

# Consciousness, Authoritarianism, and Political Violence

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Day after day as one watches their television or computer screen or reads most fact-based media, one sees an endless series of stories of Trump followers being called to commit acts of political violence, while social media apps fill the minds of Americans with weaponized disinformation specifically designed to enrage them, make them feel victimized and resentful, and encourage them to violence.<sup>1</sup> This confluence of modern technology and long-established psychological manipulation techniques has produced something never before seen in the United States, and it has been going on for several years now. Judges are under threat. Their children are under threat; prosecutors have to have security protection. Since Trump began these calls for violence election workers by the score have been quitting their posts making conducting a safe and fair election in some districts increasingly problematic.<sup>2</sup>

Civil political violence particularly since the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, has become one of the most notable features of the American political landscape, and two things stand out about this. First, how many Americans think such violence is justified. A year ago nearly one in four Americans believed political violence was justified to ‘save’ the US.<sup>3</sup> Second, nearly all of these people define themselves as evangelical Christians. As the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) describes it: “Support for political violence jumps to even higher levels among Americans who believe that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump (46%); Americans who hold a favourable view of Trump (41%); Americans who believe in the so-called ‘replacement theory’ (41%); Americans who affirm the core tenet of white Christian nationalism, that God intended America to be a new promised land for European Christians (39%).”<sup>4</sup>

How is it possible that people who profess their deep faith in Jesus and claim to shape their lives to his teachings, reconcile the proclivity for violence recorded by the PRRI with his Sermon on the Mount as found in Matthew? Jesus could hardly be clearer, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth... But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.... And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.... Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you..”<sup>5</sup>

Most commentary on the alliance evangelicals feel with Trump and the Republican Party he now controls, center principally on that cohort’s sense of victimization, feelings about gender and racial issues. However, I want to suggest there is a deeper psychological mental health issue: the

charismatic power of authoritarianism, a manifestation of what I call beingness. Beingness cannot be quantified exactly, yet everyone who encounters it knows exactly what is meant, whether it is a religious leader, a politician, or a movie star. But when it goes beyond just charisma beingness can have an authority that crosses from the individual to the social generality. A psychological linkage develops between the charismatic individual and a cohort that expresses subordination because they see the leader as the personification of their psychological profiles.

When this happens it can become the seed crystal around which a zeitgeist arises whether that individual has immediate real power or not, and the pattern is the same for good or ill. In this essay I want to focus on the negative aspect – evil beingness -- because such beingness is impacting the wellbeing of American society.

Two examples in the 20<sup>th</sup> century stand out in this way, the communist vision of Stalin and the race based national socialism of Hitler. Both took their countries and the world through changes that were violent breaks with the past, leaps into the unknown similar in essence and intensity to the founders of religion, but in a negative way.

How does a misfit like Hitler, no more than an enlisted man in the army and a minor painter become the leader of one of the great European peoples at a time of high civilization? The answer may be found in something psychiatrist Carl Jung said that illustrates the kind of negative beingness I wish to address. Jung said that to appreciate how Hitler came to power it was necessary to realize that “Hitler did not lead the German people, Hitler was the German people.”<sup>6</sup> Hitler was the personification of a popular consensus.

For decades after Jung made that statement the full import of what he meant could not be appreciated, because it was thought until years later that most Germans did not really know about his “Final Solution” and the Holocaust that was its manifestation. By 2001, however, careful nonpartisan research flatly contradicted that assumption and supported Jung. Historian Robert Gellately stated it clearly when he said: “The mass of ordinary Germans did know about the evolving terror of Hitler’s Holocaust.”<sup>7</sup>

Albert Speer, the only member of Hitler’s inner circle to plead guilty at the Nuremberg Trials, was interviewed by Gitta Sereny and said, “I ask myself time and again how much of it was a kind of auto-suggestion.

“One thing is certain: everyone who worked closely with him for a long time was exceptionally dependent on him. However powerful they were in their own domain, close to him they became small and timid.”<sup>8</sup>

How does a person who has no actual authority but presents themselves as an authority get people to do violent negative things no one would predict they would do, and when many do it, it becomes something that literally changes their society? This is the power of dark beingness, and it matters that we understand far better than we do how these linkages occur, and how to neutralize them because this dynamic is at work again.

Something little noted by politicians or the corporate media is happening not just in America, but in countries all over the world. There is a disruption of the social order, and the rise of authoritarianism and increasing political violence. Consider this: Between 2002-2022 the number of nations ruled by authoritarianism has risen from 13 to 42.

The Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden is one of the few scholarly institutions that has been studying this explicit trend, and their findings I find notable and revealing. Staffan I. Linberg, the institute's director reports, "A democratic decline has taken place globally, and an increasing number of people are living in closed autocracies... The level of democracy enjoyed by the average world citizen in 2022 is back to 1986 levels. This means that 72 percent of the world's population, 5.7 billion people, today live under authoritarian rule."<sup>9</sup>

To understand how an individual can transform a society from a democracy to an authoritarian state, I think the answer can be seen in the work of the late Stanley Milgram, a psychologist at Yale thought by many, including myself, to be the leading behavioral scientist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup>

In studying what had happened in Germany that led to the Holocaust and the mass death ordinary German citizens inflicted under Hitler's authority on six million Jews, Milgram became focused on how that kind of obedience occurs. How evil as a concept came into reality, and ordinary people would do violence that seemed to contradict everything they seemed to believe in. In 1961, in a set of rooms in Linsly-Chittenden Hall on Yale's old campus, Milgram, began an experiment that has come to haunt all scholars studying how evil arises in seemingly cultured societies. It has much to say about the power of evil beingness, both locally and nonlocally as it expresses itself today in the United States.

Milgram's protocol seemed very simple. He put in a newspaper ad offering participant's \$4.50 for an hour's participation in what was ostensibly a learning study. The U.S. minimum wage in 1961 was \$1.15 an hour, so the offer was quite attractive. Using actors who posed as "learners" he had a stern authoritarian "experimenter" wearing a gray lab coat ask "teachers", those recruited through his ad who were the real focus of the study, to help the learners learn by giving them a shock when they made a mistake. The "teachers" were told the point of the experiment was to see the relationship between punishment and learning. Ostensibly, the study required the "learners"

to perform a simple word matching task. Milgram's protocol design, although seemingly simple was, in fact, very subtle. The "experimenter," for instance, wore a gray lab coat, not a white one such as a doctor would wear, because Milgram did not want those who saw his results to think medical authority was in anyway a variable in the study.

The sessions were conducted in an elaborate "scientific" room. The "teachers" had before them an impressive apparently scientific shock generator that had 30 switches, each carefully marked and advancing from 14 to 450 volts. Each switch also had a label, describing their effect. It went from light shock to danger of severe shock to the last two which were simply marked XX.

The "experimenter" used no coercive power during the session beyond their authoritative appearance, a stern voice, and a kind of disinterested look at the "teacher" and the "learner." The "teacher" would state from a list the word to be matched, and the "learner" would often fail to match, at which point the "experimenter" would instruct the "teacher" to administer a brief shock. As the session went on with each mistake the "teacher" would be told by the "experimenter" to administer a bigger shock. In fact, there were no shocks; the "learner" was simply acting, as was the "experimenter". What the "teacher" saw, however, was very different.

"At 75 volts, the 'learner' would grunt, and recoil; at 120 volts, he would complain loudly; at 150, he would demand to be released from the experiment, and the 'experimenter' would tell the 'teacher' to disregard this and go on. As the voltage increased, the 'learner's' protests would become ever more vehement and emotional. At 285 volts, his response was described as an agonized scream. Soon thereafter, he would make no sound at all."<sup>11</sup>

Before Milgram began the experiment he sought predictions about the study's outcome from psychiatrists, college students, middle-class adults, and other faculty in the behavioral sciences. They predicted virtually all the subjects would refuse to obey the experimenter beyond a minor shock. They expected that only 4 percent would reach 300 volts, and that only a pathological fringe of about one in a thousand would administer the highest shock on the board.

What actually happened?

Sixty five per cent of teachers went all the way to the lethal end. Not one "teacher" stopped before 300 volts.

Milgram went on to conduct the experiment sessions under various other scenarios to study subtle variables. In one series, at 150 volts the actor "learner" would plead piteously and beg that the experiment should end. The "experimenter" would instruct the "teacher" to "Go on." And so they did, at least 62.5 per cent of them.

In another series he moved the sessions into an ordinary office room off of the Yale campus, and discovered in this less authoritarian setting only 47.5 per cent would go all the way to 450 volts.

In yet another series the “experimenter” was not actually in the room with the “teacher” but gave instructions over a speaker. This dropped the outcome still further, but by voice command alone 20.5 per cent of the “teachers” were still willing to continue shocking the “learners”.

Milgram concluded that when “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. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation.”<sup>12</sup>

Did individuals change in the decades after Milgram carried out his research in the 1960s? Sadly, it seems they have not. In 2009, Jerry M. Burger, a professor of psychology at Santa Clara University in California, published a replication of Milgram’s study. Like Milgram he recruited “teachers” from ads in the local newspaper, Craigslist, as well as flyers. Seventy adults signed up.<sup>13</sup>

What had changed in the almost half century since Milgram had done his research was what could be done in such a protocol, and Burger’s study did not take the sessions to apparent lethality. But the results were quite similar. He found that “70 percent of the participants had to be stopped from escalating shocks over 150 volts, despite hearing cries of protest and pain.”<sup>14</sup>

In 2022, after three years of research and investigation, the bipartisan U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs issued a report, *The Rising Threat of Domestic Terrorism*, which stated, “Over the past two decades, acts of domestic terrorism have dramatically increased. National security agencies now identify domestic terrorism as the most persistent and lethal terrorist threat to the homeland. This increase in domestic terror attacks has been predominantly perpetrated by White supremacist and anti-government extremist individuals and groups.”<sup>15</sup>

In 2024, Milgram’s research seems more relevant than ever, which is why I have focused this essay upon it. We have a former president who has been found guilty in many court actions, is under indictment for dozens of felonies. He is also a convicted rapist not because of politicians but because ordinary citizens serving on a jury made this judgment. He has no actual official position or the power a position would confer. Yet just as Jung described, Albert Speer confirmed, and Milgram and Burger experimentally demonstrated, because he personifies the psychology of Christian Nationalism. His almost daily messages of criticism and negativity against judges, prosecutors,

election workers, has escalated to a point where they need security guards. A need made very real by the many acts of actual violence that have occurred, such as the break-in and hammer attack on the husband of the then Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, or the attempted arson of the home of Senator Bernie Sanders in April of this year. It has become a trend far worse than it was when the Senate committee issued its report. And almost all of it is still being carried out by White people who call themselves Christians. Why is this cohort the particular perpetrators when the source of their religion directly forbids it? There is endless commentary about the individual incidents, but I have seen no references to the authoritarian evil action research of Milgram and Burger which, in my view, is the relevant dynamic in play. The question is: Where is this leading America as a country, and what can we expect around the November election?

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