

The Psychology of Resistance

by Aric McBay

I hear many condemn these men because they were so few. When were the good and the brave ever in a majority?

—Henry David Thoreau, “A Plea for Captain John Brown.”

How can we expect righteousness to prevail when there is hardly anyone willing to give himself up individually to a righteous cause. Such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go. But what does my death matter, if through us thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?

—Sophie Scholl, The White Rose Society, her last words.

Our premise is that the majority of people will not engage in resistance. Some reasons are obvious: ingrained obedience, ignorance, and the benefits of participation in the dominant culture. But there are also specific psychological barriers to resistance, at least four of which have been explored in psychological research.

In the 1950s, psychologist Solomon Asch conducted a series of experiments into social effects on perception. Asch set out to prove that when faced with a crystal-clear, objective question, a person’s judgment should not be affected by others.

Experimental subjects were brought into a room one at a time with people *posing* as participants: the experimenter’s confederates. They were shown a set of lines: a “reference” line, and several comparison lines of varying length, one of which matched the reference line. The experimenter asked the participants to call out which line matched. They did this twelve times with twelve different figures. The trick was that the fake subjects—the experimenter’s confederates—lied. They were instructed ahead of time to choose a line which was very clearly too long or too short.

After five false participants had stated their choice, the genuine participants would state their choice. The results of the experiment were completely the opposite of what Asch had expected. In more than half

of the trials the subjects went along with the consensus, even though the correct answer was obvious. Some 25 percent of the participants *refused* to conform in every trial, but 75 percent of the participants gave the consensus answer at least once.¹ Interviewing the participants afterward, Asch found that most people *saw* the lines correctly, but felt that since the rest of the group was in consensus, they themselves must be wrong. Some knew that the group was wrong but went along with it anyway to avoid standing out. And some insisted, after the experiment had completed, that they actually *saw* the lines the same way as the rest of the group.

Later research by other psychologists found certain commonalities among those most likely to conform.² Such people, they observed, tended to have high levels of anxiety, low status, a high need for approval, and authoritarian personalities. That last part is particularly interesting—the people who are likely to boss others around are themselves psychologically pliable.

It's not just the prevailing opinion that affects whether we will conform or not. Authority plays a very important role. Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram famously began a series of experiments in 1961, shortly after the beginning of Nazi Adolf Eichmann's war crimes trial. He wanted to understand the degree to which those responsible for the Holocaust were "just following orders." In Milgram's experiment, the subject was instructed by an authority (the experimenter in a lab coat) to give increasingly powerful shocks to another person, an actor who sometimes claimed to have a heart condition. The actor was not actually shocked, but pretended to be, eventually screaming in pain, banging on walls, and then falling silent as the shocks passed a presumably lethal threshold.

Prior to the experiment, Milgram polled his students and colleagues, all of whom believed that only a tiny percentage of subjects would administer the maximum 450-volt shock. Of course, when the experiment took place, 65 percent of people administered successive shocks all the way up to the maximum voltage.³ Of those subjects who refused to administer the maximum shock, no one demanded that the experiment itself should be stopped; no one questioned its existence. In later experiments, Milgram examined what would happen if more trappings

of authority were added. He found that the more respectable the locale of the experiment was (say, a courthouse instead of a back-alley office), the higher the obedience rate. (Suspecting that the subjects may have realized the victim was faking, two other psychologists later conducted the same experiment using real shocks and a live puppy. They found an even higher obedience rate than in the original experiment.⁴)

When a confederate performed the actual shocks, and the subject only had to assist them with other aspects of the experiment, virtually all subjects completed the full experiment. The good news is that when two confederates were introduced into the mix to defy the authority, almost all of the subjects refused to continue the experiment.

Milgram's experiment is one of the most oft-cited studies when trying to understand why people listen to those in power even when they are obviously doing wrong. And, of course, like Asch's experiment, real-world people face a worse situation than the subjects of the experiment. Milgram's lab-coated experimenter could use only verbal pressure to encourage obedience. The subject did not risk censure from their family or social group. They did not risk losing their jobs. They did not risk public ridicule. The experimenter could not use the legal system against them, or threaten them, or use physical violence to ensure their compliance. In the real world, all of these things are used against people who contemplate resistance.

Learned helplessness offers another insight into the psychology of resistance and nonresistance. The term comes from a series of experiments conducted by Martin Seligman in the late 1960s. In this experiment, several groups of dogs were put into restraining harnesses. One group, a control group, was soon released from the harnesses unharmed. The second group was given series of electric shocks, but had a lever that could be pressed to stop them. A third group was given shocks that appeared to start and end at random, with no way of controlling them. The first two groups soon recovered from the experiment, but dogs in the third group began to show symptoms similar to clinical depression.⁵

In the second half of the experiment, the dogs were put unrestrained into a "shock box" that they could easily jump out of. The dogs from the first two groups jumped out when the shocks began. Most of the

dogs in the third group, however, simply lay down and whined, even though they could have easily escaped. They had *learned* to be helpless, the experimenters concluded. The good news is that about one-third of the dogs in the latter group did *not* become helpless, but managed to escape the box despite their previous traumatic experience.

When extrapolating the experience of these more resilient dogs to the experience of humans, Seligman and other psychologists found that their behavior correlated highly with optimism.⁶ It was not, they cautioned, a naïve or Pollyanna-ish approach to optimism. This was no “cheermongering.” Instead, overcoming learned helplessness is all about understanding and explaining the source of the trauma. People who believed their problems were pervasive, permanent (“things have always been this way, and they always will be”), and personal (“it’s all my fault”) were much more likely to suffer from learned helplessness and depression.

This, too, can be extrapolated to our own situation. Those in power encourage us to believe that the status quo is natural, inevitable, even the best possible society. If someone is dissatisfied with the way society works, they say, then it is that individual’s personal emotional problem. Furthermore, the individual traumas perpetuated by those in power on individual people, on groups of people, and on the land, can seem random at first glance. But if we can trace them back to their common roots—in capitalism, in patriarchy, in civilization at large—then we can understand them as manifestations of power imbalance, and we can overcome the learned helplessness such horrors would otherwise create.

Further, those in power systematically try to get us to believe that environmental destruction is *our* fault (because we, too, use toilet paper) instead of being caused by the decisions and actions of those who run the economy. If those in power can convince us that “it’s all our fault,” they have pushed us one step closer to learned helplessness, depression, and, ultimately, a failure to resist.

The bystander effect, and the related diffusion of responsibility, is a final psychological effect at play in determining resistance or nonresistance. The concept is usually linked to the 1964 murder of a New York woman named Kitty Genovese. Genovese was stabbed to death,

over a period of about half an hour, near her apartment building. A dozen people heard her screams for help and the sound of her struggle, and some actually saw portions of the attack in which she was stabbed. But no one intervened.⁷ The bystander effect is surely something we've all seen at various times. I remember sitting in my apartment some years ago after dinner, reading a book, when the sound of a woman screaming came from the corridor outside. She called for help, banging on doors with her hands and feet as an assailant dragged her down the corridor by her hair. Of the ten or fifteen people living on the floor, I was the only one who left my apartment to stop the attack. No one even bothered to call the police.

After the murder of Kitty Genovese, psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané carried out a series of studies to explore the diffusion of responsibility. They put college students in several different cubicles, speaking by intercom about an unrelated “decoy” topic. Early in the experiment, one of the participants—a confederate of the experimenters—mentioned that he sometimes had seizures. Then, later in the experiment, the confederate feigned a seizure over the intercom, begging for help, telling the others that he was having a seizure and thought he was going to die, and then falling silent. The chance that another participant would leave their own cubicle to go help the “seizure victim” directly correlated to the number of people involved in the intercom conversation. When only one participant was present, there was an 85 percent chance that this person would go to aid the victim. When two were present that dropped to 62 percent. When five were present, only 31 percent responded. The response time of the participants also increased significantly as the number of participants grew.⁸ In other words, the more people present, the more their sense of responsibility became diffused. The experimenters found no difference between women and men.

Interestingly, Darley and Latané reported that the people who *did* act appeared *less* upset than those who did not. The people who left their cubicles appeared generally calm and “without panic,” while those who remained in their cubicles often appeared visibly upset, sweating and trembling. It wasn't so much that those people had decided *not* to act, wrote the psychologists. Rather, they were unable to decide *to* act, to

commit to action, worried that they would “make fools of themselves by overreacting.”

In a second study, Darley and Latané decided to examine how the attitudes of bystanders affected how a person would respond. In this study, participants sat in a room filling out questionnaires. After a few minutes, the experimenters began to flood the room with smoke. Lone subjects left the room and reported the smoke 75 percent of the time. With three subjects present, the chance that a participant would report the smoke dropped to 38 percent. For the last part of the study, the experimenters put one subject in the room with two confederates who were instructed to notice and then deliberately ignore the smoke. In the final case, only 10 percent of people reported the smoke.⁹

John Darley wrote that in such situations a given bystander interprets the inaction of their comrades to mean that the situation isn't urgent or dangerous. “A kind of ‘anti-panic mob’ is formed in which individuals do not respond because they define the situation as *no emergency*.”¹⁰

We can again see the parallels for our situation. Those in power constantly promise—or more subtly, imply by their inaction—that everything is fine. That mass poverty is not a problem. That global warming is not an emergency. They claim that people who do warn about such problems are “fearmongers,” and act as though acknowledging the serious global problems they cause would cause chaos and mass panic.

Even this patronizing attitude is not well-supported by history. In her book *Disaster: A Psychological Essay*, Martha Wolfenstein examined the attitude of WWII British government officials and consultants in the months before the bombing of England by the Germans began. When the bombing began, the officials expected, there would be mass panic, the masses would flee London in outright terror, and the number of psychological casualties would outnumber physical casualties three to one.¹¹ Of course, that did not happen. “There was no panic flight from London or any other city. Evacuation was orderly and fewer people than anticipated showed a wish to leave their homes for a safer location.”¹² While this idea of mass panic is a common and vivid fantasy, Wolfenstein writes that instead, “Disaster-stricken populations . . . are apt to be quiet, stunned, and dazed.”

Wolfenstein also examines the reasons that so many people, when faced with imminent danger or disaster, do nothing. Assurances by those in power—and to some degree the mere *existence* of those in power and their asserted expertise—help to keep people passive. Wolfenstein writes, “This confidence that the ‘leaders’ or the ‘government’ could and would do something was generally combined with a belief that there was nothing the private citizen could do. Such attitudes towards world affairs illustrate the trend of what has been called ‘privatization.’ The ordinary citizen tends to feel increasingly that he has neither the knowledge nor the means to take a hand in the great affairs which affect his destiny.”¹³

Not only do they feel that they can do nothing, many people in this situation (like those in the psychologist’s smoke experiment) appear to actually *feel* as though nothing is wrong: “The expectation that superior authorities will do something to ward off the threat, and the often combined belief that the individual himself can do nothing, are apt to be associated with absence of worry.”¹⁴

Of course, not everyone falls for such cognitive falsehoods. Furthermore, some people—as the psychological research suggests—are not so prone to blindly follow authority, are not so vulnerable to the pressures of conformity. Instead, some people seem psychologically predisposed to resistance. This minority group includes those who are the first to fight against injustice, the first to join and organize resistance groups. Rather than “early adopters,” such people are “early resisters.”

Claude Bourdet (a leader in the *Combat* movement of the French Resistance during WWII) said that early resisters were people who had already “broken with their social and professional milieu.”¹⁵ Famed French *resistant* Emmanuel d’Astier de la Vigerie believed that “one could only be a resister if one was maladjusted.”¹⁶ However, in his history of the German occupation of France, Julian Jackson argued that most early resisters were “far from being outsiders,” but they *were* people with strong moral convictions who may have been from traditional backgrounds or occupations. Jackson writes: “These were not maladjusted mavericks although clearly they were individuals of exceptional strong-mindedness, ready to break with family and friends.”¹⁷

Although some postwar stories about France portray a broad base of resistance against the Nazis, in fact only a very small minority of the population participated. The French Resistance at most comprised perhaps 1 percent of the adult population, or about 200,000 people.¹⁸ The postwar French government officially recognized 220,000 people¹⁹ (though one historian estimates that the number of active resisters could have been as many as 400,000²⁰). In addition to active resisters, there were perhaps another 300,000 with substantial involvement.²¹ If you include all of those people who were willing to take the risk of reading the underground newspapers, the pool of sympathizers grows to about 10 percent of the adult population, or two million people.²²

This is, of course, not unique to 1940s France. At the peak of Irish resistance to British rule, the Irish War of Independence (which built on 700 years of resistance culture), the IRA had about 100,000 members (or just over 2 percent of the population of 4.5 million), about 15,000 of whom participated in the guerrilla war, and 3,000 of whom were fighters at any one time. Among Jews in Nazi Germany, the number of people who actively fought back was often tragically outnumbered by the people who simply killed themselves. In Berlin, roughly 4 percent of Jews called up for “relocation” committed suicide, almost all of them upon the arrival of the notice (those who chose to kill themselves were mostly older and highly assimilated to German society).²³ Within Nazi Germany, resistance mostly consisted of small and isolated groups.

Even after the war, retroactive support for German resistance was limited. In 1952, after the Nuremberg Trials, and after information about the concentration camps, horrific medical experimentation, and other Nazi atrocities had become known, surveys of public opinion about resistance were made in West Germany. Members of the public were asked whether a person convinced that “injustices and crimes” were being committed by the Nazis would be justified in resisting them—whether any resistance of *any* sort was justifiable. Only 41 percent said it was. Worse, when asked whether resistance was defensible in wartime, only 20 percent of people said yes. Another 34 percent said that potential resisters should wait until the return of peace (which, under the Nazis, as under any empire, means never). The second-

largest group of 31 percent was undecided about whether resistance against the Nazis could have been justified. They were not undecided about whether *they* would participate (we can safely assume they would not), they were undecided about whether resistance should have existed at all! And another 15 percent insisted that resistance was never justifiable, whether in peacetime or wartime.²⁴ I found all this sickening and deplorable. I deeply wish I could say I found it surprising.²⁵

Those who are willing to undertake serious resistance are always a small minority regardless of circumstances, largely for the psychological and social reasons discussed above.²⁶ To put it bluntly: we have to get over the hope that resistance will ever be adopted by the majority and focus on doing what we can with who we have. Given all that, the purpose of a resistance organization is to enable as many of those people as possible to resist, and to organize those people in ways that makes maximum use of their limited numbers.



As we discussed a few chapters ago, we too often base our activism on the idea that we need to have a mass movement to overturn this wretched system. But Germany suggests the exact opposite: that overturning the system is the prerequisite to a mass movement. Even years after Germany's defeat, the great majority of Germans did not think resistance would have been justified. Only after the Nazis' authoritarian grip had been broken, and only after years or decades had passed, would the German people understand why resistance was not only acceptable, but needed.²⁷

I can only believe that if there is ever a mass movement against those in power, it will happen after civilization collapses, and not before.



The effective resister has some important personality characteristics, with bravery, intelligence, and persistence among the most important. Intelligence alone is never enough. Though an intelligent person may be better able to see through propaganda and to understand the

problem at hand, real courage is a requirement for action in the face of danger. The brilliant coward simply has a more sophisticated rationalization for inaction. And persistence is required to continue in the face of unfavorable odds against a powerful enemy in a struggle that is bound to be rife with setbacks and mistakes.

For those individuals who *are* psychologically predisposed and willing to resist, a number of factors influence whether or not they will actively engage in that resistance: the perceived benefits of resistance, the perceived chance of success, the perceived risk of participating, the perceived degree of personal responsibility for the problem (the bystander effect), the perceived legitimacy of the resistance organization or activities, and the availability of potential resistance comrades. You can probably think of more—just think about what would influence *your* decision.

In any case, a good resistance organization addresses all of these factors. It can propagandize about the problems with the status quo and the benefits that would come with its success. And the very existence of proper organization increases the chance of success. There is always some risk to resistance, but good organizing reduces that risk through a security culture and good tactics. Solid recruitment overcomes the bystander effect by addressing specific people and giving them specific means to act. A resistance organization can increase its own legitimacy through good decision-making practices, adherence to a moral code, endorsement by sympathetic authorities, and, most importantly, by its own longevity and effectiveness.

S S S

Q: If we act effectively against those in power, won't those in power just come down on us harder?

Derrick Jensen: They will, but that's not a reason to submit. This is how authoritarian regimes and abusers work: they make their victims afraid to act. They reinforce the mentality, "If I try to leave him, my abusive husband, my pimp, may kill me." And that is a very good reason to not resist.

This question explicitly articulates what we all know to be true: the foundation of this culture is force. And the primary reason we don't resist is because we are afraid of that force. We know if we act decisively to protect the places and creatures we love or if we act decisively to stop corporate exploitation of the poor, that those in power will come down on us with the full power of the state. We can talk all we want about how we supposedly live in a democracy. And we can talk all we want about the consent of the governed. But what it really comes down to is if you effectively oppose the will of those in power, they will try to kill you. We need to make that explicit so we can face the situation that we're in. And the situation we're in is that those in power are killing the planet and they are exploiting the poor, they are murdering the poor, and we are not stopping them because we are afraid.

But there have to be some of us who are willing to act anyway. We should never underestimate the seriousness of attempting to stop those in power. And we also need to be very clear about the seriousness of what is happening to the world. If you're reading this book, you probably understand how desperate things are.

What is the legacy that we want to leave for those who come after? How do you want to be seen by the generations that follow? Do you want to be seen as someone who knew what the right thing was and didn't do it because you were afraid? Or do you want to be remembered as someone who was afraid and did the right things anyway? It's okay to be afraid. Almost everyone I know is afraid at some time or another. But there is tremendous joy and exhilaration that comes, too, from doing what is right. The fact that those in power will use their power against resisters is not a reason to give up the fight before we even begin. It is a reason to be really, really smart.