

# THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM: INTERLUDE ON RIGHT- WING AUTHORITARIANISM

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The Origins of Totalitarianism Part 4: Humanity  
under Totalitarianism

The concept of authoritarian personality was introduced in 1950 in a book by Theodore Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brusnik, Daniel Levinson and Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality*. They were looking into the question whether there was something about Germans that made them unusually susceptible to Nazism, which an important concern in the wake of WWII. Their theory is based on Freudian ideas about the personality, and was heavily criticized for this and other reasons.

Hannah Arendt makes one oblique reference to this work in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

█ The Leader principle does not establish

a hierarchy in the totalitarian state any more than it does in the totalitarian movement; authority is not filtered down from the top through all intervening layers to the bottom of the body politic as is the case in authoritarian regimes. The factual reason is that there is no hierarchy without authority and that, in spite of the numerous misunderstandings concerning the so-called "authoritarian personality," the principle of authority is in all important respects diametrically opposed to that of totalitarian domination. Quite apart from its origin in Roman history, authority, no matter in what form, always is meant to restrict or limit freedom, but never to abolish it. Totalitarian domination, however, aims at abolishing freedom, even at eliminating human spontaneity in general, and by no means at a restriction of freedom no matter how tyrannical. P. 404-5.

This marks the difference between a totalitarian movement and a totalitarian regime: in the latter, all semblance of human nature is subordinated to the will of the leader.

Bob Altemeyer began researching authoritarian personalities in 1965 and worked out a somewhat different approach which he published in a 1981 book *Right-Wing Authoritarianism*. In 2006, he wrote a layman's version *The Authoritarians*, and made it available on the internet for free. Here's a link. He says there are authoritarian followers and authoritarian leaders.

Authoritarian followers usually support the established authorities in their society, such as government officials and traditional religious leaders. Such people have historically been the "proper" authorities in life, the time-honored, entitled, customary leaders,

and that means a lot to most authoritarians. Psychologically these followers have personalities featuring:

- 1) a high degree of submission to the established, legitimate authorities in their society;
- 2) high levels of aggression in the name of their authorities; and
- 3) a high level of conventionalism.

This idea has taken hold among liberals and leftists, perhaps in part because of John Dean and his book *Conservatives without Conscience*, which is based in part on Altemeyer's work. A common explanation of the rise of Trumpism is that his biggest supporters are right-wing authoritarians. A recent poll conducted by Matthew MacWilliams for UMass Amherst included a few questions designed to test for authoritarianism. The results were plain to him:

I've found a single statistically significant variable predicts whether a voter supports Trump—and it's not race, income or education levels: It's authoritarianism.

That's right, Trump's electoral strength—and his staying power—have been buoyed, above all, by Americans with authoritarian inclinations. And because of the prevalence of authoritarians in the American electorate, among Democrats as well as Republicans, it's very possible that Trump's fan base will continue to grow.

MacWilliams probably meant right-wing authoritarianism which is Altemeyer's term, and which is well-defined. For a thorough description, see this post by the excellent Paul Rosenberg or this one by John Dean.

Like most personality traits, everyone has some share of it, and some a lot more than others. Here's an on-line version of an instrument for

measuring one aspect of this trait. Even if you don't want to answer, it's interesting to read the questions and think about the issues they raise. Here's a description of the questions on MacWilliams' poll:

These questions pertain to child-rearing: whether it is more important for the voter to have a child who is respectful or independent; obedient or self-reliant; well-behaved or considerate; and well-mannered or curious. Respondents who pick the first option in each of these questions are strongly authoritarian.

I think it's important to avoid treating personality as permanently fixed, for example, to say simply that some people are just authoritarian and other aren't. I think personalities can change, and that at different times and in different circumstances, personality traits vary in their influence over our behavior. Take another look at the poll questions, and ask yourself whether your views on those questions have changed over time. Before I had children, I would have answered the poll questions unequivocally, but now I see the value of both sides of the choice. If I were answering them on a scale, I'd be closer to the middle than I would have been before I had kids. This accords with Altemeyer's findings. P. 67 et seq. It's also worth noting that the questions Altemeyer and other researchers use are more nuanced, cover more ground, and use a sliding scale, as in the online version I linked above.

There are other reasons people might differ on those questions. Perhaps people think they are doing their children a favor by choosing to raise them to be respectful, obedient, well-behaved and well-mannered. If you are trying to find a job in this lousy economy, those might seem like pretty good goals to set for your kids. Of course, they'd miss all the creative jobs, but think of all the wonderful and high-paying jobs there are in hospital administration

right now.

Adorno et al. suggest that the social environment plays a large role in the expression of this personality trait. I can't find anything like that in Altemeyer's online book, but it seems right to me. There have always been authoritarian people, and there isn't any reason to think there are more or fewer today than in prior times. I've known plenty, but their authoritarianism operated only on a small scale, aggravating their employees with nit-picking comments and derogatory language, or being brown-nosers, exercising exaggerated control over petty matters, lording it over their kids, and generally getting in the way of smooth cooperation.

Most people probably have mild cases of authoritarianism, or are mildly unauthoritarian, and generally that seems to work pretty well. Suddenly it seems as though the constraints are gone, and people sound more and more aggressive about their authoritarian issues. People say this is a Republican problem, but as MacWilliams notes a significant number of Democrats apparently support Trump as well. Presumably these are Democrats with authoritarian leanings. In the post WWI period across Europe there was a breakdown in the social and institutional structures that contained authoritarianism, which turned out very badly. Altemeyer is worried that the authoritarians are a grave danger to democracy. P. 2.

I think the important question is not whether many Trump supporters are authoritarians, it's whether the circumstances facing a many people encourage acting out authoritarian impulses at a national political level. That's a good reason to look at Arendt's description of the rise of the Nazis as I did in Part 4. And take a look at this interview with Rick Perlstein. Perhaps we can learn something useful.