

In the air

Mortal obedience

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RTBF's wonderful partition hoax stopped us in our mental tracks - if all too briefly - and made us think.

As Michel Collon pointed out in January *kulturissimo*, the fiction raised fundamental questions about the information/disinformation purveyed by the media - and how terrifyingly suggestible most people are.

The problem is our uncritical subservience to authority: we're willing to believe the most outrageous „facts“, the most fantastic theories, if they come from what we've been taught to accept as an authority.

... And to perform the most barbaric actions, if a figure of authority orders us to.

The question of obedience to authority was famously examined in the experiments devised by Stanley Milgram, a psychologist at Yale University.

The first experiments were carried out in July 1961, three months into the trial in Jerusalem of Adolf Eichmann, the Gestapo chief in charge of Hitler's deportation and extermination programme. Milgram was seeking an answer to a terrible question: how could ordinary men and women be persuaded to commit the literally unthinkable acts that made the Shoah possible?

„Could it be,“ he asked, „that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we

call them all accomplices?“

Milgram's team selected as „subjects“ for their experiment males between 20 and 50, from different educational backgrounds.

They were offered a fee of \$4.50, payable whether or not they completed their task.

The „experimenter“ was played by a stern figure in a doctor's white coat, with a specially trained

associate as the „victim.“ Subject and associate were told by the experimenter they were participating in an experiment to test the effects of punishment on learning.

A slip of paper was given to each man. The subject was told one of the slips said „learner“ and the other „teacher,“ and that they were given out at random: in fact, both slips said „teacher“, with the actor claiming he'd received the „learner“ slip to guarantee the subject was always the teacher. Teacher and learner were then placed in different rooms where they could communicate but not see each other.

The teacher was given a list of word-pairs he was to teach the learner: he would first read out the list, then the first word of each pair, giving four possible answers. The learner would respond by pressing a button. If his answer was correct, the teacher would continue; if not, the learner would receive an electric shock, with the voltage increasing with each wrong answer.

The subject was given a 45-volt shock as a sample of what the learner would supposedly receive. He was told the learner's pain would increase with the voltage and that the final 450-volt dose would be fatal.

Throughout the experiment, the subject believed the learner was receiving real shocks and that his screams denoted real pain.

In reality, he was hearing pre-recorded sounds appropriate for each shock level. After a number of increases in voltage, the learner began banging on the wall; eventually he fell silent, ceasing to complain or respond to questions.

At this point, many subjects wanted to stop and check on the learner. At 135 volts some questioned the aim of the experiment. Significantly, most continued after being assured they would not be held responsible. A few subjects began to show signs of extreme stress when they heard the screaming.

Subjects who wanted to stop the experiment, were given four verbal prods by the experimenter: „Please continue“, „The experiment requires that you continue“, „It is absolutely essential that you continue“ and „You have no other choice, you must go on“.

If the subject still wanted to stop, the experiment was halted; if not, it continued until he'd given the maximum 450-volt shock three times in succession.

Before conducting his experiments, Milgram had asked colleagues what they thought the results would be. No one believed that more than a very small sadistic minority would be prepared to give a strong shock, let alone the maximum voltage.

They were horribly mistaken.

In the first experiments, 65% of subjects administered the final, mortal, 450-volt shock, though many seemed uncomfortable; all paused at some point to question the experiment, some even offering to return their fee. No participant refused to continue before 300-volts.

Later experiments performed around the world using subjects of both sexes brought similar results: between 61% and 66% of participants were prepared to inflict fatal shocks.

There was no significant difference between men and women, save that women experienced higher levels of stress.

Starkly expressed: two thirds of adults were ready to torture and murder their fellow humans.

Milgram concluded: „I set up a simple experiment at Yale University 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. 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.“ (1974, *The perils of obedience*, in *Harper's Magazine*).

No convincing explanation for our mortal obedience has yet been found.

In 1999, Dr Thomas Blass of the University of Maryland wrote in the *Journal of applied social psychology*: „Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, 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.“

What resources are needed to resist authority, to defend our moral imperatives?

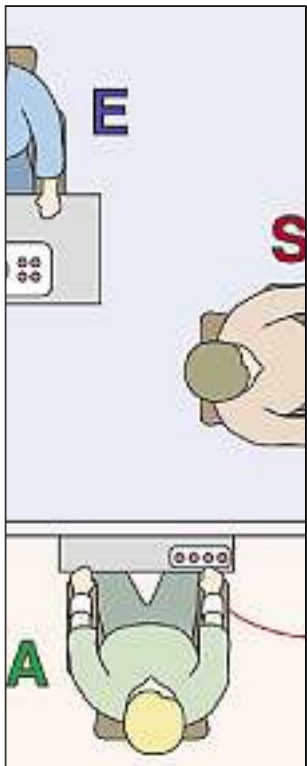
What makes a minority of humans capable of resisting, of showing „civil courage“, or „unshakeable conviction“, while most are ready to obey orders? Any orders ...

While we find no answer, in ourselves, we humans will continue murdering and torturing, as long as someone in authority is prepared to take responsibility for our actions.

Our Srebrenicas, Guantánamos, and Abu Ghraibs will go on and on.

Meanwhile, I can't help wondering how far I would have been prepared to go ...

And you?



Graphique: Wikipedia

How it worked