

# TO FREE A GENERATION!

is an angry critique of the way we live today, of "the unexamined lives" of men living in unjust, violence-ridden, and radically corrupt societies. Here, some of the world's most provocative radical activists, reformers, and thinkers launch a biting, wide-ranging attack on the automatic assumptions on which we base the conduct of our personal lives and on which nations proceed in their self-destructive strategies.

Each of the noted "gadflies" who speaks out here has a reputation for courageously ranging far beyond his nominal specialty, whether it be psychiatry, economics, politics, poetry, literary criticism, philosophy, or sociology. Together, from different but related ideological and intellectual dispositions, they vigorously expose the false mythologies, the old values, the hypocrisies now threatening our sanity, our humanity, our very survival. On behalf of the growing numbers of the disaffiliated and perplexed, the dissidents and the "outsiders" in America and Europe, they attempt to create a composite image of a new "good society" for Western man.



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# TO FREE A GENERATION!

*The Dialectics of Liberation*

*Edited by David Cooper*

*A radical attack on the false myths and self-destructive  
values fomenting social and personal chaos today*

## The Obvious | *R. D. Laing*

... a recent study of the American public's view of U.S. policy towards China (prepared for the Council on Foreign Relations by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan) reports that one out of every four Americans still does not know that the Chinese people have a communist government.<sup>1</sup>

I would not be surprised if over half of those of us who know that the people of China have a communist government, do *not* know that one quarter of the population do *not*, if this report is to be believed.

I want to draw attention to a few of those features of North American and European society that seem to be most dangerous, because they seem to help, or perhaps even to be necessary, to maintain and to perpetuate our component of a social world system that as a whole presents more and more the appearance of total irrationality.

To a considerable extent what follows is an essay in stating what I take to be obvious. It is obvious that the social world situation is endangering the future of all life on this planet. To state the obvious is to share with you what (in your view) my misconceptions might be. The obvious can be dangerous. The deluded man frequently finds his delusions so obvious that he can hardly credit the good faith of those who do not share them. Hitler regarded it as perfectly obvious that the Jews were a poison to the Aryan race and hence required to be exterminated. What is obvious to Lyndon Johnson is not at all obvious to Ho Chi Minh. What is obvious to me might not be obvious to anyone else. The obvious is literally that which stands in one's way, in front

of or over against oneself. One has to begin by recognizing that it exists for oneself.

This talk is also an attempt to exhibit for your inspection some facets of my present effort to dia-gnose, to see into and through social reality. I at most am presuming to try to articulate what seems to me to be the case, in some very limited aspects, in respect of what is going on in the human sector of the planet. I shall have to deal for the most part in generalities. I am not sure whether these are clichés to many of you. One man's revolution is another's platitude.

### *The invisibility of social events*

The study of social events presents an almost insurmountable difficulty, in that their visibility, as one might say, is very low. In social *space* one's direct immediate capacity to see what is happening does not extend any further than one's own senses extend. Beyond that one has to make inferences based on hearsay evidence, reports of one kind or another of what other human beings are able to see within *their* equally limited field of observation. As in *space*, so in *time*. Our capacity to probe back into history is extraordinarily limited. Even in the most detailed investigations of small fragments of micro-history, in studies of families, one finds it difficult to get past two or three generations. Beyond that, how things have come to be as they are disappears into mist.

They often go out of view in space and time at a boundary between here and now, and there and then – a boundary which unfortunately consigns here and now to unintelligibility without information from there and then, which is, however, beyond our reach.

### *Context of social events*

A fundamental lesson that almost all social scientists have learned is that the intelligibility of social events requires that they be always seen in a context that extends both spatially and in time. The dilemma is that this is often as impossible as it is necessary. The fabric of sociality is an interlaced set of contexts, of sub-systems interlaced with other sub-systems, of contexts interlaced with metacontexts and metametacontexts and so on until it reaches a theoretical limit, the context of all possible social contexts, comprising together with all the contexts that are subsumed within it, what one might call the *total social world system*. Beyond this total social world system – as there is no larger social context that we can define – there is no further *social* context to which one can refer the intelligibility of the total social world system.

As we begin from micro-situations and work up to macro-situations we find that the apparent irrationality of behaviour on a small scale takes on a certain form of intelligibility when one sees it in context. One moves, for example, from the apparent irrationality of the single 'psychotic' individual to the intelligibility of that irrationality within the context of the family. The irrationality of the family in its turn must be placed within the context of its encompassing networks. These further networks must be seen within the context of yet larger organizations and institutions. These larger contexts do not exist out there on some periphery of social space: they pervade the interstices of all that is comprised by them.

### *The paradox of the irrationality of the whole*

It is terrifying that having moved up through the irrationality/rationality of sets of sub-systems until we reach the

total social context, we there seem to glimpse a total system that appears to be dangerously out of the control of the sub-systems or sub-contexts that comprise it. Here we face a theoretical, logical and practical dilemma. Namely, we seem to arrive at an empirical limit which itself appears to be without obvious intelligibility, and beyond this limiting context we do not know what further context there may be that may help us to set the total social world system in a larger pattern or design in which it finds its rationality. Some people think that it may be possible to do this within a cosmic pattern. On the other hand, more than one person has said – and usually been regarded as mad for having said it – that perhaps God is not dead: perhaps God is Himself mad.

### *Mediations*

We have a theoretical and practical problem of finding the mediations between the different levels of contexts: between the different systems and metasystems, extending all the way from the smallest micro- to the largest macro-social systems. The intermediate systems that lie on this range have to be studied not only in themselves, but as conditioning and conditioned media between the individual parts and the whole.\*

In our society, at certain times, this interlaced set of systems may lend itself to revolutionary change, not at the extreme micro or macro ends; that is, not through the individual pirouette of solitary repentance on the one hand, or by a seizure of the machinery of the state on the other; but by sudden, structural, radical qualitative changes in the intermediate system levels: changes in a factory, a hospital, a school, a university, a set of schools, or a whole area of industry, medicine, education, etc.

\*For examples of such a study, see Jules Henry's essay later in this volume.

### *The example of psychiatry*

I started to try to see through the dense opacity of social events from the study of certain people who were labelled psychotic or neurotic, as seen in mental hospitals, psychiatric units and out-patient clinics. I began to see that I was involved in the study of *situations* and not simply of individuals. It seemed (and this still seems to be the case) that the study of such situations was arrested in three principal ways. In the first place the behaviour of such people was regarded as signs of a pathological process that was going on *in* them, and only secondarily of anything else. The whole subject was enclosed in a medical metaphor. In the second place this medical metaphor conditioned the conduct of all those who were enclosed by it, doctors and patients. Thirdly, through this metaphor the person who was the patient in the system, being isolated from the system, could no longer be seen as a person: as a corollary, it was also difficult for the doctor to behave as a person. A person does not exist without a social context. You cannot take a person out of his social context and still see him as a person, or *act* towards him as a person. If one does not *act* towards the other as a person, one depersonalizes oneself.

Someone is gibbering away on his knees, talking to someone who is not there. Yes, he is praying. If one does not accord him the social intelligibility of this behaviour, he can only be seen as mad. Out of social context, his behaviour can only be the outcome of an unintelligible 'psychological' and/or 'physical' process, for which he requires treatment. This metaphor sanctions a massive ignorance of the social context within which the person was interacting. It also renders any genuine reciprocity between the process of labelling (the practice of psychiatry) and of being labelled (the role of patient) as impossible to conceive as it is to observe. Someone whose mind is imprisoned in the metaphor cannot



see it as a metaphor. It is just *obvious*. How, he will say, can diagnosing someone as ill who is obviously ill, make him ill? Or make him better, for that matter? Some of us began to realize that this aspect of the theory and practice of psychiatry was an essay in non-dialectical thinking and practice. However, once one had got oneself out of the straightjacket of this metaphor, it was possible to see the function of this anti-dialectical exercise. The unintelligibility of the experience and behaviour of the diagnosed person is created by the person diagnosing him, as well as by the person diagnosed. This stratagem seems to serve specific functions within the structure of the system in which it occurs.

To work smoothly, it is necessary that those who use this stratagem do not themselves know that it is a stratagem. They should not be cynical or ruthless: they should be sincere and concerned. Indeed, the more 'treatment' is escalated – through negotiation (psychotherapy), pacification (tranquillization), physical struggle (cold-packs and straitjackets), through at one and the same time more and more *humane* and *effective* forms of destruction (electro-shocks and insulin comas), to the final solution of cutting a person's brain in two or more slices by psycho-surgery – the more the human beings who do these things to other people tend to feel sincere concern, dedication, pity; and they can hardly help but feel more and more indignant, sorrowful, horrified and scandalized at those of their colleagues who are horrified and scandalized by their actions. As for the patients, the more they protest, the less insight they display; the more they fight back, clearly the more they need to be pacified; the more persecuted they feel at being destroyed, the more necessary to destroy them. And at the end of it all, they may indeed be 'cured', they may even express gratitude for no longer having the brains left to protest against persecution. But many do not. This only

goes to show, as one leading psychiatrist said to me: 'It's the white man's burden, Ronald. We can't expect any thanks, but we must go on.'

Hundreds of thousands of people are involved in this amazing political operation. Many patients in their innocence continue to flock for help to psychiatrists who honestly feel they are giving people what they ask for: relief from suffering. This is but one example of the diametric irrationality of much of our social scene. The *exact* opposite is achieved to what is intended. Doctors in all ages have made fortunes by killing their patients by means of their cures. The difference in psychiatry is that it is the death of the soul.

Those who think they have seen through this to some extent see it as a system of violence and counter-violence. People called brain surgeons have stuck knives into the brains of hundreds and thousands of people in the last twenty years: people who may never have used a knife against anyone themselves; they may have broken a few windows, sometimes screamed, but they have killed fewer people than the rest of the population, many many fewer if we count the mass-extinctions of wars, declared and undeclared, waged by the legalized 'sane' members of our society.

Such institutionalized, organized violence seems to begin to be called into play at certain moments in a micro-political power struggle, often but not necessarily involving a family, always involving a network of people, more or less extended. The apparent irrationality and sometimes apparently senseless violence of one person in this group – not necessarily the 'patient' – finds its intelligibility in the social context. This apparently senseless violence is a moment in an ongoing set of reciprocals of violence and counterviolence. However, the worst violence of all is the reciprocal denial of reciprocity, the creation of a frozen, non-dialectical *im-*

*passee*, both by the patient who refuses to communicate, and by the psychiatrist, who double-stamps this *refusal* as *inability*.

To cut a long story very short: the context of the individual at first appears as his immediate network, and the contexts of that network come into view as larger social frameworks that have not by any means been adequately identified. However, we can theoretically reach farther than our empirical research can go, in the hope that our theoretical reach can help us to extend our practical grasp. So we may postulate that there is no end to context upon context until one reaches a total social world system which comprises a hierarchy of contexts, metacontexts, metameta-contexts: interlaced patterns of control, frequently violent control, no part of which is understandable if extrapolated from the whole of which it is a part. Nevertheless, some components of this do seem to be more irremediably irrational\* than others.

I sometimes think that the danger of the interlaced sets of psychiatric systems in our society (to their homeostasis, equilibrium, steady state) is not where most people in the system suppose it to be. In the mental-health field there is some anxiety lest we may not have enough mental hospitals, research workers, nurses, etc. to cope with the continued increase in the incidence of mental illness, so-called. It may be that the problem is not that there will be too *few* psychiatrists for too many patients, but that there will be *too*

\*An action can be regarded as irrational if it is ostensibly a means towards an end, such that this means leads to an end it purports to avoid. One attempts to avoid an outcome by certain means. Such means are irrational when they bring about the end they are intended to avoid – a common finding in the psychoanalysis of 'neurotic' defence against anxiety. The defences generate the anxieties they are defences against. I am putting in parenthesis the question of the rationality of the end.

*few patients* coming along in the next ten or twenty years.

It may be that what our system needs is a sufficient number of people to be elected patients and treated accordingly. To each network of perhaps 20 or 30 people some sort of human lightning conductor may be required into which 'bad vibrations' from un-lived living may be channelled – a sort of human earthing device. In the intermediate zone we appear to deal with our violence by such elective focusing (scapegoating being but one obvious example). This is not only in terms of psychiatry. Think how networks selectively funnel people into the criminal channel. On the intermediate levels between macro and micro we see all the time how one out of so many people is nominated as he or she who is felt to epitomize a violence that justifies violence from US. It is plausible to me that this represents a desperate stratagem to keep the system ongoing. If this sounds a bit mad to you, you will be not entirely wrong. This is the type of theory that psychiatric patients often bring forward. They are labelled psychotic partly *because* they bring forward this type of theory.

I have so far sketched some ways violence may be *focused* on single persons. Let us now look at the other end of the scale, the macro end of the intermediate zone. Here violence is projected in an antithetical way, not on any individual *within* the system, but on some vague mass being *outside* the subsystem – THEM. Here we are concerned with the massive actions of the largest groups of people in the world. I want to consider for a moment some facets of the macro-situation. Again, I am going to state only what seems to me obvious, for the same reasons I gave before: that it *might* not be obvious to others and it will give you the opportunity to make up your minds as to how misguided or naïve I am.

Looking at the whole world scene, it seems that transecting

existing human divisions and struggles in terms of race, nationality or geopolitical blocs a new transworld polarization is rapidly occurring between Haves and Have-nots. Most of the Have-nots are peasants. Their age-long misery seems to be more in the process of being deepened by the minority of the Haves than otherwise. It seems that an increasing number of the Have-nots are beginning to become restive and to be no longer resigned to this state of affairs. Armed struggles are current in Asia, Latin America and Africa. As far as I know the Have-nots do not tend to look to the U.S.A. or Western Europe for help, although their governments (who belong to the Haves) may do so. The Have-nots are not sophisticated in Western economics. Rightly or wrongly, I have formed the impression that many of them have begun to feel that the U.S.A. and Western Europe have been exploiting them for too long. They look, rightly or wrongly, to Russia, to an increasing extent to China, and to a growing extent to themselves for their help. Looking at this situation, on a worldwide scale, it seems to me as though a World War (World Wars I and II being the prodromata of the real global involvement) is well under way. The world revolution, Arnold Toynbee has suggested, has begun. But who will eventually be fighting whom is still not clear. Ten years from now the U.S.A. and China may be in alliance against Africa. Provisionally, for the time being, it seems that *our* slice of the world cake (since practically all of us here are from Western Europe or the U.S.A.) has a certain homogeneity despite the heterogeneity of very intricate interlacing of its multiple subsystems, and despite its plurality of contradictions. But many of these contradictions are more apparent than real. They arise from our belief in our own lies and mystifications. Many people are tortured by contradictions that exist only between facts and propaganda, not in the facts themselves. For instance, we have *not* abolished poverty within our own

territory; the U.S.A. is *not* a democracy. Once you do not think that the U.S.A. is a democracy, then there are a great many problems that do not have to be solved because they do not exist. Many people in the U.K. still believe that the U.K. is one of the most peace-loving countries in the world. It has fought more wars, I believe, in the last 300 years than any other nation on earth.

I am not going to enumerate the mystifications to which I think we are subject. I shall take most of that for granted. I find no problem in the fact that a growing number of the people in Africa, Asia, Latin America – the local inhabitants (called, by *us*, terrorists) – are fighting against the white invaders of their countries. This violence is not problematical. Where is the problem? What does puzzle me somewhat, however, is that the spokesmen of the U.S.A. and of this country sometimes seem to think that the violence of the inhabitants of Latin America, Asia and Africa can only be explained as the outcome of a communist plot to overthrow the U.S.A. and Europe.

Suppose the Chinese had 600,000 troops in Southern Mexico engaged in slaughtering the local inhabitants, devastating the ecology and dropping more bombs on Northern Mexico each month than were dropped on the whole of Germany during the whole of World War II. Suppose the Chinese had encircled the U.S.A. with missile bases in Canada, Cuba, the Pacific Islands; that China's fleets patrolled the seas and its atomic submarines appeared to be ubiquitous; and that all this was deployed, according to the Chinese, for no other purpose than directly to put down a threat to the Chinese people by the people of the U.S.A. And suppose that China had made it quite clear into the bargain that it regarded the U.S.A. as the greatest threat to world peace, and that if the U.S.A. sent any troops into Northern Mexico, they would give them all they'd got and smash them back into the Stone Age.<sup>2</sup> Then I would have



no difficulty in understanding the anxieties of the people of the U.S.A. and its leaders about such a policy of 'containment', whether or not they were aware that the people of China had a communist government.

But that is not what we have got to understand. We can more profitably exercise ourselves by trying to understand how the statements of the leaders of the U.S.A. often seem to attribute to the Chinese precisely the policy they themselves seem to be pursuing towards the Chinese.

In Vietnam several million men, women and children, mainly peasants, are exposed to indiscriminate death and mutilation. When they fight, they are fighting on their own land for their own land. On the other side, thousands of miles away from their homes, are mercenaries, well-paid, well-fed, steel-trained specialists in the technology of killing. There are people fighting to destroy all forms of life over a sector of the earth's surface, because somewhere in that space there may be some human beings who have inside them the 'wrong' ideology.\*

We do not have to ask why an increasing number of the world's inhabitants hate us Europeans and the U.S.A. We do not have to go into extraordinary psychological explanations of why I would hate someone who had napalmed my children. It is no more complicated than black and white.

Consider Vietnam again. It is not at all obvious why it is going on. No purely economic explanation seems adequate. It may be imperialism gone mad (Cooper\*). U Thant has proposed that it is a sort of Holy War. The theoreticians in the Pentagon say that it is a global operation in order to contain the advance of communist imperialism. It may be much more primitive. President Johnson says to combat commanders in the Officers' Mess at Qumran Bay: 'Come home with that coonskin on the wall.'<sup>2</sup> One hears extraordinary statements from U.S. politicians, such as 'Bringing

\*See page 200.

Red China to her knees'. What we have here is the most primitive analogical 'thinking', behind which lies a hinterland of fantasy one hardly dares contemplate.

Many people feel ashamed and disgusted by Vietnam. Nevertheless, some of us have to grasp the full implications of the fact that a great number of people have got to the state where they feel guilty if they are turned down by the draft; that a great number of people feel ashamed and guilty if they *don't* manufacture, deliver or drop napalm, etc.

This whole system and the eager and active human perpetuation of it is almost beyond comprehension, because it defies imagination if one is not in it, and its horror is so stark that it is almost unbearable if one is in it.

### *Multiple ignorance*

Moreover, the system itself generates ignorance of itself, and ignorance of this ignorance. I would guess that *at least* three out of four of the three quarters of Americans whom we are assured are aware that the Chinese people have a communist government would not believe this figure. Let us suppose that one in four do not know – and do not know they do not know. Let us suppose that three out of four of the remainder do not know that one out of four does not know he does not know. So how many sane men can we address?

But this is just the beginning. Three out of four *do* know that the people of China have a communist government – and By God we better do something about it before it is too late; we must contain it, if not destroy it, before it destroys *Us*. I would guess that *at least* three quarters of the three quarters who 'know' that the people of China have a communist government have a reflex of horror and terror at the thought. But perhaps the worst of all reflexes is *pity*: 'How can we sit idly by and let this happen to our



brothers and sisters the Chinese. Look what they did to our missionaries – you can't blame them *all* for that of course. Dear Chiang, he did his best.'

The dear little old lady investor in tennis shoes has her nephew the General. He thinks she is too soft. She has always thought more of others than herself. 'I believe that a people gets the government it deserves. Look at our country for example. If the Chinese have a communist government it must be their fault to some extent – you can't just let them get away with that. If they don't want to get what's coming to them, they know what to do about it.'

There are those who know they don't know, those who don't know they don't know, and legions of those who find denser and denser realms of darkness in which to veil their own ignorance from themselves. And there are those who, no matter what they think they know or don't know to any metalevel, will *just do what they are told* when it comes to the bit. Those that are left, who know they don't know and who will not necessarily do what they are told – it is to them that this speech is addressed, which I hope may be of some service, if only as a joke, to the last surviving *human beings* on the planet. The privilege of being one of this number I hardly dare claim.

Once you are hooked you don't know you are hooked. One comes to be ashamed of one's original nature, terrified of it, and ready to destroy evidence of it in oneself and anyone else. This has been achieved – one can see it being achieved – not only by families but by all the institutions that are brought to bear on children. First, in babies, through the kinesics of handling and the suppression of their immediate instinctive intelligence of smell and touch and taste; thereafter through kinesics and *para-linguistics* – words are of tertiary significance. The product of this is a young man of eighteen who is ripe to volunteer to be (or at

the very least to acquiesce in being) a hired killer. Who is *proud* to be processed to be a hired killer, deeply guilty and ashamed of himself if he is frightened, *even* in his guts, and guilty and ashamed if he feels guilty and ashamed of killing simply because he is told to do so.

For far too long psychologists have given a disproportionate amount of time and effort to the psychopathology of the abnormal. We need to catch up on the *normal* psychological correlates of the *normal* state of affairs, of which Vietnam is only one of the most obvious *normal manifestations*. I shall give you an example, a story of a type which has been told me so often that I regard it as only slightly excessively normal. A boy of three is held by his mother out of a sixth-storey window by his neck. His mother says: 'See how much I love you.' The demonstration being that if she did not love him she would drop him.

One could go through many speculations as to why a woman could be so warped as to terrorize her own son in such a way. When one has been through all that, one comes back, I think, to the obvious: the reason why she was doing this to him was exactly the reason she gave him. It was to show him that she loved him. Why else should she do it? That is what she said she was doing it for, and evidently to her no clearer proof of love could be vouchsafed. In that case, one has got to move into the psychology of that woman, and that is the *psychology of normality*. This is an example of *extreme normality*. The *normal* way parents get their children to love them is to terrorize them, to say to them in effect: 'Because I am not dropping you, because I am not killing you, this shows that I love you, and therefore you should come for the assuagement of your terror to the person who is generating the terror that you are seeking to have assuaged.' The above mother is rather hyper-normal.

To understand her one has to go back to her parents. Let us suppose she really meant what she said. She was doing

this to the child in order to show him that she loved him. She has remained constantly puzzled and hurt that he did not exhibit the gratitude she would expect for taking this trouble. Other children are grateful when their parents do a lot *less* for them than *we* have done for you. What did her mother do to her? In what way did her mother not love her? Possibly her mother never held her out of a high window and showed her how much she loved her, as she should have done. And why not? You have to ask what her great-grandmother did or did not do for her grandmother, and so on.

The whole system, in any of its aspects, is so well into such multi-generational spiral effects that it is very difficult to see how the spiral can be turned round. The psychoanalyst Winnicott recently posed the question: One looks into the mirror to see oneself – what antecedes the mirror? He suggests that what comes before the mirror is one's mother's face. So that if one's mother's face is a mirror, when one looks in one's mother's face one sees oneself. What else can one see? That is fine so long as one's mother, in looking at oneself, sees oneself. But if in looking at oneself she sees herself – sees oneself as an extension of herself, but in so doing is unaware of so doing, so that she *thinks* she sees oneself – out of that deep spiral of misapprehension however is one to find oneself again? Nor is it *herself* that she sees in the baby. She is seeing what her mother saw, and her mother saw, and so on. The spiral of alienation goes whirling back, way out of sight. And by the time one has lost oneself in the *n*th turn of this spiral of alienation and grown up to see, without knowing that one sees, one's mirror image in the face of one's enemy; to become the Other to an Other who is himself Other than himself; then we are just beginning to get to the precondition of the possibility of the amazing collective paranoid projective systems that operate on large scales. We attribute to Them

exactly what We are doing to Them. Because We are seeing ourselves in Them, but we do not know that we are. We think that They are Them, but They are actually Us.

For instance, one of the ironies of history: 'All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights: among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' It is the opening sentence of the Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Can we find some way of disarticulating the circuit somewhere from within? We might be able to consider what are the weakest, what the strongest threads that maintain the tapestry in its tightly woven state.

I was struck by a remark that Sir Julian Huxley made to me a few years ago. He said he thought the most dangerous link in the chain was obedience. That we have been trained, and we train our children, so that we and they are prepared to do practically anything if told to do it by a sufficient authority. It is always said, 'it couldn't happen here', but it is always happening here.\* It is particularly important to study the nature of obedience. Our system operates through a network of common-obedience reciprocities. What is the organization structure of this net? Clearly we have not all equal discretion in the exercise of power. In an ultimate sense we may wish to take on equal responsibility, but there is a vast differential in power in all sectors of the total world system. The people who exercise power can do so only if people carry out their orders. We have the spectacle at this very moment in the earth's history of white troops in the middle of jungle darkness blazing away at the darkness, for reasons they do not know – except that if they were forced to, I would think they would probably come down to saying, 'Well, ours is not to reason why. We are carrying  
\*No doubt, it is happening *there* as well.

out orders.' Some of them want to be heroes. I do not think many of them do.

The following is a simple morality tale from Yale University, an experiment conducted by Dr Stanley Milgram.<sup>5</sup>

Dr Milgram recruited 40 male volunteers who believed they were to take part in an experimental study of memory and learning at Yale University. The 40 men were between the ages of 20 and 50 and represented a wide range of occupations. Typical subjects were postal clerks, high school teachers, salesmen, engineers and laborers. One subject had not finished elementary school, but some others had doctorate and other professional degrees.

The role of experimenter was played by a 31-year-old high school teacher of biology. His manner was impassive but he maintained a somewhat stern appearance during the experiment. The experimenter was aided by a mild-mannered and likable man, who acted as a 'victim'. The experimenter interviewed each volunteer and, with him, the 'victim' masquerading as another volunteer. He told the two of them that the intention was to investigate the effects of punishment on learning, and in particular the differential effects of varying degrees of punishment and various types of teacher. The drawing of lots was rigged so that the volunteer was always the teacher and the 'victim' was always the learner. The victim was strapped into an 'electric chair' apparatus and electrode paste and an electrode were applied. The teacher-volunteer was then taken into an adjacent room and placed before a complex instrument labeled 'Shock Generator'. The teacher-volunteer was given a 45-volt shock to demonstrate the apparent authenticity of the machine.

### *Pulling the Switch*

A row of 30 switches on the 'shock generator' were labeled from 15 to 450 volts by 15-volt steps. In addition, groups of switches were labeled from 'slight shock' to 'danger: severe shock'. Following instructions and in the context of a mock

learning experiment, the teacher-volunteer was led to believe that he was administering increasingly more severe punishment to the learner-victim, who made prearranged responses. The learner-victim gave incorrect answers to three out of every four questions and received shocks as punishment for his errors. When the punitive shock reached the 300-volt level, the learner-victim – as had been prearranged – kicked on the wall of the room in which he was bound to the electric chair. At this point teacher-volunteers turned to the experimenter for guidance. The teacher-volunteer was advised to continue after a 5-10 second pause. After the 315-volt shock, the pounding was heard again. Silence followed. At this point in the experiment the teacher-volunteers began to react in various ways. But they were verbally encouraged, and even ordered in a firm manner, to proceed right up to the maximum level of voltage.

### *Test Results*

... Dr Milgram states that contrary to all expectations 26 of the 40 subjects completed the series, finally administering 450 volts to the now silent 'victim'. Only 5 refused to carry on after the victim's first protest when 300-volts were apparently administered. Many continued, even though they experienced considerable emotional disturbance, as clearly shown by their spoken comments, profuse sweating, tremor, stuttering and bizarre nervous laughter and smiling. Three subjects had uncontrollable seizures. The teacher-volunteers who continued the shock frequently voiced their concern for the learner-victim, but the majority overcame their humane reactions and continued as ordered right up to the maximum punishment.

One observer related: 'I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his earlobe and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered: "Oh God, let's stop it." And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end.'

The conflict that the subjects faced in this experiment was between obeying an authority they trusted and respected, and doing something they felt to be wrong. The real-life situation is more horrible. There is, for many, perhaps no conflict at all. My guess is that *most* people feel guilty at not doing what they are told, even though they think it is wrong, and even though they mistrust those who give the orders. They feel guilty at trusting their own mistrust.

It would be nice to live in a world where we could feel that if one of the authorities of society – whether Mao, the Pope, or Lyndon Johnson, and their acolytes – told us something, the fact that they said so would make it more likely to be true than false. It would be nice, even, if one could believe that something that appears in any of our journals of scholarship, or medical or social-science research, was more likely to be true than false by the fact of its publication. Unfortunately we are forced by the cynical lies, multifarious deceptions and sincerely held delusions to which we are now subjected through all media – even the organs of scholarship and science – to a position of almost total social scepticism. There is almost nothing we *can* know about the total social world system, or any of the systems for several levels down from there. But it is possible to know that we cannot so know – this being a historical contingency of the present world situation, but given that situation, a necessity of that situation. Yet we are so ‘programmed’ to believe that what we are told is more likely to be true than false because we are told it, that almost all of us are liable to be caught out occasionally. We have all a ‘reflex’ towards believing and doing what we are told.

We can put no trust in princes, popes, politicians, scholars or scientists, our worst enemy or our best friend. With the greatest precautions, we may put trust in a source that is much deeper than our egos – if we can trust ourselves to have found it, or rather, to have been found by it. It is ob-

vius that it is hidden, but what it is and where it is, is not obvious.

### References

1. *Contemporary China*, ed. Ruth Adams, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1966, p. viii.
2. See *The Bitter Heritage. Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941–1966*, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, Sphere Books, London, 1967. Schlesinger's position is all the more interesting as he has been so much a part of the administrative élite.
3. See *Air War: Vietnam*, Frank Harvey, Bantam, London, 1967.
4. ‘Mirror Role of Mother and Family in Child Development’, (1967). D. W. Winnicott, in *The Predicament of the Family*, ed Peter Lomas. Hogarth Press, London.
5. As summarized in: *New York Academy of Science*, 4, 4 18–20, 1964. Milgram's original paper is: ‘Behavioural Study of Obedience’. (1963) *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. 67, p. 371–9.