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"Shocking" Masculinity

Stanley Milgram, "Obedience to Authority," and the "Crisis of Manhood" in Cold War America

By Ian Nicholson*

ABSTRACT

Stanley Milgram's study of "obedience to authority" is one of the best-known psychological experiments of the twentieth century. This essay examines the study's special charisma through a detailed consideration of the intellectual, cultural, and gender contexts of Cold War America. It suggests that Milgram presented not a "timeless" experiment on "human nature" but, rather, a historically contingent, scientifically sanctioned "performance" of American masculinity at a time of heightened male anxiety. The essay argues that this gendered context invested the obedience experiments with an extraordinary plausibility, immediacy, and relevance. Immersed in a discourse of masculinity besieged, many Americans read the obedience experiments not as a fanciful study of laboratory brutality but as confirmation of their worst fears. Milgram's extraordinary success thus lay not in his "discovery" of the fragility of individual conscience but in his theatrical flair for staging culturally relevant masculine performances.

STANLEY MILGRAM'S STUDY OF "OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY" is one of the most famous psychological experiments of the twentieth century. First published in 1963, the experiments remain a staple of undergraduate education in psychology and the inspiration for ongoing research and debate in a number of disciplines.[1] The size and scope of the Milgram-inspired literature is impressive, but such conventional measures of

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[1] The first published account of the obedience to authority experiments is Stanley Milgram, "Behavioral Study of Obedience," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1963, *67*:371–378. The significance of Milgram's work is discussed in Rebecca M. Lemov, *World as Laboratory: Experiments with Mice, Mazes, and Men*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill & Wang, 2005); Arthur G. Miller, *The Obedience Experiments: A Case Study of Controversy in Social Science* (New York: Praeger, 1986); and Nestar Russell and Robert Gregory, "Making the

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scholarly renown do not do justice to the iconic status and broad academic and cultural appeal of the obedience experiments. Over the years, a number of scholars have noted that the study has been transformed from a psychological experiment into a cultural reference point of extraordinary reach and power. The social psychologist Lee Ross spoke with particular eloquence in this regard, suggesting that the obedience experiments have become "part of our society's shared intellectual legacy—that small body of historical incidents, biblical parables, and classic literature that serious thinkers feel free to draw upon when they debate about human nature."[2]

This is high praise indeed for a study undertaken by a hitherto unknown twenty-seven-year-old untenured assistant professor, but there is ample evidence that attests to the experiments' remarkable appeal and mythic aura. The study has been repeatedly referenced in connection with one of the most monumental events of the twentieth century: the Holocaust. This connection was made by Milgram himself in his first publication on the obedience experiments, and throughout his career he claimed that his work provided special insight into Nazi crimes. This was and remains a controversial claim, but, as Arthur Miller has noted, "in the intervening decades, countless enthusiasts have endorsed the view that these studies contain vital insights into the Holocaust." The experiments have also been enshrined in popular culture, appearing in Hollywood films, television shows, plays, and popular music.[3] The philosopher C. D. Herrera noted that "Milgram may be the only social psychologist to earn the status of pop-icon." The experiments' popularity and standing in American politics and jurisprudence is no less remarkable. In the early 1970s Milgram's work was used to critique aspects of the Vietnam War, and in the aftermath of Watergate the experiments were used to explain the conduct of President Nixon's staff. During the famous 1974 trial of Patty Hearst, Milgram's research was cited to explain how the kidnapped heiress could have come to obey the instructions of the Symbionese Liberation Army. More recently, Milgram's experiments have been mentioned in relation to the behavior of American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.[4]

Works of science and culture that attain such extraordinary "celebrity" status are typically sustained by a wide range of popular interests and anxieties. For example, in his

Undoable Doable: Milgram, the Holocaust, and Modern Government," *American Review of Public Administration*, 2005, *35*:327–349.

[2] Lee Ross, "Situationist Perspectives on the Obedience Experiments," *Contemporary Psychology*, 1988, *33*:101–104. Ross's assessment of Milgram has recently been echoed by the historian Kirsten Fermaglich, who noted that "by 1978, the obedience experiments, along with the Nazi imagery that Milgram invoked to describe them, had become integral to American life": Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares* (Waltham, Mass.: Univ. Press New England, 2006), p. 83.

[3] Arthur Miller, "What Can the Milgram Obedience Experiments Tell Us about the Holocaust?" in *Social Psychology of Good and Evil*, ed. Miller (New York: Guildford, 2004), pp. 193–239, on p. 194. In 1975 the obedience study was the subject of a full-length film—*The Tenth Level*—featuring John Travolta in a supporting role and *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk—William Shatner—in the role of Milgram. There is also an allusion to Milgram's study in the film *Ghostbusters*. In 2008 the experiment was referenced in an episode of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* that featured the actor Robin Williams playing a character trying to dissuade people from mindless obedience. The study has also been featured in the TV shows *Malcolm in the Middle* and *The Simpsons* (episode no. 7G04, "There's No Disgrace Like Home," which premiered on 28 Jan. 1990). The rock musician Peter Gabriel wrote a song about the experiment entitled "We Do What We're Told (Milgram's 37)." In 2006 the psychologist Jerry Burger undertook a partial replication of the obedience study, which was subsequently broadcast on the ABC prime-time series *Basic Instincts*.

[4] C. D. Herrera, "Ethics, Deception, and 'Those Milgram Experiments,'" *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 2001, *18*:245–256, on p. 253; Herbert Kelman and Lee Lawrence, "Assignment of Responsibility in the Case of Lt. Calley: Preliminary Report on a National Survey," *Journal of Social Issues*, 1972, *28*:177–212; Howard Muson, "Blind Obedience: John Dean Meets Milgram, Szasz, and Others," *Psychology Today*, 1978, *11*:12, 112; William Graebner, *Patty's Got a Gun: Patricia Hearst in 1970s America* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 2008); and Lemov, *World as Laboratory* (cit. n. 1) (Abu Ghraib).

essay on the infamous nineteenth-century hoax the "Cardiff Giant," Michael Pettit has documented an extensive network of social, intellectual, and religious interests that helped transform a gypsum statue of a large man into an alleged "giant"—an object of intense popular interest and scientific and religious controversy. Although the obedience study has been the subject of considerable discussion, historical analysis of its special charisma and lasting cultural significance has been surprisingly limited. The lengthiest and most thoroughly researched study of the experiments—Thomas Blass's biography of Milgram, *The Man Who Shocked the World*—is a case in point.[5] Blass does a commendable job of documenting the biographical details of Milgram's life and the application of the obedience experiments to the study of the Holocaust. However, his purchase on the wider symbolic register of the obedience study is limited, leaving largely unexamined the American political and gendered context of the experiments while taking their extraordinary cultural appeal for granted.[6] This tendency is evident in most other treatments of the experiments, where the appeal and influence of the study are usually taken as givens or briefly "explained" as a function of its experiments' dramatic character, the "timelessness" of its questions, and most notably, its explicit connection to the Holocaust.[7]

What has gone largely unexamined in the voluminous secondary literature on the obedience experiments is the wider historical and cultural context that sustained Milgram's remarkable claims concerning his study's generalizability. Why were so many Americans willing at least to consider Milgram's "scientific" and dramaturgical invitation to "see their own lives and political actions through the lens of Nazi Germany"? What combination of beliefs and anxieties sustained the perception of a connection between an American psychology laboratory and Nazi concentration camps? On the face of it, the idea that one can "explain" something as vast and historically complex as the Holocaust in a psychology laboratory in New Haven, Connecticut, is implausible, if not absurd—as is the idea that "ordinary" men living in early 1960s America were somehow analogous to members of the SS. As Alan Fenigstein has noted, "the terms that are routinely used to describe the horrors of the Holocaust—e.g. atrocity, inhumanity, hatefulness, wickedness—are simply preposterous in the context of Milgram's studies."[8] And yet, for many

[5] Michael Pettit, "'The Joy in Believing': The Cardiff Giant, Commerical Deceptions, and Styles of Observation in Gilded Age America," *Isis*, 2006, *97*:659–677; and Thomas Blass, *The Man Who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram* (New York: Basic, 2004) (hereafter cited as **Blass, *Man Who Shocked the World***), p. 360.

[6] In 1985 the political philosophers Charles Helm and Mario Morelli commented on the absence of any sustained consideration of the social and historical context of the obedience experiments. "Too often social scientists like Milgram . . . discuss authority as an essence or Platonic Idea or, at least, in pristine abstraction. Milgram's study took place in the early 1960s at a major university in New England. Surely this deserves some attention": Helm and Morelli, "Obedience to Authority in a Laboratory Setting: Generalizability and Context Dependency," *Political Studies*, 1985, *33*:610–627, on p. 626. Helm and Morelli's "plea for a more historical and contextual analysis" (*ibid.*) of the obedience study has gone largely unheeded. A notable exception is Kirsten Fermaglich's recent study of Holocaust consciousness in postwar America, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares* (cit. n. 2). Fermaglich is particularly effective in documenting the generational divisions and political concerns of Milgram and his American Jewish contemporaries while highlighting the centrality of "Holocaust consciousness" in the obedience research. However, like Blass, she does not consider the gendered, Cold War context of the experiment in much detail.

[7] See Miller, *Obedience Experiments* (cit. n. 1); James H. Korn, *Illusions of Reality: A History of Deception in Social Psychology* (Albany: State Univ. New York Press, 1997); and Ludy Benjamin and Jeffry Simpson, "The Power of the Situation: The Impact of Milgram's Obedience Studies on Personality and Social Psychology," *American Psychologist*, 2009, *64*:12–19.

[8] Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares* (cit. n. 2), p. 84; and Alan Fenigstein, "Were Obedience Pressures a Factor in the Holocaust?" *Analyse und Kritik*, 1998, *20*:1–20, on p. 17. There is a sizable critical literature in psychology and Holocaust studies on the relevance of the obedience experiments to the Holocaust.

Americans in the 1960s and early 1970s these sorts of differences didn't seem to matter; the idea that the experimental setup represented a kind of "mini-Holocaust," with American men as quasi-Nazis, was at least worth considering, if not actually proven by the study itself.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the historical origins of the obedience experiments' special charisma and, more specifically, to extend consideration of the study's appeal beyond the powerful Holocaust framing that Milgram himself proposed. I view the obedience study and much of its reception in the context of the Cold War. Definitions of the term "Cold War" vary, but for the purposes of this essay I will take it in its broadest sense to mean "an era defined by fears of Communist subversion and anxieties about nuclear power and by an attraction to 'dualistic' and rigidified visions of political morality." As Joel Isaac has recently documented, the Cold War has emerged as an object of special concern for historians of the human sciences.[9] Historians have examined the emergence of the "military-industrial-academic complex" in the postwar period, and they have considered how "Cold War politics helped to determine what science was, what it did, and what it meant."[10] Although the obedience study is not usually viewed as a Cold War undertaking, the experiments provide a revealing window into that era's pervasive sense of anxiety and menace. The study is especially useful as a way of exploring the influence of Cold War gender ideals in the human sciences. I suggest here that part of the extraordinary interest in Milgram's experiments and much of the willingness to consider them as a Holocaust analogue fed off a popular and at times flamboyant Cold War narrative of a seemingly lost or enfeebled American "character," which was generally understood and often explicitly identified as masculine. During this period, an extensive popular and academic literature linked consumerism, feminism, and Communist infiltration to the demise of the strong "inner-directed" American male, the backbone of the nation and a bulwark of democracy. In place of this self-directing agent was an "other-directed" conformist, a trend that spoke to a "worrisome lack of distance between the United States and the Soviet Union."[11] In this essay, I argue that much of the obedience study's appeal lay in its "scientific" and visual "confirmation" that such fears were justified. Indeed, part of the experiments' power to captivate lay in their capacity not only to showcase already existing masculine weakness but to demonstrate "scientifically" that a new and altogether more barbaric level of male enfeeblement had taken root in the

For a good overview see Miller, "What Can the Milgram Obedience Experiments Tell Us about the Holocaust?" (cit. n. 3).

[9] Joel Isaac, "The Human Sciences in Cold War America," *Historical Journal*, 2007, *50*:725–746, on p. 732. He suggests that the "field of Cold War studies is booming" (p. 725).

[10] Stuart Leslie, *The Cold War and American Science: The Military-Industrial-Academic Complex at MIT and Stanford* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993); and Mark Solovey, "Introduction: Science and the State during the Cold War: Blurred Boundaries and a Contested Legacy," *Social Studies of Science*, 2001, *31*:165–170, on p. 168. For a discussion of the connection between psychology and the U.S. military see Ellen Herman, "The Career of Cold War Psychology," *Radical History Review*, 1995, *63*:52–85, esp. p. 78; and Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in an Age of Experts* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1995).

[11] Jamie Cohen-Cole, "The Creative American: Cold War Salons, Social Science, and the Cure for Modern Society," *Isis*, 2009, *100*:219–262, on p. 225. American Cold War masculinities are discussed in K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005); James Burkhart Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 2005); and Robert Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Boston: Univ. Massachusetts Press, 2001). For more general discussions of the history of American masculinities see Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996); and E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic, 1993).

American male psyche. At Milgram's behest, seemingly strong-willed American men of business and industry could apparently be quickly and easily converted into robotic conformists. Thus, according to Milgram, the threat to the self-starting "inner-directed" man exceeded even the most pessimistic assessments of 1950s social commentators. Although many Americans would dispute this dystopian vision, it made for an enthralling debate in the context of a defeated Fascism and still-to-be-vanquished Communism. The study would ask, perhaps more dramatically and emphatically than other "scientific" investigations undertaken during the Cold War, what exactly American men were all about and what they were capable of doing and unable to resist doing. Ultimately, it would be the study's ability dramatically to pose these questions—and not Milgram's ability to answer them—that would establish the obedience experiments' renown in the academic and popular imagination.[12]

STUDYING THE HOLOCAUST AND WINNING THE COLD WAR

Milgram's obedience research was relatively unusual in social psychology insofar as it explicitly linked an experimental framework to a historical event whose political relevance was still current: the Holocaust. As noted earlier, Milgram invoked the Holocaust in the opening paragraph of the first academic publication of the obedience results:

> Obedience, as a determinant of behavior, is of particular relevance to our time. It has been reliably estimated that from 1939–45, millions of innocent persons were systematically slaughtered on command. Gas chambers were built, death camps were guarded, daily quotas of corpses were produced with the same efficiency as the manufacture of appliances. These inhumane policies may have originated in the mind of a single person, but they could only be carried out on a massive scale if a very large number of people obeyed orders.[13]

Several scholars have demonstrated that the Holocaust had an immediate personal relevance for Milgram and that it was an important source of inspiration for the obedience experiments. As the child of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, he grew up with a keen awareness of the Holocaust and an enduring fascination with the conditions that led to the horrific slaughter. "It was only an accident," he later wrote, "that I was on this side of the Atlantic when Hitler's insane orders were carried out with dispatch and efficiency." This personal context is significant, but it is important to note that Milgram was not always clear on the relationship between his study and the Holocaust. His flamboyant reference to the Holocaust in the opening paragraph of his 1963 paper invited readers to view his work as a study of Nazi behavior, and at times he claimed that the study was a direct

[12] Some clarification is in order concerning the unusual publication history of the obedience experiments. Milgram conducted the study between 1960 and 1963, and the first published account of the experiments appeared in a 1963 article entitled "Behavioral Study of Obedience" (cit. n. 1). This paper was followed by two further articles on obedience in 1964 and 1965: Stanley Milgram, "Group Pressure and Action against a Person," *J. Abnormal Soc. Psychol.*, 1964, *69*:137–143; and Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," *Human Relations*, 1965, *18*:57–76. Owing to a variety of personal and theoretical problems, a book-length treatment of the study did not appear until 1974: Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (London: Tavistock, 1974). Although the journal articles and the book are closely linked, there are important differences in emphasis and theory. The popular and academic contexts in which the works were received also varied quite significantly. This essay will focus primarily on the first published accounts of the research and the popular and academic reaction to them. The career of the obedience experiments in the 1970s will be considered in a later study.

[13] Milgram, "Behavioral Study of Obedience," p. 371.

investigation of the Holocaust. "Let us stop trying to kid ourselves," he wrote sharply in an unpublished note. "What we are trying to understand is obedience of the Nazi guards in the prison camps, and that any other things we may understand about obedience is pretty much of a windfall, an accidental bonus." Later, however, when pressed on the numerous differences between his laboratory subjects and Nazi concentration camp guards, Milgram became defensive, stating that the Holocaust was simply a "background metaphor" for the "real" issue: obedience to authority.[14]

Irrespective of its status as metaphor or object of study, the Holocaust clearly featured in Milgram's thinking, and its staggering scale represented a huge challenge for a social psychologist who wished to use "experimentation" as an investigative tool. How could one possibly re-create such savagery in the "safe" and politically sanitized environment of a psychology laboratory? Riding a crest of optimism and faith in the power of human experimentation, Milgram believed that such a re-creation was possible. Following established discursive practices in psychology, he presented the obedience research as a test of culturally inert "subjects" in the face of a generalized "authority," thereby implying that the immediate political context and the gender construction of the participants and the experimenters were largely irrelevant. The move enabled Milgram to position the obedience study as part of a grand, universal discourse on "human nature" and thus as applicable to historical contexts like the Holocaust. However, to mimic the Holocaust scientifically Milgram needed to devise a new and more visceral aesthetic for social psychological experimentation. The restrained workaday world was out: Milgram needed to devise a space of power, pain, anguish, and domination. He needed a "scientific" spectacle that could at least begin to approximate the brutal wonder of Nazi horror. In what has come to be known as the "obedience to authority" paradigm, Milgram found his spectacle.

The details of the experiment are well known and require only the briefest outline. Milgram recruited 1,000 subjects to participate in what was supposed to be a memory experiment. Subjects were assigned the role of "teacher" and were asked to read a series of word pairs to another subject who played the role of "learner." The "learner" was to try to identify "which of the four terms had originally been paired with the first word."[15] Mistakes were punished by the application of what appeared to be electric shock using a professionally crafted machine. The machine was—apparently—calibrated to administer shocks that increased in intensity, with the last of its levers labeled "Intense Shock," "Extreme Intensity Shock," "Danger Severe Shock," and "XXX." As the level of shock intensified, so did the level of protest from the "teacher." Subjects experienced pressure from a series of firm, unrelenting directives or "prods" from the experimenter, who remained in the room to direct the study in most of the experimental conditions. Unbeknownst to the subjects, the experiment was not about memory at all, but about obedience to authority. There was no memory experiment, nor was there any "real" electric shock.

[14] Stanley Milgram to Hannalore Lehnoff, 4 Nov. 1963, Milgram Papers, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, Series III, Box 55, Folder 12 ("only an accident"); Milgram, "Unpublished Note," n.d., Milgram Papers, Series III, Box 70, Folder 289 ("accidental bonus"); and Milgram, "Issues in the Study of Obedience: A Reply to Baumrind," *Amer. Psychol.*, 1964, *19*:848–852, on p. 851 ("background metaphor"). For studies that treat the role of the Holocaust in Milgram's work see Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares* (cit. n. 2), pp. 87–89; and Nestar Russell, "Milgram's Obedience to Authority Experiments: Origins and Early Evolution," *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 2010, *49*:1–23.

[15] Milgram, "Behavioral Study of Obedience" (cit. n. 1), p. 373.

It was all a ruse designed to see just how far subjects would go in obeying the directives of the experimenter.

Milgram's interest in Nazi Germany was undoubtedly sincere; however, the staggering scale and emotional intensity of the Holocaust has tended to obscure the immediate American Cold War context from which the obedience study derived much of its logic. As the historian Ellen Herman has noted, postwar psychology was intimately connected to the larger ideological struggle against the Soviet Union, a contest that was largely viewed in psychological terms. As President Eisenhower proclaimed in 1954, the Cold War was a "war for the minds of men," a conflict between "hostile concepts of man's character and nature." In this pre-Vietnam era, the "ideological belief system of the World War II generation" of social scientists remained largely unchallenged, and most psychologists saw little problem in partnering with government agencies and the military in support of American interests. Funding provided the most tangible connection, coming from the Office of Naval Research and, of particular relevance for Milgram, the National Science Foundation (NSF), both of which saw national security as their "predominant focus." The NSF's interest in supporting work in the social sciences grew from the time of its founding in 1950, with a particular increase coming in the wake of the Soviet launching of *Sputnik* in October 1957. In December 1957 Vice President Nixon cautioned Americans about the dangers of allowing the Soviet Union to overtake the United States in the social sciences, and in February 1958 a blue-ribbon committee chaired by the University of Michigan psychologist James Miller issued a similar warning. Underfunding the social sciences could leave the United States unable to respond effectively should another country achieve a "breakthrough in the control of attitudes and beliefs of human beings through exceptionally effective educational techniques, drugs, subliminal stimulation, manipulation of motives, or some as yet unrecognized medium." To counter such a threat, NSF funding for the social sciences was increased, and in 1960 the foundation placed the social sciences on an administrative par with the natural sciences. The politics of social science funding at the NSF were still fraught, however, and support was restricted to "basic research [that] meets the usual scientific criteria of objectivity, verifiability, and generality."[16]

Milgram's research was embedded in this "military-industrial-academic complex" and funded by the NSF. His proposal reflected the foundation's interest in national security, and it made no mention of the Holocaust. The study was framed in the context of the scholarly literature on conformity (which will be considered later) and the psychological and military context of the Cold War. Milgram's proposal was especially appealing to the NSF because it combined politically salient Cold War themes with an ostensibly "rigorous" methodology inspired by the natural sciences. He proposed to study the conditions under which compliance with authority could be increased or decreased—knowledge that had obvious military and political applications. Lest there be any doubt on this point, Milgram was careful to make reference to the connection between his own work and the techniques used on American POWs by the "Red Chinese in North Korean POW camps." Equally important to the success of the proposal was Milgram's emphasis on the objectivity and exactitude of his design. He stressed that his work was systematic and suscep-

[16] Herman, "Career of Cold War Psychology" (cit. n. 10), pp. 63 (quoting Eisenhower), 78 ("ideological belief system of the World War II generation"); and Daniel Lee Kleinman and Mark Solovey, "Hot Science/Cold War: The National Science Foundation after World War II," *Rad. Hist. Rev.*, 1995, *63*:110–139, on pp. 115 ("predominant focus"), 123 (Miller committee warning), 124 (quoting a 1959 National Science Board statement regarding restrictions on NSF funding for the social sciences).

tible to quantification, capable of rendering complex, politically significant concepts like "obedience" and "authority" in unambiguous and measurable categories: "For any particular subject and for any particular experimental condition we may specify with a numerical value the degree of obedience." The NSF panel that evaluated Milgram's grant application clearly liked what it saw, concluding that the proposal was a "bold experiment on an important and fundamental social problem."[17]

COLD WAR AMERICAN MASCULINITY BESIEGED

Inspired in part by Nazi horror, and willing to be of service in the ideological struggle at hand, Milgram undertook a study that—perhaps in ways that he did not intend—shone a revealing spotlight on one of the principal preoccupations of America during the Cold War: the state of American masculinity. Given the study's overwhelmingly male demographic, it really could not have been otherwise. Of the 1,000 subjects that participated in the obedience experiments, 960 were men. All but one of the eighteen experimental conditions involved men drawn from a wide range of ages, occupations, and educational backgrounds. Typical subjects included "postal clerks, high school teachers, salesmen, engineers, and laborers." The use of an almost exclusively male subject pool, and the interchangeable deployment of the terms "men" and "subjects," was consistent with the scholarly practices of 1950s psychologists and social commentators. Social psychologists such as Solomon Asch, whose work served as a model for the obedience study, relied exclusively on male subjects, and like most researchers and intellectuals he typically used the terms "man," "men," and "character" to refer both to society and to men specifically. In this context, as James Gilbert has noted, "'man' meant essential and representative, while 'female' implied frivolous or inessential or marginal."[18] Milgram did not discuss his rationale for including a small number of women in the study; however, the decision likely reflected his commitment to experimental thoroughness rather than any sustained interest in women's experience. Tellingly, the data on the female subjects was not reported at all in the initial 1963 publication of the obedience study, nor were women subjects even mentioned in the two follow-up journal articles in 1964 and 1965. The female participants were discussed in passing in a brief one-page summary in the 1974 book *Obedience to Authority*. In a highly gendered, Cold War context where women were presumed to be "other directed" and largely uninvolved in the military, police, and related national security roles, their strength of character was of relatively little interest.[19]

The original study was conducted at Yale with subjects from New Haven, Connecticut. A later study was run at Bridgeport, Connecticut. Both revealed American masculinity to

[17] Stanley Milgram, "Dynamics of Obedience: Experiments in Social Psychology," Research Grant Application, National Science Foundation, 25 Jan. 1961, Milgram Papers, Series II, Box 43, Folder 128; and Blass, *Man Who Shocked the World*, p. 72 (citing the NSF panel evaluation). The funding of the obedience experiments has recently become a source of controversy. In 2006 the historian Alfred McCoy argued that Milgram was funded by the CIA, a claim hotly disputed by other Milgram scholars. See Alfred W. McCoy, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror*, 1st ed. (American Empire Project) (New York: Metropolitan, 2006); and Thomas Blass, "Unsupported Allegations about a Link between Milgram and the CIA: Tortured Reasoning in a Question of Torture," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 2006, *43*:199–203.

[18] Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (cit. n. 12), p. 16; and Gilbert, *Men in the Middle* (cit. n. 11), p. 66.

[19] For a thoughtful discussion of the invisibility of gender in American social psychology in the early 1960s see Frances E. Cherry, *The "Stubborn Particulars" of Social Psychology: Essays on the Research Process* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995), esp. Ch. 2: "Kitty Genovese and Culturally Embedded Theorizing" (pp. 16–29).

be disconcertingly passive and compliant. In what has emerged as the study's best-known finding, two thirds of subjects went "all the way," inflicting potentially lethal electric shock on their helpless victims. Although some subjects protested, they behaved with unnerving regularity, the majority doing what they were told, their agency and self-possession neutered by a series of commands from a man in a lab coat. This finding, Milgram suggested, was the real "shock" of his obedience research. To underscore the point and maximize its dramatic impact, Milgram famously asked a group of psychiatrists to predict the results of his study. The psychiatrists predicted that only a fraction of participants—a "pathological fringe" of 1 or 2 percent—would inflict lethal shock.[20] With expert opinion seemingly at odds with his empirical reality, Milgram reasoned that he was on to something very new and important.

The "counterintuitive" quality of the research findings became a central part of the obedience narrative, and subsequent discussions of the experiments almost invariably mention the "inability" of experts to anticipate the results. Not surprisingly, Milgram himself developed a strong emotional attachment to the idea that he had made a psychological "discovery," and a former graduate student recalled that "he would become furious if a student suggested that it was all common sense."[21] Given the rhetorical force and professional cachet of a "counterintuitive" finding in psychology, Milgram's touchiness is understandable; in hindsight, however, it would appear that "expert" opinion was not as far removed from the experiments' main finding as the psychiatric survey implied. As the psychologist Don Mixon has noted, the description of the study that was given to the psychiatrists provided minimal detail, thus making it difficult for the "experts" to understand the nature of the experiment from the perspective of the subject (the teacher). To underscore the point, in 1971 Mixon asked people to predict the results of the experiment, using four different descriptions that varied in their level of detail. The results differed sharply from those obtained by Milgram, with predictions of lethal shock administration ranging from 40 to 80 percent, depending on the level of detail offered. "Given enough detail," Mixon concluded, "and when care is taken not to point to what should be done, people are quite good at judging what happens in Milgram's study."[22]

The intellectual and cultural context of Cold War America also serves to undermine Milgram's claim that the obedience study results were "counterintuitive" and at odds with expert opinion. His empirical findings were embedded in a discourse of national decline that centered on the idea that American culture was losing its ability to produce autonomous, strong-willed individuals. Reflecting on the wider meaning of his study, Milgram argued that the results showed that "men" were now easily "seduced by the trappings of authority" and that the "kind of character produced in American democratic society cannot be counted on to insulate its citizens from brutality and inhumane treatment." Milgram presented this argument with a sense of solemnity and surprise, noting, rather pompously, that he came to it through a "painful alteration of my own thinking." However, Milgram's principal trope—the erosion of individual autonomy and the power of organizational

[20] Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (cit. n. 12), p. 31.

[21] Milgram's emotional investment in the counterintuitive aspect of the obedience research was reported by a former graduate student, Harold Takooshian, who studied with Milgram at City University of New York. His remarks can be found in Thomas Blass, "The Milgram Paradigm after Thirty-five Years: Some Things We Now Know about Obedience to Authority," in *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm*, ed. Blass (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2000), pp. 35–59.

[22] Don Mixon, *Obedience and Civilization: Authorized Crime and the Normality of Evil* (London: Pluto, 1990), p. 25.

structures—was a theoretical commonplace and one of the main preoccupations of 1950s human science and social commentary.[23] The derivative nature of the obedience study's theoretical framework is very apparent when one considers the work of prominent sociologists such as David Riesman, whose book *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) pointed to the "demise" of the strong, self-made, "inner-directed" American "character" and the subsequent rise of a feminized, "other-directed" organization man whose principal goal was to conform to mass culture rather than assert his own individuality. Although Riesman repeatedly claimed that he was not calling for a nostalgia-inspired return to "inner direction," his work was read as an attack on modern conformity and an endorsement of traditional American individualism. *The Lonely Crowd* became a best seller and one of the most popular social scientific texts of all time.[24] Riesman was hardly alone in his anxiety. The prominent Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger complained of a "crisis of American masculinity" and the "unmanning of American men": "For a long time," he argued, "[the American male] seemed utterly confident in his manhood . . . easy and definite in his sense of sexual identity," but by the 1950s there were "multiplying signs that something had gone badly wrong with his conception of himself." Schlesinger's concerns were not unlike those of *Fortune Magazine* editor William Whyte, whose best-selling book *The Organization Man* (1956) documented the apparent decline in America of the Protestant ethic of "hard-boiled . . . struggle against one's environment." According to Whyte, middle-class men had exchanged their individual will for a more traditionally feminine "social ethic" that affirmed "'belongingness' as the ultimate need of the individual." Whyte's critique of the "organization man" was consistent with the analysis of the sociologist C. Wright Mills, whose famous book *White Collar* (1951) was a blistering attack on middle-class men, describing them as "pitiful" while bemoaning their sheep-like docility: "He is pushed by forces beyond his control, pulled into movements he does not understand; he gets into situations in which his is the most helpless position. The white collar man is the hero as victim, the small creature who is acted upon but who does not act, who works along unnoticed in somebody's office or store, never talking loud, never talking back, never taking a stand."[25] (See Figure 1.)

Riesman, Schlesinger, Whyte, and Mills gave voice to what was in fact a wide and deeply felt cultural anxiety over a masculinity seemingly besieged at every turn. Television, film, religion, and literature all communicated a spirit of unease beneath the masculine swagger of "John Wayne's America." The extraordinary popularity of Marvel comics is a case in point. Comics featuring characters such as the Incredible Hulk and Spiderman (both first published in 1962) were enormously popular escapist fantasies of male empowerment that played off the contrast between a masculinity enfeebled by conformity and suburbia and a secret reserve of powerful masculine energy hidden within the male protagonist. As the historian Robert Genter has recently noted, the "half-man,

[23] Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority" (cit. n. 12), pp. 75, 74. On the 1950s preoccupation with the erosion of individual autonomy and the power of organizational structures see Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (cit. n. 12), p. 188; Gilbert, *Men in the Middle* (cit. n. 11); and Cohen-Cole, "Creative American" (cit. n. 11), p. 225.

[24] David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1950). Riesman's discomfort with popular appropriations of his work is discussed in Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, p. 48.

[25] Arthur Schlesinger, "The Crisis of American Masculinity," in *The Politics of Hope* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), pp. 237–246; William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956), pp. 6, 7; and C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Class* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1951), p. xii.

Figure 1. *American masculinity in decline. Illustration by Robert Osborn featured in J. Robert Moskin, "The American Male: Why Do Women Dominate Him?"* Look, *4 Feb. 1958. Reproduced with permission of Elliot Osborn.*

half-monster" figure of the Hulk "represents the repressed side of man that had vanished with the appearance of organization men." The male gender anxiety that fueled these comics was also evident in popular "hard-boiled" novels and the "film noir" genre of detective and gangster films. These novels and films typically centered on a rootless, solitary white male confronting a dark and corrupt urban landscape. They are bleak, dystopian narratives of alienation and despair where one's sense of morality, selfhood, and "inner direction" is under constant threat from racial others, femmes fatales, and the lure of the fast buck. Although the male protagonist is invariably a tough, hard-bitten character, much of the dramatic power stems from the sense of impending collapse that is one of the hallmarks of the genre. As Megan Abbott has noted, "these men repeatedly find themselves dissembling, fainting, unconscious, overpowered, and out of control while their ideals of masculinity continue to require of them self-discipline [and] toughness."[26]

The dystopian fantasies of film noir and comic books reflected concerns about the impact of postwar prosperity on American men, a theme that manifested itself in another of the era's signature discourses: male dieting. After years of Depression and war American men were said to be indulging in an orgy of consumption, dramatically expanding their waistlines in the process. Suburbanization and the demise of physical labor among middle-class men compounded the problem, prompting a wide range of experts and media commentators to label male obesity as a "major health problem."

[26] Garry Wills, *John Wayne's America: The Politics of Celebrity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 1; Robert Genter, "'With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility': Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 2007, *40*:953–978, on p. 964; and Megan Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (Gordonsville, Va.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 7.

Remarking on the context of the weight problem, the director of the Selective Service Administration noted in 1955 that "we are not inherently a nation of softies, but it's a harder fight for us . . . than for a lot of less-privileged people. . . . Autos, inner-spring mattresses, and regulated heating make it tough for us to stay fit. We've got to learn to stay vigorous and still enjoy luxury."[27] What made the issue of men's weight so worrisome was the apparent connection between prosperity, national character, and morality. Affluence seemed to be producing obesity and indolence and thus undermining America's ability to lead the free world. In 1960, a symposium in *U.S. News and World Report* noted the paradox underlying the American malaise: "Never before in history has a people enjoyed the mass prosperity now to be found in this country . . . [yet] never have there been such widespread signs of a deep uneasiness developing in the U.S., so much talk that something is happening to American morals."[28]

The Cold War invested academic and popular discussions and depictions of masculinity with an added sense of urgency and political significance. Confrontation with the Soviet Union was often framed in gendered terms, and many prominent American politicians and diplomats fretted over the capacity of a nation of flabby, weak-willed men to confront an allegedly rapacious Soviet hypermasculinity and its "unceasing pressure for penetration." In his State of the Union message in 1960, President Eisenhower cautioned that America's "material ease and comfort" was leading to "internal moral and spiritual softness" and compromising national security. The idea of America as a "soft" and increasingly feminized society was pervasive among the political leadership in both parties and exerted considerable influence on policy decisions ranging from government-sponsored programs of physical fitness to the deployment of American military advisors in Vietnam. As the historian K. A. Cuordileone has noted, the Cold War "put a new premium on hard masculine toughness and rendered anything less than that soft and feminine and, as such, a real or potential threat to the security of the nation."[29] This masculine imperative was especially pronounced in the political career of John F. Kennedy, who frequently mobilized gendered language and who derived much of his political success from the perception that he could somehow rekindle an enfeebled national masculinity. "We are, I am afraid, in danger of losing something solid at the core," Kennedy remarked in 1960. "We are losing the Pilgrim and pioneer spirit of initiative and independence—that old-fashioned Spartan devotion to 'duty, honor, and country.'"[30]

[27] Jesse Berrett, "Feeding the Organization Man: Diet and Masculinity in Postwar America," *Journal of Social History*, 1997, *30*:805–825, on p. 808.

[28] "What's Wrong/What's Right with Today's America," *U.S. News and World Report*, 22 Feb. 1960, pp. 60–79. Anxiety over what affluence was doing to America is discussed in Warren Susman, "Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 19–37.

[29] Frank Costigliola, "'Unceasing Pressure for Penetration': Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan's Formation of the Cold War," *Journal of American History*, 1997, *83*:1309–1336; Robert Griswold, "The 'Flabby American,' the Body, and the Cold War," in *A Shared Experience: Men, Women, and the History of Gender*, ed. Laura McCall and Donald Yacovone (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 321–348, on p. 329 (quoting Eisenhower); and K. A. Cuordileone, "'Politics in an Age of Anxiety': Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949–1960," *J. Amer. Hist.*, 2000, *87*:515–545, on p. 516. On the policy decisions prompted by concern about the increasing "softness" of American society see Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood* (cit. n. 11).

[30] Robert Dean, "Masculinity as Ideology: John F. Kennedy and the Domestic Politics of Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History*, 2000, *22*:29–62, on p. 29. Kennedy was also attentive to the security implications of male obesity, drawing a very clear connection between the state of male bodies and the strength of the national will. In 1961 he remarked that "there are an increasingly large number of young Americans who are neglecting their bodies, whose physical fitness is not what it should be, who are getting soft. Such softness . . . can help strip and

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It was in this context of Soviet menace and pervasive anxiety about the state of American masculinity that Milgram set out to investigate "obedience to authority." Although Milgram himself does not appear to have been conscious of the gender dynamics of the experiment, a masculine construction colored many aspects of the study and its subsequent interpretation. Indeed, Milgram's initial choice of social psychology as a scholarly vocation reflected a gendered discomfort that existed within the disciplinary culture of psychology toward the traditionally female world of the subjective interior. Since the turn of the century, those branches of psychology that were aligned with the natural sciences were perceived within the field as being "harder" and more "manly." Psychologists who trafficked in subjectivity and worked in branches of the discipline more closely aligned with the humanities often felt their masculinity compromised.[31]

Milgram did not explicitly address any feelings of masculine insecurity, but in an interview with one of his former students he recalled that he had gone into social psychology because it involved something other than the traditionally female world of the subjective interior: "There is something of a redeeming feature in becoming a social psychologist," he remarked, "because it doesn't make you into a somewhat sickly, Viennese analyst thinking about inner thoughts. When you stress the social it doesn't have to deal with personal problems . . . [and] you're not such a distorted, personal invalid."[32]

Milgram may have aspired to avoid subjectivity by choosing experimental social psychology, but as Jill Morawski and Robert Steele have argued, attempts to contain or bracket psychologists' selves have often served to obscure gender dynamics and power relations rather than to eliminate them from the investigation at hand: "Canonical psychological writing, although adopting a literary genre that attempts to erase authorial presence or agency, nevertheless contains traces of the author and the culture of power relations within which he or she writes." In Milgram's case, his conscious disavowal of the world of "inner thoughts" and subsequent embrace of "objectivity" led him to one of the dominant preoccupations of American men in the late 1950s, conformity—an issue that resonated strongly with his own experience as a man. In the 1950s, this seemingly neutral term had a distinctively gendered connotation. Barbara Ehrenreich has noted that it "became the code word for male discontent—the masculine equivalent of what Betty Friedan would soon describe as 'the problem without a name.'" As previously noted, Milgram's interest in the topic was inspired by the psychologist Solomon Asch, whose work on conformity was widely known and had been featured in *Scientific American*. Asch's study placed "young men" in a group and required each individual to identify which of a series of lines was the longest. Unbeknownst to each man, the other members of the group were confederates of the experimenter who had been instructed to give incorrect answers. The test was whether the subject would give the correct answer or "conform" to the group. Although it cleverly reflected the corporate culture that many men were having to adapt to in the 1950s, Milgram rejected Asch's approach as too cerebral

destroy the vitality of a nation. This is a national problem." Cited in Berrett, "Feeding the Organization Man" (cit. n. 27), p. 806.

[31] Laurel Furumoto, "Gender and the History of Psychology," in *The Gender and Psychology Reader*, ed. B. M. Clinchy and J. K. Norem (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 69–77; and Ian Nicholson, "'Giving up Maleness': Abraham Maslow, Masculinity, and the Boundaries of Psychology," *History of Psychology*, 2001, *4*:79–91.

[32] Maury Silver, "On Being a Social Psychologist: An Interview with Stanley Milgram," unpublished interview, Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 23, Folder 282.

and out of step with the Cold War emphasis on "action" and confrontation. Milgram wanted to show real American men submitting to other men or defiantly asserting their own masculine power in the face of irresponsible male authority. "I was dissatisfied that the test of conformity was judgments about lines," he remarked. "I wondered whether groups could pressure a person into performing an act whose human import was more readily apparent, perhaps behaving aggressively toward another person, say by administering increasingly severe shocks to him."[33]

Drawn to the ruggedly masculine themes of machinery, shock, and torment, Milgram brought his own particular gender preoccupations to the study. At 5'7", he was small, bookish, and nerdy—a visual inversion of the large and physically powerful brand of masculinity portrayed by John Wayne and admired by millions of American men. However, as a number of men's studies scholars have noted, masculinity is not unitary or homogenous. There are "multiple masculinities, some subordinate and some dominant, which are created by differences in ethnicity, race, class, sexual orientation, age and occupation." The academic environment that Milgram operated in produced its own masculinity, and in this context he was every bit Wayne's equal: single-minded, domineering, ambitious, and thoroughly self-absorbed. Displays of academic respect were important to him, and he insisted on being addressed as "Dr. Milgram" by his graduate students, even after they had finished their Ph.D.'s. Milgram's colleagues and former students noted that, ever conscious of authority, he was "routinely cruel to graduate students," with a "razor tongue" that "cut to the quick . . . with a caustic, even devastating surgical precision."[34] As one of his former students noted, "where he hurts, no grass grows." Always dominant in the classroom, he struck terror in the hearts of his students, challenging them by name "while openly deriding shallow comments."[35]

Known as an "equal opportunity insulter," Milgram brought an equally combative, hierarchical attitude to his relationships with colleagues. A student recalled that Milgram was "egalitarian in his dislikes. He'll be as rude to other faculty and administrators as to students." In an otherwise sympathetic account, his biographer Thomas Blass noted that there was a "wide consensus" among Milgram's colleagues concerning his "off-putting, domineering, and prima donna–ish ways." Many of these qualities carried over to his personal life, and while Milgram was devoted to his family he was ever conscious of competition and power. His daughter Michele recalled that it was difficult to play the board game Monopoly with her father because he would frequently "accuse someone of

[33] Jill Morawski and Robert Steele, "The One or the Other? Textual Analysis of Masculine Power and Feminist Empowerment," *Theory and Psychology*, 1991, *1*:107–131, on p. 128 (see also Morawski, "Just One More 'Other' in Psychology?" *ibid.*, 2000, *10*:63–70); Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1983), p. 30; Solomon Asch, "Opinions and Social Pressure," *Scientific American*, Nov. 1955, pp. 31–35; and Carol Tavris, "The Frozen World of the Familiar Stranger: An Interview with Stanley Milgram," *Psychol. Today*, 1974, *8*:71–73, 76–78, 80 (quotation).

[34] Marianne Cooper, "Being the 'Go-to-Guy': Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the Organization of Work in Silicon Valley," *Qualitative Sociology*, 2000, *23*:379–405, on p. 381 ("multiple masculinities"); Judith Waters, "Professor Stanley Milgram—Supervisor, Mentor, Friend," in *Obedience to Authority*, ed. Blass (cit. n. 21), pp. 25–34 ("Dr. Milgram"); Thomas Pettigrew, rev. of Thomas Blass, *The Man Who Shocked the World*, *Social Forces*, 2005, *83*:1778–1779, on p. 1778 ("routinely cruel"); and Harold Takooshian, "How Stanley Milgram Taught about Obedience and Social Influence," in *Obedience to Authority*, ed. Blass, pp. 9–24, on p. 13 ("razor tongue").

[35] Carol Tavris, "A Sketch of Stanley Milgram: A Man of a Thousand Ideas," *Psychol. Today*, 1974, *8*:74–75, on p. 75 ("no grass grows"); and Takooshian, "How Stanley Milgram Taught about Obedience and Social Influence," p. 13 ("openly deriding shallow comments"). See also Pettigrew, rev. of Blass, *Man Who Shocked the World*.

cheating . . . [and] get very upset, especially if he was losing." Milgram's wife Sasha, though generally supportive of her husband, recalled that he "insisted on my being by his side while he was watching TV."[36] (See Figure 2.)

Intellectually brilliant, but often psychologically unreflective, Milgram could not see, or at least would not acknowledge, the extent to which his own masculine preoccupations and insecurities informed his obedience research. He insisted to graduate students that "I didn't study obedience because I'm an authoritarian person"; however, the very force of his denials spoke to the degree to which the era's masculine insecurities informed much of his approach. In addition to the choice of topic, gendered Cold War assumptions also influenced how Milgram and his associates interacted with the experiments. When discussing the experiments, Milgram invoked the language of objective science to portray himself as a detached and disinterested observer who was recording the "data" as systematically as possible. "I am an experimental social psychologist," he explained. "We study behavior and we want to study it in as simple a form as possible, relatively unfettered by preconceived notions."[37] True to his word, Milgram was a careful experimenter, but the experimental situation was saturated with gendered meanings and Cold War significance: a man was using technology to do violence to another man at the behest of a "scientific" male authority. Ever attentive to theatrical detail, Milgram paid particular attention to the masculine cues in the experiment without ever explicitly acknowledging the gendered meaning of what he was doing. The "shock generator" was especially important in this respect. The machine was one of the central characters in the drama, and in a technologically charged Cold War context in which "ordinary" men would be called upon to "use" a scientific instrument it was vital that the shock generator look the part and evoke an appropriate sense of authenticity and manly respect. Milgram lavished considerable attention on the machine, which was professionally engraved and included a fake manufacturer's label.[38]

Confident that the shock machine could satisfy the most discerning masculine gaze, Milgram shifted his attention to the other male parts in the performance. In the early trials during the pilot phase of the research, Milgram cast himself in the role of "learner" and his research assistant Alan Elms in the role of "experimenter." However, Milgram's keen sense of theater quickly detected that something wasn't quite right, so the experimental performance was recast. Elms recalled that "I looked too young, and Milgram was temperamentally unsuited to being a victim, so he hired people who better fit their roles." Replacing the fresh-faced Elms as "experimenter" was John Williams, who was chosen on the basis of his ability to convey manly authority. He was a thirty-one-year-old high school biology teacher whom Milgram described as having an "impassive" manner and a

[36] Blass, *Man Who Shocked the World*, p. 182 (quoting John Sabini on the "equal opportunity insulter"); Tavris, "Sketch of Stanley Milgram," p. 75 ("egalitarian in his dislikes"); Blass, *Man Who Shocked the World*, pp. 185 (colleagues' views), 189 (quoting Michele's remarks); and Alexandra Milgram, "My Personal View of Stanley Milgram," in *Obedience to Authority*, ed. Blass (cit. n. 21), pp. 1–7, on p. 4.

[37] Blass, *Man Who Shocked the World*, p. 184; and Stanley Milgram, "Large Staff Conference, Psychiatric Service Beth Israel Hospital: Experimental Studies of Obedience to Authority," unpublished presentation, Milgram Papers, Series III, Box 71, Folder 305.

[38] Milgram scoured electronics shops in New York for parts, and he drilled the holes for the switches himself in a Yale machine shop. He later told a reporter of his delight when his machine fooled a man from the Lehigh Valley Electronics Company who had stopped to inspect it. "'This is a very fine shock generator,' he said. 'But who is the Dyson Instrument Company?' Milgram felt proud at that, since the Dyson Instrument Company existed only in the recesses of his imagination." See Philip Meyer, "If Hitler Asked You to Electrocute a Stranger, Would You?—Probably," *Esquire*, Feb. 1970, pp. 73–132, on p. 130.

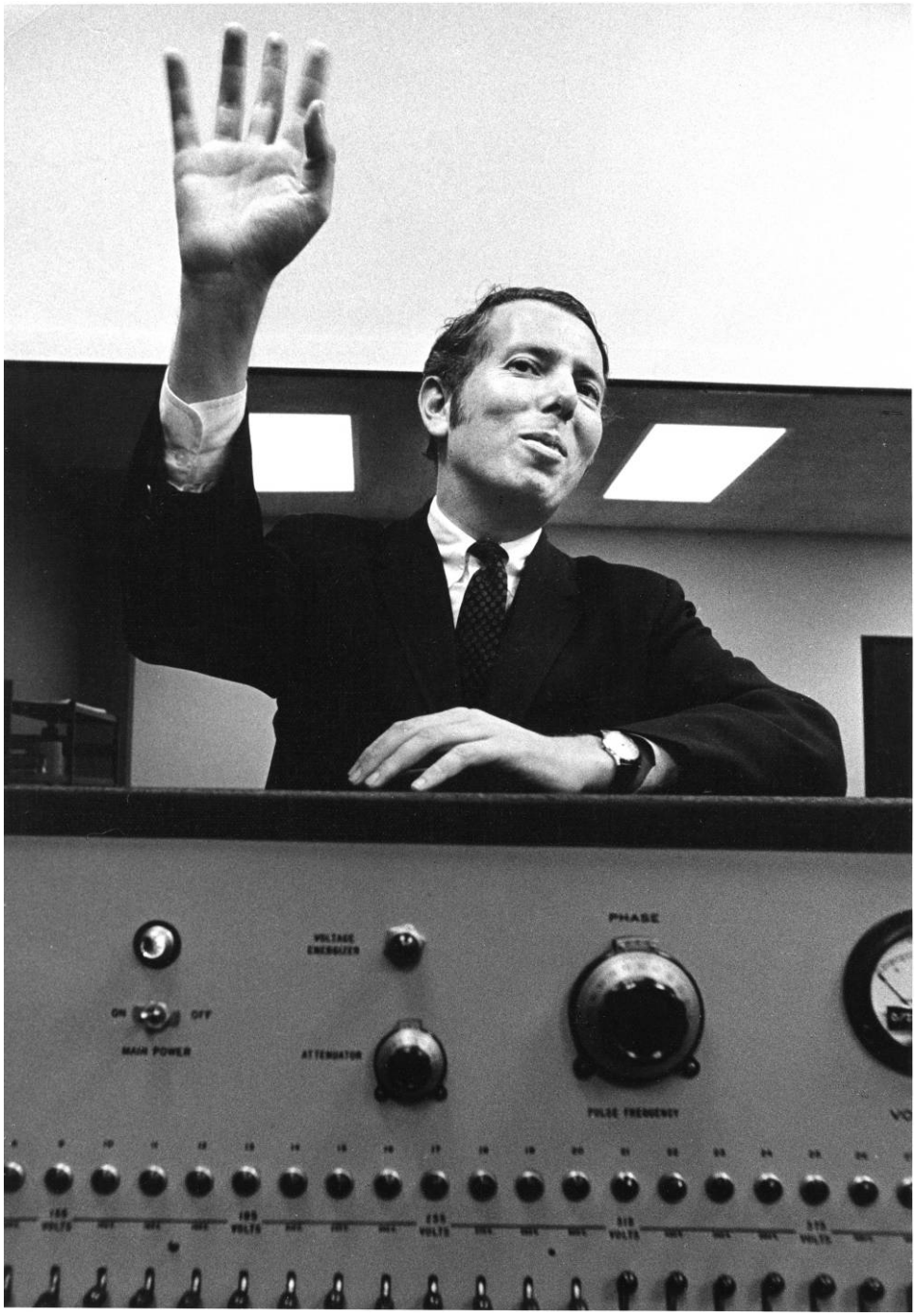

Figure 2. *Shocking Cold War masculinity: Stanley Milgram in Linsly-Chittenden Hall, Yale University, circa 1962. Yale University Archives, Digital Images Database, mssa.ms.1406. Reproduced with permission of Joel Elkins.*

Figure 3. *Emasculating the victim: James McDonough is strapped into the "electric chair" by John Williams (right). Still from the film* Obedience. *Reproduced with permission of Alexandra Milgram.*

"somewhat stern" appearance. Replacing the status-conscious Milgram as the "learner" was James McDonough, the head payroll auditor of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad, who was selected precisely because he lacked masculinity. In *Obedience to Authority* Milgram described him as "mild-mannered and likeable," a description elaborated more forcefully in his private notes: "This man would be perfect as a victim," he gushed. "He is so mild mannered and submissive; not at all academic. . . . Easy to get along with." Adding to an already impressive list of "unmanly" characteristics, McDonough also had a flair for communicating his submissiveness. Elms recalled that "Milgram auditioned and rehearsed a victim whose cries of agony were truly piercing." Lest there be any doubt as to the learner's status as an "inferior" man, Milgram visibly emasculated McDonough in front of the naive subjects. Participants watched the experimenter physically strap the "learner" to an "electric chair" and then apply "electrode paste" to his body.[39] A man whose masculinity was already suspect was thereby transformed into a feminine object of submission and an inviting target of masculine punishment. (See Figure 3.)

[39] Alan Elms, *Social Psychology and Social Relevance* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), p. 120; Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (cit. n. 12), p. 16 (describing Williams); Blass, *Man Who Shocked the World*, p. 77 (citing Milgram's description of McDonough in his private notes); Elms, "Obedience in Retrospect," *J. Soc. Issues*, 1995, *51*:21–31, on p. 24 ("truly piercing"); and Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, p. 19.

With the cast in place, Milgram drilled his performers relentlessly. The experiments "took a tremendous amount of rehearsal," he later recalled. "Two full weeks with constant screaming on my part, constant." What was on display in this polished, gender-enhanced context was not simply "obedience" but masculinity itself. As the sociologist Michael Kimmel has noted, masculinity is a "homosocial enactment." It is a performance put on largely for the benefit and approval of other men. Competition is its signature feature, as men continually struggle to outdo each other—from the size of their televisions to the number of their sexual conquests. "We test ourselves," Kimmel argues, "perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood."[40] The obedience experiment was a spectacle of masculine competition par excellence. Men were called upon to perform their masculinity by exercising their will, their facility with machinery, and the culturally sanctioned masculine task of disciplinarian—all under the gaze of a male authority.

The politicized, masculine context of the experiment is apparent in the remarks of several of Milgram's participants after the experiment was completed. Many subjects drew on gendered Cold War categories and, especially, the politically loaded hard/soft dichotomy to make sense of their experience. For some, resisting authority was an indication of their "hardness." "As a result of my participation in the experiment, I have proven myself, unable to be completely mastered."[41] Echoing this masculine discourse, another participant saw his defiance as an affirmation of his manhood: "I was glad to find that I had the 'guts' to refuse to continue despite assurances that all was well." One subject went so far as to say that he had wanted to be the learner in order to prove his manhood: "during and after the experiment I would have liked to have been the learner: a) to see whether I could do a better job in the memory association b) to have completed the experiment because I was quite sure I could 'take it.'" Although several participants saw the experiment in explicitly gendered terms, the correct—that is, "tough"—response was not always clear. Several participants noted that a very real problem for the United States in its struggle with its Soviet adversary was not that there was too much obedience but that there was too little. "My old master sergeant in basic training was right," one participant noted emphatically. "We were not tough enough then (1947) and have a long way to go, if we are to survive as a nation."

For many subjects, the design of the experiment resonated powerfully with broader cultural concerns about American vulnerability in a context of weakened male psyches. Several men drew on their own experience as soldiers in World War II and framed the study as a test to identify tough guys who could get the job done against a determined Communist foe. "One of the great difficulties in warfare is that only a few men are able to pull the trigger to kill someone. Studies like this may be able to show how many are what the Air Force calls 'tigers.'" Some participants who broke off the experiment felt badly about the decision and thought that it did not reflect well on the tough masculinity

[40] Tavris, "Frozen World of the Familiar Stranger" (cit. n. 33), p. 75; and Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," in *Toward a New Psychology of Gender: A Reader*, ed. Mary M. Gergen and Sara N. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 223–242, on pp. 231, 232.

[41] All of the subject reactions quoted in this essay may be found on a series of index cards entitled "Reaction of Subjects," Milgram Papers, Series II, Box 44. These reactions were drawn from a questionnaire Milgram sent to the 856 subjects who participated in the main series of the obedience experiments six weeks after the completion of the study. According to Blass, 92 percent of the subjects returned questionnaires: Blass, *Man Who Shocked the World*, p. 125.

that had been honed through their military experience. "My 38 months of active duty and 17 of them overseas have stood me in good stead . . . while in the service I was affected by seeing men killed and wounded and it made me somewhat 'hard.' However, after the experiment when I found I could not or would not continue it made me realize I have softened." A similar sentiment was expressed by a man whose principal regret was not his willingness to inflict pain but his unmanly reticence about getting the job done: "although I may have acted a bit squeamish or hesitant to 'deal severe pain' to the subject I am sure that if and where steadfast decisions must be made and adhered to I would have acted differently." For these men, the experiment was not a test of an abstract inner morality but a measure of their warrior masculinity. "In my opinion," one subject remarked, "it definitely shows how much one human can stand to see another human suffer. . . . Is this a separation of the 'men from the boys'?"

Milgram was not inclined to use such glib, gender-specific terminology, but he viewed the experiment as an exercise in sorting out the morally strong. The men who came through his laboratory in a steady parade were watched and assessed through a filter of Cold War–era gender assumptions and Riesman-inspired nostalgia for strong, inner-directed men. The format made for gripping theater, and Milgram was keen to share the spectacle with others. In his private journal, he noted that he would periodically invite young (and, given the time period, one assumes predominantly male) faculty to join him behind the two-way mirror to observe the confrontation between the unsuspecting research participant and his confederate tormentor. What they observed, as one visitor to Milgram's lab noted, was a truly extraordinary and strangely compelling spectacle of anguish as man after man was severely tested and in many cases slowly crushed by the unrelenting pressure of the experiment (See Figure 4 and cover):

> 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 an 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.[42]

The anguish, pain, and stress of the subjects did not seem to unnerve "the guys." Milgram reported that, like fans at a particularly brutal extreme fighting contest, the young male faculty "left the laboratory in a state of exhilaration," having declared the experience to be a "brilliant revelation of human nature."[43] "Exhilaration" in the face of such unrelenting brutality seems highly unethical, but in a cultural landscape haunted by dystopian visions of imminent nuclear Armageddon, collapsing male psyches, and "flabby" male bodies the reaction is unsurprising. The experimental results were completely consistent with the pervasive narrative of masculine decline, and, if anything, they appeared to show that the devolution of American men had actually gone well beyond the familiar trope of compliant drones in gray flannel suits. American males were in fact much worse than "organization men": they were authoritarian "hollow men"—incipient Nazis, nascent Communists, pliable almost beyond recognition.

[42] The unnamed observer is quoted in Milgram, "Behavioral Study of Obedience" (cit. n. 1), p. 377.

[43] Stanley Milgram, "Evaluation of Obedience Research: Science or Art?" unpublished manuscript, July 1962, Milgram Papers, Series II, Box 46, Folder 173.

Figure 4. *The decline of the American man: "inner-directed" masculinity breaks down during the obedience experiments. Still from the film* Obedience. *Reproduced with permission of Alexandra Milgram.*

WONDER SHOWS, AMERICAN NAZIS, AND THE INVASION OF THE "OTHER DIRECTED"

As a "spectacle of masculinity," the obedience experiments have an undeniable power, yet—as with so many spectacles—much of their forcefulness was based on masquerade: a school teacher "dressed up" as a symbol of scientific power and authority; a railway company bean counter in a kind of sadomasochistic drag, strapped in a chair, parts of his body lathered in lubricating jelly. It was all a show, but as the film theorist Chris Holmlund has argued, spectators often see this kind of theatricality as "reinforcing hegemonic power relations precisely because masquerade suggests that there may be something underneath which is 'real,' and/or 'normal.'" The masquerade points to something lacking that is perceived as fundamental and essential. As Holmlund notes, masquerade is in this respect "inherently nostalgic": an appearance that evokes a longing for an idealized past.[44]

With their heavy reliance on masquerade, it is thus hardly surprising that what stands out in the obedience experiments is not a spirit of freshness but a strong sense of nostalgia. Like many of his contemporaries, Milgram was steeped in the Cold War culture of masculine virility, and he was enamored of the idea of strong, "inner-directed" men who could "step up" as men—stand up for their convictions and do so with powerful masculine flair. Echoing the era's sense of masculinity in crisis, Milgram lamented the "numbing

[44] Chris Holmlund, "Masculinity as Multiple Masquerade," in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 213–229, on p. 224.

regularity" with which men were shown to "knuckle under" to the demands of authority. For Milgram, the danger to the United States was obvious: invoking a Riesman-style idiom of "American character," he argued that his results "raise the possibility that human nature, or—more specifically—the kind of character produced in American democratic society, cannot be counted on to insulate its citizens from brutality and inhumane treatment at the direction of a malevolent authority."[45]

Convinced that masculinity (a.k.a. "American character") was imperiled and determined to highlight the danger, Milgram did not allow the subjectivity of his participants to undercut his message. Instead of presenting the subjects as a set of historical actors whose actions are readily explainable by the cultural context, Milgram incorporated participants into the masquerade. They were shorn of their cultural identities and "dressed up" in the costume of experimental subjects—a procedural cloak that rendered their particularity invisible. With their subjectivity and cultural specificity shielded behind a wall of induced anonymity, Milgram's participants seemed to possess both a curious familiarity and a mysterious, beguiling horror. They were both everyday Joes from Main Street America and incomprehensible monsters. Here again, Milgram unwittingly mirrored a familiar Cold War political and cultural motif: the enemy within. In the postwar period, fears of Communist infiltration were given credence by a series of high-profile espionage trials in the United States and Britain. The sensational trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953 was especially significant in this respect, raising fears about Communist infiltration and convincing many Americans that "ordinary" citizens were often not what they seemed. The Rosenbergs projected an unremarkable image of American middle-class respectability, but their trial revealed them to be Soviet agents who had passed on atomic secrets. For many observers, what made the Rosenbergs so unsettling was their extreme "other direction": they seemed to lack any moral compass or individual identity outside the role of committed Communist. In a 1953 essay, the literary critic Leslie Fiedler observed that the "tragedy" of the Rosenbergs was their incapacity "to think of themselves as real people."[46]

Cold War science fiction further popularized the idea of a malevolent, conformist presence beneath the placid, benign exterior of middle America. In these films and shows, fundamental American values and beliefs are torn away—but not by outside forces or aliens. The real threat is from those close to you—ordinary Americans who willingly give up their individuality. This "enemy within" theme is clearly evident in two of the best-known works of science fiction from the era: the iconic film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and the television series *Twilight Zone* (1959–1964).[47] In *Body Snatchers*, the horror comes from the very normalcy of the town and its people. Everything seems to be as it should be, and yet something is wrong. Slowly, the menace is revealed; but, surprisingly, the real threat is not the aliens, who never actually appear on screen. The danger comes from "ordinary" Americans who complacently surrender their individuality and give themselves up to "other direction." (See Figure 5.)

Milgram's "scientific" indictment of American complacency in the face of expansive "other direction" proved to be every bit as engaging as its political, cinematic, and television counterparts. In the Yale laboratory, Americans could literally see inner-directed masculinity

[45] Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority" (cit. n. 12), p. 75.

[46] Leslie Fiedler, cited in Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (cit. n. 11), p. 113.

[47] Katrina Mann, "'You're Next!' Postwar Hegemony Besieged in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*," *Cinema Journal*, 2004, *44*:49–68. See also Rick Worland, "Sign-Posts Up Ahead: *The Twilight Zone*, *The Outer Limits*, and TV Political Fantasy, 1959–1965," *Science Fiction Studies*, 1996, *23*:103–122.

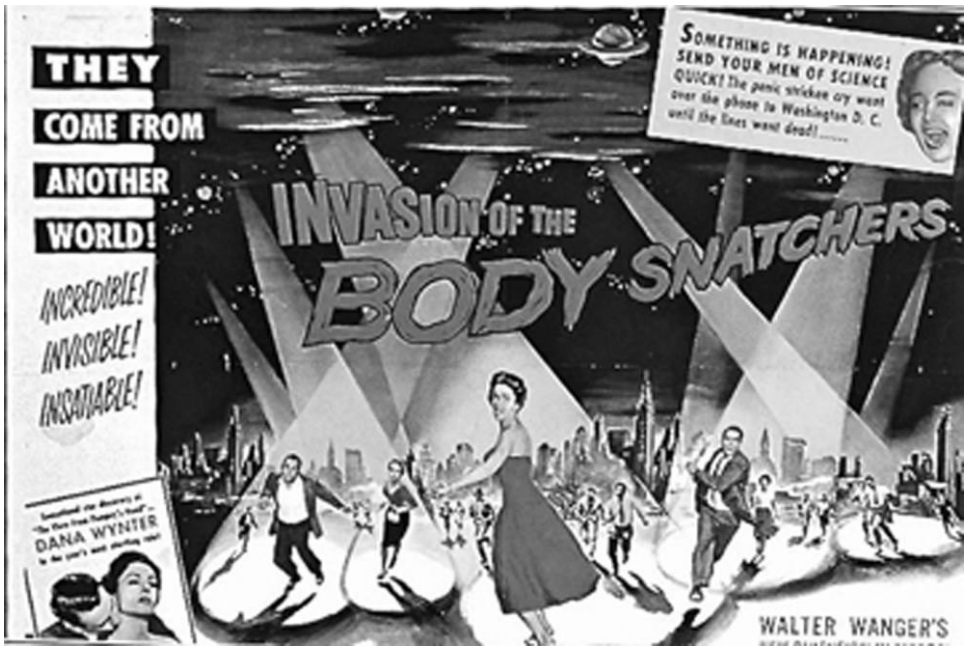

Figure 5. *Invasion of the "other directed": "ordinary" Americans surrender their individuality to a malevolent authority. Source: http://screencrave.com/2008-11-07/movies-6-12/.*

being squeezed out of seemingly powerful men; the worst nightmares of Cold War science fiction were being realized. Within psychology, interest and excitement was considerable, and Milgram was inundated with reprint requests. Library copies of the issue of the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* featuring "Behavioral Study of Obedience" were in such demand that the article sometimes physically disintegrated. As a student in 1966, after hearing of Milgram's work, "I went to the library," the psychologist Don Mixon recalled, "opened Volume 67 of the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, and saw something I had never before and never since encountered. The article in question, called 'Behavioral Study of Obedience,' had been handled so often that, quite literally, it was in tatters."[48]

Many psychologists wrote to Milgram to congratulate him and share their enthusiasm and support for his work. The language in a number of these letters is remarkably effusive, speaking not simply of polite academic interest but of a sense of "wonder" tinged with horror. The psychologist Jerome Bruner told Milgram that he was "enormously impressed" by the experiments, adding that they "point to a strikingly important phenomenon in human social behavior that we are all too apt to overlook."[49]

The psychologist Elliot Aronson was equally enthralled and horrified: "My students were very excited by your experiment and came up with tons of suggestions for next steps that one

[48] Blass, *Man Who Shocked the World*, p. 123 (reprint requests); and Mixon, *Obedience and Civilization* (cit. n. 22), p. ix.

[49] Jerome Bruner to Milgram, 12 Feb. 1962, Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 1a, Folder 3. Shortly after the publication of "Behavioral Study of Obedience," Milgram commented on the positive professional reaction to Claude Buxton, chair of the Department of Psychology at Yale: "About sixty letters arrived in response to my JASP article; fifty-nine of them were strongly complimentary." Milgram to Claude Buxton, 14 Nov. 1963, Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 1a, Folder 9.

might take from your original design. . . . We are terribly intrigued with the question 'what the hell is going on in people's minds when they are performing such behaviorisms [*sic*]'? Do they really think that they are doing the right thing?" Milton Erickson, editor of the *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis*, was somewhat more restrained in his praise but no less impressed: "I believe this is a very important contribution, with rather far reaching implications." The Harvard personality psychologist Gordon Allport, a psychologist renowned for his moderation and restraint, happily joined in the chorus of praise: "I've never known 'shock' or its threat to be used in so clear and clever a social context. Even the pilot results are fascinating. One is tempted to all sorts of reckless extrapolations."[50] David Rosenhan, a research psychologist with the Educational Testing Service, was so inspired that he wrote to Milgram pledging himself to the cause of further obedience-type studies: "A number of us here are interested in extending your work and would like to establish further communication with you after we have read the work thoroughly. Needless to say, we feel you've discovered a remarkable phenomenon."[51]

The careful casting, skillful acting, and high production values that had gone into the making of the obedience experiments had clearly paid off. Milgram had created not simply a scientific study but a kind of dystopian, Cold War "wonder show" that evoked awe while transforming otherwise sober academics into an exuberant audience. The history of American "wonder shows" can be traced to the 1830s, and Milgram's work can be profitably viewed in this context. During this period, mesmerists, electric healers, and magicians produced highly successful shows that combined theatricality, popular science, and seemingly mysterious hidden forces or energies. These shows established a flourishing marketplace for "artful deceptions"—spectacles and performances that appeared to defy everyday understanding while challenging audiences somehow to account for what they had seen. For much of the nineteenth century, P. T. Barnum was the undisputed maestro of this form of playful fraud; but as James Cook has astutely noted, Barnum would often build skepticism into the show and thereby cultivate interest by inviting the public to gauge a given spectacle's "wondrous" authenticity for themselves. Thus Barnum and other tricksters across the ages have thrived not by merely fooling the unsuspecting, but by trafficking in the "indeterminate object, the uncertain image, the morally suspect act—an engaging assortment of cultural deceits with which an eager public gauges its moral and aesthetic thresholds."[52]

As a social psychologist at one of America's premier research universities, Milgram would appear to be far removed from the self-conscious hucksterism of Barnum. Yet Milgram was, by his own admission, a very theatrically minded person who enjoyed writing fiction and plays in his spare time. A devotee of the hugely popular TV show

[50] Elliot Aronson to Milgram, 4 Feb. 1964, Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 13, Folder 188; Milton Erickson to Milgram, 4 Nov. 1963, Milgram Papers, Series III, Box 55, Folder 12; and Gordon Allport to Milgram, 28 Jan. 1962, Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 13, Folder 183. Intriguingly, Allport had himself used electric shock in work for his 1922 Harvard Ph.D. dissertation. For a discussion of Allport's career in psychology see Ian Nicholson, *Inventing Personality: Gordon Allport and the Science of Selfhood* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association Press, 2003).

[51] David Rosenhan to Milgram, 9 July 1963, Milgram Papers, Series III, Box 55, Folder 12. Rosenhan would later achieve fame for his article "On Being Sane in Insane Places," *Science*, 1973, *179*:250–258.

[52] James Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), p. 259. For a discussion of "wonder" in science see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone, 1998). The history of "wonder" in America is discussed in Fred Nadis, *Wonder Shows: Performing Science, Magic, and Religion in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2005).

Candid Camera, he was fascinated with the idea of inserting unsuspecting people into dramatic scenarios in order to find out what they were "really" like. For example, in 1960 he joined a group of friends to enact improvised psychological experiments—what Milgram referred to as "street-theater scenes"—on the Massachusetts Turnpike. These psychological performances involved "common human situations" such as a man shaking and slapping his wife. Milgram sensed that there was scientific potential in these kinds of theatrical events, and in his private notes he indicated that he was well aware of the way the obedience study worked as a performance. The challenge for Milgram came in translating theatrical appeal into unambiguous scientific language. Good drama seemed to be a promising basis for good human science, but for all the success of the obedience experiments Milgram still had his doubts. In July 1962, shortly after the study was completed, he privately dismissed the growing fascination with his work as "ballyhoo" and questioned the basis of this interest. Was all the attention an indication of "*significant science*," he mused, "or merely *effective theater*"? Milgram professed some uncertainty in the matter but eventually concluded that "I am inclined to accept the latter interpretation." "The drawing power of the experiments stems in part from their artistic, non-scientific component. This makes them more interesting; it does not necessarily make them more valuable for a developing science of man."[53]

What Milgram did not add, but what would soon become apparent, was the way in which "wonder" and the indeterminacy of his scientific/theatrical spectacle helped propel academic and public interest in the obedience study. Popular interest in the experiments developed extraordinarily quickly, and the study was picked up by newspapers across the United States. Milgram's first article on the experiments—"Behavioral Study of Obedience"—was published in October 1963, and on 26 October a detailed and largely factual account of the study appeared in the *New York Times*. Entitled "Blind Obedience Is High in Tests," the article faithfully reproduced the Holocaust narrative that Milgram himself had proposed: "What sort of people, slavishly doing what they are told, would send millions of fellow humans into gas chambers or commit other such atrocities?" The *Times* story established the Holocaust narrative for other popular publications, although some also mapped the study onto Cold War and colonial conflicts. In the *Los Angeles Times* account of the study, entitled "Experiment Found Plenty of Sadists," the experiment was linked to Nazi Germany, "Mao's China," and the "torturing of Algerians by French military authorities."[54]

The study's perspective on the Holocaust clearly appealed to reporters, but what made the experiment so newsworthy was its potential generalizability to an American audience. Reporters read Milgram as saying that the "sadists" were not just in Nazi Germany but

[53] Milgram, "Evaluation of Obedience Research" (cit. n. 43). Milgram's fascination with *Candid Camera* is discussed in Anna McCarthy, "'Stanley Milgram, Allen Funt, and Me': Postwar Social Science and the 'First Wave' of Reality TV," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 19–39. Regarding the "street-theater scenes" see Tavris, "Frozen World of the Familiar Stranger" (cit. n. 33), p. 78.

[54] Walter Sullivan, "Blind Obedience Is High in Tests," *New York Times*, 26 Oct. 1963; and "Experiment Found Plenty of Sadists," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 Nov. 1963: Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 21, Folder 335. Milgram actively encouraged these connections, and when interviewed by reporters he made a point of emphasizing both the study's value for understanding the Holocaust and its generalizability to Cold War concerns. For example, in the *Yale Daily News* Milgram noted the psychological similarities between the obedience experiments and nuclear war: "it was like being told to drop a bomb or push a button launching an atomic missile." See John Garabedian, "Experiments Warn of Blind Obedience," *Yale Daily News*, 31 Oct. 1963, Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 21, Folder 335.

right here in America, regular guys one and all. Many reporters attempted to enhance the dramatic character and American context of the story by casting the reader as a potential Nazi. In the title of its article on the study, *Esquire* asked its readers "If Hitler Asked You to Electrocute a Stranger, Would You?—Probably." In 1964 *Science Digest* used a similar framework in a piece entitled "Could We Be Nazi Followers?" and in 1966 *Pageant Magazine* reported on Milgram's work, informing its readers that "you might do Eichmann's job." Some accounts were more subdued, but in an American Cold War context dominated by narratives of "other direction" and the eradication of the "pioneer spirit," most editors and reporters eagerly accepted the study's generalizability at face value. For example, in a letter to Milgram, Alice Hilton, editor of World Publishing Company, spoke of her anxious interest in the study, embedding her concerns in a Riesman- and Mills-inspired discourse of a nation beset by flaccid organization men:

> I must say that if one can draw some broad generalizations and valid conclusions from the experiment, as it is reported in the [New York] Times, the future for this country and for the world looks very bleak indeed. Whatever happened to the heirs of Jefferson and the American Dream? Where is the nation of free-standing individuals and what hope is there in an age where machine-produced abundance and unlimited leisure to fulfill human tasks is technically possible?[55]

Hilton's dystopian reading of the experiments was echoed by many reporters who, in matter-of-fact style, equated Americans' capacity for cruelty with that of citizens of Fascist and Communist regimes.[56] The *New Haven Register* began its account of the experiments by linking and implicitly equating the Holocaust with the American use of atomic weapons during World War II. "Why did Germans put to death millions of Jews in the concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald? Why did two American pilots drop deadly A-bombs that virtually destroyed two industrial Japanese cities? 'Obedience to Authority' claims Stanley Milgram." Using Milgram's experiments to cast Americans as incipient Nazis was an attention-grabbing device made all the more effective by its extraordinary political flexibility. The American Nazi theme could be used to buttress nostalgic, Cold War narratives of a lost "Jeffersonian age" of "free-standing individuals," but it could just as easily be adapted to more recent struggles. In one of the most provocative appropriations of Milgram's work, Ossie Sykes, writing in the widely distributed African-American newspaper *Muhammad Speaks*, used the obedience experiments and Milgram's Holocaust framing to support his contention that white Americans in the 1960s were "acting just like the Germans when the killing of Jews started there." Milgram's work was cited as evidence of how "sick and sadistic many [white] Americans have become" and of how skeptical African Americans should be toward seemingly well-meaning whites.[57] The article claimed that the obedience experiments demonstrated

[55] Meyer, "If Hitler Asked You to Electrocute a Stranger, Would You?—Probably" (cit. n. 38); Blass, *Man Who Shocked the World*, p. 159 (citing *Science Digest* and *Pageant Magazine*); and Alice Mary Hilton to Milgram, 10 Nov. 1963, Milgram Papers, Series III, Box 55, Folder 12.

[56] For example, the *Los Angeles Times* saw the obedience experiments as confirmation of the moral darkness that had descended on America and the world in the twentieth century: "The 20th century is the century which has restored torture and made it nearly 100 percent efficacious. . . . How many of us would refuse to spy on our next trip abroad if politely asked to do so? . . . How many of us would go to bullfights or attend executions if they were held in public?" "Experiment Found Plenty of Sadists" (cit. n. 54).

[57] "Obedience to Authority Is a Habit, Yale Psychological Testing Reveals," *New Haven Register*, Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 21, Folder 335; and Ossie Sykes, "Could Nazi-Germ in U.S. Whites Bring about Gas Chamber 'Solution'?" *Muhammad Speaks*, 9 Sept. 1965, Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 21, Folder 336.

SEPTEMBER 9, 1965 MUHAMMAD SPEAKS

Could Nazi-Germ in U.S. Whites Bring About Gas Chamber 'Solution?'

By Ossie Sykes

When the hunt was on in Mississippi for the three missing civil rights workers, they were finding bodies all over the place, including those found in the river cut in half. Was there a national outcry of outrage at these hideous crimes? NO! The thing that was important to most whites is that two white boys were now involved.

The important thing to remember is that in this respect the Americans, in effect, are acting just like the Germans when the killing of Jews started there. They are letting it happen without making any effective moves to stop it for good.

THIS FORM OF RACISM is prevalent in the American consciousness. T. W. Adorno (and others) in the "Authoritarian Personality" (Studies in Prejudice Series) have written an extensive volume on social discrimination. "The central theme of this work is a relatively new concept — the rise of an anthropological species we call the AUTHORITARIAN TYPE OF MAN.

"In contrast to the bigot of the older style, he seems to

pendence and inclined to submit blindly to power and authority.

"THE CHARACTER structure which comprises these conflicting trends has already attracted the attention of modern philosophers and political thinkers." For the black man, this means that white citizens—while being capable of achieving technological wonders — are also capable of primitive destructive acts such as those perpetrated against black people for decades.

CONSCIENCE HAS VERY little to do with the problem; political, social and economic convictions (premises) of individuals in white society do have everything to do with the problem. As indicated by public opinion polls, the American, by and large, is convinced that he is superior to black people to the point that most whites cannot understand why anybody bothers to contest the idea.

For them it is an accepted fact. This feeling of racial superiority is exactly like that of the Germans. T. W. Adorno brings the point home: "The major concern (in the study of

Figure 6. *American Nazis: obedience experiments "prove" the sadistic character of American whites. This illustration accompanied an article by Ossie Sykes, "Could Nazi-Germ in U.S. Whites Bring about Gas Chamber 'Solution'?"* Muhammad Speaks, *9 Sept. 1965, Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 21, Folder 336.*

that American whites will behave in a sadistic fashion even though such actions went against their professed values. In light of Milgram's results and the American history of racial oppression, Sykes concluded that American whites were quite capable of undertaking a genocidal war against blacks. (See Figure 6.)

Athough most "ordinary" white Americans did not see Milgram's work in the context of domestic race relations, many readily concurred with the dystopian message of the obedience experiments, and the study became fodder for public discussion. Milgram received many letters from the public expressing support and commenting on the study's meaning and how it could be applied to contemporary issues. These letters underscore the experiments' cultural resonance, but they also further illustrate how the study's generalizability and theoretical uncertainty powered much of its appeal. University student Ellen Jaffe found that the study spoke to her interest in civil rights and concerns about the fraudulent nature of American democracy. She sent Milgram a newspaper clipping showing police detaining a civil rights demonstrator, explaining that the photograph

Muhammad Speaks was published by the Nation of Islam, and in 1965 it was the largest circulating black newspaper in the United States.

showed "why it was possible to obtain your results in 'democratic' America." Elementary school librarian Holly Ruff saw the study through the dystopian framework of American moral decay, noting that the experiments had "enormous significance for anyone concerned with the increasing dislocation of human values in the twentieth century." Ruff added that many of her friends and colleagues were discussing the experiment and that she was "surprised at the vehemence with which some people argued that Milgram's laboratory situation does not fairly reproduce a larger social situation." John Goldston, a photographer from St. Louis, expressed his support for the research, describing himself as a "staunch defender of your experiment," but he questioned Milgram's interpretation of the underlying motivation of the subjects. The central dynamic for Goldston was not fear or anxiety in defying authority but pleasure in being "given the authority to hurt someone." The social context of the obedience was all-important. If responsibility for the action is removed and a plausible justification is given, he suggested, many people will happily inflict pain on others. Highlighting the study's remarkable adaptability, Goldston related the experiments to the recent assassination of President Kennedy. "Imagine someone like [Lee Harvey] Oswald as the victim and start letting subjects press the buttons. Would many people give him severe shocks? Or kill him?" In Goldston's view, "basically, people are no damned good," and given an opportunity to kill someone "without fear of censure" many would happily do so.[58]

ETHICS, "LADY PSYCHOLOGISTS," AND EXPERIMENTATION

The obedience experiments provided psychologists, reporters, and the public with a provocative context for "explaining" current events, posing dramatic questions and in some cases restating the prevailing Cold War wisdom about the weakening of American "character." Although the initial reception in the academy and the media was generally favorable, the study was soon mired in controversy. The experiment was heavily criticized on ethical grounds shortly after Milgram published his first set of results. However, just as controversy fueled interest in P. T. Barnum's "artful deceptions" in the nineteenth century, the intense debate over the ethics of Milgram's experiments further extended the study's already impressive reach. The obedience experiments would quickly become required reading for anyone interested in the use of human subjects in American science, and they remain a staple of ethical debates in several disciplines.[59]

Given the stridently masculine character of the obedience experiments, it is hardly surprising that gender would emerge as one of the decisive subtexts of the ethical controversy. The earliest, best known, and still one of the most incisive critiques of the obedience experiments was published by the developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind in *American Psychologist*—the flagship journal of the American Psychological Association. Although Baumrind did not frame her critique in explicitly gendered terms, she undertook what was in effect an assault on Milgram's stereotypically masculine outlook,

[58] Ellen Jaffe to Milgram, 2 Dec. 1963, Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 1a, Folder 9; Holly Ruff, "Milgram's Experiment in Blind Obedience," *The Capsule: Onteora Central Schools Newsletter*, 1964, *2*, Milgram Papers, Series III, Box 55, Folder 13; and John Goldston to Milgram, 17 Nov. 1963, Milgram Papers, Series III, Box 55, Folder 13.

[59] For a good overview of the ethical debates over the obedience research see Miller, *Obedience Experiments* (cit. n. 1). See also C. D. Herrera, "A Historical Interpretation of Deceptive Experiments in American Psychology," *History of the Human Sciences*, 1997, *10*:23–36; and Herrera, "Ethics, Deception, and 'Those Milgram Experiments'" (cit. n. 4).

attacking his lack of social awareness, his insensitivity to the feelings of others, and his prioritizing of his own scientific work over the potential harm caused by the experiment. "The detached, objective manner in which Milgram reports the emotional disturbance suffered by his subject contrasts sharply with his graphic account of the disturbance," Baumrind noted in a sharply worded passage that reflected the overall tone of the article. "In view of the effects on subjects traumatic to a degree which Milgram himself considers nearly unprecedented in sociopsychological experiments, his casual assurance that these tensions were dissipated before the subject left the laboratory is unconvincing."[60]

Although Milgram was eager to pass judgment on the ethics of his subjects, describing their behavior as "harsh," "callous," and "severe," he was, by his own admission, extremely sensitive to any criticism of his own ethics. In an unpublished interview, he described Baumrind's critique as "a source of a good deal of grief," adding that he was "not prepared to be exposed to criticism of that sort, being rather thin-skinned." Milgram's graduate students were even more incensed, and they framed their objections to Baumrind in crude, gendered terms. Graduate student Leon Mann wrote to Milgram that the obedience work is "attracting the wrong sort of attention. Happily, the female who wrote that article was so hysterical and ridiculous, that you should have little trouble in putting her in her place." As Kirsten Fermaglich has noted, implicit in Mann's remarks is the idea that "ethics was a female concern, one associated with softness, passivity, and even hysteria." Such views were echoed by Alan Elms, one of Milgram's graduate assistants during the experiment. Elms dismissively characterized Baumrind's critique as the product of a misguided and emasculating maternalism that was incapable of viewing the subjects for what they were: "*grown men*, in full legal possession of their senses and wills." In what one commentator has described as a "venomous" attack on Baumrind, Elms added that "she is a child psychologist and the volunteers are all children at heart, unable to resist the experimenter's wiles and therefore needing protection by someone who knows better, namely Dr. Baumrind."[61] For Mann and Elms, the archetype of the strong, inner-directed male that provided the obedience research with much of its inner logic and cultural momentum is clearly evident; "real men" had a choice in the study, as they do in real life, and they do not need the womanly protection of weak-kneed ethical busybodies.

Milgram had plenty of supporters within psychology and psychiatry, and in the aftermath of the Baumrind critique many publicly defended the obedience experiments, often drawing on the same gendered themes that animated much of the original research. The psychiatrist Milton Erickson invoked the idiom of masculine decline while casting Milgram as a heroic "pioneer." There "is a great need to study [how] the normal man . . . can be manipulated into inhumane behavior," he noted emphatically. Echoing American Cold War discourse that linked national security to a robust masculinity, Erickson argued that much depended on "tough minded" scientists like Milgram who were "strong men with strong scientific faith and a willingness to discover that to man himself, not to 'the

[60] Diana Baumrind, "Some Thoughts on Ethics of Research: After Reading Milgram's 'Behavioral Study of Obedience,'" *Amer. Psychol.*, 1964, *19*:421–423, on p. 421.

[61] Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority" (cit. n. 12), p. 74; Stanley Milgram, unpublished interview, n.d., Milgram Papers, Series II, Box 45, Folder 160; Leon Mann to Milgram, 5 July 1964, Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 18, Folder 263; Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares* (cit. n. 2), p. 103; and Elms, *Social Psychology and Social Relevance* (cit. n. 39), p. 151 (emphasis added). In his detailed discussion of the academic reaction to the obedience study, Arthur Miller characterized Elms's discussion of Baumrind as "venomous criticism": Miller, *Obedience Experiments* (cit. n. 1), p. 132.

devil,' belongs the responsibility and the control for his inhumane actions." The psychologist Harry Kaufmann was more critical of Milgram, but he also defended the research on the basis of its ability to clarify the latent moral danger in a society where, according to both Milgram and the prevailing Cold War wisdom, so many American men could be so easily manipulated. "Perhaps, realizing that it can happen here, and with me as an instrument of murder, my dormant or seemingly irrelevant values can be mobilized and made salient."[62]

Intriguingly, Milgram's private reaction to the ethical controversy was rather more nuanced. Prior to the study's publication he had in fact agonized over many of the issues raised by Baumrind and later critics. In his journal in August 1962, shortly after the experiments had been completed, Milgram rejected the idea that the scientific knowledge gained from the research outweighed the potential harm to the subjects. "A fine argument," Milgram noted tersely, "but the author does not buy it." Milgram was equally dismissive of the idea that an awareness of his research would help safeguard American democracy by making people more inclined to question authority. "My hopes for [more questioning of authority] are dim," he remarked. "No person who has seen the fruits of science perverted to the cause of destruction in our time can dare think otherwise." In a moment of remarkable candor, Milgram even admitted that his participation in the torment of a thousand people was not motivated and could not be justified by a desire to help humanity. Such motives "withered to insignificance alongside the strident demands of intellectual curiosity." For Milgram, the motivation was much closer and more immediate. He wanted to explore the contours and limits of the anguish he had induced, and he implied darkly that he enjoyed what he was doing. "When an investigator keeps his eyes open throughout a scientific study he learns things about himself as well as his subjects and the conclusions do not always flatter."[63]

In the immediate aftermath of the experiments, Milgram appears to have been unsure of his own ethics, and he evidently sensed a disquieting sadistic element in his character. However, the rapidly growing celebrity of the study quickly overtook him, and he soon banished any doubts he may have had concerning its ethics and his personal motivations. In a letter to Mann Milgram referred to his critics as "the timorous, the concerned, and the stupid," and in an unpublished interview he dismissively characterized the ethical issues raised by Baumrind as a "tempest in a teapot," inferring that the objections reflected an overly emotional and unduly sensitive female mindset. "It was very clear to me that a reasonable *man* would consent to the study . . . so what was all the fuss about?" In the same interview, Milgram provided further evidence of his tendency to characterize his ethical critics as feminine, irrational, and angry. He recalled being introduced to a "lady psychologist" who "turned her head and said 'you bastard.' Within a year, I understand, she was divorced so perhaps it was displaced anger." Publicly, Milgram did not resort to such blatant sexism to defend himself; in his published response to Baumrind in *American Psychologist*, however, he subtly reiterated the distinction between tough men of science and overly solicitous women who tend to infan-

[62] Milton Erickson, "The Inhumanity of Ordinary People," *International Journal of Psychiatry*, 1968, *6*:277–279, on pp. 278–279; and Harry Kaufmann, "The Price of Obedience and the Price of Knowledge," *Amer. Psychol.*, 1967, *22*:321–322, on p. 322.

[63] All of the quotations in this paragraph come from Stanley Milgram, note to self, Aug. 1962, Milgram Papers, Series II, Box 46, Folder 173.

tilize the predominantly male subjects of experiments. "Baumrind sees the subject as a passive creature," Milgram asserted, "completely controlled by the experimenter. I started with a rather different viewpoint. A person who comes to the laboratory is an active, choosing adult, capable of accepting or rejecting the prescriptions for action against him."[64]

CONCLUSION

Whatever else they may have been, the obedience experiments were a theatrical triumph—early audience reactions were glowing and the videotape was stunning. But what did it all mean? Had Milgram captured "evil" on tape? Did the study demonstrate some inherent "flaw" in human nature? Or were the results readily explainable by the cultural context and the highly ambiguous circumstances of the experiment? In the immediate aftermath of the study, Milgram danced awkwardly between historical specificity and abstract, scientific "findings." In the report sent to all participants, he framed the experiment in terms of the Cold War, justifying the torment he had visited on his participants by referring to the "possible day when a man in another country is told by a superior to drop a hydrogen bomb on the United States. Will he participate in this act of destruction?" As we have seen, many of the participants saw the study in precisely these terms, and the political context had a significant impact on how they interpreted their experience, ironically providing many with a powerful motivation to continue with the experiment. Not surprisingly, given the political and laboratory context, the majority of the obedience study participants—even those who administered severe shock—were largely untroubled by their behavior, in many cases mobilizing the very political context that Milgram had himself suggested in their defense. In a confidential follow-up report on the experimental subjects, Alan Elms noted that "only a small number (less than five) of the 41 subjects I interviewed admitted to feeling any later twinges of conscience or regret at having 'shocked' the victim in the obedience experiment."[65]

Milgram was well aware of the Cold War mind-set of his participants, but he was not about to allow a complex set of political and situational factors to crowd out the sleek, singular meaning that laboratory psychology demanded. Milgram insisted that the experiment had but one meaning: it was a study where individuals had unthinkingly lent "themselves to the purposes of authority and [had] become instruments in its destructive processes." For Milgram, the subjects' unwillingness to see the experiment in abstract moral terms was an indication not of the ethical ambiguity of the situation but of the power of the mind to defend against guilt or anxiety feelings. In his published research, the immediate political context and situational ambiguities of the experiment were filtered out altogether, allowing Milgram to emphasize the idea of shocking the learner as "unjustified." This presentation of the psychological laboratory as a space "apart" from culture and history appealed to many and greatly enhanced the study's apparent generalizability. As one Milgram enthusiast noted, the obedience experiments succeeded in "stripping the obedience problem from the complexities of dramatic historical or political events, and exposing the phenomenon, reduced to its barest essentials to laboratory investigation." For

[64] Milgram to Mann, 9 July 1964, Milgram Papers, Series I, Box 18, Folder 263; Milgram, unpublished interview, n.d., Milgram Papers, Series II, Box 45, Folder 160 (emphasis added); and Milgram, "Issues in the Study of Obedience" (cit. n. 14), p. 852.

[65] Stanley Milgram, "Report to Memory Project Subjects," n.d., Milgram Papers, Series III, Box 45, Folder 159; and Alan Elms, "Statement by Alan C. Elms on Subjects He Had Interviewed," 27 Mar. 1963, Milgram Papers, Series III, Box 46, Folder 173.

many of Milgram's colleagues in psychology, this was his "singularly most impressive achievement."[66]

In hindsight, it is apparent that the obedience experiments were never "stripped" of history and politics but were in fact saturated in Cold War anxieties about an American masculinity besieged by Communism, feminism, and conformity. That said, Milgram would never have achieved the kind of spectacular success that he did had he simply reheated old concerns—albeit in a "scientific" way. One of the things that made the obedience study so compelling was the way Milgram amplified existing Cold War anxieties about "soft," weak-willed American men. The experiments seemed to demonstrate not only that American men had become "other-directed" conformists, as Mills, Whyte, and Riesman argued, but that the problem was now so acute that all bets were off morally. Even before the experiments had been completed, Milgram began reporting that American men were Nazis in waiting: they had become so weak and feeble that anything was now possible, up to and including death camps in the United States. Anticipating African-American activist Ossie Sykes's use of the study mentioned earlier, Milgram remarked in a 1961 letter to Henry Riecken, head of the Division of Social Sciences of the NSF, that he had "once wondered whether in all of the United States a vicious government could find enough moral imbeciles to meet the personnel requirements of a national system of death camps, of the sort maintained in Germany. I am now beginning to think that the full complement could be recruited in New Haven."[67] It was an extraordinarily bold claim; but having been extensively schooled in the idiom of "other direction" for more than a decade, American journalists, psychologists, and the public took it in stride and had little difficulty assimilating Milgram's "shocking" results into larger discussions of national character, government authority, and the role of the individual in American culture.

I have argued in this essay that much of Milgram's extraordinary success lay not in his "discovery" of the fragility of individual conscience but, rather, in his theatrical flair for staging culturally relevant masculine performances. His study stands as perhaps the quintessential scientific fable of the Cold War era, brilliantly showcasing the gendered, political obsessions of the age while packaging them in a "scientific" and visual context for all to see. The packaging was important, for without it there was little to differentiate the obedience experiments from the larger cultural and intellectual context in which an "imperiled American masculinity" was a crucial trope with a wide range of implications, up to and including matters of national security. By his own admission, Milgram was no theorist, and there was nothing especially novel or intellectually illuminating about the experiment—beyond the fact that a "scientist" had demonstrated what American politicians, movie producers, and social commentators had been indulging in for years: the specter of the seemingly "good" man cracking under pressure and succumbing to the direction of some evil outside force. Thus, much of Milgram's success, like that of David Riesman a decade earlier, was based on the power of American social science to confirm and dramatically amplify what we already knew and feared. What James Gilbert said of *The Lonely Crowd* is equally true of the obedience study: "Its success rested not in its scientific validity so much as in the plausibility of the familiar—in the [social scientist's] ability to give substance and coherence to, and to name an emerging critique of modern society."[68]

[66] Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (cit. n. 12), p. 180; Elms, "Statement by Alan C. Elms on Subjects He Had Interviewed"; and Miller, *Obedience Experiments* (cit. n. 1), p. 258.

[67] Milgram to Henry Riecken, 21 Sept. 1961, Milgram Papers, Series II, Box 43, Folder 127.

[68] Gilbert, *Men in the Middle* (cit. n. 11), p. 61.