism, Authority and Power

Sidney E. Parker

1976

Among a bundle of literature sent to me from Amsterdam recently was an essay by Michael Tobin entitled “Obedience to the State: The Greatest Menace Facing Our Mankind”. This is a summarization and criticism of a book by a psychologist, Professor Stanley Milgram, on “Obedience to Authority”, which is based on experiments carried out by Milgram at Yale University and repeated elsewhere. These experiments took the form of a series of volunteers (‘teachers’) who were placed before an electric shock generator having a line of switches ranging from 15 to 450 volts. This generator appeared to be connected with electrodes attached to the wrists another volunteer (‘learner’) who was strapped into a chair. The ‘teacher’ was ordered by the psychologist (‘instructor’) to read out a sequence of word pairs to the ‘learner’. If the ‘learner’ replied wrongly the ‘teacher’ pressed one of the switches and gave him an electric shock, increasing the voltage each time this happened. What the ‘teacher’ did not know was that the ‘learner’ was not a volunteer, but an actor who did not actually experience a shock — he only simulated the agony of receiving one.

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According to Milgram, the result of the experiments was to establish the fact that the majority of ‘teachers’ continued to obey the ‘instructor’s’ orders and administered shocks even when the danger mark was passed and the ‘learner’ was screaming to be released or feigning heart trouble and unconsciousness.

“Many subjects will obey the experimenter”, writes Milgram, “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.” The ‘teachers’ were not sadists, he continues, “The ordinary person who shocked the victim did so out of a sense of obligation — a conception of his duty as a subject — and not from any peculiarly aggressive tendencies.”

Milgram was astonished at the number of individuals who violated their professed moral standards in obedience to the authority of the instructor. He observes that “the force exerted by the moral sense of the individual is less effective than social myth would have us believe”. It does not seem to have occurred to him that at least one reason for this is that “moral principles” themselves are forms of authority. They thereby facilitate obedience to other forms of authority because the basic thing is not what is *forbidden*, but obedience to the dictates of an *authority*. Milgram himself supports this view when he records that

“Although a person acting under authority performs acts that seem to violate standards of conscience, it would not be true to say that he loses his moral sense. Instead, it acquires a radically different focus. He does not respond with a moral sentiment to the actions he performs. Rather, his moral concern now shifts to a consideration of how well he is living up to the

expectations that *the authority* has of him.” (My emphasis)

Milgram’s final conclusion is that this “fatal flaw” of obedience to authority makes the future survival of the “species” questionable since it paves the way for a very probable global nuclear war. Indeed, although acutely aware of the consequences of authority, he does not believe that it will ever be possible to dispense with it. Like the poor it will always be us.

Michael Tobin disagrees with Milgram. He believes that all authority can be abolished and a world-wide “anarchocommunist” society created. His reasons rest on — “belief”. “We are full of hope and optimism”, “we are certain”, “we believe passionately”, etc., etc. He presents not a tittle of cogent evidence for his hopes, certainties and beliefs. It is clearly for him a matter of “faith” and like all “faiths his rest on — the “faith” of the faithful one. As such it can be passed by.

The most significant result of these experiments, however, is what they reveal about the nature of authority. There is a tendency, particularly among anarchists, to identify authority with external coercion. But they are not the same. The volunteers in Milgram’s experiments were not coerced by any external power. They took part freely and could depart any time they wished. Nonetheless, the majority carried out the instructor’s orders to the end, even though some did protest. *Their obedience was motivated by the authority they saw as inherent in the person of the instructor.* It was not power, but authority that they obeyed.

In his book, “In Defense of Anarchism”, Robert Paul Wolff writes: “Authority is the right to command, and correlatively, the right to be obeyed. It must be distinguished from power, which is the ability to compel compliance, either through the use or the threat of force. When I turn over my wallet to a thief who is holding me at gunpoint, I do so because the fate with which he threatens me is worse than the loss of money which

I am made to suffer. I grant that he has power over me, but I would hardly suppose that he has authority, that is, that he has a right to demand my money and that I have an obligation to give it to him. When the government presents me with a bill for taxes, on the other hand, I pay it (normally) even though I do not wish to, and even if I think I can get away with not paying. It is, after all, the duly constituted government, and hence it has a *right* to tax me. It has *authority* over me. Sometimes, of course, I cheat the government, but even so, I acknowledge its authority, for who would speak of “cheating” a thief?...To *claim* authority is to claim the right to be obeyed.

A leader of a religious sect, for instance, may have no apparatus at his disposal to *compel* obedience to the practices he lays down for his followers, but he can nonetheless *command* obedience by virtue of the authority he claims. Of course, there are examples in which authority and coercive power are combined in one body, the State being the most prominent and dangerous contemporary of these, but, as Milgram and robber gangs show, the mystique of authority and the reality of superior force do not always coincide. And even when they do, as in the State, it is an open question whether the apparatus of coercive power is intended or able to deal with any other than the recalcitrant individual or minority. Authority is the cementing force for the fabric of organized collectivities, whether it is exercised vertically as in the State, or horizontally as in the most primitive societies (and as it would be in certain projected *future* societies mistakenly called “anarchist”).

In his book Wolff remarks “It is the rare individual in the history of the race who rises even to the level of questioning the right of his masters to command and the duty of himself and his fellows to obey”. This is profoundly true, and one could add that those individuals who carry this questioning to a thoroughgoing repudiation of *any* “duty” to obey authority are even rarer (even Wolff believes in the duty to be bound by “moral constraints”). Indeed, there appears to be no valid reason to sup-

pose that their numbers will significantly increase. History has shown that the human sheep who accept the authority of their shepherds are always the largest class.

As an anarchist-individualist having no faith in Tobin-like apocalypses or the nebulous dreams of educational gradualists, I know that such anarchy as I am likely to experience will only be here and now, not there and then. My anarchism, therefore, takes the form of denying the legitimacy of any claim of authority over me, not in denying that there are any will remain “social forces” more powerful than I which can compel my compliance to their demands, even though I grant them no authority to do so. Anarchy thus becomes not a future place, but a present “state of mind”, an *individual* perspective, not a future *social* practice. Nonetheless, if I have not the power to overthrow these “forces” which claim authority and/or demand compliance, I will evade them where possible, assert my individuality when I can, and when all else fails take refuge in what James Joyce described as “silence, exile and cunning”.